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MOTIVATIONS FOR ACTIVISM: EXPLORING BERSIH ACTIVISTS' COMMUNICATIVE ECOLOGIES

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ABSTRACT

Social media provides people with new ways of approaching and engaging in politics. This article explores how Bersih activists develop new communicative practices and motivations for their activism. The study investigates the communicative strategies that they employed in using social media to mobilize their supporters and explores their personal communicative experiences which are likely to enhance their public commitment. My study draws on data collected from a longitudinal study conducted before and after the 14th General Election (GE14) in 2018, which saw the fall of the dominant Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition after ruling continuously for six decades. Findings show Bersih activism uses mediated and unmediated communication strategies in mobilization, each is organized in a particular way that connects activists with their local and global networks. This study concludes that motivation moderates the three layers of activists' communicative ecology and the integration of social media into their everyday life helps to actualize collective affordances. Bersih activists use social media to deliver truthful information about their activism as this helps to combat the distribution of fake news, and reinforce the political participation that helps to sustain Malaysian democracy.

Keywords: motivation, activism, communicative ecology, social media

INTRODUCTION

Living in a social media-active society, citizens are increasingly informed and engaged in public issues that require their critical examination. They participate in issues through social media which enables them to connect and organize themselves in offline activism (Gerbaudo & Trere, 2015). Activists use social media to mobilize physical protests, effect social change and raise awareness (Y.H. Khoo, 2014). In 2007, Bersih activists such as Hishamuddin Rais (tukartiub.blogspot.com) and Haris Ibrahim (harisibrahim.wordpress.com) relied

on blogs to disseminate information. Later in 2011, Bersih 2.0 and Global Bersih activists built their supporter base on Facebook and exchanged ideas with others using WhatsApp. Other activism that actively uses social media platforms for mobilisation includes the Indignados movement in Spain, Arab Spring (Castells 2012; Gerbaudo 2012), the Occupy Movement in North America (Bennett and Segerberg 2012) and the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong (Lee and Chan 2016).

Social media activism refers to the communicative action individuals perform by using social media platforms to collectively address a problem (Chon & Park, 2020). The growing popularity of social media activism makes it imperative to understand how activists use social media for digital and offline activism, deal with contentious issues, organize groups to influence others through collective action and solidarity, and solve problems using communication. Many digital activism studies explored the impact of technology or increased social media use on political participation, focussing on the government's role or the difference between online and traditional offline participation (Pandey et al. 2019), but nothing much is done on the grassroots. To fill in this gap, this article intends to take the perspective of the activists in a semi-authoritarian and multi-ethnic country like Malaysia, investigating how activists coordinate their activities locally and globally, and sustain it over time by using social media platforms. It uses the communicative ecology framework to explore the inter-relationships between different communication methods and social dimensions in a specific movement.

The Coalition of Clean and Fair elections ("Bersih" in Malay) is one of the largest movements in Malaysia that had organized five major rallies nationwide demanding electoral reform and a better democracy (Chan 2018). Their supporters spread the news online through blogging and social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. They used #bersih hashtags (Postill 2014) and added picBadges and Bersih-related images to their personal Facebook profiles (J.B.Y. Lim 2014). Those who live in semi-rural areas used Facebook and WhatsApp to spread information about the corruption and nepotism of prominent politicians during the GE14 campaigns (Tapsell 2018). The participatory nature of social media allows users to express personal emotions that are eventually weaved into a common narrative and bond them together in the public sphere (M. Lim 2012; Johns and Cheong 2019). With the growing emphasis on participation, ordinary people can easily use social media platforms to express their personal concerns and be part of collective decision-making.

