

Social Media and Ge15: A Network Approach in Analysing Participatory Propaganda on Twitter

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Abstract

The 15th General Election (GE15) in November 2022 resulted in Malaysia's first hung parliament, where no political party or coalition secured a majority. Confusion and uncertainties rocked the nation for days before BN, PH, GPS, GRS, and others finally came together to form a post-election coalition government, with Anwar Ibrahim as Prime Minister. Meanwhile, on the social media front, a fierce battle unfolded, particularly on Twitter, as various groups sought to influence public opinion. So, in attempting to explore this further, this research adopted a participatory propaganda framework to analyse the Twitter networks and narratives during the GE15 campaign. Methodologically, this was done by using social network analysis (SNA) via NodeXL, by collecting data from Twitter containing relevant keywords and popular hashtags like #ge15. The findings revealed distinct political clusters within the network, where influential figures and ordinary users actively shaped narratives, engaging in awareness campaign, as well as political attacks. The study also validated widely held views about the political leanings of Twitter users, while also highlighting a strong mood for change and increased political participation. To a significant extent too, the online narrative reflected broader national sentiments, suggesting that these Twitter networks played a significant role in participating and influencing political sentiment during GE15.

Keywords: GE15, Participatory Propaganda, Social Network Analysis, Twitter

Introduction

The 15th General Election (GE15) has produced a chaotic and an unprecedented outcome where for the first time in Malaysian electoral history, no single party or coalition was able to win a simple majority. So, the result was a hung parliament that has gripped the entire nation for days, leaving many voters somewhat puzzled and confused. While such hung parliament situation may be common in European democracies like the United Kingdom, Italy, or Belgium, it is a first for Malaysia. Pakatan Harapan, despite winning the most seats, was short of 30 seats for a simple majority or 112 seats, to form a new government on their own (The Star Online, 2022).

Perikatan Nasional, on the other hand, won 74 seats, followed by Barisan Nasional, 30 seats, and the rest are seats won by Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS), Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS),

other smaller parties and independent candidates (The Star Online, 2022). However, because of the proactive measures taken by the King or the Yang diPertuan Agong who proposed a unity government between all the major coalition parties, the four days long political deadlock was finally resolved when the leader of the Pakatan Harapan coalition Anwar Ibrahim was sworn in as Malaysia's tenth Prime Minister on 24 November 2022 (New Straits Times, 2022). UMNO and BN's crucial support, particularly Zahid Hamidi's, was the scale that tipped the balance. GPS and GRS followed suit soon after in supporting Anwar Ibrahim and Pakatan Harapan (Louis, 2023).

As cliché as it may sound, "there are no permanent enemies, and no permanent friends, only permanent interests" – a famous quote attributed to William Clay – rings true again (Forbes Quotes, n.d.). Prior to GE15, no one could have possibly imagined that Anwar Ibrahim and Zahid Hamidi, or UMNO and DAP, would one day be working together in a coalition government. But GE15 made the impossible, possible.

Meanwhile, on the social media front, observers have noted the fierce and intense battle for the hearts and minds leading up to GE15. Across all platforms from Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to TikTok, apart from the official role by political parties and their online supporters; ordinary users and influencers – or participatory propagandists – have been actively engaging in shaping the political narrative, and rallying support for their preferred parties, as well as clashing in debates.

For instance, a series of hashtag campaigns and participatory movements like the #undibanjir, #kitajagakita, #undiharapan to other more generic GE15-related hashtags like #malaysiamemilih and #kelasdemokrasi amongst others, were tweeted and shared extensively across the Twitter network to generate more electoral awareness, political education, as well as in trying to influence the users on Twitter especially first-time voters and the undecideds.

