

SOCIAL MEDIA AS AN ONLINE PUBLIC SPHERE: A STUDY AMONG THE FIRST-TIME MALAY VOTERS

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Published online: 31 October 2024

To cite this article: Mohd Faizal Kasmani. 2024. Social media as an online public sphere: A study among the first-time Malay voters. *Kajian Malaysia* 42(2): 29–50. <https://doi.org/10.21315/km2024.42.2.2>

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.21315/km2024.42.2.2>

ABSTRACT

In a developing democracy like Malaysia, social media is pervasive in its influence on politics and democratic processes, particularly among the youth. Social media promotes the expression of opinions among groups, thereby opening up the realm of the public sphere in a semi-democratic country like Malaysia. Unlike the original conception of the public sphere, social media consists of spaces where citizens belonging to different groups and cultures, speak in different registers or languages, finding meaningful participation. Based on online interviews with 44 first-time voters among the Malay youth group, this article investigates the aspects of the interaction between young voters and the social media “public sphere.” It examines the platforms they use to communicate about politics, how they make sense of politics, and how they interact with other citizens through social media. The findings reveal four prevalent themes. First, young people have a keen interest in accessing political information on social media, albeit passively. Secondly, Twitter and Facebook were found to be the most influential social media channels for first-time voters seeking political information. Thirdly, out of concern about the surveillance practices on social media, private WhatsApp groups have emerged as the primary platform for first-time voters to engage in political discussions and debates. This leads us to the fourth theme, where the stories that feature on WhatsApp and Instagram are gaining prominence as the dominant platform for sharing political information. This trend highlights the potential for the incidental and ephemeral consumption of political content through these

platforms. This trend may have significant implications for how political messages are communicated and received on these social media platforms.

Keywords: Malaysia, politics, public sphere, social media, Twitter, WhatsApp

INTRODUCTION

One of the most studied aspects of politics is young people's involvement in politics. Various studies have shown that the voting rate for first-time voters is in decline (Gümüs and Yılmaz 2015). During the historic 2018 election in Malaysia, which ended the ruling coalition's 60 years in power, the estimated turnout among young people declined from 83% in 2013 to 79% (Welsh 2018). It might not be realistic to claim that the youth are becoming politically indifferent based on voter turnout (Norhafiza and Grasso 2020). The youth are engaging in politics through social media, from passive engagements like retweeting or liking political messages to active engagements like signing petitions, participating in boycotts, and attending demonstrations (Alvarez, Levin and Núñez 2017). These everyday political exchanges on social media may encourage more young people to vote in the upcoming elections.

With the reduction of the voting age in Malaysia from 21 to 18 as of December 2021, it is crucial to examine the political engagement of Malaysian youth, particularly their use of social media. Concerns have been raised about the superficial nature of political participation on social media, with the viral and like cultures potentially hindering in-depth discussions and the deliberation of diverse perspectives (Kruse, Norris and Flinchum 2018). There is a need to investigate the quality and depth of political engagement on these platforms and to assess the potential impact on offline political participation. By shedding light on the dynamics of political engagement on social media among young voters in Malaysia, this study seeks to inform discussions on the role of social media in shaping political discourse, fostering political awareness, and influencing offline political participation. The recent 2022 General Election witnessed an additional 1.3 million voters aged between 18 and 21, resulting in a surge of the country's total number of registered voters by over 40%, from 15.8 million to 21.1 million (Lim 2021). Limited research has been conducted to investigate how first-time Malaysian voters employ social media to engage, express, and communicate their political views (Haslina et al. 2021). This study aims to explore the participation of first-time Malay voters in the public sphere of social media. By conducting in-depth interviews with 44 participants aged 21–23 years old, this study examines their preferred platforms for discussing political issues, their understanding of political matters, and their interactions with fellow citizens on social media.

Social media usage has seen a remarkable surge in Malaysia over the past few years. The Malaysian Communication Multimedia Commission conducted a survey in 2020, which revealed that the percentage of internet users had risen to 88.7%, indicating a 1.3% increase from 87.4% in 2018. Facebook remains the dominant social media platform in Malaysia, attracting 91.7% of users. The number of Instagram users has grown from 57% in 2018 to 63.1% in 2020, while Twitter users have increased from 23.8% to 37.1% during the same period.

