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Political Modernization and Digital Democracy: The Internet Participation of Malaysia Domestic Citizens to "2021–2022 Malaysian Floods" Event in Public Policy Process of Flood Response

Niwen Liu[a], Megat Al Imran Yasin[a], Syed Agil Alsagoff[a], Ng Chwee Fang[b], Mengyu Li[a]

[a]Department of Communication, Faculty of Modern Languages & Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, 43400, Selangor, Malaysia, [b]Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Modern Languages & Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, 43400, Selangor, Malaysia
Corresponding Author's Email: megat@upm.edu.my

Abstract

In the mid-century, Internet information technology began to flourish worldwide, and a dramatic revolution brought about the Internet information age. The Internet has changed the way of human political life. A staggering number of Internet users began to form a significant force to participate in and influence national politics and public policy. The Internet has transformed traditional public policy processes on a global scale. Citizen participation on the Internet has gained widespread attention in politics, public administration, and public policy issues. The staggering amount of politically relevant information posted by citizens on the Internet has begun to form a significant political force that involves and influences politics and government public policy decisions. This study discusses the Malaysian government's response to the flood event, the well-known "2021–2022 Malaysian Floods," to explore the current state of political modernization and digital democracy in Malaysia based on bottom-up participation mechanisms of citizens' Internet involvement in public policy processes. This paper argues that public participation in our public policy through effective Internet will have a broader democratic base and will be closer to the goal of democratic and scientific decision-making.

Keywords: Citizen Online Participation, Public Policy Process, Policy-Making, Government Response, "2021–2022 Malaysian Floods"

Introduction

In the history of human civilization, every technological revolution has brought about the structural transformation of human society. In the mid-1990s, the technology of the Internet began to flourish globally, ushering in the Information Age. Scholars Toffler and Toffler (1996, pp.5-6) defined the Information Age as "the Third Wave" of human society,

which involved changes in "institutional and political structure," "ethics," "culture," and "opinion." As early as 1983, A. Toffler, from a futurist perspective, in his influential book, *Previews & Premises: An Interview with the Author of Future Shock and The Third Wave*, has foreseen the deep and complex relations between politics and information in the Information Age. Nowadays, the influence of the Internet on us has penetrated all aspects, changing the way of lifestyle (Wang, 2013). Our social activities have gradually transferred from physical reality to the networking sphere. The Internet provides us with new ways and methods to engage in various private and public affairs (Yuan et al., 2006). Based on the contribution of the Internet, citizens can obtain political information, follow the progress of major political events, express political opinions and interest demands, comment on international politics, and even participate in government decision-making online (Wang, 2013). Thereby, we have recognized that the Internet is no longer merely a power of technology since it has conferred the ability for citizens to interact with politics. Likewise, it is a more critical political resource that empowers the authority to hear from the public immediately (Li, 2009).

Fast and convenient Internet technology allows most Internet users to quickly learn about the country's public decisions and facilitate the democratization process in Malaysia. The openness of national public policies enables most Internet users to put forward ideas and actively participate in them. Along with the rapid development of Internet technology, the rapid expansion of the size of Internet users, and the rapid changes in the structure of Internet users, there is a need for further exploration regarding the impact of Internet cyber opinion on public policy in Malaysia. It is necessary to proactively exert subjective initiative and analyze it from the perspective of public administration and communication science. Broaden research ideas and innovate research methods to minimize the negative impact of Internet public opinion on public policy-making in Malaysia. Due to the Internet users of Malaysia spread their online opinions to the Malaysian government's response to "2021–2022 Malaysian Floods," therefore, this study is aimed to explore certain issues as flowing:

1. *Discuss the impact of Malaysian Internet users' online involvement on the Malaysian government's public policy-making regarding the flood event;*
2. *Explore the current circumstances of Malaysian political modernization and digital democracy.*

Political Modernization in the Information Age

Modernists have claimed that technology would be able to transform world politics (Keohane & Nye, 1998). The rapid technological development of the Internet has changed almost every field of life of human beings, leading to the transformation of the social, economic, and political structure in the Information Age (Simon et al., 2017). Since the 1990s, enormous research studies relevant to politics and the Internet have emerged. Many scholars have coined massive new terms in their works to describe the politics on the Internet, such as cyber politics, virtual politics, politics on the net, and politics of cyberspace (Alexander & Pal, 1998; Browning, 2002; Davis, 2009; Sunstein, 2001). Western studies mainly are from the perspective of sociology and communication, around aspects of the networking politics theory, networking political participation (e-participation), networking democracy (e-democracy, digital democracy, electronic democracy), networking government (e-government, virtual government, digital government), and networking public space (Choucri, 2000; Islam, 2008; Jordan, 1999; Kellner, 1998; Masters et al., 2004). In the networking space, which is similar to a virtual society or a digital kingdom (Jordan, 1999), cyber power has affected politics in nearly every dimension.

