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Socio-culture of Youths: Impact of Personal Values towards Effective Communication

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Abstract

Understanding the sociocultural context of youths; personal values, will give direction in planning communication strategies and initiatives to motivate participation of youths. In addition, it will give insights to youths preferred tools, medium, design and approach for communication. This study aims to understand the personal values that are being upheld by youths in Malaysia, and identify the effective communication medium that is aligned to their personal values. The objectives were attained through systematic review of secondary data available in open sources platforms, published between the years 2017-2021. Thematic analysis was done using Atlas.Ti followed by an expert focus group discussions (FGD) to validate the findings. Among the main personal values that are upheld by youths in Malaysia from the 10 Basic Human Values Theory (BHV Theory), are hedonism, self-direction and power. Secondary findings from this study shows that youths in Malaysia use social media as their main communication preference platform i.e., WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter and TikTok. Personal values influence social media preference, in terms of platform, design and approach with characteristics i.e., affordability (most are free of charge), ease of use, control, and having personalized and customization features. Social media enables them to interact, collaborate, entertain, stay connected, and voice out.

Keywords: Social Media, Youths, Personal Values, Effective Communication.

Introduction

Youths are an important segment of the society and the future of the nation. General assumptions are usually being made to illustrate them are that they are individualistic in nature, non-partisan to any political roles, and are attracted to superficial hedonism. Many studies have tried to decipher the sociocultural framework of these youths, including in the aspect of personal values that is being upheld by them.

The importance of understanding the sociocultural aspects of youths is displayed as many corporate and social organizations are revamping the organization structure, visions and missions to attract youths' participation in the organization. This is also illustrated in many marketing and business strategies, which dynamically responds to the young customers' segment market, and changing business strategies according to their needs and preferences.

Personal values are most often described as a set of abstract goals, beliefs, etc. that influence a person's view of the world, and can be used to predict and change a certain behaviour. Different generations have different preferences of communications according to their values and technology environment advancement. As a society, many different generations co-exist together, and need to communicate effectively with each other. This is true for every setting of society, in organizations, in families and in corporate sectors. Communication barriers exist when there is a generational gap between these different individuals. Many organizations which are mostly led by seniors in a different generation, are struggling to find ways and approach to effectively communicate with youths, internally in the organization, and externally to the consumers, clients or society in general.

Youth

The United Nations defines 'youth' as people between 15-24 years of age for statistical purposes (United Nation, 2021). In Malaysia, the National Youth Policy (2015) defines youth as people aged 15-30 years old and they are divided into three groups: (i) early youth (aged 15-18 years old), (ii) middle youth (aged 19-24 years old), and (iii) adult youth (aged 25-30 years old). Youth contributes to 28% of the total population, or approximately 10 million people (Worldometers, 2020; IYRES, 2019).

Youth categorized as majority Gen Z, are the digital native and technology savvy youth which were born between the years 1996 to year 2012. They were acquainted with digital technology from a young age by their parents who were Gen X, the electronically-engaged generation; thus, created them to become adaptive to fast-changing technology. It was supported by contemporary data presented, stating that Gen Z had 98% of Internet as well as 99% smartphone penetration (The Star, 2019). Everything was at their fingertips, as smartphones are considered as their necessity – this generation would be heavily hooked on their gadgets or devices to communicate, to socialize, to learn and do almost everything. They required up to five screen experiences, explicitly as smartphone, computer, television (smart TV) or tablet. As technology evolved, these youth crave for instantaneous gratification and happiness.

Youth Population in Malaysia

Youth represents the largest proportion of the Malaysian population, 28%; thus, it is vital to concentrate on this population segment. As stated in the Youth Development Report, Malaysia was ranked 34 out of 183 global countries, and 9 out of 49 Commonwealth countries, for an overall score of 0.729 which shows that Malaysian youth have good potential to be developed (IYRES, 2019).