The widespread adoption of this new media technology has influenced social phenomena, including political discourse and social media's capacity, and relates to reviving Habermas' public sphere, which is a crucial element of deliberative democracies (Habermas 1989). With features like open access and the ability for anybody to create and share information, social media has a higher potential for fostering constructive political discourse (Kruse, Norris and Flinchum 2018). Despite the enormous diversity of communication that social media enables, some researchers worry that it also contributes to fragmentation, with public spheres becoming solitary communication. Different points of view can be easily excluded, which promote little tolerance for diverse points of view (Dahlgren 2005; Jenkins 2006).

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The emergence of social media has rekindled the conversation about the importance of the public sphere. It has the potential to engage people in participatory democracy. Social media platforms offer fair and unrestricted access to information, as well as protected engagement and participation (Loader and Mercea 2011). In addition, the internet allows for the distribution of information by virtually anybody, making it free from external influence (Kruse, Norris and Flinchum 2018).

In general, social media satisfies the fundamental criteria of the public sphere as Habermas (1989) first conceptualised it. He defined the public sphere as a setting where "private people come together as a public" to form public opinion. According to Habermas, the three primary components of the public sphere are unlimited access to knowledge, equal and protected participation, and the lack of institutional influence. Habermas argues that mass media fails to function as the ideal platform for the public sphere due to commercialisation and the influence of public relations (Habermas 1989; Batorski and Grzywińska 2018).

In 2005, Dahlgren proposed a contemporary definition of the public sphere in line with the development of new media and digital technologies. He defines it as a

constellation of social places for communication that allow for the free exchange of information, ideas, and debates, which is instrumental in shaping public opinion. He conceptualises the public sphere as consisting of three constitutive dimensions: structures, representation, and interaction. The structural dimension refers to the formal institutional features. This includes media organisations, their political economy, ownership, control, regulation, and financing (Batorski and Grzywińska 2018). The representational dimension refers to the output of the media. The last dimension, the interactional one, which is the main interest of this article, is connected to one of the critical tenets of public sphere theory – that it has to be an interchange of thought and opinions among citizens (Habermas 1996). The dimension of interaction consists of two aspects. First, it concerns the citizens' encounters with the media—the communicative processes of making sense, interpreting, and using the output. The second interaction aspect is between citizens, including two-person conversations and large meetings.

Social media platforms, particularly Facebook and Twitter, have become gathering spaces for issue communities or issue publics. These platforms facilitate the seamless integration of personal interactions and public discussions, allowing users to navigate between interpersonal and public topics. Studying these online spaces is valuable for understanding the changing structures and dynamics of the broader public sphere (Bruns and Highfield 2015).

Facebook users have various ways to engage with content, such as expressing their agreement through likes, voicing their opinions via comments, or sharing content within their network. These metrics offer valuable insights into the kind of political content that captivates people, promoting political awareness and encouraging offline participation. Facebook's interface, which includes the News Feed architecture where text and image posts hold equal significance as well as its user-friendly native features, make it particularly intriguing for examining political communication (Gerodimos and Justinussen 2015).

Twitter plays a crucial role in politics by providing a platform for the public and political candidates to freely express their opinions and assess voter reactions without the influence of mainstream media. Its rise has brought about a significant transformation in political communication and has the power to shape political discourse. Twitter facilitates open and deliberate public communication, particularly through the use of hashtags, which allow users to initiate discussions on specific topics and enables others to follow and engage in those conversations. Hashtags, including the open nature of Twitter, have proven to be essential in the application's response to breaking news events and facilitating the gathering of users around common interests or shared activities (Buccoliero et al. 2020).

Dahlgren (2005) argues that the internet most obviously contributes to the public sphere. It leads to the public sphere becoming more plural, which both widens and disperses the congested public sphere of the mass media. Although social media permits an incredible level of communicative variability, the major drawback is fragmentation as public spheres diverge into isolated political communication islands (Staab and Thiel 2022).

Furthermore, information and participation are also constrained due to the presence of surveillance practices on social media (Yoo 2022). Surveillance is defined as the concentrated, systematic, and routine attention to personal information for the objectives of influence, management, protection or direction (Lyon 2007). These practices can be performed at the state, institutional, and interpersonal levels. This monitoring restricts the freedom that users perceive in society for the meaningful and unfettered exchange of ideas. Instead, individuals could be reluctant to be open about their political views out of concern for online abuse and its possible impact on their career or personal lives, such as their connections with their family and friends (Marwick 2012; Trottier 2012; Westcott and Owen 2013).

