The influence of peer engagement on voting among Malaysian youths through social networking sites

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ABSTRACT

The 14th General Election saw a significant transition in political views and voting inclinations on social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook and Twitter among Malaysian youths despite their absence in the electorate. These digital natives rely heavily on SNSs to consolidate information, to interpret social structures and to engage among themselves as political cognizance is often limited to them. This study proposes that peer engagement through SNSs significantly affects Malaysian youth attitudes on political views, particularly on the act of voting. The study also investigates the extent of information sharing and identifies the motivations that drive Malaysian youths to seek information on voting from their SNSs. A self-administered questionnaire was conducted with a total of 371 participants; of which 60% were female and 40% male. Our analysis showed that Malaysian youths are significantly influenced by their social connection to others hence posts by their peers and political figures on SNSs receive a higher engagement. There is strong evidence that discussing politics with friends on SNSs is preferred and is in line with their personal interests, thus creating a more inclusive experience among them. This further substantiates the positive impact of SNS consumption by Malaysian youths towards their potential voting participation. The outcomes of the study will ascertain the benefits of SNSs in reaching out to youth to nurture patriotism that could create a sophisticated social networking framework to understand the social impact of new media in the Malaysian context and onwards – on a global scale.

Keywords: *social networking sites, peer engagement, voting, youths, GE14*

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INTRODUCTION

Prior to the 14th General Election (GE14), the Malaysian Election Commission had reported that Malaysian youth voters aged 21 to 30 outnumbered older voters 2 to 1 but as many as 3.8 million eligible voters did not register in time for this election and two-thirds of them were in their twenties (Mei Lin, 2018). A study by Merdeka Centre (2018) indicated there is a clear lack of interest in the polls particularly among urban youths where a majority do not believe that their votes will bring tangible change to the government while assuming political representatives do not put youths as top priority. The study also indicated a great mistrust of politics amongst youths despite their fascination with political parties due to their limited information-gathering skills on social media. The disadvantage of political inexperience is also a main factor where they do not actively search for information on politics and voting unless it is shared by others in their social circle. Nevertheless, the recent victory of the opposition coalition, *Pakatan Harapan* (PH) in GE14 witnessed a high voter turnout due to widespread discontent with government policies such as Goods and Services Tax (GST), misconduct of government officers, perceived inequality and various frustrations that were actively discussed on social networking sites (SNSs) (Teoh, 2018). Prior to polling, strict government control and ownership of traditional media saw some alleviation on freedom of speech and information through online platforms such as *Youtube* and news portals such as *Malaysiakini* and *MalaysianInsider.com* that purveyed unbiased and vibrant news reporting. These news sources enabled sharing of content to SNSs such as Facebook and Twitter that had a tremendous influence on the voting behaviour of those who had access to them (Lim, 2013). This can be related to studies that pointed out youths appreciated messages that are vivid, entertaining and targeted on SNSs (Holliman & Rowley, 2014; de Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012; Tucker, 2012).

Moreover, Călin & Bîrsănescu (2017) had coined the term "digital natives" for youths ranging from high-school adolescents to university students who actively use SNSs to socialise and fulfil more personal gratifications. This generation was nurtured with the growth of cyberspace and is considered the most susceptible to new media trends as well as quick to connect with subcultures that are reproduced from it. Fernández-Cruz & Fernández-Díaz (2016) further identified this cohort as "Generation Z" with the common denominator being information and communication savvy. Furthermore, research has deliberated how youths frequent SNSs to obtain a socially supportive network outside close friends and family that attribute to their personal well-being and cognition of social issues (Subrahmanyam & Lin, 2007). With that said, content sharing between youths on SNSs prioritises "electronic word-of-mouth" (eWoM), creating opportunities of peer engagement from the initiated discussions on politics and voting online. The outreach and interactivity inadvertently reduce their trust in content from authoritative bodies and media organisations. In the same way, such media affordances provide mobility for youths where their positions as receivers of information is interchangeable with sources of information on SNSs. In Castells' discussion of "networked societies" (2010), communication and content create social morphology of societies, shape relationships from networking logic and mediate power connections between one another. The proliferation of SNSs in the last decade has created renewed awareness among youths and diversified their intentions to seek and navigate information. This study seeks to understand Malaysian youths and the impact engagement with peers on their social reality in an ever-changing landscape of networked communication.

In the Malaysian GE14 context, participation of the youth is transformational. Although polling day is over, the ripple effect of social media sharing and the emerging

keenness towards the new ruling coalition on SNSs would consequently affect the voting mindsets of both registered and non-registered youth voters. Opportunities for interconnectedness allow digital natives to collaborate and curate their thoughts through their social media sharing that inadvertently expose each other to the socio-political and economic issues of a renewed nation. Thus, this creates the question of how Malaysian youths navigate their world and share their voices. The gaps and limitations established in this study offer a framework of human relations initiated from networking on SNSs that extends towards political views and future voting inclinations of youths. The objectives of this present study are to examine the influence of peer engagement on SNSs that affects youth attitudes on voting, to investigate the extent of information-sharing on voting among youths on SNSs and to identify the motivations of youths in seeking information on voting through their SNS use.