'Youth' is a group of people from the age range of 15 to 30 years old that can be categorized as Gen Z and partly Gen Y. The Gen Z group can be divided into early youth and middle youth, and Gen Y belongs to adult youth. Both Gen Z and Gen Y are digital native and technology-savvy youth who were born between the years 1991 to 2012. Since their parents are members of Gen X which is the electronically engaged generation, they are introduced to digital technology at an early age, a characteristic that enables them to quickly adapt to rapid technological changes. Moreover, current available data suggests that Gen Z is highly connected with 98% having Internet access and 99% having smartphones (The Star, 2019).

Personal Values

Individuals' personal values provide the guiding principles of their behavior and actions in many different circumstances (Sagiv & Schwartz, 2021; Sagiv et al., 2017). Through time and across situations, they influence perception, cognition, and behavior. Values receive outsized attention in the everyday discourse of education, work, religion, and politics (Sagiv & Schwartz, 2021). Everybody has values, but everyone's values are different. A range of factors affect these differences, including personal experiences, culture, upbringing, and others (Weber, 2017). Values are applicable across situations and over time.

An individual can have many values, with some values being more important than others. The values an individual hold may or may not influence the way they behave. An individual may exercise certain values in everyday life. It may be that someone has a personal value they hold dear, but they are not practicing it in their daily lives. Furthermore, an individual's values may not line up with their actions. An important value motivates action more strongly. Values can therefore be distinguished from other attributes by their relative importance (Sagiv & Schwartz, 2021).

Ten Basic Human Values Theory

According to the Basic Human Values theory from Schwartz (1992), there are ten (10) basic human values. Each of the ten basic values can be characterized by describing its central motivational goal as stated below:

1. Self-Direction. Independent thought and action; choosing, creating, exploring.
2. Stimulation. Excitement, novelty, and challenge in life.
3. Hedonism. Pleasure and sensuous gratification for oneself.
4. Achievement. Personal success through demonstrating competence according to social standards.
5. Power. Social status and prestige, control or dominance over people and resources.
6. Security. Safety, harmony, and stability of society, of relationships, and of self.
7. Conformity. Restraint of actions, inclinations, and impulses likely to upset or harm others and violate social expectations or norms.
8. Tradition. Respect, commitment, and acceptance of the customs and ideas that traditional culture or religion provide the self.
9. Benevolence. Preserving and enhancing the welfare of those with whom one is in frequent personal contact (the 'in-group').
10. Universalism. Understanding, appreciation, tolerance, and protection for the welfare of all people and for nature.

The ten basic values are intended to include all the core values recognized in cultures around the world. These ten values cover the distinct content categories found in earlier value theories, in value questionnaires from different cultures, and in religious and philosophical discussions of values (Schwartz, 2005).

An empirical research recently published on understanding personal values and communication preference of Generation Z highlights that youths valued respect, effective communication, and relationships in the workplace and that personal values play a significant role in their lives (De Jesus, 2020). Comparison between low- and middle-income background youths, shows that both groups of youths uphold purpose in life and certain personal values

and beliefs (Bronk et al., 2020). Importance of understanding personal values to determine the right tools and medium for communication is clear. A quantitative study in Hong Kong, analysed the medium of preference for communication to traditional communication, face-to-face communication, old mobile messaging and new mobile messaging. This study also found that different mixtures of communication preferences and relationship cultivation strategies will result in different relationship qualities (Lu, 2020).

Materials and Methods

The objectives were attained through systematic review of secondary data available in open sources platforms, published between the years 2017-2021. Thematic analysis was done using Atlas.Ti followed by an expert focus group discussions (FGD) to validate the findings.

Systematic Literature Review

Systematic review refers to a more or less systematic approach to collecting and synthesising all relevant research findings that fit pre-defined inclusion criteria, to set up a solid foundation for driving theory development and advancing knowledge and helps to obtain an in-depth understanding of a specific research field. This study undertook a systematic review of the previous publications relating to youth and social media.

There are several general databases used to search for publications in order to obtain the research objectives highlighted such as Science Direct, Google Scholar, Web of Science and other open source data available, which is published from 2017-2021 (5 years). Literature search commenced until the database is exhaustive.