According to Johns (2020), encrypted messaging platforms like WhatsApp are becoming increasingly vital for activists and citizens due to their potential to provide a secure space for political expression. This is particularly relevant in environments where government surveillance and the manipulation of open social media platforms are prevalent. The use of end-to-end encryption in WhatsApp ensures that the content of the messages circulated within groups remains unsearchable and untraceable by state monitoring. This encryption feature is seen as a means to protect activists and individuals who engage in speech that could be deemed “seditious” where they may face legal repercussions on easily surveyed social media platforms.

Furthermore, this trend may also account for the growing adoption of another important element in the social media ecosystem: ephemerality. Ephemerality refers to platforms that display shared content for a limited duration, enhancing privacy and control over the visibility of posted content. This trend was initially introduced in 2011 by apps like Snapchat, Yik Yak, Slingshot and Frankly Chat. Since then, there has been a growing interest in platforms designed to automatically erase communication artefacts after a short period. In 2016, Instagram introduced its “stories” feature, allowing users to post content with a 24-hour lifespan. Throughout the day, users can add to their story, creating a fragmented snapshot of their day, and friends can view the story multiple times. However, after 24 hours, the story is automatically deleted (Bayer et al. 2016). Both WhatsApp and Facebook introduced their own versions of the stories function a year later.

Ephemerality is often coupled with anonymity, providing users with greater privacy and becoming a central element of the user experience on many social platforms. Studies have shown that users find value in ephemeral communication as it reduces self-consciousness, prevents the accumulation of embarrassing content, and alleviates concerns about unintended audiences. Additionally, ephemerality allows users to express their authentic selves and supports their evolving self-identity (Zhang et al. 2021).

Scholars call into question the efficacy of social media in political communication as participation in politics on social media becomes more superficial in nature rather than being characterised by in-depth discussions or deliberation. The viral, like, and hashtag cultures may cause participants to quit the debate before there is a chance for a genuine discussion of other points of view, obstructing the free flow of ideas (Kruse, Norris and Flinchum 2018).

YOUTH VOTERS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Many studies have shown the potential benefits of youth political communication through social media. According to the research by Jenkins (2006), political communication via social media provides opportunities for peer-to-peer learning, attitude modification, and cultural expression diversity concerning politics. Masiha et al. (2018) discovered that posting comments and exchanging opinions on political matters on Facebook has dramatically increased the level of political engagement. According to the study, there is a strong relationship between political opinion sharing on Facebook and its effects on encouraging young people to get involved in politics. Similarly, Chan (2018) concurred that the size of the Facebook network and the connections of public figures and political actors might impact the dissemination of news, the expression of opinions, and the emergence of political engagement (Haslina et al. 2021).

The previous studies also indicate that active or passive social media activities can qualify as part of political participation. In traditional political engagement, people publicly express their opinions through mass media outlets, such as by writing essays for newspapers, engaging in politics, or attending political meetings (Skoric and Poor 2013). In contrast, participating in politics on social media may be as easy as expressing one's political views to others, publishing pictures of oneself at a political event, or just "liking" someone else's political debate. Political engagement on social media is also distinct from other types of political engagement online, such as actively searching for online news, participating in discussion forums, or uploading films to YouTube. Users who are passively exposed

to these signals and actions have the opportunity to come across information that they would otherwise avoid in other channels, providing these inactive users with a reason to become interested in the state of politics or campaigns (Lin 2016). Encountering news on social media is common even for individuals not actively looking for it – a phenomenon referred to as incidental exposure to political news. A growing body of research has explored how incidental exposure to social media increases political knowledge and participation (Lee, Nanz and Heiss 2022). Furthermore, incidental exposure to political information on social media can influence individuals to engage in political behaviours, even if they are typically uninterested in politics. People who are not politically motivated often participate in simple political actions such as liking and commenting on political content on social media. Those who engage in these actions are more likely to increase their offline political activities as a result. This implies that these easy political behaviours can serve as a starting point for more substantial political involvement (Bode 2017).

According to the research by Ohme (2019) on media exposure of first-time voters who are digital natives, social media platforms play an essential role in their media diet and can encourage campaign engagement. Both news media material on social media and direct communication from political actors play an equal role in both groups' media diet. The findings imply that polarised information settings in the digital media ecosystem may enhance the voters' participation in subsequent elections.