However, the growing practice of online fake news has caused the Malaysian government to introduce a controversial Anti-Fake News law in April, 2018, just a month before the GE14, and this requires us to reassess the role of social media

in digital activism. A similar development can be traced globally where several incidents such as 2016's United States presidential election campaigns which were aided by Facebook's user data and fake images used by the Burmese officials to cover up the actual tragedy in the Rohingya conflict have resulted in the United Nations to adopt a Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and Fake News, Disinformation and Propaganda on 3 March 2017. To combat the spread of fake news and digital exploitation, social media platforms including Facebook, YouTube and Twitter as well as Google have agreed to the terms set.

Some Copenhagen School scholars argued former Prime Minister Najib Razak's decision on fake news represented a pressing security threat politically and constitutes a securitisation move (Neo, 2021). Political issues that involve scandalous 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) and growing discontent among citizens against the ruling government were seen as a threat that led Najib's government to take measures. Najib's government announced that fake news posed a threat to national security and criticized the opposition for spreading it. Najib himself spoke publicly of how fake news had jeopardized the country's economic growth, including at the Global Transformation Forum (2017). Unfortunately, the censorship mechanism was not properly developed and transparent, leading to criticisms that his government was denying freedom of expression and information. Later, the act was scrapped in October 2019 after the Pakatan Harapan government came to power and claimed that fake news required a new definition.

This article explores how activists develop communicative strategies to ensure truthful information about the electoral system is disseminated to combat fake news. It also investigates the various motivations influencing Bersih activists, how they mobilize others in political activism and the way they use social media to sustain large social networks. By using Foth and Hearn's (2007) communicative ecology framework that sees social media as an ecology; a context in which the communication process occurs, this article conceptualizes activism as a communicative process in which individuals collectively resolve political problems. This conception adapts Bennet and Segerberg's (2013) logic of connective action and argues that individuals use social media to connect by sharing personalized ideas and resources for activism. This study conceptualizes the connection formed through social media is not completely leaderless but more individual-driven. It addresses two main research questions: (1) What drives the Bersih activists to engage in political activism? (2) To what extent do they use social media to shape political content that would generate and sustain political change sentiment?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Motivations for Participating in Online Activism

Tilly (2004) argues activism is a series of contentious activities that people perform collectively with the aim to change social issues. It comprises networks of information interactions between different individuals or groups that shared collective identities and engaged in political or cultural conflicts (Diani 1992). Citizens' participation in online activism can be determined by motivation which refers to the accessibility and ability to use the Internet including their levels of interest, confidence, knowledge as well as open-mindedness towards democracy (Norris 2001).

Most of the literature on social movement emphasizes structural and societal factors than individuals. Some argue that social movements were caused by groups' discontent with access to resources (McCarthy and Zald 1977). While some research focused on frustrations as factors that motivate individuals or collective political actions, others recognized social media as a significant tool that stimulates activism through mobilization and interaction (Harlow 2011; Boulianne 2015) and enables people to connect and organize among themselves in offline activism on contentious issues (Earl et al. 2014; Gerbaudo and Trere 2015; Kavada 2015). Montagno et al. (2021) argue social media motivate people to collectively address a problem and mobilize them in participating in the actual protest.

Other motivations that continue to influence activists today include individuals' political consciousness, personal life expressions of oppressions and solidary with groups (Kunst et al. 2018). For marginalized groups, the motivation is there when resources such as leaders, organizing skills, and interested individuals come together (Jenkins 1983; McCarthy and Zald 2002). When opportunities for activism are made available, individuals are more likely to become activists.

Social Media Shapes Individuals' Communicative Ecology

A communicative ecology is an approach to understanding the dynamic interrelationships between technology, content, and social (Foth and Hearn, 2007). This approach places a communication process in context and explores the type of communication activities people engage in as well as the availability and usage of resources in everyday life (Tacchi and Watkins, 2007). The technological layer refers to devices that connect people, the discursive layer refers to the communicative content, themes, and ideas, and the social layer refers to the people involved in the communication process. Communicative ecology assumes individuals as autonomous and driven by their own personal preferences

and needs (Ngu 2021). Therefore, it is important for a social movement to come up with strategies that encourage individuals to personally express their opinions and willingly practise public commitment. The notion of ecology serves as a foundation to critically assess the interaction between the three layers (S. Seol et al. 2016) within the Bersih movement in Malaysia.