Searches were done using keywords that are identified to meet the requirements needed and answer all research questions. Keywords used are as follows: '*personal values*', '*communication preference*', '*digital platform preference*', '*media preference*', '*Malaysian youths*' and '*Gen Z*'. Screening of the material compiled was done using inclusion and exclusion criteria identified. All study findings were documented in a database, and themed accordingly to the different aspects of youth, social media, personal value and sociocultural elements.

Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

Three expert Focus Group Discussions (FGD) were conducted between August and September 2021, to discuss the important findings and triangulate it with new insights from the experts. Each session took up about 2 hours to briefly explain the findings from secondary data and listened to their opinion and experience. All the findings were used to answer all the research questions. The FGDs were transcribed into text-based format to review all the important points from the discussion. Table 1 shows the list of respondents for all the FGDs conducted.

Table 1

List of respondents for FGD

Name of Respondent	Affiliation
Expert A	Academician & Institute for Youth Research Malaysia (IYRES)
Expert B	Communication MCMC
Expert C	Non- Governmental Organization (NGO)
Expert D	Business –Marketing
Expert E	Business – Human Resources

Results and Discussion

Personal Values Uphold by Youths in Malaysia

Youth or young generation is no different in those ways than the generations before them. Every generation is unique in its own way. Youth differ from other segments of the population due to their love of creativity, advanced technology, and ability to share experiences online using social media (Stahl, 2021). Among the main personal values that are upheld by youths in Malaysia from the 10 Basic Human Values Theory (BHV Theory), are hedonism, self-direction and power

Hedonism

Many studies have shown that social media is primarily used by youth for entertainment and lifestyle (Daniel et al., 2021; Alimna et al., 2020; Hossain, 2019; Tjiptono et al., 2019; Shariffadeen & Manaf, 2018; Eva, 2018). It is found that 62% out of 138 articles that had been reviewed, stated these values using the words ‘fun’, ‘pleasure’, ‘entertainment’, ‘enjoy’, ‘watch’ which refer to hedonism. Tiktok and IG reels as entertainment by scrolling from one video to another, as the input in these two platforms is easy to follow and understand. YouTube is the most-used platform in watching videos using their smartphones (Contributor, 2019) or in Netflix, Ifix, Viu and Tonton for longer movies. A research study also found that TV programmes (PF) like *Pencetus Ummah* (PU) for leisure and entertainment, rather than as a source of Islamic information (Shariffadeen & Manaf, 2018). They love the votes, celebrities involved in these Islamic programmes. Few studies found several interesting findings about youth in Southeast Asia, which one could conclude is that youth love anything related to social be it - stories, people, humour, rare, beauty, gossip, music and others (Tjiptono et al, 2019). Even on Twitter, they felt satisfaction or pleasure when they are ‘ranting’ at people or bashing them, according to Schwartz (2006), this describes the hedonism value, as pursuit of pleasure. Furthermore, it relieves stress, stops boredom, diverts from their routine and provides youth with instant access to the Internet at an affordable price (Ahad & Ansari, 2017; Eva, 2018).

“... Ranting is part of hedonism actually. When you bash people then you feel superior, that’s pleasure yes. So that’s the value that Twitter showcase. Showing that you’re right. That’s a kind of a pleasure...”
(Expert E)

Self-Direction

Youth nowadays are known to be more independent and freer than previous generations. These youth are open-minded and curious. Internet access makes things easier for these young people, so they don't need to wait for their parents to teach them things or give them advice. As they become equipped with a wealth of information and tendency towards transparency, they are able to compare facts, and develop curiosity on lots of things (Murad et al., 2019; Tjiptono et al., 2019).

“...youth likes a discourse, they like to discuss. They open up to different views and insights, that’s why I like to talk to them ...”
(Expert A)

“... relationship between youths and adults should be cultivated. The adults shouldn’t dictate the youths, we should give them space... we coach and guide them, cultivation is a concept in youth development – youth adult partnership.”