The power of networking emerges from citizens' Internet participation, which also reflects the progress of political modernization in the Information Age. Particularly, information is power (Nye, 2004), and the power of Internet information is the central factor in impacting political democracy on the Internet, which is a power that possibly changes the in charge of authority. The staggering amount of politically-related information posted by citizens on the Internet has begun to form a significant political force that involves and influences politics and government in public policy decisions (Wang, 2013). Political modernization, as scholars Shi and Zhang (2013) put it, is a process of development and evolution from lower to higher levels; it implies the movement of a country's constitutional system and political life from the fetish of authority, autocracy, and the rule of man to rationality, autonomy, democracy, and the rule of law. Citizens' participation in public policy on the Internet has contributed to the increasing development of political modernization and the rising of digital democracy (Wang, 2013). As described by Huntington (1988), an effective channel for influencing political evolution is citizen participation, and the level and scale of citizen participation are the primary keys to measuring political modernization.

The Attitudes toward Digital Democracy in Research

The Information Age has revealed a series of issues in the political field, which this paper mentioned above. The main subject of these research issues is politics on the Internet and is centered on digital democracy (Wang, 2013). Although Western scholars, based on the advanced theoretical and experimental achievements in a democratic society, have conducted many research studies on digital democracy, they continuously argue about whether the Internet is a leading influence positively or negatively on democracy. Scholar Agrawal (2001) proposed three forms, techno-positivism, techno-neutralism, and techno-negativism, which challenge what information and communication technology can bring to bear on the political paradigms. However, earlier since the 1990s, western scholars have adopted three sects of digital democracy attitudes which are positivism, negativism, and neutralism, to discuss the impact of the Internet on democracy. This paper sheds light on positive and negative attitudes toward digital democracy.

In the literature, optimistic scholars often use consultative democracy as a theoretical perspective when discussing digital democracy, which coincides with the revival of consultative democracy in the second half of the 20th century (Wang, 2013). With its emphasis on information exchange, freedom of debate, tolerance, understanding, and compromise from citizens (Eagan, 2016), the theory of consultative democracy constructs a civil society that provides an open public sphere for allowing citizens to debate freely on public affairs. Fortunately, the Internet offers the possibility to experience this ideal, and many scholars argue that the Internet has brought prosperity to consultative democracy (Wang, 2013). Scholars who share the same view, for example, Sunstein (2001) refers to the belief that the Internet is good for democracy and that new technological communication can only make things better; Browning (2002) argues that citizens expressing their opinions on the Internet can form a united force that can exert influence on the government. More in detail, Browning delivers that in the Internet society, citizens who are scattered are enabled to quickly express their group voices due to common interests or common concerns about a particular issue and make their voices heard by the government or politicians, thus giving an imprint to democracy and representation potentially and sincerely. However, on the other side, pessimists believe that the emergence of the Internet harms democracy, just as the digital divide and the monopoly of Internet information make some people lose their right to

speak and be excluded entirely from politics (Robins & Webster, 1999). Applbaum (1999) states that although there is a consensus view among citizens on the Internet, this dialogue mechanism is more limited to the self-identification of citizens, and its impact on the existing political system is undoubtedly biased.

The Types of Citizens' Internet Participation

The impact of citizens' online participation is particularly prominent in public policy. However, there are several variables that affect the outcome of citizens' online participation, such as online public opinion, government attitudes, political elites, intellectual elites, media channels, civil society organizations, and social celebrities (Wang, 2013). These variables can be divided into two categories, one is internal variables, including online public opinion and government attitudes; the other is external variables. In the process of citizens' online participation in public policy, the changes in internal variables affect the final effect of participation. The external variables, on the other hand, act as catalysts, accelerators, and amplifiers of the event process and jointly shape the process of citizens' Internet participation with the internal variables. Citizens' Internet participation types based on "the Internet public opinion—the government attitude" can be distinguished into high-efficiency, low-efficiency, forced, isolated, hindered, and public enemy (Wang, 2013, p. 229–232).

