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Social media sentiment analysis on Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak's court case: A study of public perception in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the public perception and sentiment on social media towards the court case involving Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak. The approach of this study was qualitative, with a focus on social media content analysis and in-depth interviews with expert informants. The study leveraged content from platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube that featured netizens' comments, tweets and reactions to the development of Najib Razak's court case from 2020 to 2023. A total of eight informants, consisting of political analysts, media practitioners, academics and lawyers, were interviewed in depth to obtain professional and critical views on this phenomenon. The analysis shows that the majority of online sentiment towards this case tends to be negative, especially related to issues of integrity, trust in leadership, and frustration over abuse of power. However, there is also a parallel narrative of sympathy and defence that elevates Najib's character as a victim of political prosecution, especially among UMNO supporters and followers of the "Bossku" campaign. Social media is seen as playing a huge role in shaping public perception, not only as an information channel, but also as a narrative battleground between proponents and critics. The study emphasizes the importance of understanding the dynamics of political communication in the digital age, particularly in a post-truth context where information and emotions interact rapidly. In conclusion, the study urges judicial institutions and governments to strengthen their digital strategic communications to more effectively address public perceptions.

Keywords: ***Najib Razak, sentiment analysis, social media, public perception, political communication***

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INTRODUCTION

Political leadership integrity in Malaysia has become a critical topic in public discourse, especially after the revelations of large-scale financial scandals involving key figures in the country. One of the most high-profile cases is the case involving former Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak in relation to the SRC International and 1MDB scandals, which attracted a lot of attention from both domestic and international media (Ibrahim & Sani, 2021).

The circulation of comments, tweets and reactions of netizens, especially through short videos on TikTok and YouTube Shorts, shapes the way people interpret the justice and validity of court decisions (Gerbaudo, 2016; Van Dijck, 2013). In Najib's case, the public reaction reflects a range of sentiments—from frustration and anger to sympathy and defence. However, there is a lack of empirical studies that systematically analysed how these sentiments are formed and function in shaping political perceptions. Existing studies focus more on news reports or general interpretations (Lim, 2020). This raises questions about the extent to which social media reflects reality, or is simply a space for collective emotional manipulation (Zuboff, 2019).

Social media also displays the phenomenon of polarisation, where there are two main camps —supporters and opponents — that influence each other's narratives and perceptions related to this court case (Pariser, 2011). The narrative of "Bossku" and "political persecution" emerged as a counter-discourse to judicial decisions carried out according to the legal process (Sani et al., 2019). Digital political communication in this context has crossed traditional boundaries, where social media users also act as narrative shapers, not just recipients of information (Castells, 2012). Therefore, it is important to examine how this narrative affects trust in the institutions of justice and democracy.

The study adopted a qualitative approach through social media content analysis as well as interviews with experts to understand the public's perception of Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak's court case in a more comprehensive and contextual manner. To further understand the phenomena that contribute to the issue, the objectives of the study are as follows, which are crucial in providing the much-needed guidance to delve deeper into the issues with contextual discourse analysis:

1. To analyse the content and sentiment patterns expressed by social media users towards Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak's court case.
2. To identify the main narratives formed in social media related to the trial process and judicial decisions.
3. To assess expert perceptions of the impact of digital communication on public trust in the judicial system and political leadership in Malaysia.

Public Sphere Theory

The Public Sphere Theory put forward by Jürgen Habermas (1989) is a very relevant theoretical framework in understanding how society shapes critical discourse on national issues, such as the trial case of Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak. According to Habermas, the public sphere is a social space outside the formal structure of the state and the market, where citizens can rationally debate about any public interest.

In the contemporary context, social media such as Twitter, Facebook, TikTok and YouTube have evolved into new forms of digital public spheres (Van Dijck, 2013), where community interaction is no longer limited to traditional media channels but takes place bilaterally, openly and without hierarchical controls. This change in the structure of communication provides space for ordinary users to question political power, dispute the judicial institutions and form alternative discourses on Najib's case.