Informed, but unmotivated

A survey by Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) (2017) highlighted 89.3% of smartphone users regularly visit SNSs and search engines to seek information. With the recent turnout in Malaysian polls, it can be said that while youths are politically informed online, they may be initially unmotivated to partake in voting or even seek information on politics unless influenced by significant factors. The Asian Foundation (2012) affirmed that political support of youths extends towards core government policies such as "1Malaysia" and "Vision 2020". This shows that youths are concerned about their communities and are critical about the administrative performance of the ruling party. Even though the study had highlighted a large percentage of youths who felt that their opinions may not be impactful towards change in their community or government, the numbers of those who felt otherwise surged significantly between 2008 and 2012 (The Asian Foundation, 2012).

Scholars have long debated that the political leanings among youths are nurtured from their communication habits that now lie within the fragmented media environment and are focused in the digital realm of SNSs (Marquart, Ohme & Möller, 2020; Literat, Kligler-Vilenchik, Brough, & Blum-Ross, 2018; Lee, Shah, & McLeod, 2013). Despite its unseen normalcy, engaging in the idea of politics with peers as well as interactivity with politicians would eventually increase internal efficacy towards voting. SNSs can fuel the confidence of potential voters and empower them towards the actual act of voting through curation, selection of algorithms as well as the freedom to manipulate existing content through the SNS profiles of the youth (Banaji & Buckingham, 2010). Similarly, Malaysian youths and their immersive SNS practices can establish a powerful stance in their voting intentions compared to other generational cohorts (Boo, 2018). With this realisation, political parties such as the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) have been quick to utilise Facebook micro-targeting as well as the creation of Whatsapp groups for their constituencies to update their electorate with selected political news and administration.

To sum up, the turnout of young voters during GE14 in Malaysia saw the need for information efficacy as the youth are increasingly critical about the actual deliverance of political parties. Mohamed Azmi and Chinnasamy (2019) further posited that Malaysian youths are more inclined to seek information from multitudes of SNS platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Youtube instead of mainstream media where political views are made available. Further, Kamaruddin and Rogers (2020) found that younger Malaysians had different perceptions and renewed hopes about politics, mainly because of their distrust of the long-ruling coalition of *Barisan Nasional* (BN) and thus a collective memory of poor

national administration for the decades after Malaysia's independence. The generational gap and differences in communication practices had an immense influence on potential voter participation among Malaysian youths, even more so after the takeover of a more diverse PH-led cabinet in 2018 and its subsequent reshuffling by another reformed political coalition of *Perikatan Nasional* (PN) due to internal crises in 2020. There are still a lot of questions left unanswered in terms of societal change as well as political liberation as desired by the youth in the unnecessarily rapid changes of the Malaysian government.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To understand how SNSs significantly influence the participation of Malaysian youths in political discussions and subsequently, the likelihood of voting, the study examined networked relationships that stabilise and create social norms from technologies and individuals who find them necessary to go about their daily lives (Couldry, 2008). Viewing this from the perspective of online engagement, Vigayan, Perumal, and Shanmugam (2005) had outlined several approaches, namely: 1) *domestication* that explores social interactions that mediate consumption and adoption; 2) *diffusion* in which technology spreads and affords the audiences; and 3) *adoption*, which looks at the acceptance of technology through the social cognitive theory lenses (Band, 2006). Studies on uses and gratification have long posited the power of long tails of small sites in which the new media provides new functionalities such as interactivity, demassification and asynchronous communication; thus creating behaviours from these processes (Ruggiero, 2000, as cited in Sundar & Limperos, 2013). The content accessed, discussed, and created have driven rituals of audience diversion.

Even in its earliest inception, Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1974) had predicted how the context of information consumption is encouraged by interaction opportunities offered by the medium used. As such, it can be said that the affordance of mobility today offers enhancement in downloading content and participating in social activities as well as has triggered various rituals such as immersing oneself in technologies of the internet that enable both real-time and delayed access in information and entertainment with various intermediaries and moderators. The intention to use information through communication technology that allows status and experience sharing is one factor that continues to drive the usage behaviour (Gallego, Bueno & Noyes, 2016). Subsequently, Calvignac and Cochoy (2016) put forward the importance of examining these consumer practices, decisions and adaptive behaviour based on agencies that appeal to them in their knowledge environments, with emphasis on attitudes towards purchasing action (in-market) that are correlated with their content consumption. However so, studies on such decision-making behaviours in the context of uses and gratifications on voting information and intention are limited at present.