· **High-efficiency**: Netizens are highly motivated to participate in a public event online, and public opinion is expressed enthusiastically, forming a dominant online public opinion on the Internet and spreading it continuously, causing a broad impact on society. The government profoundly intervenes to support and endorse the behavior of online public opinion and online participation, or the government is the initiating subject of online participation. Some external variables, such as the media and scholars, report and comment on the event to expand its social influence; however, they may criticize and suggest, in general, that they affirm the government's attitude of absorbing public opinion and the active participation of citizens in public affairs.

· **Low-efficiency**: The government takes an active and supportive attitude to encourage citizen participation online, and in many cases, the initiator of online participation is the government itself. External variables, such as public figures and mass media, generally analyze and comment on events, especially questioning the extent of citizen participation. For a variety of reasons, online participation is not high and public opinion is not expressed strongly enough.

· **Forced**: A particular event is hotly debated by netizens online, expressing their opinions and suggestions on the event with great enthusiasm. The more extensive range of online and public opinion constitutes a public opinion field spreading from the Internet to reality. The initiator is not the government, but the government's tacit approval of citizen participation on the Internet has contributed to netizens' continued high level of participation. In terms of external variables, scholars, media, and public figures frequently express views and support public opinions and instructions or expressions of opinion by politicians at critical moments. The government is generally forced to respond under online solid public opinion pressure.

· **Isolated**: A public issue is discussed by a relatively small number of netizens, for various reasons, it does not have a large-scale impact on the Internet, and the external variables are barely involved. Due to the lack of response from many netizens, public opinion does not receive support and response from the government. There is also no

way to know whether citizens' participation behaviors are passed on to the government.

· **Hindered**: After a specific focal event occurs, citizens' online participation is active, and the discussion is lively, forming a large-scale online public opinion. Through the dissemination mechanism of the Internet, online public opinion is continuously spread and amplified, producing a relatively substantial social impact. External variables are generally not very active, and the mass media and specialist academics are usually silent. The government has a negative attitude toward participation and takes control of it, which hinders the participation of netizens until it stops.

· **Public-Enemy**: In some exceptional cases, a certain amount of public opinion is expressed on the Internet, and a specific range of influence is generated by discussing an event, but there is no general agreement or support. The government takes a firm stance against such occurrences. The external variables adopt a silent attitude, and when they comment, they do so fiercely and critically. Without the support of online public opinion and under the control of the government, this kind of online participation becomes a public-enemy and is difficult to survive.

The Bottom-Up Participation Mechanism

Within six different types of citizens' Internet participation, two mechanisms appear in the dynamic participation process: the bottom-up and the top-down (Wang, 2013). The participation starts from ordinary citizens in the bottom-up participation mechanism, forming a powerful force on the Internet that follows the bottom-up path to pressure the policy-making initiators and influence public policy (Figure 1). Under this participation mechanism, the origin of online participation behavior is generally the appearance of a focus event, which triggers heated discussion on the Internet, and at this node, influenced by the internal and external variables of Internet participation, the bottom-up participation develops along with two different directions, resulting in four different types of citizens' Internet participation which are forced, hindered, isolated, and public-enemy.
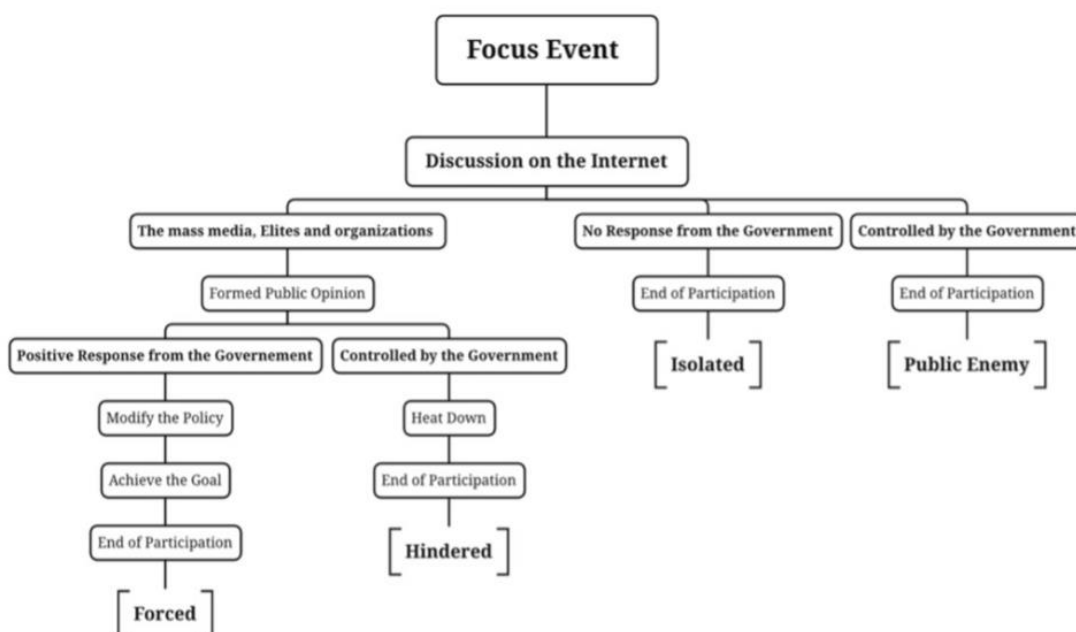