A Participatory Propaganda Framework

While the concept of participatory propaganda may be new, fundamentally, the idea of participating or to participate politically in a protest or any social or political cause through mass media channels is not entirely new in democratic societies. As Philip Taylor (1990) once said, "we are all in fact propagandists to varying degrees, just as we are all victims of propaganda". Echoing the same sentiment, Mercieca (2021) argued that a new form of propaganda has emerged in the 21st century, and that "it's enlisted us all as propagandists". In looking at the new phenomenon, she differentiates between Chomsky's popular concept of manufacturing consent in the 20th century to what she described as the "manufacturing dissent" as a new model of propaganda today (Mercieca, 2021). The new model today is fundamentally different in the sense that it takes advantage of our abilities to produce, circulate and amplify propaganda (Mercieca, 2021). In other words:

"The new propaganda can emerge from anyone, anywhere – and it is designed to create chaos so no one knows whom to trust or what is true" Mercieca (2021)

Understanding the dynamics of participatory propaganda is incomplete without recognising the technological changes that drove such shift. One of the key aspects of information

technology that disrupted the traditional process of propaganda is the participatory culture of the internet and social media. Essentially, the notion of participatory culture is a term that is often used for designating the involvement of users, audiences and consumers and fans in the creation of culture and content (Fuchs, 2014). Jenkins (2009, cited in Fuchs, 2014), in describing social media as an expression of participatory culture, has outlined five defining characteristics of participatory as a culture: i) relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, ii) strong support for creating and sharing creations with others, iii) some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known to be the most experienced is passed along to novices, iv) members who believe that their contributions matter, and v) Members who feel some degree of social connection with one another.

Alice Wanless (2018) describes the new participatory culture in propaganda as “the audience is the amplifier”. She argued that in today’s dynamic environment, audiences are no longer passive consumers but they are active agents who participates in the creation and amplification the messages – or agenda – of the propagandists. This is done by behavioural advertising, manipulating internet algorithms, and provoking online echo chambers (Wanless, 2018). The idea that people are naturally an active being, are not actually new. No doubt the people can be manipulated and persuaded but at the same time too, Albert Bandura’s social cognitive theory asserted that “people are self-organising, proactive, self-reflecting and self-regulating, not just reactive organisms shaped and shepherded by environmental events” (2001, cited in Wanless, 2018).

Expanding from traditional propaganda studies, Wanless (2018) conceptualised a new Model of Participatory Propaganda. This was based on a lengthy study on the U.S. presidential election campaign in 2016 where for the first time the American democracy appeared to be under attack from all sort of digital propaganda techniques such as fake news, trolls, memes, and botnets. Drawing from her previous studies and the U.S. presidential campaign by Donald Trump on Facebook, Wanless (2018) produced the following six digital tactics for engaging a target audience online to turn them into sub-propagandists: i) conduct hyper-target audience analysis; ii) develop inflammatory content that erodes faith in the opponent and manipulates audience cognitive biases: fake news; memes; data leaks/hacks; iii) inject this content into echo chambers identified through audience analysis; iv) manipulate feed and search algorithms, v) mobilise followers to action; vi) win media attention: be a trend; stage a scandal; or commune with the news; and vii) rinse and repeat.

More recently, Ika Idris (2024), too observed a similar trend of audience-driven participatory propaganda during the 2024 Indonesian presidential election, and during the Russian invasion of Ukraine. She noted that such actions could essentially or mistakenly cause political content creators to become fake news peddlers in the wider digital propaganda ecosystem when people interact with contents, and knowingly or unknowingly helped to disseminate disinformation materials (Mahendra, 2024).

In studying the effects to individuals and their communities, Asmolov (2019) highlights how participatory propaganda can deepen social divides by pushing individuals into isolated, polarised groups. This kind of propaganda manipulates relationships, turning ordinary users into active propagandists, often without them realising it. As people engage more in online conflicts, they begin to consume and produce propagandistic content, while gradually

internalising the narratives. Over time, this emotional investment locks them into echo chambers, reinforcing their beliefs, and deepening political polarisation (Asmolov, 2019).

Methods and Instruments

Within that context, this paper employs a participatory propaganda framework to analyse the characteristics and networks of such propaganda within the Malaysian context during the GE15 election campaign, using Social Network Analysis (SNA). It aims to identify the types of participatory propaganda activities and narratives present in Twitter networks. SNA is employed to gain deeper insights into the structural aspects of these networks, including the messages and key agents of propaganda. The study further explores how these networks shape both online communities and potentially influence real-world behaviours and opinions. So, in achieving those objectives, a thorough Social Network Analysis on Twitter is conducted by using NodeXL, a social media network analysis tool that is capable to extract, retrieve, classify, and visualise the relevant social media data and network (Meier, 2023). Twitter was chosen as an ideal platform for analysis for two main reasons; its accessibility and reach. Twitter's Application Programming Interface (API) allows the mining of thousands of data and information in the form of large dataset, which allows analytical tools like NodeXL to mine data off Twitter based on relevant keywords and hashtags (Meier, 2023).