Conscious attention
Social networking sites (SNSs) hold a great deal of participatory potential. Facebook has seen mobilised audiences among immediate and extended networks, which would be highly effective to educate and create awareness on social movements, particularly enhancing the political proficiency of youths and increasing their share of voice online as deliberated by Giménez, Luengo, and Bartrina (2017). There are also studies that underlined political participation and adaptation of audiences moving away from actual electoral politics but emphasising more on peer and civic engagement. Multitudes of online content contribute to new knowledge on current issues specifically about politics and voting, which explains the

proliferation of online communities or advocate groups that had thrived in the emergence of credible candidates such as Barack Obama in 2008. The UK 2017 Election was a significant example of how political actors leverage on incredible momentum to activate young voters. Polonski (2017) highlighted the increasing popularity of Instagram among young adults to express political views and show support for the causes they care about. After Theresa May's election announcement, there was a deluge of Instagram posts about what this election might mean for the British society. In addition, to encourage young people to vote, several musicians, actors, athletes, and social media celebrities joined the political discourse. In the months leading up to the election, the hashtag #RegisterToVote caught on and amassed overwhelming support for the Labour Party. The findings suggest Britain's youth and their prolific use of social media had a massive effect on the election outcome. This surge in young people registering, soon dubbed as the "youthquake", partly constituted Labour's 10-point advance in vote share. Henceforth it can be summarised that rather than having political actors utilise SNSs to push forth their electoral agenda, SNSs are used by digital communities to candidly exchange thoughts and engage with candidates or political parties in a healthy, reciprocal relationship that would further create power relationships through the full potential of SNS technologies (Koc-Michalska & Lilleker, 2017; Gerodimos & Justinussen, 2015).

In Malaysia, the youth are more open to choosing a political party that represents the interests of the people regardless of race and religion (71%) compared to parties that represent the interests of their own religious (14%) or ethnic group (11%) (The Asian Foundation, 2012). A survey by the Merdeka Center before the 2018 elections reflected that economic hardship, such as inflation, low income, and limited job opportunities, was the main concern of most potential youth voters (Kamaruddin & Rogers, 2020). Therefore, the development of information efficacy is contingent upon several factors: 1) the information in the news needs to be related to the information that young citizens already understand (Sotirovic & McLeod, 2004 as cited in Moeller, Kuhne & Vreese, 2018); 2) the information must be presented in a way that allows young news users to learn about the political system; 3) the level of motivation of news users will condition how much information is retained (Elenbaas, De Vreese, Schuck & Boomgaarden, 2014). Repeated exposure to news over an extended period of time has been found to be instrumental in fostering internal efficacy or the "beliefs about one's own competence to understand and to participate effectively in politics" (Niemi, Craig & Mattei, 1991, p.1408, as cited in Polonski, 2017). This feeling of internal efficacy is crucial in mobilising young voters up to the day of the election. In fact, feeling competent to cast a vote is one of the most important predictors of turnout among young voters (Kaid, McKinney & Tedesco, 2007, as cited in Moeller et al., 2018). Therefore, this study hypothesises that:

H1: Conscious attention will have a positive impact on reaction towards voting.

Time spent

Malaysia is reportedly in the top 10 countries in the world for video consumption on Facebook in terms of time spent watching 159 minutes on average, compared to the global average of 102 minutes. Further into this survey, findings show that 1 out of 4 (24.9%) handphone users check their phones constantly, even without notification (Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission, 2017). During the off-campaign seasons, evidence points out that citizens are still motivated and reliant political actors, specifically peers within their communities whom they are more engaged and immersed with in their

constant mobile and internet consumption (Larsson, 2015). Similarly, youth audiences are found to be heavily engaged with the comments section in the posts they are invested in (Gerodimos & Justinussen, 2015).

Voluntary interactions are significant to SNS engagement, which were prescribed by Clemenz and Brettel (2015) as highly sensitive and respectful towards intrusiveness and distraction. Clemenz and Brettel further proposed that among the engagement elements that are preferred by SNS users are "likes" that are considered to be a strong stimulus. A "like" may be more easily perceived and mentally processed than a more complex, time-consuming comment. Another explanation for the strong effect of "likes" might be the users' positive attitude to content. Users seem to identify themselves and their preferences with the content displayed. This leads to a stronger cognitive and emotional involvement with the subject of discussion. Scholars also proposed two functions which explain an individual or society's level of dependence. Firstly, the greater the number of social functions performed for an audience by a medium (e.g. informing the electorate, providing entertainment), the greater the audience's dependency and time spent on that medium. According to Lin and Chiang (2017), the more the audience can receive from the media, they will then have a greater dependency towards that medium. Their second proposed function states that the greater the instability of a society, the greater the audience's dependency on the media, therefore, the greater the potential effects of the media on the audience. Therefore, this study postulates that:

H2: Time spent online will have a positive impact on reaction towards voting.