Figure 1 Two mechanisms

The "2021–2022 Malaysian Floods" Event

On 16th December 2021, a natural disaster took place in Malaysia. The tropical depression named TWENTYNINE made landfall on the eastern coast of peninsular Malaysia, bringing torrential downpours throughout the peninsula, and 33 districts in eight states were directly impacted (IFRC, 2021). According to the ASEN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management, early on the 17th, "more than 380 people have been displaced to evacuation centers" (ECHO Daily Flash, 2021). Soon, on the next day, "a total of 428 families (1766 persons) were displaced in 46 evacuation centers" (AHA Centre, 2021). Unfortunately, the population of flood victims population increased rapidly day by day. As of 3rd January, up to 50 deaths have been reported by the media (ECHO Daily Flash, 2022); overall, 71,000 residents were caused to be displaced, and over 125,000 people have been affected by the floods (CNN, 2022). As shown in Table 1, the disaster situation of each state in the "2021–2022 Malaysian Floods" events.

Table 1

Description of "2021-2022 Malaysian Floods" events

State	Displaced persons [a]	Flooded Area by states [b] (km^2)	Total loss due to floods by states [c] (RM million)
Selangor	22,947	7.24	3,100
Pahang	34,924	28.87	593.2
Melaka	564	0.63	85.2
Negeri Sembilan	208	0.03	77.1
Johor	nd [d]	8.25	50.1
Kuala Lumpur	415	0.01	32.4
Kelantan	3,593	32.32	22.0
Sabah	nd	nd	9.3
Perak	285	0.08	3.4
Terengganu	63	nd	0.4
Sarawak	nd	nd	0.01

a. Data in December 2021 from Malaysia's Agensi Pengurusan Bencana, and ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance;
b. Data from December 2021 to January 2022 in the study by scholars Tew et al. (2022);
c. Data in January 2022 from the Department of Statistics Malaysia (dosm.gov.my), and ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute (iseas.edu.sg);
d. nd-not found.

As the affected population rose against such quickly and continued, Malaysian government officials declared this event a once-in-a-century disaster (Hassan, 2021).

However, while facing a natural occurrence with super destructive power, the Malaysian authorities blamed each other instead of reacting fast to the flood. Malaysian domestic citizens relied on themselves in the first place when damage was caused (Zainuddin, 2021). Table 2 demonstrates the theme discussions, releasing time, and the number of viewings from TikTok and YouTube hashtags or posts about flood events. The Malaysian public actively discussed flood disasters and rescued themselves. Like this, countless opinions from citizens were spread on social networking platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram; meanwhile, many influential political and intellectual elites shared their views on the mass media; which led to a heated discussion among Malaysian domestic citizens on the Internet about the flood incident progress and the government flood response. Due to its delayed response and apathy, the Malaysian government has suffered massive criticism from the public (Kumar, 2021). For example, slogans like "the government has failed us," and "we only have each other" appeared on the Internet.