Lin's (2016) study, conducted during the 2012 Taiwanese presidential election, found that active engagement in political activities on Facebook before the election directly impacted offline political participation after the election for first-time voters aged 20 to 24 years old. However, no such direct effect was observed for individuals aged 25 years old and older. Passive exposure to politically-related activities on Facebook before the election indirectly impacted offline political participation and voting behaviour through the perceptions of Facebook's role in political engagement. This study suggests that Facebook participation is a type of political engagement among younger individuals that may motivate first-time voters to become more politically engaged. Both active participation and passive exposure to politically-related activities on Facebook contribute to voting and offline participation.

Similarly, Ohme, de Vreese and Albæk (2018) found that social media exposure for first-time voters increases their certainty as the campaign progresses, while experienced voters do not experience the same effect. The authors argue that social media can help first-time voters make sense of the campaign information

and increase their confidence in their vote choice. Additionally, the young voters' frequent use of social media for news outside of the election period provides them with their main source of political information during the campaign, leading to a more intense engagement and higher vote choice certainty.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND MALAYSIAN POLITICS

Since 2008, social media has become an essential medium and tool for political communication in Malaysia. Due to the government's control over the media, the internet significantly impacts the public's ability to engage in political discourse. Online news and social media became the opposition group's platform for reaching Malaysian voters during the 12th General Election (GE12) held in March 2008 (Mohd Azizuddin 2014). As a result, for the first time during an election since 1969, the opposition party succeeded in preventing the Barisan Nasional (BN) from obtaining a two-thirds legislative majority.

Social media continued to play an important role during the 13th General Election (GE13) in 2013. Although BN was able to hold onto power, the opposition party was able to significantly weaken BN's support and win the popular vote. Mohd Azizuddin (2014) identified social media as a major factor in the shift of urban and suburban youth towards supporting Pakatan Rakyat during GE13. Online platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, news portals, and blogs served as popular channels for political parties to campaign and engage with voters. The study showed that Pakatan Rakyat was particularly successful at leveraging social media to their advantage, resulting in a more competitive election.

During the 14th General Election (GE14) in May 2018, the opposition Pakatan Harapan coalition, which mostly employed social media as a campaigning tool, broke the ruling BN coalition's six-decade monopoly and won a historic election. It represented the nation's first change in leadership since gaining independence more than 50 years prior. The GE14 win of the Pakatan Harapan coalition, which primarily employed social media platforms as campaign tools, has reignited conversations about the predictive value of social media during elections.

Welsh (2018) contends that the BN's failure to appeal to young people was a crucial factor in the political breakthrough of the GE14. The results show that young people did not vote for BN in the GE14 as they had in the past, with BN only capturing less than 30% of voters under 30 years old and those aged 31 to 40 years old. The movement among young voters alone may be shown to be responsible for a sizeable portion of the vote swing in GE14.

The reduction of the voting age from 21 to 18 years old in Malaysia, effective as of December 2021, underscores the importance of first-time voters, especially youths, in the 2022 general election. Despite the significance of first-time Malaysian voters in the 2022 general election, only a few studies have examined their behaviour. The most recent study by Haslina et al. (2021) suggests that Facebook use significantly promotes political participation among Malaysian youth by facilitating the sharing of views and comments on political issues. The study shows that Facebook's news, expression, efficacy, network sizes, and connections with public political actors directly and indirectly impact youth participation. Johns' (2020) study examined the use of encrypted chat platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram by Malaysian-Chinese activists and citizens aged 18 to 24 years old as a "safe space" for discussing politically contentious views and actions. This approach is seen as an alternative to more open social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, which are subject to government censorship and surveillance. The study revealed that the use of encrypted group chats facilitated the creation of new publics, referred to as "crypto-publics."

METHODOLOGY

This study examined the interactions on social media among Malay youth who are first-time voters. It investigated how first-time voters share, debate and peruse social media to get political information and form an opinion in line with the concept of the public sphere. This study investigated the political interactions of first-time voters on social media using a qualitative methodology. The data was gathered using online interviews conducted through Zoom. The qualitative analysis of the interviews aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the significance of political participation from the youths' perspective through social media.