Enthused participation

To illustrate these dynamics in the digital realm of SNSs, the utilisation of Facebook by political actors has seen a rise in stimulating involvement of citizens as they are able to express their opinions freely and interact with those who provide views on politics and voting. Although initially seen as one-way communication from the political actor who shares relatable content, the act of sharing has vast possibilities to generate even bigger followings that, create a stable pool of trust thereafter as well as reach out to an even bigger audience for future election campaigns (Heiss, Schmuck, & Matthes, 2019). SNS use has been associated with civic engagement and political participation in current research literature. To illustrate, the study by Valenzuela, Park, and Kee (2009) found that the intensity of Facebook use positively predicts civic participation patterns, whereas the intensity of Facebook group use enhances both actual civic and political participation.

Further, increased access to information saw the lowering of (and resources required for) acquiring political information (Schlozman et al., 2012, as cited in Keating & Melis, 2017). There has been an increase in the number of news sites and commentators, which in turn has increased the number of different viewpoints available to youths to resonate with. Now that information can be shared rapidly, widely, and easily by anyone — friends, family and peers are becoming the curators of news and political information. Youths are no longer reliant on institutionalised (national) media or political parties for political information. Past research suggests that social media users are more likely to participate in offline and online political activities than non-users. A Pew Centre study revealed that Facebook users who use the site multiple times per day are more likely to be politically engaged than those who did not (Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011 as cited in Yang & DeHart, 2016). Therefore, this study speculates that:

H3: Enthused participation will have a positive impact on reaction towards voting.

Positive reinforcement

Galan, Lawley and Clements (2015) stressed that electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) on SNSs has become a part of many decision-making processes and development of "the self" as SNS audiences could potentially engage with fellow peers that provide positive and negative reinforcements (Hudson & Thal, 2013). A recent Pew survey showed that 66% of social media users participate in one of eight civic or political activities—to "like" or promote material related to politics or social issues, to encourage people to vote, to post their own thoughts or comments on political and social issues, to repost content related to political or social issues, to encourage others to take action on political or social issues, and to post links to political stories or articles (Rainie et al., 2012 as cited in Yang & DeHart, 2016). There is a huge potential of engaging voters and campaigning via social media because those who use social media for political purposes are more likely to vote or donate to a campaign.

The second highest gratification achieved by youths that motivates them to share contents, are acts of altruism, selflessness that intend to help others and provide guidance (Wu & Pearce, 2016). Actors are also constantly affecting one another in a traceable and reversible social network through multilayers of user motivations, particularly with the advent of SNSs that offer users a variety of social gratifications (Keefer, 2015; Sayes, 2014; Fenwick & Edwards, 2011). Entertaining content is among the most likely motivations for youths to continue using SNSs as outlined by Celebi (2015) and Zhou and Bao (2002). Therefore, this study hypothesises that:

H4: Positive reinforcement will have a positive impact on reaction towards voting.

Self-evaluation

In terms of civic duty, the first elections traditionally have a high socialising effect on citizens. It has been shown for example, that participation in the first two elections has a high predictive power to explain political participation for a lifetime (Sears & Levy, 2003). Consequently, the period leading up to the first elections is a period in which civic norms are formed and young citizens are highly engaged in developing their political identity. Exposure to specific items can often spark discussions about politics that deepen the identification as an interested and active citizen. Consistent exposure to relevant news online is associated with an individual belief of partaking in the democratic processes and greater confidence in one's ability to do so. These factors are significant drivers of participating in the elections. As young people choose to access digital news outlets on their own devices, this self-selection process may influence the beginning of the formation of their political identity.

Sundar and Limperos (2013) argued that in addition to the content of media, the technological mode of exposure also gratifies the needs of young voters. Consequently, the mode of presentation is crucial for the satisfaction of media-related needs and the motivation to process information. Oscar et al. (2013) and Schlozman et al. (2012, as cited in Keating & Melis, 2017) found that online political engagement is stratified by education and socio-economic status (SES) even among young adults; this suggests that online political engagement replicates the inequalities that are apparent in offline participation. Therefore, this study speculates that:

H5: Self-evaluation will have a positive impact on reaction towards voting.

Importance

A study by Andrade and Valadão (2017) revealed that public reactions are analysed by its outcomes, as can be seen with the formation of public policies and governance in Spain. The authors emphasised that the government is not solely responsible for outcomes in such developments and that the varieties of actors or actants from the general public are part of the shared future of such communities. Michel Foucault's philosophies were also present in these studies that were concerned with the neutrality of policies hence bringing forth the instrumental influence of the public that utilises them. As such, the public power and the social relations that they intend to represent in their interactions with one another define the meanings they uphold. The gap herein identified is the characteristic of the audience itself, whether significant age groups have consistently responded the same way; specifically from the aspect of participation in discussions on current politics and the idea of voting thus inciting behavioural change of youths that this study intends to ascertain.

In a preliminary study, Callon (1986) found the combination of agencies and elements within a network that is accurately aligned is posed to create change in the society. Even without the significant diffusion of technology such as the era of social networking, both human and non-human relations share and distribute knowledge and commodities. The notion of agency identifies the ability to act can be shared and distributed to justify the potential course of action and its significance to an individual. Therefore, this study proposes that:

> H6: Importance of voting will have a positive impact on reaction towards voting.