The scope and context of the research is based on the GE15 election campaign. So, accordingly, a selected number of prominent politics-related keywords and hashtags like #GE15 and #PRU15 from Twitter were tested before being selected for analysis. The timeframe of the study was set during the two-week election campaign period, from 3 November 2022 to 17 November 2022. In this study, a total of 3,826 sample of data from Twitter have been extracted, cleansed, and analysed. The gathered data will then be saved in an Excel spreadsheet for data coding, classification, and visualisation.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings and analyses from the data extracted from Twitter. It maps out the GE15 Twitter network, identifies the key Twitter players, political narratives, and political inclinations; which collectively would contribute to a new and better understanding of the participatory propaganda network on social media.

The Malaysian GE15 Twitter Network

Figure 1 shows the overall network graph which represents a complex web of the Malaysian Twitter users and communities engaging and participating in the political discussions and topics related to GE15. The networks of communities are grouped or clustered into distinct groups and sub-groups in different shapes and sizes according to their level of interaction and engagement on Twitter. The coloured circles (nodes) represent people, while the lines (edges) between them shows their interactions, conversations, or connections. For example, the more central or connected a node is, the more influential a Twitter user is in disseminating information or communication to the user's followers and to the rest of the network.

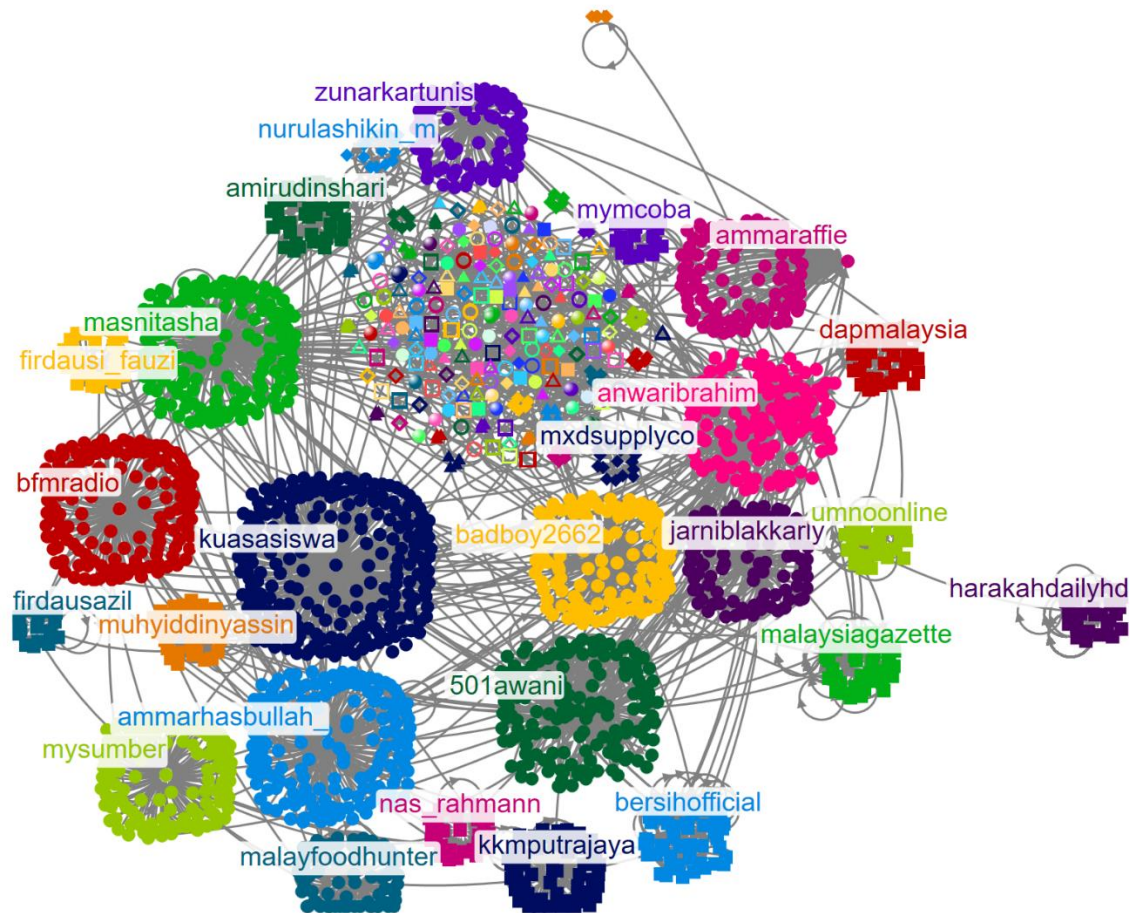


Figure 1 - Network Graph of the Malaysian GE15 Twitter Network

Key nodes, such as @kuasasiswa, @anwaribrahim and @bfmradio become central hubs of distinct clusters — implying that they are the influencers or focal points for discussions within particular communities. This network graph shows that the largest cluster in the network is the one that centres on the account @kuasasiswa, the Twitter handle of influential socio-political activist Fahmi Reza. Compared to other clusters, Fahmi's cluster stands out from the rest due to its size and density, which clearly suggests a highly engaged community. Next, clusters such as those around @masnitasha, @ammarhasbullah_ and @ammaraffie are highly connected but slightly smaller than @kuasasiswa's cluster. They may not stand out in terms of their followings, but they are good examples that sometimes size of the group may not always correlate with its level of activity. In fact, small groups that are active and focused, can result in strong internal dynamics and maintain high levels of engagement too.

While Fahmi Reza's @kuasasiswa leads in size and centrality, @anwaribrahim, the Twitter handle of the leader of Pakatan Harapan, Anwar Ibrahim, Malaysia's tenth Prime Minister, is an important figure in the network. His cluster is not the biggest, yet he connects a considerable number of different communities, especially those who are more politically oriented or politically connected. This position shows the significance of "anwaribrahim" not only within his network but also as a bridge between various clusters, not just within his own party or band of supporters, but across media organisations, journalists, political activists to average users.