There were 44 participants aged 21 to 23 years old. The sample consisted of 31 female and 13 male participants from the Faculty of Leadership and Management, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, across years one to three. All participants were Malay and first-time voters eligible to vote in the next election. The study was conducted from June to July 2021. Determining an appropriate sample size for qualitative research, specifically in-depth interviews, can be daunting because there is no strict rule to adhere to. This study relied on the concept of saturation to determine the sample size, which is the point where no new information or themes emerge from the data. Typically, a sample size of 30 to 40 is considered to be adequate to reach saturation in qualitative research (Saunders et al. 2018). This study discovered that the sample size of 44 in-depth interviews fell

within the customary range for qualitative research and was, therefore, sufficient to attain saturation.

The participants were selected based on snowball sampling. Snowball sampling was utilised in this study due to the specificity and hard-to-reach nature of the target population. This method enabled the researcher to identify and recruit individuals who met the eligibility criteria and shared similar characteristics (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981). Youths who met the eligibility requirements were asked if they wanted to participate in the study. They were informed about the study and advised that participation was completely optional and that the interviews would be recorded. Those who accepted signed a consent form. The study adopted semi-structured and open-ended questions to conduct in-depth, online interviews lasting one hour to one and a half hours. The interview topics included the participants' interest in politics, the participants' family background, which social media platforms the participants use to get political information, how the participants interact on social media, and how social media makes the participants more interested in politics.

The interviews were conducted in Malay language and transcribed for data analysis. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the interview data. This involved the repeated reading of the data and manual coding using a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to systematically identify, categorise and label the data based on common themes or patterns. This allowed the author to engage deeply with the data and to comprehensively understand the phenomena under investigation. This approach provided a structured framework for identifying and interpreting the key themes that emerged from the data, enabling meaningful conclusions from the analysis (Clarke and Braun 2018).

FINDINGS

The analysis of the interview data revealed four prevalent themes, which have become the subheadings of the following sections. These are a keen interest in accessing political information on social media, Twitter as the primary platform for political communication, privacy concerns and the ephemerality of social media use, and interpersonal communication regarding politics.

Keen Interest in Findings Political Information on Social Media

The study's results indicate that the majority of the participants expressed interest in obtaining political information via social media. Specifically, 30 out of 44 respondents reported consuming political news and actively seeking political

information on social media platforms. These findings were corroborated by Respondents 32, 33, and 41, who reported following news and political pages on social media platforms and politicians on Facebook and Twitter.

I can be categorised as someone who is interested in politics. This is because I often use social media to follow politicians such as Najib Razak and Tun Mahathir and follow political satire sites and local news pages. (Respondent 32)

I often follow current developments on political issues happening in our country. I have also followed world political developments, especially in multilateral relations. I often follow Tun Dr Mahathir, Syed Saddiq, Nurul Izzah Anwar and several other politicians on social media. (Respondent 33)

I often keep track of political issues from time to time through social media. I also follow politicians such as Syed Saddiq, Hamzah Zainuddin, Tun Mahathir and others. (Respondent 41)

Out of the total respondents, 14 reported a lack of interest in actively seeking political news and information on social media. Instead, they relied on incidental exposure, accessing political content only when it appeared on their social media timelines. Respondent 1 cited the constant “fighting among Malaysian politicians” as a reason for their disinterest in politics. As Respondent 1 said, “I took the choice not to be too interested in politics because I don’t like to see politicians who are constantly fighting with each other.”

Respondents 6 and 17 similarly expressed a lack of enthusiasm for political news but indicated that they would consume such content if it appeared on television or social media. These findings align with previous research that suggests that incidental exposures to political news on social media can increase political knowledge and participation (Lee, Nanz and Heiss 2022).

I do not always see and read anything about politics. However, I read political news on Twitter when it appears on my Timeline. (Respondent 6)

I don’t categorise myself as someone with a political interest, but I always watch politics on television and on social media. (Respondent 17)

Despite reporting a lack of interest in politics, all 14 participants indicated they planned to vote in the 15th General Election in 2022. Respondents 10 and 11 cited their sense of responsibility as a driving factor in their voting decision. Their willingness to vote may be explained by the gateway political exposure (Bode 2017), in which incidental exposure to many people, including the politically uninterested, allows them to engage in easy political behaviours like liking and commenting on political content on social media. When they do, it can lead to greater political activity offline, including active participation in voting. These findings suggest that even individuals who do not actively engage with political news and information may still value their civic duty to participate in the democratic process.