(Expert A)

These youth are not satisfied with just following instructions and completing a to-do list. They like to be involved in innovative tasks and want to feel like they are challenging themselves to develop new solutions to problems. This young generation values the opportunities to actually sit and talk with their colleagues and superiors, giving them a chance to ask questions and voice their opinions. The issues are particularly important to youth, diversity, equity and inclusion (Stahl, 2021). Furthermore, they are concerned that communication via e-mail may not accurately convey the message, there is a lack of interaction and they are not able to get immediate feedback (Tjiptono et al., 2019).

“... We have to create policies that encourage self-direction with minimal boundaries. They should be given a clear direction, but have freedom to arrange what to do within the boundaries. For example, in Islam, there are many boundaries being set but there is still room for creativity. You can do whatever you want as long as you don’t cross the boundaries...”
(Expert D)

Similar as found globally, Malaysian youth significantly are interested in becoming entrepreneurs, to start their own business, (Global Web Index, 2021; The Star, 2018a, 2018b). This job-creator mindset, instead of job-hunter perspective, is mostly driven by monetary reasons, saying that that earning potential is much higher as an entrepreneur than working for someone else (The Star, 2018a; 2018b). They are interested in starting their own business providing they have gained sufficient work experience and have accumulated enough capital in their current job. These findings indicate that this generation prefers to be an entrepreneur than just an employee in a company over a longer period. They may start their career development by looking for a job with stable income and some professional development opportunities. Once they have obtained sufficient knowledge and skills to start their own business, they may be keen to become their own boss with their own savings as the start-up capital.

“... many more youths are pursuing free-lancing jobs, even though they are overqualified. I think this is because they want the self-satisfaction, the freedom... businessman are the next doctors and engineers in future ...”
(Expert E)

They are willing to take work challenges and willing to sacrifice immediate pleasures for a greater future reward as long as they think they are worthwhile. Experiences are more valuable for them. In the same manner, social freedom or socializing between men and women, and the resulting changes to their values, lifestyles, and practices are in turn influenced by the continuously changing global environment (Ahad & Ansari, 2017). All these were under self-direction values, which also includes curiosity, creativity, choosing their own goal, independence, freedom and self-respect toward their life choices.

The value of belonging is also included in this value that is related to niche. Niche focuses on a specific interest group (population) or demographic (market) that is defined by unique preferences, needs, deeply-held desires or identities. Numerous niche markets exist, including finance, fashion, lifestyle, health, relationships, and business. Typically, these markets are broken down into niches or sub-categories. With a niche that is narrower and applicable to youth, there is an emotional connection, a sense of belonging. Therefore, a niche that pertains to youth is more easily reached.

“...now there is something called the niche ecosystem.... People consumes things following it's niche. In the niche, it's about a group of people with the same interest, there are no hierarchy ... it's decentralized...”
(Expert E)

Power

Over 37% of youth are selective about the friends they choose for their close circle of friends as defined by their friendship-value and in person communication even though they are open to making friends anywhere on the planet (Stahl, 2021; Parry & Gentina, 2020). The issues youth face also includes declining social skills, unwillingness to interact with the outside world, as well as an inability to cope with stress and life pressures. However, they value personal communication and communication that focuses on recognizing the individual (Hughes, 2018).

Youth tend to be able to change many aspects of their personal identities much quicker and easier than it was before to express their identities because it's an easier and more convenient way of coping with identity change while maintaining anonymity in their personal lives (Parry & Gentina, 2020). They know how to manage their digital privacy because they have grown up with a keen understanding of the line between public and private in online settings, and, thus, preserve their privacy. This can explain why youth has less interest in Facebook, preferring social media. They keep their interactions restricted to their intimate friends with private communication or present a carefully curated image (Gentina, 2020; Murad et al., 2019).

These are under the category of power, according to Ten Basic Human Values by Schwartz (2006). Under these power values, it is under social recognition, the key factor for motivation in the digital age. Everybody has varying values, beliefs, drivers and work styles, yet we all share one common element — we are all human, so we are motivated and inspired by recognition. Recognition is not similar to rewards, but could be part of it.