Activists use social media to frame common narratives and foster solidarities. Selvanathan et al. (2020) argue Bersih activists embrace diversity by collaborating with other groups and communicating in multiple languages to craft an inclusive movement identity. Social media allows multiple interactions to be made regardless of geographical locations (J.B.Y. Lim 2017). Every activist's communicative ecology involves multiple mixtures of media that are organized in specific ways (Jo Tacchi et al. 2003) and each platform uniquely frames narratives based on a constantly changing dynamics of social and political protest in different countries. Paying attention to individuals' own practices of social media for mobilization helps to add insights to the various layers of the communicative ecology of the collective action (Mattoni, 2017).

Moreover, activists use social media to pressure the government for alternative political spaces (M. Lim 2012; Subramaniam 2011). Social media facilitate new ways of information consumption and discussions of everyday political content (Woolley and Howard 2018). The platforms allow activists to interact with people from their personal social networks (Bennett and Segerberg 2011), debate with citizens on public interest issues (Johns 2020) and empower them to coordinate collective actions to produce political change (Tye et al. 2018). These strengths benefit the activism but are seen as potential weaknesses that led to the rise of slacktivism, and superficiality. It is crude and simplistic to assume that social media alone brings democracy without a critical examination of how social media companies have exploited the users' privacy and commodified information for commercial interest in support of consumerism and capitalism (Fuchs, 2014). Furthermore, Edwards (2019) argues face-to-face engagement is essential in forming a public sphere that involves debate, deliberation, and consensus-building because it makes people evaluate their own views and reveal true feelings in front of those who opposed them. In contrast, digital engagement by like-minded groups has yet to be translated into generating consensus on social and economic issues hence people are wired but disconnected. Today's public spheres require a combination of different elements that can protect the common interest when communication is segmented and privatized. This leads to the argument of this article on how the Bersih activists' multiple-media-platforms communication organizes their social interactions with others to collectively address problems and make alternative voices visible online.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts Foth and Hearn's (2007) communicative ecology and its three layers – technological, discursive, and social to investigate the motivations that drive people's political participation. It takes a qualitative approach that combines interviews, content analysis of the Bersih movement's official social media content, and secondary sources to understand the different motivations to participate in the Bersih movement that emerged during the GE14. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 Bersih activists, from 2017 to 2019. Half was the Steering committee members for 2018-2020 such as the chairperson, vice-chairpersons for Sabah and Sarawak, former Secretariat manager, media officer, and regional secretariat members. The rest comprised student activists, academic researchers, former leaders of political parties who endorsed the movement. The key informants are selected because of their active involvement in the movement, either holding leadership roles or participating actively in the Bersih rallies. They are from Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Johor, Sabah, and Sarawak.

CASE STUDY: BERSIH MOVEMENT

The Bersih movement started as a Joint Action Committee for Electoral Reform (JACER) between opposition parties in 2005 and it was relaunched as Bersih 2.0, a nonpartisan and apolitical movement in 2010. Bersih's mass rallies built solidarities among supporters (G.C. Khoo 2013); their personal stories and experiences of injustices were amplified and circulated through social media hence provoking heated national debate and conversations online. Scholars applauded the rallies had united people of different political and economic civil society groups (Y.H. Khoo 2014). The capacity to form solidarities and unity among people reflects the Bersih movement's ability in reinvigorating the opposition forces in the country against the centralized semi-authoritarianism government. This collective effort continues until the present with the activists providing social support (i.e. food aid) to the people during the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, continuous election monitoring and support for Anti-Hopping Law (2022) under the country's nation-rebuilding plan – Malaysia Madani (2023).