This will be my first experience as a voter if any elections are to be held in the future. Honestly, I do not categorise myself as someone interested in politics, but it is my responsibility as part of a Malaysian to vote and know a little about politics. (Respondent 10)

I categorise myself as not interested in politics, but I want to carry out my responsibilities as a citizen to vote in the next election. (Respondent 11)

The results support earlier research indicating that social media participation is a form of political engagement for young people that can inspire first-time voters to become more politically active. This includes both actively participating in discussions and passively engaging with politically-related content on Facebook networks, which can increase voting and offline participation (Lin 2016). Furthermore, social media can assist first-time voters in understanding campaign information, as well as boosting their confidence in their voting decisions (Ohme, de Vreese and Albæk 2018).

Twitter as a Go-To Political Communication Platform

The microblogging site Twitter emerged as the dominant platform for first-time voters to acquire political information, with 36 respondents indicating it as being their primary source for perusing, acquiring, discussing, sharing, and discovering such content. This finding aligns with the previous research highlighting the rapid dissemination of information through Twitter, enabling political actors, including politicians, journalists, and the public, to broadcast their message to a wide audience. Furthermore, Twitter has become a crucial communication channel for politicians to broadcast their thoughts, with messages often being retweeted and journalists mentioning tweets in their election coverage, thereby creating a virtuous circle that brings more attention to the microblogging platform (Buccoliero et al. 2020).

Three subthemes emerged from the analysis of Twitter use by first-time voters. Respondents 3, 17, 18 and 22 identified Twitter as a platform that enables people to express their ideas and opinions and engage in political debates.

I chose Twitter because the platform is news-friendly, and it always gives updates on political news happening in Malaysia. I can also find out other people's opinions on current issues. That is why I love this platform; it is an excellent resource for learning about political issues. (Respondent 3)

I prefer Twitter because Twitter is a place for people to express what they feel, especially on political issues. Twitter also has features like hashtags for me to read the latest political issues. (Respondent 17)

I chose Twitter because it is where people talk about issues and ideas. (Respondent 18)

I often use Twitter compared to other social media. I also participated in discussions and debates about issues raised by politicians on the platform. (Respondent 22)

Respondent 28 noted that Twitter debates tend to be more in-depth, rational, and two-sided and can quickly go viral.

I use Twitter because of the more rational discussions. Also, I found the discussions on Twitter to be more in-depth. I was able to find out information from both the government and the opposition. Politicians also use Twitter to reach out to the people, significantly the younger generation. (Respondent 28)

Respondents 5 and 7 reported that Twitter is a popular platform among young politically-inclined voters who appreciate the site's brief, quick, and succinct nature of political information. They found Twitter to be a go-to platform for gathering information from like-minded individuals who are open-minded and interested in politics.

On Twitter, there are mostly young people who are interested in politics. Also, the news spreads faster, briefer and more succinctly on Twitter. With only a few words, we can get the information quickly. (Respondent 5)

Twitter users are more open-minded than other platforms because most of them are young. What they share on Twitter is more

politically thoughtful and better than on Facebook, that is my opinion.
(Respondent 7)

In contrast to Twitter, fewer respondents cited Facebook and Instagram as their preferred platforms for acquiring political information. Only 15 respondents mentioned Facebook, and 11 cited Instagram. Respondent 16, however, highlighted the potential benefits of Facebook for political discussion, noting that it offers a more mature and extended form of discourse on politics compared to other platforms without the disruptive cursing and bickering that can sometimes occur. Gerodimos and Justinussen (2015) support this view, arguing that Facebook's interface, with its News Feed architecture, provides an equal space for text and images, facilitates online conversation and cross-syndication, and enables the quick dissemination of political content. These features of Facebook's design can encourage productive and respectful political discussion without the disruptive cursing and bickering that can occur on other social media platforms.

I am more inclined to use Facebook and Instagram because I love reading the arguments and more in-depth explanations about political issues. Not just cursing or incivility argument. The average Facebook user is between 30 to 50 years old. So, they have more experience and understanding of politics. (Respondent 16)

Privacy Concerns and the Ephemerality of Social Media Use

The majority of respondents in this study preferred to acquire political information passively and did not engage in commenting or interacting with political news on social media. Only six respondents reported discussing, debating, and commenting on political information. Respondent 10 expressed concern that commenting on Facebook might violate their privacy and upset their friends due to differing political beliefs.