Table 2
Top discussions for 2021–2022 Malaysian flood events on social media of TikTok and YouTube

Source	User Name	Title or Hashtag	NO. of Viewings (million)	Theme Discussed	Releasing Time
TikTok	N/A	#malaysiaflood	13.2		Dec 2021 till now
	.belle15	Malaysia right now	7.1		Dec 2021
YouTube	South China Morning Post	Malaysia suffers worst floods in decades after torrential rains	0.7		Dec 2021
	Vulnerability	(Hundreds of cars drown after flood hit Shah Alam)	0.6	Saving animals in flood; displaced peoples; drowned cars; property loss; pray for Malaysia; Gaining insurance	Dec 2021
	NDNews Weather	(Peninsula sinking with heavy rain and flood of Malaysia everywhere)	0.7		Dec 2021
	Wahr	All the water in the world has hit Malaysia! The Shah Alam city has become the sea!	1.9		Dec 2021
	Kumaar Family	Klang flood destroys our stuff	0.4		Dec 2021

With heavy pressure coming from the public online, the Malaysia government made responses aiding to resume affected regions, 453 vehicles were deployed, and a total of 66,015 personnel were directed which are from the Royal Malaysia Police (RMP or PDRM), Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF or ATM), Fire and Rescue Department of Malaysia (JBPA), Malaysia Civil Defence Force (MCDF or APM), Malaysian Public Works Department (JKR), Department of Social Welfare (JKM) and state agencies, and various departments of the

government have also begun to carry out emergency response measures. The Malaysian Prime Minister—Ismail Sabri Yaakob, said, "The government will allocate 100 million ringgit for house and infrastructure repairs and provide 1,000 ringgit each to affected households" (Shukry, 2021). Later on 3rd January, Ismail announced, "Five states—Kelantan, the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur, Melaka, Terengganu, and Perak—have achieved 100% disbursement of Bantuan Wang Ihsan (BWI) to heads of households affected by the recent floods," "the BWI or compassionate aid, payments for Negeri Sembilan had reached 82.7%, Pahang 65.5%, and Selangor 47.6%", and he added, "over 28,000 household heads received compassionate aid" (The Edge Markets, 2022). See Table 3, which is the description of thematic posts on social media about flood relief during the 2021–2022 flood events in Malaysia.

Table 3
Flood-relief themes for 2021-2022 Malaysian flood events posted on the Social Media of Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, etc.

Theme	Description
Transportation Systems	Posts on functioning public transports, closed roads or bridges
Power Net	Posts on power supplies in cities or rural areas
Weather Conditions	Posts on weather conditions or warnings
Volunteering/ Donations	Posts on how to assist in the flood relief work or to donate food, clothes, etc.
Sheltering/ Evacuation	Posts on abandonment of houses and shelters for the victims in need
Animals	Posts on caring and helping for animals
Greeting/Praying	Posts on wishing families, friends and strangers to stay safe
Requests for specific helps	Posts on asking for some helps, such as for evacuation and shelters

Note: Facebook was the most extensively employed digital platform. The most highly sought and exchanged information involved eyewitness pictures or videos, road or traffic conditions, and weather conditions or warnings (Yap et al., 2022).

Despite the Malaysian government's efforts to rescue from the disaster, public dissatisfaction has not subsided. Without warning from the Malaysian government, this severe disaster has made the public angry at an all-time high; citizens' focus has kept loopholes in the government's public policy on flood disasters (Hunter, 2021). Some disaster management experts first pointed to coordination (Lim, 2022). As shown in Table 4, it is the description of topics and posts related to flood self-rescue by Malaysian citizens through Twitter. To calm angry citizens, Ismail has claimed the "weaknesses in the federal agencies' coordination efforts" and promised to modify them (Shukry, 2021). Later in the post-disaster, as reported by the National Disaster Management Agency (Nadma)—the Prime Minister

directed to simplify the distribution process of BWI to ensure that every district office facilitated the distribution of the aid (The Edge Markets, 2022). See Table 4.