On the other hand, there are a few interesting anomalies too. The purple cluster connected to @harakahdailyhd, PAS' official media, Harakahdaily, is somewhat isolated with fewer links to other clusters and a smaller number of nodes. This could suggest that this community is more focused on niche political issues that are not widely shared across the larger network. The second anomaly is the orange cluster around @muhyiddinyassin, the Twitter account of the leader of Perikatan Nasional, and President of Bersatu. Though it is smaller and somewhat on the margins of the network, this group still maintains a strong connection and plays important role with other clusters in the network.

Next is UMNO's @umnoonline. Of all the major clusters in the GE15 network, UMNO's official Twitter account forms the smallest group and occupies a relatively peripheral position which is, to some extent, a stark reflection of its low level of influence and engagement both digitally and in the real world during the election campaign period. Perhaps, the GE15 results, where UMNO and BN suffered their worst electoral defeat in history, winning only 30 seats, are a clear manifestation of their socio-political standing or support on social media.

Identifying Key Twitter Propagandists

While the previous section provides a thorough mapping of the GE15 Twitter network, this section zooms in to specifically examine the top nodes, or the key users within the network of communities. Table 1 highlights the diversity of influential figures within the network, ranging from average citizens – sometimes popularly referred to as netizens – to media outlets, activists, and politicians according to their level of influence, based on the in-degree metric.

In Social Network Analysis (SNA), in-degree refers to the number of links that connects a particular node or person. In other words, it shows the number of people who are directly interacting with or referring to that individual. A high in-degree means the person is receiving a lot of attention or interaction, in the form of tweet engagement such as mentions, likes, replies, or retweets. A lower in-degree means fewer people are connecting with the person. Table 1 shows the list of top twenty users who are not just central to their clusters, but actively participating in discussions, and the flow of information. While politicians like @anwaribrahim and @muhyiddinyassin, and political party like @dapmalaysia may have relatively high engagement numbers within the network, overall, the online activists, non-governmental organisations, and the average users – or collectively referred to here as participatory propagandists – who are more influential in stimulating discourse and shaping the narratives within their own clusters and others in the GE15 Twitter network. Cumulatively, they form the biggest percentage, 45 percent, among the list of top users, followed by politicians and their official Twitter party accounts, 30 percent. The remaining 25 percent are the news media, journalists, and business organisation.