No, I will not comment on any news column posted on Facebook. I feel it violates my privacy as a Facebook user. Suppose I make a comment that a particular party may not like. In that case, my profile page will automatically be mentioned and go viral and invade my privacy.
(Respondent 10)

Similarly, Respondent 16 reported that he refrained from commenting on politics publicly and only discussed the issue with close friends and family.

I'm more interested in being a reader and taking the essence of grounded and factual comments to serve as a talking point with the family. I am

less inclined to comment on any of the social media platforms because I am not interested in being too visible on social media. (Respondent 16)

Additionally, Respondents 32 and 42 indicated that they did not want to attract negative attention from netizens or upset their friends with different political ideologies. This preference for privacy in relation to political views aligns with previous research, which indicates that surveillance practices on social media lead many individuals to be hesitant to share their political leanings for fear of disrupting their relationships with their family and friends (Marwick 2012; Trottier 2012; Westcott and Owen 2013).

I have never shared the news on social media. One of the reasons is that most of my friends on Facebook are my teachers and close friends. I'm also worried that if I share about a particular party or support only one party, it may upset my friends who are not supporting the party. (Respondent 32)

No, because I am not an expert in these political matters. I also fear misunderstandings among my friends that could lead to debate. (Respondent 42)

Fourteen respondents explained that, while they do not typically comment on political information on social media, they do share such content through the story function on platforms like WhatsApp and Instagram. This function allows for short-lived content which can be consumed within seconds or minutes and may only be viewed a certain number of times or for a specific amount of time (Bayer et al. 2016; Cavalcanti et al. 2017; Švecová 2017). Although the content remains open to their friends or the public, depending on their privacy settings, this represents an interesting development. Despite the reluctance to share political information permanently on their timeline, the respondents seem willing to share such content briefly through the story function, as stated by Respondents 2, 4 and 18. This suggests that the story function may provide a space for a more ephemeral sharing of political content, which the respondents may view as less risky than permanent posts on their profiles.

Yes. Sometimes I will share funny news and “troll” or “meme” related to politics, and I will share it on WhatsApp story. (Respondent 2)

Yes. Usually, I will retweet the news on Twitter or share the news on the WhatsApp status and groups. (Respondent 4)

I did not comment on the news I read on social media. If I were to comment, I prefer to do it through WhatsApp status, which can only

be read by my friends and family only. I also retweet and share the news that interests me. (Respondent 18)

Interpersonal Political Conversation

Although many respondents are hesitant to publicly share their political views on social media, the results suggest that they still engage in political discussions using the information they acquire from their social media. Specifically, 24 respondents reported using private channels such as family and personal WhatsApp groups to discuss their views. This finding is consistent with Johns' (2020) argument that encrypted chat platforms provide a "safe space" for discussing politically sensitive topics. More specifically, Respondents 18 and 22 indicated a preference for discussing political matters with their family and friends through private WhatsApp groups.

I usually have discussions with friends about political issues in Malaysia. We usually do it through the WhatsApp group. (Respondent 18)

I'll share it on a WhatsApp group since most of my family members are older people. With technology, I can share the news more quickly with them. (Respondent 22)

Respondent 11 also reported a preference for using WhatsApp groups, noting that they tend to be more "relaxed" and civil than open social media platforms.

I usually discuss politics through WhatsApp group. Through the platform, we can discuss issues in a more relaxed manner, and we can share opinions more civilly. Usually, on Facebook, for example, there are sensitive political issues or topics, especially race, ethnicity, and religion. So, I chose to discuss this through WhatsApp group to avoid fights and to make others uncomfortable. (Respondent 11)

Despite concerns about incivility and negativity in political discussions on social media, the majority of respondents agreed that these debates and discussions are influential in shaping their opinions on political issues. This finding aligns with Ohme's (2019) argument that social media provides young voters with access to a wide range of relevant information during election campaigns. As first-time voters, young people value direct political communication as a means of obtaining information about candidates and issues, and they tend to tailor their news consumption accordingly to meet their unique needs. Respondents 3, 9, 32 and 44 noted that the debates and information presented on Twitter and Facebook were persuasive in helping them form their opinions. Despite concerns about incivility

and negativity in the political discussions on social media, the potential benefits of these platforms for informing and engaging young voters should not be overlooked.