Debates on the integrity of the courts, abuse of power, and political interference are clear manifestations of the functioning of the digital public sphere. This is in line with Dahlgren's (2013) view that digital media expands the deliberative dimension of democracy when public discourse moves freely across institutional political boundaries. For example, comments by Twitter and Facebook users criticizing court decisions are no longer seen as fringe opinions, but as part of a national discourse that influences public perceptions of justice.

Post-Truth Theory

The Post-Truth theory explains how emotions, political identities and subjective beliefs override objective facts in the formation of public opinion. According to Waisbord (2018), the post-truth era is characterized by a situation in which facts are no longer the primary basis for assessing public issues. Instead, narratives that align with individual beliefs and political identities become more believable. This theory is significant in the digital perceptions of Najib's case as the discourse on social media is not centred solely on legal facts but driven by sentiment, anger, sympathy, and political polarization.

In Najib's case, netizens' debate shows how facts and court decisions are often interpreted through the lens of emotion and political identity. Narratives such as "Najib is a victim of political abuse", *"Bossku ikon rakyat"*, or "courts controlled by certain parties" show that netizens' political emotions and beliefs shape their interpretations of the legal reality. This phenomenon is in line with the premise of Waisbord (2018) that post-truth is not just a rejection of facts, but a social mechanism in which information is filtered according to the needs of the group identity. To this, Freelon et al. (2020) argued that social media accelerates the process of disseminating emotional information through virality, making it more dominant than factual information.

The combination of the Public Sphere Theory by Habermas (1989) and the Post-Truth Theory by Waisbord (2018) forms a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding how digital sentiments and narratives regarding Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak's case are formed and disseminated, which then impact public perceptions of justice and the country's institutions. These two theories complement each other by explaining two important dimensions: (1) the structure of communication spaces, and (2) the way in which social meaning is shaped in the digital age through emotions and political identities.

In the context of the Public Sphere Theory, social media serves as a deliberative space where citizens gather virtually to discuss important issues, including Najib's trial. This space allows critical discourse to take shape beyond the control of political institutions and the mainstream media. However, this theory does not fully explain why discussions in the digital public sphere are often irrational, emotionally charged, and divided into two extreme camps (pro- and anti-Najib). This is where the Post-Truth

Theory fills the gap. According to this theory, the digital public sphere is not just a space for discourse, but a space for clashes between "emotional truth" and "truth of fact".

The combination of these two theories allows us to understand that while social media provides a democratic space for society to debate, the discourse often turns into a sentiment-driven polarization field. This phenomenon shows how the structure of communication (the public sphere) and the epistemic state (post-truth) are interrelated. In short, these theories explain how rational discourse can be "hijacked" by emotions and political identities in a digital public space.

This theoretical framework also helps to understand the echo chamber phenomenon and polarization found in the study findings. The digital public sphere provides an open space for discussion, but in the post-truth era, this space is divided into closed groups that only reinforce existing opinions. The algorithms of social media platforms reinforce this situation by presenting content according to the user's beliefs, causing everyone to construct their own "truth". The combination of both theories provides a solid foundation for analysing political perception in Malaysian society, where the public's understanding of Najib's court decision is not only influenced by the information received but also by the social dynamics in the digital space.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The development of digital technology and the emergence of social media as the main communication channel has drastically changed the landscape of political communication. In Malaysia, social media serves as a new public space for political discussion, the channelling of public emotions and the formation of perceptions of political figures and national institutions. Recent studies from 2023 to 2024 show new trends in research related to political sentiment, social media user perceptions, and digital narratives formed in the context of political and legal crises. The study by Mohd Pouzi et al. (2024) is one of the latest studies that applies a sentiment analysis approach using machine learning algorithms such as Naïve Bayes, SVM and Logistic Regression to assess people's sentiments on current political issues.