Youth desires for social recognition yet they want to preserve their identity between the real and virtual world. Likewise, high media consumption and heavy use of digital technology

creates strong external loci of control where users may attempt to impress others by posting, or keeping over 100,000 double-taps they get from social media. Through external locus of control, these youths end up seeking validation from others and become dependent on them.

While in organization, peer-to-peer social recognition is a concept that grew out of newer social technologies, diminishing hierarchy at organization, and the increasing diversity of today's organizations, which are of various generations. It could come from gamification,

According to IYRES research, Political Socialisation Domain has the lowest with 29.03, followed by the economy domain (IYRES, 2019). Malaysia is experiencing a transition era from an ethnically driven political environment to a political situation defined by social class. This new generation having the voting right has expressed a need for political change, freedom of speech, transparency in political moves, and policies. As they experience a transformational political era, Generation Z in Malaysia shows an increased awareness and interest in political issues. The change in the ruling party brought along several critical challenges to the government to rebuild the nation. In 2019, the Youth Societies and Youth Development Act was passed to establish a new definition of youth by lowering the youth age range from 15 to 40 years to 15 to 30 years (The Star, 2019b). In the same year, the voting age was lowered to 18 from 21. This aligned with personal values upheld by youth, the authority to be non-partisan and become more neutral and mature; where they choose to educate, not trolling. For youths, nothing is cast in stone – everything is dynamic, as is the politics.

Social media such as Facebook and Twitter and Web become the main platform for Malaysian youth to encourage young Malaysians to participate in politics and to perform online politics activities such as to discuss and share their views over public and political issues. They post links to political articles, comment and express opinions about politics, search for political information and issues, and also listen to other views via online. Youtube is taken as a medium of personal video sharing and utilised for downloading and uploading videos of political lectures and other political movements (Abdullah et al., 2021; Zainon & Hashim, 2017).

Other Values

The countless exposures to global issues such as economic stability, polarizing social issues, greenhouse effects, as well as the overreliance on social media have also cultivated a philanthropist spirit in these youth (Chung, 2017). In response to a message or image they see on social media, youth become inspired on how to make the world a better place (Chung, 2017). These are categorized under universalism values based on (Schwartz, 2006). Under these values, there are few sub-category named as a world of peace, protecting the environment, unity with nature, and social justice.

On the other hand, with the current situation in the world as well as Malaysia, youth feel somewhat pessimistic and uncertain with the world they inherit (Parry & Gentina, 2020). Even globally, almost 37% of young people think the world is getting worse, compared to 20% who think it is getting better (39% think neither) (Gentina, 2020; Broadbent et al., 2017). A recent survey has found that Malaysian youth have mixed views on the country's future, with 46 percent saying it is heading in the "right" direction, while another 42 per cent believe it is

going the “wrong” way. This is the survey done by Merdeka Center’s ‘National Youth Survey 2021’, with 2520 respondents aged 18 to 30 across Malaysia in February 2021.

Security value included family security, national security, social order and health. The feeling secure is something that matters for these youth. With much information online, they know everything going-on within their fingertips. A study found that the widely held belief that youth are more vulnerable to the impact of COVID-19 (REFSA, 2020). Rural youth tend to be more seriously affected compared to their urban counterparts, with a more drastic income reduction. For the recent graduates, many lost their internship or job offers as they are often the first ones to be laid off. Undeniably each age group experiences different difficulties. As the younger, youth are less established in their career, hence more vulnerable, but at the same time, older youth have more commitments and dependents. These however increase the insecurities of youth towards their future (REFSA, 2020).

Effective Communication Mediums

Personal values influence social media preference, in terms of platform, design and approach with characteristics of the platforms such as affordability of the social media platforms, ease of use, control, and having personalized and customization features. Social media enables them to interact, collaborate, entertain, stay connected, and voice out, which satisfies youths personal values.