Yes, the discussion on social media can change my view on a particular political issue. Social media helps me understand and support a particular issue that I am not very clear about. (Respondent 3)

A discussion through the comment space or status sharing on Facebook can change my views on a political issue. More so on Twitter, people debate and comment almost every day, which sometimes makes me change my views on some political issues. (Respondent 9)

People have their arguments on social media, with elements of trolls, satire, jokes, etc. This will make the debate in the comment space even hotter. Indirectly, the debate can change my views, for example, from supporting politician A to politician B. (Respondent 32)

Yes, usually discussions on Twitter, because it is not biased to only one side. There were times when arguments and debates on Twitter changed my opinion about politicians or political issues. (Respondent 44)

DISCUSSION

The study results demonstrate that first-time young Malay voters are not entirely politically apathetic, as all respondents expressed their intention to vote in the next election. Even among those who claimed to have no interest in seeking political information on social media, they were exposed to such content inadvertently through the status updates posted by their social networking site connections. This exposure may have the potential to serve as a gateway effect, leading to increased political engagement offline (Bode 2017).

The public sphere theory posits that citizens should openly exchange their views and opinions on social media. However, the interactional aspect of this theory appears to be minimal (Habermas 1996). Although the respondents did encounter political information on social media, their interactions were primarily passive as they made sense of, interpreted, and used the output. Many refrained from even low-effort online political participatory activities such as posting short political comments (Knoll, Mathess and Heiss 2020). The participants were constrained by the presence of surveillance practices on social media and were hesitant to express their political leanings honestly for fear of upsetting family and friends (Marwick 2012; Trottier 2012). The participants typically refrained from publicly debating political matters on social media to avoid confrontational discussions with people

who held opposing political views. Furthermore, they worried about interpersonal friction caused by differences in political opinion and retaliated by self-censoring on social media (Kruse, Norris and Flinchum 2018).

The dimension of interaction within the public sphere in social media is clearly pluralised, resulting in private, clustered public spheres, particularly through instant messaging platforms such as WhatsApp. The respondents extend their discussions privately with their family and friends through the WhatsApp group platform, using the information acquired from semi-public platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. This facilitates communicative heterogeneity and fragmentation, creating disparate islands of political communication (Kruse, Norris and Flinchum 2018).

Although many respondents are reluctant to engage in political discussions on their social media pages, they are more comfortable sharing political information via Instagram and WhatsApp stories. These stories are typically visible to their social media friends and networks for approximately 24 hours (Newman 2018). The stories' function is built on the principle of "ephemerality," meaning that the creation of political content can be consumed for a specific amount of time and is momentary in nature (Bayer et al. 2016). This is similar to the nature of oral and direct communication, where the content is volatile and ephemeral and not stored by default (Cavalcanti et al. 2017; Švecová 2017). The incidental and ephemeral consumption of political information has become widespread among the younger generations. Future research is necessary to better understand the audiences' motivations and satisfaction when sharing political information through the stories function.

CONCLUSION

This study suggests that the internet has expanded and decentralised the previously concentrated public sphere of mass media. However, this does not necessarily imply that online political participation has transformed into a private, consumer-driven activity. While younger individuals may be less inclined to actively engage in political discourse, instead leaning towards passive consumption on social media, platforms like WhatsApp appear to significantly influence their willingness to discuss and explore political issues. WhatsApp's conversational yet private nature provides a unique space for open dialogue among trusted connections. Although people still rely on social media for information, they tend to prefer private discussions about politics with their close contacts on WhatsApp. One contributing factor is the public and non-private nature of social networks, which

can undermine individuals' sense of security. Despite the value of social media for accessing and sharing news, expressing opinions, and promoting political actions, it remains susceptible to monitoring by the authorities.

This study is limited to Malay respondents, which restricts the generalisability of the findings. Future research should include respondents from different races and use other methodological settings such as focus groups or surveys. This study also acknowledges that other social variables must be considered when determining why and how first-time voters obtain and use political information through social media. A comparative study involving other social media platforms and other groups of young people with similar or varying contexts would shed further light on the influence of social media in political communication.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research work is supported by the Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) Grand Challenge Research Grant (PPPI/UGC_0119/FKP/051000/13419).

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