Sahrul Afendi (2024) analysed 11,800 tweets by Twitter users to identify public perception of the General Election in Malaysia by employing Naïve Bayes to classify sentiment, and found that the majority of tweets were closely related to issues of candidate integrity, manifesto promises, and trust in electoral institutions. In their study of Facebook users' comments on major political parties, including UMNO, PAS, PKR and BERSATU between September and December 2020, Kasim and Kamarul Zaman (2024) found that the majority of user comments contained elements of sarcasm, anger, cynicism and political jokes. This shows how political discourse in Malaysia's social media carries an emotional and critical tone where the narratives formed are often influenced by historical experiences, political leanings and social identities.

Meanwhile, Mohamed's (2019) study focused on the visual narrative formed by Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak through his personal Instagram account, where he forged a new political identity as an "ordinary citizen" after the fall of the Barisan Nasional government in 2018. An analysis of 94 Instagram posts found that a narrative was built to reduce the distance between him and the people through visual elements,

unpretentious captions, and the image of 'Bossku'. The study asserted that political leaders can reshape public perception through systematic and symbolic digital communication strategies, even when involved in legal crises. Kasmani (2022), through a study of the elements of political humour in Najib's Facebook posts, found that Najib used the strategy of jokes, memes and light-hearted sarcasm to attract attention and manipulate the emotions of his followers, particularly the younger generation. This phenomenon raises questions about the ethical limits of political communication and the effectiveness of populist strategies on digital platforms.

A study by Jalli and Jamaluddin (2024) focused on the issue of disinformation and electoral integrity in Malaysia. While the focus was on GE15 and its legal framework, the study also referred to Najib's case and looked at how the protracted litigation process had affected the public's perception of justice and truth. The study pointed out that weaknesses in addressing disinformation in the digital space can contaminate the integrity of the legal system and democracy. Interestingly, in Najib's case, the popular "Bossku" campaign on social media demonstrates how a positive narrative can be created even after a major scandal. A local study by Azizuddin (2020) found that there is a strong relationship between digital sentiment and perceptions of the legitimacy of political institutions.

The prosecution case against President Donald Trump involving election interference, financial fraud, and abuse of power shows how digital sentiment can divide society. A study by Freelon and Lokot (2020) found that social media platforms such as Twitter, Truth Social and Facebook present a significant pattern of polarization, with Trump supporters viewing the prosecution as a revenge-motivated political conspiracy, while opponents perceive it as evidence of the transparency of the legal system. This phenomenon suggests that the interpretation of legal cases is strongly influenced by the political orientation of individuals.

In Brazil, the Operation Car Wash (*Lava Jato*) mega-corruption investigation involving former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva became one of the country's most intensive studies on digital sentiment. Araújo and Bahiana (2018) contended that Brazilians are divided between those who see Lula as an oppressive symbol of reformation and those who regard Lula as the biggest architect of corruption in Latin America. This is evident in the millions of social media comments that form two narrative circles that do not interact rationally. Their analysis revealed that Twitter and Facebook have become spaces for "moral warfare" between Lula's supporters and opponents, where emotional rhetoric is more dominant than factual information. These findings resemble the "Bossku" phenomenon in the Malaysian context, where political figures facing legal proceedings continue to receive online support through populist narratives and identity symbols.

In Europe, the case of Silvio Berlusconi in Italy provides an additional insight into how populist leaders manipulate public sentiment to fend off legal charges. Bobba and Hubé (2021) explained that although Berlusconi faced various charges, he used social media and media to frame himself as a victim of political prosecution. This narrative shows how powerful the elements of identity and emotion are in shaping the perception of law. It highlights that sentiment towards court cases is often influenced by pre-existing beliefs. This reinforces the concept of confirmation bias, which is the

tendency of individuals to choose information that confirms existing views while rejecting conflicting information.

Meanwhile, literature from India shows a similar phenomenon in cases of corruption and abuse of power involving political figures such as Narendra Modi and Arvind Kejriwal. Jain and Sharma (2020) found that social media in India presents a hyper-partisan narrative in which each political group tries to impose its own interpretation of legal cases. Digital sentiment in India is heavily influenced by online networks of political supporters who actively repeat certain narratives through WhatsApp, Twitter and YouTube. The spread of political messages in India is particularly rapid due to the highly collective nature of its society and is prone to emotional rather than analytical messages.