Table 4
Reports about people taking to Twitter to help each other in "2021–2022 Malaysian Floods"

Source of reports	Title of reports	Time of posting	Social media hashtag or users reported	Theme of Social media posts
TheStar (thestar.com.my)	Flood Alert: People take to social media to call for help	Dec 2021	#banjirdarurat; @hafizmdrahim; @theramss2; @mhmdamirkhalil	Evacuation; food assistance; electricity; shelters
TheStar (thestar.com.my)	INTERACTIVE: How Malaysians mobilised online to aid flood victims	Dec 2021	150 thousand users within six days	To organise and deliver help to victims
New Straits Times (nst.com.my)	Malaysians rally on social media to help Klang Valley flood victims	Dec 2021	#DaruratBanjir; @hxrithn; @ayeitsdharsh	To seek and offer helps for Klang Valley flood victims

Discussion

Malaysian citizens within the country have provided a great deal of input to their government through social networks, and many elites and academics have commented on issues they have noticed in Malaysia's flood response public policy; to date, in the aftermath of the disaster, the Malaysian government has been working to revise flood response public policy and direct emergency directives to assist flood victims. The Malaysian government is committed to changing the coordination issues noted by the public. Based on the bottom-up participation mechanism, the online participation of citizens within Malaysia seems to be a powerful force in this flooding event towards a forced type of interaction with the Malaysian government in the public policy process. Based on this powerful force and its impact on citizens' online participation, it can be seen that the scale and level of domestic citizens' online participation in Malaysia are at a high point, and a sign of "political modernization" emerged during the flooding event. The rapid spread of public opinion on the Internet and the immediate feedback from Malaysian domestic citizens was important for the Malaysian government to be able to quickly notice the flaws in the flood response rather than spend unnecessary time searching for problems on its own. Thus, the Internet has the benefit of representing the positive side of digital democracy in flooding events.

The Malaysian government needs to put more effort to listen and consider the valuable public opinions formed by citizens. Nevertheless, Malaysian domestic citizens should realize that, more importantly, for them to achieve better results in the impact of citizen network participation in the public policy process, they need to construct online public spheres that

center on the discussion and formation of valuable public opinions for the government to consider.

The authors of this study argue that the Malaysian government may have discovered the power of citizens' online participation in the public policy process. It appears that Malaysia is tasting digital democracy, which is an important sign of Malaysia in terms of political modernization. A blueprint for the future of Malaysia's flourishing digital democracy has been drawn. Although this study's view of digital democracy is based on an activist approach, it is also important to discuss the negative side of the difficulty of developing a specific cyberspace to form valuable public opinions for the government to consider. The Malaysian government should take action to create an online public sphere for citizens to express their opinions.

Conclusion

Through the study of citizens' online participation in the public policy process, we found that nowadays ordinary citizens have exploded with a surprising power on the Internet and have begun to exert a significant influence on political development and governmental public policy decision-making. However, through the study of this paper, it must be clearer that the most important force influencing citizens' online participation in the public policy process at this stage is still the government. The attitude of the government and its key leaders becomes the primary factor affecting the performance of online participation. With government support, network participation tends to develop smoothly and achieve better results, while without government support or even government opposition, most of the citizens' unilateral network participation behavior will be aborted. Therefore, it would be premature to say that the Malaysian people's power represented by network participation has begun to constitute a check on the government's power, and this is precisely the goal of further development of network participation. It is encouraging to note that there are more and more cases of increasing support for online participation, online governance, and online government-public interaction at all levels of government in Malaysia. It can be seen that the standardization and legalization of online participation are advancing step by step. Under the framework of legality, it has become some kind of consensus for the government to guide and promote Malaysian people's online participation in public affairs and public policy. This paper argues that citizens' online participation in the public policy process will be further developed in the future with the goal of achieving a certain degree of direct democracy through online participation. To achieve or approach the goal of direct democracy, a breakthrough can be achieved by both the citizens and the government.

Contribution

It is necessary to bear in mind that we are now in the information age. The Internet provides a public sphere for ordinary citizens to express their views or share political information, and as a result, citizens can influence public policy-making by their governments. While citizens can disseminate their ideas online, there is still an urgent need to create a specific online public sphere where key messages can come together and effectively reach the government. This study makes a theoretical contribution by explaining the bottom-up participation mechanism by which citizens' online participation can have a significant impact on the government's public policy decisions, addressing the call to help understand citizens' online participation in the government's public policy process.

Data Availability
The experimental data used to support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

Conflicts of Interest
The authors declared that they have no conflicts of interest regarding this work.

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