FINDINGS

Technological layer: Shape Individual and Network Communications

Technology operates based on its operating principles, each is unique in bringing different dimensions to activities and reshaping them differently (Altheide, 1994). The emergence of social media has placed average citizens at the centre of political conversations and allows them to express freely (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011). Activists have optimized the features of social media platforms to curate personalized messages targeting their supporters and monitor the information flows and sources to balance their online communities' objectives and privacy. Although physical locations such as school, work, and home are at the core of our everyday life, we no longer rely primarily on them to communicate and get information. Based on Foth and Hearn's (2007) local and global place-based networks, Bersih activists use social media to form networks of citizens who reside inside and outside of Malaysia. It is a communicative ecology based around a range of socially linked portfolios online that represent a group of local-global trans-geography networked community. Their supporters move around while communicating about socio-political issues with one another which eventually form mediated conversations within intertwined online and offline spaces. Social media facilitate these networked and interactive communications and sustain them.

Habermas (1989) argues everyday political talk may appear trivial, but it forms the basis of rational public deliberation while Ikegami (2000) and Putnam (2000) treat personal interactions as important factor in forming shared public life (Breese, 2011). Most users may talk about political issues in a personally mediated fashion and do not have sufficient knowledge to critically judge the information source, hence rely on platforms that they and their social networks use to ensure source credibility. The growing practice of online fake news has made users vulnerable when they start spreading information that they thought was likely to be true or consistent with their pre-existing assumptions (Buchanan 2020). The continuous use of fake news to polarize public opinion and promote extremism and hate speech has required activists to reassess the role of social media in activism and revise their communication strategies to tackle the challenges caused by fake news. Bersih activists are motivated to manage political conversations flowing within their communicative ecology with the help of social media distribution networks where they could develop counterclaims and critical narratives against predominant mainstream claims, fake news, misinformation, political propaganda and hate speech.

Activists today use multiple social media platforms to amplify their messages and mobilize citizens (Poell 2014), and connect to people and networks that they

desire to influence (Zhao et al. 2016). Based on the interviews, Bersih activists said they needed to understand the diverse communicative needs of their supporters in order to effectively use social media platforms to mobilize and engage them. Therefore, they always kept social and political contexts in mind when delivering information online. Activist Johor imagined his supporters as concerned citizens who are interested in politics and thus he would update truthful and relevant content timely through multiple platforms. He pointed out,

> Different platforms serve different purposes, I use WhatsApp to send personal texts to other activists and volunteers. For Facebook, we use it for network publicity and to generate wider awareness. During rallies, I encouraged supporters to use Telegram because it's more secured.

The motivation for truthful information was also echoed by another activist who was aware of potential state surveillance that might have infiltrated their online working groups. These political or government spies who secretly forwarded the chat messages to the authorities were probably interpreting the content out of context and using them for political propaganda. Other threats that activists received include government surveillance, police arrests during Bersih rallies and professional cyber troopers hired to spread distrust and division among citizens through social media. To prevent this, Activist Penang said he was selective in his choice of platforms as he preferred the one that provides heavy encryption for communication. Platforms that provide better security and privacy reassured Bersih activists and their supporters to freely interact and express their political views in private groups.

Activist Sarawak was skeptical about anonymous people posting about Bersih who might have ulterior motives. He admitted that social media was a double-edged sword that could bring truthful information as well as fake news. To maintain a good civil space for online political discourse, he said,

> We need to adopt a hybrid media use and stay critical in reading the online content through accessing multiple sources because we never know when we will be manipulated, there is too many fake news...checking the information from official Bersih page is better.

Social media are used for communication and mobilization because they effectively diffuse information in multiple overlapping networks and engage diverse populations (M. Lim 2017). And, citizens prefer to get information from social media than state-controlled mainstream media because they are open to opposing views, more transparent, and free (J.B.Y. Lim 2014). Despite potential data leakage or surveillance by the platform operators, some Bersih activists

preferred to use social media platforms to promote the movement's ideology because they are easily accessible and beyond state control. Activist Sabah stated,

> It is important for us to tell the people that the Malaysian constitution has granted every citizen the legal right to express themselves. People are afraid to join Bersih because they think it is haram ("illegal") for them to go on the street to protest, and they constantly asked whether we have the permit from government. I always want to tell them it is your right to speak out and demand for clean and fair elections.