Social connection

Current developments in the social media landscape, particularly in the area of information-seeking, observe the power and the networks of relations between social media practices and the material relations that exist between the social media use of digital natives and their take on youth movements and cultural identities in urban and growing cities. The networking entities and power relations that exist could be deployed to codify knowledge from the flows of action, people, and objects within the confines of the social media environment and their differentiation with physical networking elements.

With the affordance of both traditional and digital media environments and their interactions with other actors, their access to resource centres provide beneficial information both offline and offline, which are visibly non-human. As these actants also include human interactions with family and friends, scholars should shift focus to these changes in behaviour logic that demonstrate the reshaping of repeated purchasing patterns and identify factors that incite more positive or responsible social practices (Calvignac & Cochoy, 2016).

Malaysians are reportedly to have 1.6 times more friends on Facebook than the global average (Boo, 2018). Storsul (2014) pointed out that young people are motivated to advocate current conversations on SNSs such as political movements on a macro level, but are also willing to enhance social ties through customisable online modes of self-presentation on a personal level. In this regard, studies in Malaysia show that youths primarily share thoughts and feelings through SNSs because of the perceived freedom that social media allows (Salman, Hj Abdullah, Hasim, & Pawanteh, 2010; Pawanteh, Abdul Rahim, & Ahmad, 2009; Levi & Samsuddin, 2010). SNSs can increase an individual's exposure to political information and social mobilisation when peers and family post links to news stories or express political opinions. This can, in turn, trigger political interest,

political information-seeking and/or social pressure to become engaged in political acts and/or political discussions (Theocharis & Quintelier, 2014 as cited in Keating & Melis, 2017). For example, a randomised-control trial in the United States found that Facebook users are more likely to vote and more likely to seek out voting-related information if they saw that their peers in their social media networks had voted (Bond et al., 2012). Therefore, this study postulates that:

H7: Social connection will have a positive impact on reaction towards voting.

Significance of study

One of the major contributions of the study is to establish the role of peer engagement on SNSs as an actor towards the media use patterns of youths to determine the dimensions of engagement that were superficially explored by the preliminary discussions of the uses and gratifications theory and networked communication. The research investigates alternative hypotheses on the attitudes towards the act of voting and information-sharing behaviour of the generational cohorts reactive to them. The outcomes of the study will ascertain the benefits of SNSs in reaching out to youths in nurturing patriotism that would be able to create a sophisticated social networking framework to understand the social impact of new media in the Malaysian context and onwards, on a global scale.

METHODOLOGY

A survey questionnaire was administered by the research team within Klang Valley cities (e.g., Petaling Jaya, Subang, Kuala Lumpur etc.) in Malaysia. There were approximately 100 respondents aged between 18 and 30 who were recruited for pre-testing. First, they were informed about the objectives of the study and asked to respond to the questionnaire. Once the respondents completed the questionnaire, they were debriefed to gather feedback regarding the questionnaire design, survey process and feedback on certain questions (whether they found any misleading survey question and/or inconsistent scales used). Consequently, the questionnaire was pre-tested, modified and refined before final data collection. The final data collection consisted of a total of 371 valid responses where respondents were asked to complete a self-administered questionnaire structured in a few sections that measured independent, dependent variables and demographic profiles, and they were also assured that the collected data would be used only for academic purposes. The questionnaire was distributed in both printed (distributed via face-to-face) and online version (distributed via Google Form) to the targeted respondents.

The sample consisted of 371 respondents (60% female and 40% male), ranging from 18 to 30 years of age. The sample was well-educated, with 52% pursuing a university degree. As our objective was to examine young adults' voting behaviour, rather than to explore their previous decision whether or not they had casted their vote in the previous election, all respondents met the criterion of being future or eligible voters (see Table 1). To ensure the validity and reliability of the measurement, two statistical tests (factor analysis and reliability test) were performed. First, responses collected from all questionnaire items were analysed with Principal Component Analysis where the number of components and factor loading were determined. Secondly, the reliability test was run to determine the Cronbach's alpha of each construct that was being examined in this study.

Table 1. Sample characteristics

Demographic details		n	%
Gender	Male	148	39.89
	Female	223	60.11
Age	18–20	218	58.76
	21–23	134	36.12
	24–26	17	4.582
	27–30	2	0.539
Level of education	SPM/ O-levels	36	9.704
	Pre-university/ A-levels/ Diploma	142	38.27
	Bachelor's Degree/ Undergraduate	193	52.02
	Others	0	0

Measures

Scales were adapted from prior studies to measure conscious attention (Alt, 2015), time spent (Mirbagheri & Najmi, 2019), enthused participation (Vivek, Beatty, Dalela, & Morgan, 2014), positive reinforcement (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004), self-evaluation (De Stobbeleir, Ashford & De Luque, 2010), importance of voting (Schneider & Rodgers, 1996), social connection (Vivek et al., 2014), and reaction towards voting (Mirbagheri & Najmi, 2019) (see Table 2). Each item was measured on a 5-point Likert scale with values ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) and were tested in an initial pilot study with a convenience sample of 150 respondents. Table 3 shows that the factor loadings (λ) of each of the indicators of constructs for the datasets are > 0.50 (Hair, Sarstedt, Ringle, & Mena, 2012). All the constructs in the model provided Cronbach's alpha values and composite reliability (CR) values of > 0.70, which indicates that the measurement model has adequate internal consistency (Barclay, Higgings, & Thompson, 1995).