WhatsApp is the most-used social media platform that is widely chosen by youth and Malaysians generally, for personal, fast and direct communication. It is easier, and formed groups for particular subjects to discuss and get information. Moreover, WhatsApp allows businesses to create a customized business profile for their phone numbers, which clients can refer to. It is aligned with the statement from an experts in FGD as below:

“... space to communicate and convince on good values. WhatsApp is a powerful medium and can be one of the best platform to convey precise and apt information to youths. I also use WhatsApp Groups to guide them about good values ...” (Expert C)

“... about the use of social media, I agree, the most used social media is WhatsApp, followed by Instagram, Facebook and fourth is YouTube ... and there’s also Twitter, Telegram and TikTok... youths choose social media according to their preference and values” (Expert B)

Instagram is also one of the preferred social media platforms for youths to socialize with features they like. It is found that a total of 15.25 million or 47.0% of the total Malaysian population are Instagram users, which had significantly increased from 12 million in 2018 to 14 million in 2020 (Napoleon, 2021; MCMC, 2020). The majority of them were women, representing about 56.5%. The users aged 18 to 34 years old were the largest user group which accounted for 63.6% of total users or 9.7 million users. Instagram provides graphic images with short videos (reels) and trending music which is aligned with their personal values of entertainment (hedonism).

Twitter had 49.0% as the most-used social media platform with total users of 3.35 million equivalent to 12.9% of Malaysian total population (Napoleon, 2021). Although there is no exact number of Malaysian youth users for Twitter, it is estimated that more than 50% of the

users were in the range of youth ages. Twitter functions as a micro-blogging platform where users communicate via short text posts known as tweets. Currently, there are Twitter chats for recurring conversations and discussions among members.

“...Twitter is more transparent, there’s no closed group most of the contents are open and public. We can search I Twitter and get a lot of information in Twitter. For the time being, Twitter does not delete contents, and so many information are there...” (Expert B)

“... if you really want to know the real Malaysians, you can see it in Twitter. People don’t really think about the language used there... spontaneously people just Tweet their post and replies in Twitter...” (Expert B)

Being the most current social media, TikTok has 4 million users with 41% of total users being aged 16 to 24 years old (Omnicores, 2021). It had 35.5% of most-used social platforms in Malaysia, and became the highest download as mobile apps, along with Foodpanda, Zoom, PUBG during the pandemic in these 2 years (Hootsuits, 2021; 2020).

The interface and functions of TikTok are user friendly along with music, text and visual pictures which leads to incredibly strong engagement rates and loyalty among youth. Although the entertainment and dance videos monopolize TikTok users' time and interest, yet the youth also increasingly learn about and discuss weightier issues such as climate change, politics, and news (ETX Daily Up, 2021).

It should be noted that many TikTok videos are spreading outside of its own platform, in which the distribution of TikTok content is reaching other social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and even Facebook. The particular campaign or challenges create rapid movement and spread of TikTok videos as one of the quickest methods and ways of virality.

“...TikTok started with pure entertainment, but currently people are starting to create meaningful contents to disseminate information, in an entertaining approach especially to youths...” (Expert B)

Understanding youths’ personal values guides us to understand the various approach and medium if communication that are preferred and effective to them. This is important to make sure that the right and important information reaches the youths whether it’s a government announcement, or a campaign or educational message, to ensure the communication loop is effective.

Conclusion

Generations are influenced by contextual factors such as the economy, technological advances, education and surroundings, which lead to developing their own values. Each generation has its own characteristics and understanding their preference will help in crafting the right strategy for effective communication. In general, youths uphold three main values which are hedonism, self-direction and power. Personal values influence social media preference, in terms of platform, design and approach. Youths are the digital natives whereby smartphones are considered as a life necessity.

Social media is the youth preference mainstream medium for gaining information, socializing and entertainment. This is due to its characteristics i.e., affordability (most are free of charge),

ease of use, control, and having personalized and customization features. Social media enables them to interact, collaborate, entertain, stay connected, and voice out. Malaysian youths prefer Instagram, Twitter, TikTok and YouTube as the main social media platforms because of their easy features. The approach they prefer are simple text with visual graphics and audio. This approach and design of information is related to youths' personal gratification towards social media use which are entertainment and lifestyle. However, this is a general conclusion as the analysis was primarily using secondary data available. Further study should be executed to validate this conclusion.

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Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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