To ensure truthful information is accessible to all citizens, a media officer cum administrator of Bersih's official social media platforms noted that it was important for the movement to optimize the online searchability of Bersih information so that their supporters will not be manipulated by fake news. Therefore, she often added hashtags to the content she posted online. Among the popular hashtags were #bersih, #KeluarMengundi ("Come out to vote"), #GE14, and #Ubah ("Change"). She believed these hashtags as conversational markers will help to direct the flow of information and conversations in the networked public, and make Bersih-related information more visible. The constant up-to-date online conversations will compensate for its short lifespan. When activists are able to moderate and control the flow of information online through customizing the setting of their social media platforms and validating the information sources, this helps to fulfill the demands for truthful information by the users.

Social layer: Connect Users to form Solidarity

Activists use different communication platforms to exchange information and strengthen mutual support. Networking helps them to maintain relationships that support information flow and social influence (Gilchrist, 2009). Activists' network of contacts comprises their families, friends, co-workers, members of civil society, religious groups, and civil servants from the government whom they regularly deal with. Their personal community networking affects the social media platform they use and the way they communicate to keep their values relevant in society. They use social media to form solidarity, devotion, and commitment to others in a collective, within the social movements.

The Bersih activists interviewed revealed that they formed solidarity through sharing individual emotions and experiences that are made collective. Their personal use of social media formed communal bonding between them and their social networks locally and globally such as Global Bersih. Over time, this bonding gradually nurtured their public-spirited commitments, turning them from concerned citizens to human rights and electoral reform activists. Their second

motivation for activism was their belief that social and political justice must be upheld. This view was equally shared among their social networks and develops out of individuals' empathy for each other. The regular use of social media backed up with the support from Bersih activists' social networks and the local communities help to make online activism effective.

Activist Johor expressed that he was motivated to uphold justice and create political changes because his Christian social network commits to loving others like how God loves them. He said,

> [at first] I volunteer to help people to register for voters…then I get to know more about phantom voters been used during election to try to cheat and to the work of Bersih we became more aware of some of these fraudulent methods, so when Bersih 2.0 rally was organized in KL [Kuala Lumpur] in 2011, I went up with a few friends to join the protest…I didn't do it as a Christian, but I did it as Malaysian.

Gradually, Activist Johor's personal commitment to bringing social and political justice set him as a role model among his social networks. He managed to influence and mobilize his friends to support the activism. He created local content and share it with his networks through social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Telegram that they used on a daily basis. After some years, his active participation in the Bersih movement finally bridged his perception of the movement's cause as both personal (individual) and societal (collective) issue. To enhance activists' commitment to the Bersih movement, social media keep their ties with others strong through consistent social support from offline community.

Activist Penang expressed his involvement in the Bersih movement started from some informal face-to-face discussions with friends who were politically interested. They first kept in touch through email and blogging, then social media on a more regular basis. Social media interaction has turned their political action into more individualized, decentralized and flexible. He recalled how he was invited for his experience and expertise as a researcher to restructure the Bersih group and eventually formed strong networks with other activists. Likewise, in Bersih 4, the rally organisers adopted Firechat, an application used by activists of the Umbrella revolution (2015) in Hong Kong. The motivated feelings of obligation towards others are enhanced with shared narratives and solidarities that are formed and sustained through regular use of the same social media platforms by members of their local and global networks.

Another activist who was a former staff for the Bersih Secretariat said he started to pay attention to politics when the mass media reported about former deputy

Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim being unfairly terminated from his official position in 1998. He supported the Reformasi movement initiated by Anwar's supporters to stop injustices and started seeking information about it with his friends through reading blogs, discussing on forum and attending political talks. He said,

> Despite coming from a family who is very active in BN, my mum was the woman wing chief and my dad was the secretary of…I do join the activities, go and listen [to] this kind of [political] things.