Table 2. Constructs and source

Construct	Adapted from	No. of items	Cronbach's Alpha
Conscious Attention	Alt (2015)	4	.825
Time Spent	Mirbagheri & Najmi (2019)	4	.850
Enthused Participation	Vivek et al. (2014)	6	.918
Positive Reinforcement	Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004)	4	.893
Self-evaluation	De Stobbeleir, Ashford & De Luque (2010)	4	.915
Importance of voting	Schneider & Rodgers (1996)	6	.907
Social Connection	Vivek et al. (2014)	3	.869
Reactions towards voting	Mirbagheri & Najmi (2019)	5	.904

Table 3. Factor loadings and reliability result of measurement items

Construct	Item	Adapted from	Loading	Cronbach's Alpha
Conscious Attention	CA1	I like to know more about voting on social networking sites	.706	.825
	CA2	I like social networking sites that are related to voting	.840	
	CA3	I pay a lot of attention to anything about voting on social networking sites	.857	
	CA4	I try to keep up with things related to voting on social networking sites	.833	
Time Spent	TS1	I lose track of time when I am doing the requested activities of political posts related to voting (such "liking" or "commenting")	.803	.850
	TS2	"Liking" or "commenting" on posts related to voting and following its related posts takes my mind off other things.	.867	
	TS3	When I visit social networking sites pages related to political posts related to voting and browse the posts related to it, it is difficult to detach myself.	.860	
	TS4	"Liking" or "commenting" on political posts related to voting is an enjoyable experience.	.790	
Enthused Participation	EP1	I spend a lot of discretionary time reading about politics	.840	.918
	EP2	I am heavily into politics	.883	
	EP3	I try to fit discussion on politics into my schedule	.862	
	EP4	I am passionate about politics	.890	
	EP5	My days will not be the same without knowing about politics	.791	
	EP6	I enjoy spending time reading about politics on social networking sites	.787	
Positive Reinforcement	PR1	I feel that when I continue using social networking sites, I can express opinions about politics and voting	.864	.893
	PR2	I feel that when I continue using social networking sites, I can express disappointment about politics and voting	.894	
	PR3	I feel good when I use social networking sites to tell others about my positive political experiences	.895	
	PR4	My social network contributions show that I am knowledgeable about politics and voting.	.829	
Self-evaluation	SE1	I have a desire to discover what my responsibilities are as an informed citizen	.875	.915
	SE2	I have a desire to discover exactly what is expected of me.	.884	
	SE3	I have desire to understand better what I want from voting	.916	
	SE4	I have a desire to strengthen my knowledge on voting	.899	

Table 3. (con't)

Construct	Item	Adapted from	Loading	Cronbach's Alpha
Importance of voting	IM1	Choosing to vote is a big decision in anyone's life.	.871	.907
	IM2	I attach great importance to selecting a political party to vote	.776	
	IM3	Political parties need to be relevant to me	.826	
	IM4	I need to have more information before I vote	.856	
	IM5	Social networking exposed me to more information on voting	.781	
	IM6	Decisions about voting are serious, important decisions for youths.	.848	
Social Connection	SC1	I love discussing politics with my friends on social networking sites	.906	.869
	SC2	I enjoy talking about politics more when I am on social networking sites	.908	
	SC3	Talking about politics is more fun when others do it too.	.863	
Reactions towards voting	RV1	I follow political posts related to votings (e.g., posts with the hashtag #XYZ).	.807	.904
	RV2	I read the comments on the political posts related to voting	.803	
	RV3	I'd like to comment on the political posts related to voting	.875	
	RV4	I'd like to share the political posts related to voting.	.889	
	RV5	I invite my friends to participate in political posts related to voting	.874	

RESULTS

A multiple regression was run to predict reactions towards voting from conscious attention, time spent, enthused participation, positive reinforcement, self-evaluation, importance of voting and social connection. Overall, the model explains 63% of the variance of the factors in predicting reactions towards voting with most of the variables statistically significantly predicting reactions towards voting, $F (7, 363) = 88.264$, $p < .0001$, $R^2 = .63$. However, the result also shows that only five variables (conscious attention, time spent, enthused participation, positive reinforcement, and social connection) have significantly and positively influenced reactions towards voting. Among these variables, social connection has the stronger effect on reactions towards voting ($\beta = .452$, $p = .000$), followed by time spent ($\beta = .154$, $p = .001$), enthused participation ($\beta = .149$, $p = .003$), positive reinforcement ($\beta = .142$, $p = .004$), and ($\beta = .089$, $p = .046$). These results, therefore, support H1, H2, H3, H4 and H7 (see Table 3).