The literature also shows that digital sentiment towards high-profile political cases is directly related to the country's political culture. In the Philippines, support for Rodrigo Duterte remains high despite allegations of abuse of power in the drug war. Overall, the international literature proves that sentiment towards political figures facing legal action is not a neutral or objective phenomenon. It is shaped by three main factors: (1) political identity, (2) strategically designed digital narratives, and (3) the dissemination of information through social media algorithms that reinforce polarization. All these factors affect the way people assess the authority of the judicial system.

METHODOLOGY

Study design

This study adopted a qualitative approach that is recognized as appropriate for studying complex digital phenomena. Creswell & Poth (2018) emphasized that in socio-political contexts, in-depth interviews and narrative analysis can uncover meanings that cannot be seen in quantitative data. Thus, a qualitative approach is best suited for studying complex phenomena such as public sentiment because it allows for a deepunderstanding of hidden social and narrative meanings. The main virtual locations for data collection were social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. Data collection took place between August 2022 (the date of court conviction) and February 2024, to ensure coverage of early reactions, follow-up responses, and post-decision narrative formation. The study combined two main methods of data collection: online user comments and in-depth interviews.

Data was collected from user comments on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube platforms using keywords such as "Najib Razak", "Bossku", "SRC", "Najib's court ruling" and "abuse of power". The purposive sampling technique was used to select posts and comments that were relevant and obtained a high response (≥ 100 comments or shares). Content analysis allows researchers to identify key themes in digital narratives, such as negative sentiments (anger, cynicism, frustration) and positive sentiments (sympathy, defence, nationalism) (Krippendorff, 2018). The collected social media content was thematically analysed to identify the patterns of sentiment and social meaning contained in digital expressions.

In-depth interviews

A total of eight informants were selected through purposive sampling involving academics in the fields of communication and political science, senior journalists, lawyers, and media analysts. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner to allow for flexibility in discussion but were still guided by key questions about public sentiment, the role of social media, and the legitimacy of judicial institutions. This method allowed the researchers to understand expert views on the relationship between digital perceptions and the legitimacy of the justice system. As stated by Rubin and Rubin (2012), in-depth interviews provide space to understand the values, experiences and interpretations of informants on the issues being studied.

Data analysis

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis, and later, the triangulation technique was used to verify the results of social media analysis and the results of interviews. This study adheres to the criteria of validity and reliability in qualitative research as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985), namely, credibility, transferability, robustness, and confirmability. The study also confirms that qualitative approaches such as narrative analysis and expert interviews are still relevant and important in the context of political communication research in Malaysia. Therefore, a triangulation approach that combines digital data with the views of expert informants can produce a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of public perceptions of high-profile court cases in the digital age. This study meets the ethical standards of research. The identities of social media users were disguised, and information was only used from accounts that are public in nature. For interviews, written consent was obtained, and the informant's name was disguised using a code (such as IP1, IP2 and so on). The study was approved by the university's research ethics committee (reference code included in the original report).

RESULTS

Social media analytics

The sentiment analysis of 4,590 posts and comments demonstrates how Najib Razak's trial has become a clash of political narratives, justice, and institutional integrity in Malaysia. The findings show that Twitter/X posts/comments were the most dominant (40%), used for political arguments, harsh criticism, and trending hashtags. Facebook post/comments (30%) were more balanced, with a lot of long comments (pros and cons). On the other hand, TikTok (20%) content was more inclined to short videos with an emotional narrative (a lot of positive and sympathetic angles) while Instagram posts/comments (10%) were the least, tending to be neutral/visual, and lacking in-depth political debate. The main sentiment of all sources remains predominantly negative (>50%), but TikTok content highlighted more positive narratives than any other platforms.