These Bersih activists understand the importance of social and political justice in a democratic society. Their motivations to seek social and political justice are in line with people's right to receive fairness and equality as human beings. These personal needs and beliefs for justices have framed the way they see a community in society and shaped their social relationships with others. Their sense of community has shifted from collective behavior to a more personalized communal experience. In the past decade, the growing emphasis on social media use among activists' social networks is due to the popularity of the platforms which provide a connecting structure that can sustain connections among members and accumulate actions over time. The growing personalization due to digital media practices has influenced Bersih activists' distribution and consumption of media content. Their social networks' preferences of communication can influence their own and the movement's communication choices too.

Discursive Layer: Personalise Movement's Narrative to Make it Visible

The technological, social, and discursive layers of communicative ecology are interwoven (Foth & Hearn, 2007). The discursive layer focuses on the content or ideology of the movement that can be presented in various forms depending on the selection, organization and presentation of experience and information (Altheide, 1994), An observation on the Bersih movement's official Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube between 2017 and 2019 showed some recurring themes such as people's voices, fair elections, anti-corruption, and good governance. These themes constitute the conversations and narratives of Bersih's ecology that emphasizes people are the priority. Bersih activists have consistently spoken for people's rights by pressuring the government and Election Commission to ensure clean and fair elections. They always asserted the right of *rakyat* ("People" in Malay) in their press statements, online posts, and events. Bersih activists are not only connected to their supporters through social media but also by the content they consumed and shared collectively within their social networks. Although individuals are fragmented, content is abundant online and attention span is short, social media features nurture short interactions and simplified narratives that are

likely to go viral (M. Lim, 2013) which help to direct users to engage in quick but continuous conversations online. Stories that focus on individuals, for example the story of the icon of democracy – Bersih Auntie Annie can easily be retold in casual online chat. Bersih activists are motivated to share personal stories or frame a narrative that humanizes political issues so that they appeal to the public. Stories about how people's lives are affected by poor governance and their rights as citizens proved to have stronger appeal to the public's sympathies and attention, compared to complex issues published on official news outlets.

The Bersih movement's capacity in mobilizing supporters and gaining support from people of multiple ethnicities, races and religious backgrounds has made them popular and influential (Welsh 2011; G.C. Khoo 2013; Y.H. Khoo 2014). However, there were claims that the movement was not able to represent everyone's rights and voices because it was dominated by the educated middle-class elites and their demands for change were complex and difficult to understand. Activist Penang rebuked the claim and explained,

> I don't expect rural folks to lead the electoral reform, but I hope they are willing to follow and help to spread the words among their people. When Bersih was put under negative light, we do need support from both urban and rural folks. Our demands are very relatable to the everyday lives of the rural folks as we cover local issues and the basic rights of the people.

Social media platforms, and smartphone had sped up the transition from elite dominance to grassroots by opening up strictly controlled political space and the accessibility of alternative political views (Nadzri 2018; Tapsell 2018). Social media's instantaneity and virality have increased the visibility of the Bersih movement's narratives when individuals' personal narratives about their demands for clean and fair elections are weaved into #bersih collective stories. The growing prominence of personal expressions encourages individuals to commit publicly and form transethnic solidarities online. To sum up, the third motivation which believes the Bersih movement always prioritizes people's rights echo this research on political participation, which stated that people join and support Bersih because they believe the movement defends their rights and speaks for them. Social media have provided Bersih activists with a new means of personal expression and overcome communicative barriers in online activism.