In line with the existing literature on social connection, young voters are not only actively involved in social ties on SNS but also willing to discuss political movements on a macro level (Storsul, 2014). With the increase in internet accessibility, young voters are greatly exposed to massive information about politics and social mobilisation, which can subsequently provoke their interest in political acts or political discussion (Theocharis &

Quintelier, 2014 as cited in Keating & Melis, 2017). More importantly, their engagement on SNSs is also very much influenced by their peer engagement (Fenwick & Edwards, 2011). In this study, young voters have demonstrated great interest in discussing politics with friends, especially on SNS platforms, which in turn leads to positive reactions towards voting activities (H1). There are two possible reasons for this occurrence. First, young votes rely a strong on peers and their close communities for political and voting advice (Larsson, 2015). Since social media is the main source they use for information seeking, they develop greater dependency on seeking information regarding political viewpoints from their peers and communities. Secondly, the dependency on the social media as the main source for political information is stronger when there is instability in a society (Lin, 2016). The excessive involvement in these activities contributes to favourable reactions towards voting activities (H2).

In addition, young voters are also found to be greatly involved in online activities that involve political issues. Findings from this study show that young voters often lose track of time when they immerse themselves with activities such as researching, commenting, and liking social media posts that are related to voting and political issues. Besides, findings also reveal that youths' enthused participation in political issues also influence their reactions towards voting activities (H3). Rather than depending on institutionalised media or political parties for political information, youths nowadays rely and trust the information provided by their friends and acquaintances online. For example, Valenzuela et al. (2009) found that social media platforms such as Facebook help to enhance both civic and political participation. Many SNS users utilise these platforms to send political emails, sign e-petition and participate in political forums or groups.

Lastly, the findings from this study demonstrate that positive reinforcement influences the youth's reaction towards the voting activity (H4). Studies have shown that acts of sharing content are meant to help others and provide guidance as forms of selflessness and altruism (Wu & Pearce, 2016). As purported by Galan (2018), the decision-making processes of the youth and their self-development progress are influenced by electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) where audiences could potentially engage with fellow peers who provide positive and negative reinforcements as they encourage others to take action on political or social issues, and to post links to political stories or articles (Hudson & Thal, 2013; Rainie et al., 2012 as cited in Yang & DeHart, 2016). This can be related heavily to affordance of social connections that influence the youth's reaction towards voting activities (H7). From this result, it confirms that the sharing activities and socialisation process of family, friends and peers on social networking sites have diversified the curation of news that would motivate them to act on voting (Bimber, 2012; Norris & Inglehart, 2009). As their social connections are close and less formal, the youths find enjoyment by discussing and exchanging similar views about politics and their likelihood to vote as they find comradery in their mutual interests.

On the other hand, self-evaluation ($\beta = -.001$, $p = .980$), and importance of voting ($\beta = -.031$, $p = .563$) failed to demonstrate significant influence on reactions towards voting. Thus, H5 and H6 cannot be validated. While Sears & Levy (2003) argued that the self-selection of digital content available on media platforms could shape the political identity of youths hence influencing their self-evaluation of personal civic duties, it is clear the reactions of the youth respondents towards voting and their perceptions on importance of voting are more dependent on the input of human actors. Callon (1986) and Cooren (2010) similarly saw elements that could simultaneously create a knowledge and commodities network, but peer engagement and the experience from connecting with others outweighed self-interpretation due to the key findings that pinpoint the importance of socialising with

one another through SNSs. Hence, the results for self-actualisation is inconsistent with the posited studies on non-human actants between youths and their processing of information (Couldry, 2008) and that the act of technology systems are not behaviours of socialisation per se, unless acted upon by users of social networking sites (Latour, 1991).

Table 4. Test of hypotheses

Effects			β	(B)	B	t	p	Support
					SE			
H1	Conscious attention will have a positive impact on reaction towards voting	CA → RV	.086	.064	.128	2.005	.046	Yes
H2	Time spent online will have a positive impact on reaction towards voting	TS → RV	.154	.060	.200	3.305	.001	Yes
H3	Enthused participation will have a positive impact on reaction towards voting	EP → RV	.149	.039	.119	3.034	.003	Yes
H4	Positive reinforcement will have a positive impact on reaction towards voting	PR → RV	.142	.063	.181	2.874	.004	Yes
H5	Self-evaluation will have a positive impact on reaction towards voting	SE → RV	−.001	.071	−.002	−.025	.980	No
H6	Importance of voting will have a positive impact on reaction towards voting	IM → RV	−.031	.046	−.027	−.579	.563	No
H7	Social connection will have a positive impact on reaction towards voting	SC → RV	.452	.071	.713	10.071	.000	Yes