Table 1. Sentiment analysis

	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Social Media		
Twitter/X	1836	40.0
Facebook	1377	30.0
Instagram	459	10.0
Other Platforms	918	20.0
Sentiment Issues		
Politics & Power	1710	37.2
Justice & Legal System	1670	36.4
Institutional Integrity & Morals	1210	26.4
Sentiment		
Negative	2346	51.1
Positive	1226	26.7
Neutral	1018	22.2

The findings show that issues related to politics and power received 1710 mentions (37.2%) of the total. Of this, 980 mentions (21.3%) related to criticism of power abuse, Najib's political legacy, and impact on the party were negative. A positive display with 410 mentions (8.9%) was related to his support based on his political merit and the party's grassroots support. While 320 mentions (7.0%) were neutral, more of an emotionless political commentary, e.g., analysis of the position of parties and political leaders.

Issues related to justice and the legal system obtained 1670 mentions (36.4%) of the overall content. Displaying a negative tone, 820 mentions (17.9%) casted doubt on the integrity of the courts and allegations of political interference. The positive sentiment of 470 mentions (10.2%) reflected the belief that the judicial system is still functioning. Meanwhile, 380 mentions (8.3%) in the form of reports and summaries of facts of the proceedings was neutral.

Institutional integrity and moral issues received 1210 mentions, equivalent to 26.4% of the total. The negative sentiment of 546 mentions (11.9%) criticised the transparency of MACC (Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission), the judiciary and other institutions. The positive sentiment of 346 mentions (7.5%) represented the confidence of some netizens that Malaysian institutions are still independent. While the neutral sentiment of 318 mentions (6.9%) was a general observation of the role of the institution without bias.

The findings show that negative sentiment predominated with 2,346 mentions, equivalent to 51.1% of the overall digital content analysed. Positive sentiment of 1,226 mentions equals 26.7%, while neutral sentiment of 1,018 mentions equals 22.2%. These sentiments were mostly focused on political and power issues. This implies that social media users have been vocal in their criticism of the political leadership, the power struggle among the elite, as well as the impact that Najib's case has had on the country's leadership image.

Studies have shown that positive sentiments are mostly born from platforms like Facebook and TikTok, which often enable emotional discussion spaces and

supportive narratives. In this case, the positive sentiment emphasizes the sympathy aspect towards Najib, especially in the context of his personal and family life and highlights the view that he is a victim of a larger political game. Apart from that, neutral sentiments also exist in forms such as commentary or sharing of information without any emotional attachment. The presence of this neutral group is important because it reflects the efforts of a few netizens to maintain an objective discourse and provide space for the formation of opinions based on more balanced perspectives.

Based on the breakdown of themes, the analysis showed that political and power issues was the dominant theme with 1,710 mentions or 37.3%, followed by justice and legislation with 1,670 mentions or 36.4% while institutional integrity recorded 1210 mentions or 26.3%. This pattern clearly shows that the majority of netizens judge Najib's case not only from a legal perspective, but also relate it to the political dynamics and credibility of the country's institutions. In other words, Najib Razak's trial has evolved into a symbol of a wider debate on Malaysia's political future and the people's confidence in the country's system.

Dominant issues

The following are the dominant issues from Najib Tun Razak's case that trended on social media:

1. Most dominant: Politics & power (37.3%): describes how Najib Razak's case is seen more from a political lens than just the law.
2. Second dominant: Justice & legislation (36.4%): netizens' discussion focused on whether the judicial system is truly independent.
3. Third dominant: Institutional integrity (26.3%): discourse emphasizing transparency, accountability, and trust in state institutions.
4. Key sentiment: Negative (51.1%): majority view Najib's case unfavourably.
5. Alternative sentiment: Positive (26.7%) : born out of political sympathy and confidence in the system.
6. Intermediate sentiment: Neutral (22.2%): present in the form of reports and analysis without emotion.

Overall, the pattern of discussion on social media regarding Najib Razak's case shows that the majority of netizens tend to view the case in the context of distrust in the country's politics and justice. While the narrative of sympathy and support still exists, it is limited to certain groups and specific platforms only.