DISCUSSIONS

This article concludes with a few meaningful findings. First, social changes occur when there is a change in individuals' communicative ecologies. The result

shows that individuals' motivations affect the three layers of their communicative ecology. Activists' personal beliefs and experiences formed the motivations that drove them to join the Bersih movement and mobilize other citizens to support clean and fair elections. Second, this study conceptualizes public commitment at an individual level. Different experiences and interior motivations cause different forms of mobilization. Third, integrating social media into activists' everyday lives creates opportunities for collective action. The growing personalization of social media has positive impact on activism and activists' political communications. Social media makes a difference in the Bersih movement because activists use them to mediate a complex communicative ecology that allows multifaceted conversations between citizens who fight for electoral reform and the state. Bersih activists appear more innovative in their encounters with media and proactive in turning those mediated experiences into a collective mobilization.

Social media has nurtured multiple possibilities that motivate many individuals to participate in activism. Instead of presenting the Bersih case as a fragmented collection without any underlying common characteristics, this article tries to synthetically analyze Bersih activists' motivations to use social media for communication and mobilisation from an integrated viewpoint that incorporates technology, information, and social interaction. To sum up, Bersih activists use social media to 1) Shape individual and network communications, 2) Connect their supporters to form solidarity, and 3) Personalize the movement's narrative and make it more visible. The findings are organized in a social setting where social, technological, and discursive layers collide with one another based on the notion of ecology. This ecology approach sees social media as not isolated, but involving multiple media platforms that organize social interactions in unique ways. Each individual's communicative ecology is weaved into the Bersih movement's narrative, and eventually forms larger communicative ecology that involves multiple levels of media use and social interactions.

The primary contribution of this study is the analysis of motivation in moderating the three layers of communicative ecology through a narrative view of activists' personal experiences and the way they conceptualize their own communicative ecology. It empirically documents Bersih online activism and the activists' communicative practices and motivations. The application of the communicative ecology approach provides nuances and a deeper analysis of the role of social media in activism, thereby contributing to Malaysian digital activism research. This study also extends the theoretical dimension by attempting to link it to a broader literature by applying Foth and Hearn's framework and the technological, social and discursive layers.

All the activists interviewed admitted that the role of social media is significant in activism but were not fully convinced that technology alone could stimulate solid political and societal transformation or change the fundamental political narratives of Malaysian politics. For example, the two successful Bersih rallies in 2011 and 2012 had used social media to mobilize large crowds to the streets to protest. But soon after the BN government retained its power in the 13th general elections (2013), many Bersih supporters felt disappointed and assumed that activism was not able to change the politics in Malaysia. In order to reinvigorate the momentum of reform, Bersih activists relied more heavily on social media in updating and exposing the electoral irregularities (Chan 2018). On the other hand, the BN government hired cyber troopers to disrupt the digital networks by manipulating citizens' emotions and beliefs, conducting online surveillance, and legally penalizing political dissent (Johns and Cheong 2019).

Many activists experienced the brutality of police during public demonstrations, raids to the Bersih secretariat office, and sudden arrests of their leaders. These misconducts drew massive attention to the public governance and human rights conditions in Malaysia, hence prompting citizens' political empathy towards the victims.

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has demonstrated activists' motivations to support the Bersih movement stem from their beliefs and personal experiences, and eventually affect their three layers of communicative ecology. Therefore, they are driven to demand social change by using social media to shape their communications, connect their supporters to form solidarity, and personalize the movement's narrative and make it more visible online. However, most voices are collected from the Bersih steering committee and their supporting partners living in Malaysia. This limitation could be improved by including Global Bersih activists that reside abroad and rely primarily on social media for their activism. Future research could also expand the scope of this study to include more online grassroots activists and give a more critical lens on the role of social media in Bersih activism.

With the public attention gradually shifted from institutional politics to COVID-19, transparency and accountability are even more needed in the governance especially the spending of public funds in food aid and COVID relief programmes. Therefore, scrutiny from civil society and NGOs remains necessary to reduce the chance of misconduct. Now, entering the endemic stage, the GE15 has opened the door to personalized politics and people are demanding more

truthful information on the distribution of public resources and the power structure in the new government after years of political crisis.

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