DISCUSSION

The results show that when it comes to youth participation in political discussions and their inclination to vote, the information source they use to build their knowledge plays a major role. In this study, after being tested individually, youths are significantly influenced by their social connection with others as well as any posts by the politicians they follow, and ultimately, by their friends. Subsequently, a higher engagement and their trust among peers increases the likelihood of their political participation. Consistent with the study by Marquat et al. (2020), there is evidence of a very strong networked communication logic as youths in this present study find that discussing politics with friends on SNSs is preferred and are in line with their personal interests, thus, creating a more inclusive experience among them. While this study is unable to inference the type of content accessed or shared online, previous studies found that the rehashing of information and its anticipating audiences are important to their considerations of assessing information available to them online (Park & Kaye, 2019).

In its earliest inception, peer engagement through electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) is characterised by the diversity of its channels and quantity of information that traditional media seldom offer. Skoric and Poor (2013) highlighted that university students preferred Facebook as a social networking site (SNS) due to the ease of transferability and amplification of messages by sharing information on their personal SNS feeds, in addition to the trusted network of friends who lend inherent credibility to the information, regardless of its authenticity. Subsequently, the keenness of youths on spending time online on this matter is also a significant motivator of their engagement with the political topics and discussions with peers on SNSs. This is in line with Vromen, Xenos, and Loader (2015) who posited youths as curators of politics online as they are heavily engaged with politics on social media and their dependency towards others to curate and filter information from social media for them. Furthermore, the affordances of social networking sites particularly on features such as liking and commenting makes it difficult for the respondents to detach themselves from it.

Evidently, the enthused participation of youths would include spending their discretionary time reading about politics for them to enjoy and becoming passionate about politics. According to Waller (2013), dialogic interactions can be through talk/argument, text, or from the perspective of technology adoption and online engagement. The extent of peer engagement in news diffusion and distribution of political views among Malaysian youths can be attributed to their perception of the credibility of their information sources and how it can be utilised. While this study is not looking into social media use in seeking information about politics per se, the goal was to look into how the role of online socialisation and digital communities influence the political affiliation and efficacy of the youths which was found to be relatively understudied. These insights also raise several concerns in terms of online information credibility that are easily manipulated and are possibly ill-assessed. Leeder (2019) also asserted that the dependency on peer information could impact the authenticity of news especially when it is shared through SNSs. There needs to be increased media literacy and efforts to educate such young adults to critically evaluate information and content.

Limitations of the study

The data collection was not implemented during any election campaign season as the study intended to establish the general attitudes of youth towards social change and the actors involved in encouraging the act of voting. In doing so, the study looked at the patterns of SNS habits as well as the extent of closeness and communication among Malaysian youths and their family, friends and peers that attribute to their staple knowledge on politics and their general information-retrieving patterns. As we are not concentrated on specific election activities and campaigns, future research can explore factors that motivate the youths' reaction to voting during campaign-heavy periods to determine the stimulants from such media organisations in their social media campaigning content. Moreover, the study did not account for the details of political posts that the youths have experienced or posted during their engagement with others on SNSs; hence as per the study of Messing and Westwood (2014), the extent to which their attitude is attuned towards a current political scenario can be an interesting topic for future studies.

Future research could also examine the differentiation on separate SNSs to find whether there are any variations in terms of algorithm and curation methods that motivate youths to participate in discussions on politics. This would expand the work of this present study which investigated the sharing act and the interpolation of political views in the curation of peers within the network and how the youths engaged with them on SNSs.

CONCLUSION

From this present study, it is established that friends and followers of Malaysian youths are the main source of engagement in SNSs. Hence, this means that the youths are selective of whom they are inclined to receive and process information on politics from, to gather a reaction towards voting. Thus, the relationship between content curation by peers and their engagement regarding political views is seen as a positive motivator in nurturing social change and inculcating promising civic responsibilities among them. It can be said that the consistency of media consumption and content sharing by youths on SNSs is beneficial to their social needs as well as the growth of a civic-minded digital community. Similarly, SNS practices by digital natives today present opportunities that mobilise and actively interchange the position of youths as actors, actants and agencies to their peers as the interactions and information-sharing acts are heightened.

Findings of this study underline changes on information-seeking processes that have evolved from traditional communication models and highlight the positive impact of social media consumption by youth towards their potential voting participation; with an emphasis on the effectiveness of communication strategies for nation-building in the Malaysian context. New media literacy is necessary to enable young people to create their own media that encourages critical inquiry and skills so that they can employ essential life skills and values in the current knowledge society. The study highlights the need to address programmes for young people and social media as a new area for self-governance. In this regard, policy recommendations are proposed to enable young people to manage content and communications as well as educate themselves and their families on the potential benefits of voting and exercising their civic responsibilities through social media.

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