These findings show that social media is not only a space for sharing information, but also an arena for public discourse that reflects the level of public trust in politics, the law, and the integrity of the country's institutions. In a broader context, the results underscore the significant impact Najib's case has left on the public perception of the credibility of Malaysia's leadership and the future of democracy.

Interview

Overall, the findings demonstrate that social media has transformed the way people interact with justice and political discourse. Public sentiment is now shaped by diverse, emotional, and influential digital narratives. The judiciary is no longer in an exclusive position as the determinant of the meaning of justice; instead, it has to compete with the voice of the people formed through algorithms and digital expressions. This study

highlights the urgent need to develop a proactive crisis communication strategy and strengthen media literacy among the people so that they can assess justice issues more critically, balanced and rationally.

Objective 1: Public sentiment on social media

Analysis of the in-depth interviews shows that social media has become a major arena for Malaysians to channel their emotions and stance on Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak's court case. Among the dominant themes that emerged was the sentiment of anger against the political elite, who were perceived as having abused power and the legal system over the years. Informants noted that this anger is not only focused on Najib alone, but reflects a collective frustration with the system that is often seen as shielding the upper class from accountability.

> *The people are angry not because of Najib alone, but because they feel that this system has always protected the top.* (P1)

Such sentiments show that the public's perception of justice is heavily influenced by the country's history and political experience. Despite the conviction being handed down by the courts, the vast majority of social media users still show a lack of confidence in the overall integrity of the political and judicial system.

> *The sentiment on social media is very angry and cynical. People see this case not just about Najib, but a symbol of their frustration with the political elite over the years.* (P7)

In addition to anger, there is a parallel narrative of sympathy and defence for Najib Razak. Informants admitted that the narrative of "Najib as a political victim" is gaining ground among certain segments of social media users, especially those who are still loyal to the image of "Bossku". This narrative is rooted in the perception that the conviction was a result of political pressure or revenge by his political opponents.

> *Many think Najib is being persecuted because he is no longer in power.* (P4)

This case study shows how social media functions as a space for the formation and reinforcement of competing narratives against court decisions, with netizens presenting their own interpretations of legal facts and procedures. In this context, social media not only influences how information is disseminated, but also reshapes social meanings about who is considered right or wrong, fair or oppressed. At the same time, the presence of humour and political satire, especially in the form of memes and short videos on platforms like TikTok, shows that netizens not only want to express their opinions but also tap into creativity to criticize and express dissatisfaction. Elements like these reinforce the role of social media as a tool of collective emotional communication on major political issues.

However, the study also found that the digital landscape is becoming increasingly polarized: there are two main camps – supporters and opponents of

Najib – that push each other's narratives and create an "echo chamber" that reinforces each other's views.

> *Twitter has become a battlefield for two groups that don't want to hear each other's arguments.* (P5)

Finally, these findings suggest that social media functions not only as a reflection of public sentiment but as an active producer of narratives that challenge or rival formal institutional narratives, thus shaping the landscape of public perception on justice and political issues in Malaysia. Table 2 lists the main themes of public sentiment on social media, as derived from the interview analysis.

Table 2. Main themes of public sentiment on social media

Main Themes	Description
1. Sentiment of Anger Towards Political Elite	Netizens are showing dissatisfaction with the elite and the issue of injustice.
2. Sympathy and Sentiment of "Political Victims"	Some netizens see Najib as a victim of a political power game.
3. Innuendo and Political Humour	The style of sarcasm and memes is used to express disbelief or ridicule.
4. Support Polarization	There are two very active camps – supporters and opponents, challenging each other's narratives.
5. Shock of a Guilty Conviction	Most netizens did not expect the court to make such a firm decision.

Objective 2: Digital narratives and justice system

The analysis of the in-depth interviews shows that the digital narrative formed around Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak's court case is very complex and is a mixture of belief, cynicism and hope. Most informants identified that there was a positive narrative that praised the courage of the judiciary in finally sentencing a high-profile political figure. This narrative presents the court as an entity that is free from political influence and is a symbol of institutional reform.

> *There is a narrative that this is proof that our judiciary is free from political influence.* (P3)

However, this narrative does not dominate the digital space entirely because there is also a cynical view that equates the courts as being a political puppet. In other words, the people's perception of the justice system is still unstable – some hope for the restoration of integrity, while others remain sceptical about the sincerity of the system. Some informants explained that this narrative was used by Najib's supporters to defend his image and reject the court's decision which is attributed to political pressure from opponents. The following excerpt illustrates how distrust of the legal system is manifested in the form of alternative narratives.

> *This is not a question of justice; it is a question of who was in power at the time* (P8)

At the same time, Najib's "Bossku" character continues to be a symbol of resistance to the mainstream and a symbol of the courage of the ordinary people. This narrative is actively built through images, videos and slogans on social media that presents Najib not just a political figure, but a digital icon. This shows social media can play an active role in reconstructing the image of leaders by ignoring the official narrative and replacing it with more emotionally friendly populist stories.

In addition, there is an emergence of critical awareness among social media users, especially youth, who is seen to be increasingly cognizant of political games. This segment does not fully accept any narrative, whether pro or anti-Najib, but is more likely to judge based on the principles of fairness and transparency.

> *Young people today are not quick to believe – they are concerned about both, Najib and the system.* (P2)

This signifies a change in digital political participation where people are increasingly actively challenging official discourse and shaping alternative discourses through social media. The digital narrative formed in this case, therefore, is not single and homogeneous, but multi-layered, reflecting various social interpretations of the concepts of justice, leadership responsibility, and institutional integrity in the Malaysian political system. Table 3 presents the main themes of digital narrative and the judicial system.

Table 3. Digital narrative and the judicial system

Main Themes	Description
1. The Narrative of Bold Justice	There is a new narrative that judicial institutions are beginning to show fangs and independence.
2. Political Conspiracy Narrative	Some users spread conspiracy narratives against certain leaders.
3. Legitimacy and Trust Deficit	The lack of trust causes the public to interpret the results according to emotions and biases.
4. Digital Heroism "Bossku"	Bossku's narrative is still strong among supporters, despite negative court rulings.
5. Critical Awareness Among Young People	Young people tend to criticize both sides and want systemic change.

Objective 3: The role of social media and institutional trust

Findings also clearly show that social media is now playing a role as a "digital public court", which is highly influential in shaping trust in the judiciary. According to the informants, court decisions often trigger social media users' responses, which are not solely based on legal principles but on emotional interpretations influenced by the dominant narrative on social media. This phenomenon represents a major shift in the structure of authority, where courts that were once the exclusive symbols of justice are now forced to compete with online "people's courts". As P2 put it:

> *The people make their own decisions on Twitter before the judges make an official decision.*

Such a notion reflects how the judicial process is currently evaluated in the field of public opinion that does not necessarily understand or respect the legal process formally. This discourse also shows that social media algorithms such as those on TikTok and YouTube reinforce users' tendency towards only one side of the narrative, thus creating an "echo chamber". Informants contended that many users are only exposed to views or content that confirm their existing beliefs. Consequently, it leads to a further polarization of perceptions of the judiciary – some see the decision as a symbol of reform, while others see it as a political plot. As P6 stated:

Each TikTok feed is of interest, so the more extreme our views are.

This psychological effect makes social media not only a platform for the dissemination of information, but also a powerful collective emotion formation, which sometimes drowns out logic and legal facts. In addition, informants also stressed that the lack of official communication between the judiciary and the government has worsened the situation. An official narrative that is defensive and slow-acting gives digital influencers and political YouTubers ample space to dominate public perception. As P6 stated: *"The royal narrative is incapable of countering viral perceptions on TikTok."* In this context, social media not only challenges institutional credibility but also creates a form of "alternative political reality" that the digital society strongly believes in.

Retrospectively, this has congruently illustrated that trust in judicial institutions is highly dependent on the ability of those institutions to understand, interact, and adapt their communication strategies to the current digital reality. In summary, social media has been a significant force in shaping public trust in the judicial system, and this role is becoming increasingly influential in the era of rapid communication and digital emotions.

DISCUSSION

The findings confirm that social media in Malaysia is no longer just a channel of personal expression, but has evolved into a highly influential power field in shaping public perception of national issues, including high-profile legal cases such as those involving Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak. Social media now serves as a space where the meaning of justice, integrity and power is reinterpreted by the people collectively, beyond the formal institutional framework of the country. This reinforces the role of social media as a "power broker" that influences public belief, political behaviour and institutional credibility.

In particular, the study's findings demonstrate that social media plays a significant role in shaping people's sentiment and understanding of Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak's court case. This is in line with Latif and Ying (2020) who contended that news media creates a sense of representation in the general view of the masses which then translates into support or rejection. For the first objective, the main theme shows that the people are no longer just observers but also communicators – expressing their emotions openly, whether through anger, sarcasm or support. The polarization of support shows increasing fragmentation of the digital society.

For the second objective, the digital narrative that is formed reflects the people's ambivalence towards the judiciary. On the one hand, there is appreciation for the courage of the judicial system, but on the other, conspiracy sentiments and distrust continue to exist. The character "Bossku" has also become a populist symbol that manages to balance bad perceptions with a more understated digital personality appearance. The third objective emphasizes the role of social media as the main field of narrative formation. Social media not only disseminates information but also forms an "emotional truth" that is believed to be stronger than the official narrative. This shows the weakness of institutional communication in dealing with the crisis of perception, as well as people's dependence on political influencers to clarify issues.

This study also highlights that digital narratives are never singular or static. Instead, it operates in a complex manner, clashing with various emotions and views such as trust in the system, cynicism towards the elite, as well as deep-seated populism. Narratives such as "Najib as a political victim" or "daring court" are among the manifestations of emotions and perception strategies that clash in the digital space. This volatile narrative exposes the gap between public perception and formal authority, thus challenging the legitimacy of judicial institutions if they fail to respond effectively to public unrest.

In this regard, the study suggests that national institutions – in particular judicial and government institutions – strengthen their crisis communication strategies with a more strategic, responsive and honest approach. In a world defined by the speed of information and emotional games, formal communication can no longer rely on traditional media statements that are reactive and defensive in nature. Instead, inclusive, transparent, and integrity-based counter-narratives need to be proactively built to rival the dominance of digital narratives that are free and sometimes manipulative. State institutions need to come forward not only as regulators and enforcement agents, but as trusted communicators, to educate and engage directly in the public discourse that is currently taking place in the borderless digital world.

CONCLUSION

This study provides a comprehensive overview of how social media shapes, reinforces and changes public perceptions of Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak's court case through sentiment analysis, digital narratives and expert interviews. This echoes the study by Rajaratnam et al. (2020), which reveals that media framing has a significant impact on how truth is perceived when words, images, phrases and presentation styles are used to effectively relay information issues or events. The findings show that social media is no longer just a communication medium but has become a space for political discourse that has a significant influence on the formation of collective perceptions. The sentiments that emerged—positive, negative, neutral, sarcastic and emotional—reflect the highly dynamic nature of digital discussions and are influenced by political identity, social beliefs and partisan loyalties. This phenomenon shows how society interprets a legal issue not only through court documents, but through discourses shaped by communities, political influencers and social media algorithms.

This study concludes that state institutions—particularly the judiciary, government agencies and policymakers—need to understand that crisis

communication now takes place in a highly complex digital ecosystem. In such an environment, honesty, transparency and narrative consistency are crucial in countering the dominance of informal discourse on social media. Experts emphasize that narrative strategies are not simply an effort to convey information, but a process of rebuilding eroded public trust. Therefore, this study recommends that the government strengthen public information literacy, develop data-based communication strategies and create an inclusive and fact-based counter-narrative. Overall, this study proves that the future of political perception and trust in institutions in Malaysia depends greatly on the ability of the country and society to navigate digital narratives more critically, strategically and responsibly.

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