Table 1

Key Twitter Players During GE15 campaign

No.	Top Users	In-Degree (Influence)	Followers	Type
1	kuasasiswa	259	224,122	Activist
2	masnitasha	179	182	Average citizen
3	ammarhasbullah_	168	445	Average citizen
4	bfmradio	154	236,320	Media
5	badboy2662	124	8,929	Average citizen
6	ammaraffie	85	436	Average citizen
7	zunarkartunis	80	153,299	Activist
8	anwaribrahim	77	1,497,275	Politician
9	jarniblakkarly	68	2975	Average citizen
10	nas_rahmann	33	7815	Average citizen
11	muhyiddinyassin	21	1257279	Politician
12	malaysiagazette	20	152325	Media
13	amirudinshari	18	87454	Politician
14	firdausazil	18	46076	Media
15	mymcoba	17	2004	NGO
16	mxdsupplyco	16	26185	Business
17	harakahdailyhd	10	155115	Media
18	kkmputrajaya	9	2015382	Government ministry
19	dapmalaysia	7	189531	Political party
20	umnoonline	6	175011	Political party

How do average citizens and activists drive engagements despite having fewer followings compared to traditional politicians and political parties and media outlets? While politicians and political parties may have larger followings, however in terms of content visibility and engagement, average citizens like @masnitasha and @ammarhasbullah_ have higher in-degree or influence values, although both of them have a small base of followers. This shows that they do not just consume information, but they are active participants in their respective clusters. Essentially, this is a clear testament to the participatory nature of social media, where ordinary users significantly contribute to shaping public opinion.

Meanwhile, activists like @kuasasiswa and @zunarkartunis too exemplifies the Twitter influence dynamics. They have smaller followings than major political figures, but they display high levels of engagement and interaction. For instance, @kuasasiswa has the highest in-degree in the network, which suggests that his social media activism, particularly his #kelasdemokrasi series of political education videos, resonated well with his audience. In contrast, political parties, and politicians, despite having large followings, are not as engaging or active compared to average users and activists. The Twitter accounts of @anwaribrahim and @muhyiddinyassin, the respective leaders of Pakatan Harapan and Perikatan Nasional are indicative of this; in that they both have larger followings but less influence within the GE15 network vis a vis @kuasasiswa or @ammaraffie. Likewise, party channels like @dapmalaysia and @umnoonline too showed a minimal level of engagement, perhaps an indication that traditional political players no longer dominate public opinion on social media platforms like Twitter.

GE15 Political Narratives on Twitter

The chart in Figure 2 presents the distribution of top election topics across the Twitter network during the timeframe of the GE15 campaign period. The list of topics or the political narratives in the analysis here are taken from the major clusters as discussed in previous sections. Overall, tweets about and related to political and electoral awareness were the most prominent, with 5 mentions. An in-depth look into this topic shows examples of tweets focusing on voting guide, awareness on voters' right, political education, as well as weather forecast on election day too. @bfmradio, for example, tweeted the following awareness campaign in an informal Malay language:

Panduan mengundi yang akan buat newbie jadi otai. Jangan lupa untuk undi Sabtu ni. Kalau tak sia2 je kitorang buat content PRU15 banyak2. Penat tau. Kalau masih blur, tanya lah kat komen. Nanti ada orang yang lebih pandai daripada admin akan jawab. Kita kayuh sama-sama! 1/10

Politically, pro-Pakatan Harapan (PH) activists or propagandists appeared to be the most active, diversified, and they dominated most of the topics and narratives. They were more visible in highlighting their election pledge, appealing for vote, while they had equal share in political attacks and election coverage. For example, one of the top retweeted tweets (656 retweets) came from @masnitasha who emotionally appealed to her followers to vote for PH, by posting an image of PH leader, Anwar Ibrahim speaking on stage in one of his election rallies, "He works so hard for the rakyat, tak pernah jemu, tak pernah mengaku kalah, come what may, lets give him the opportunity to contribute his brain for OUR COUNTRY!"

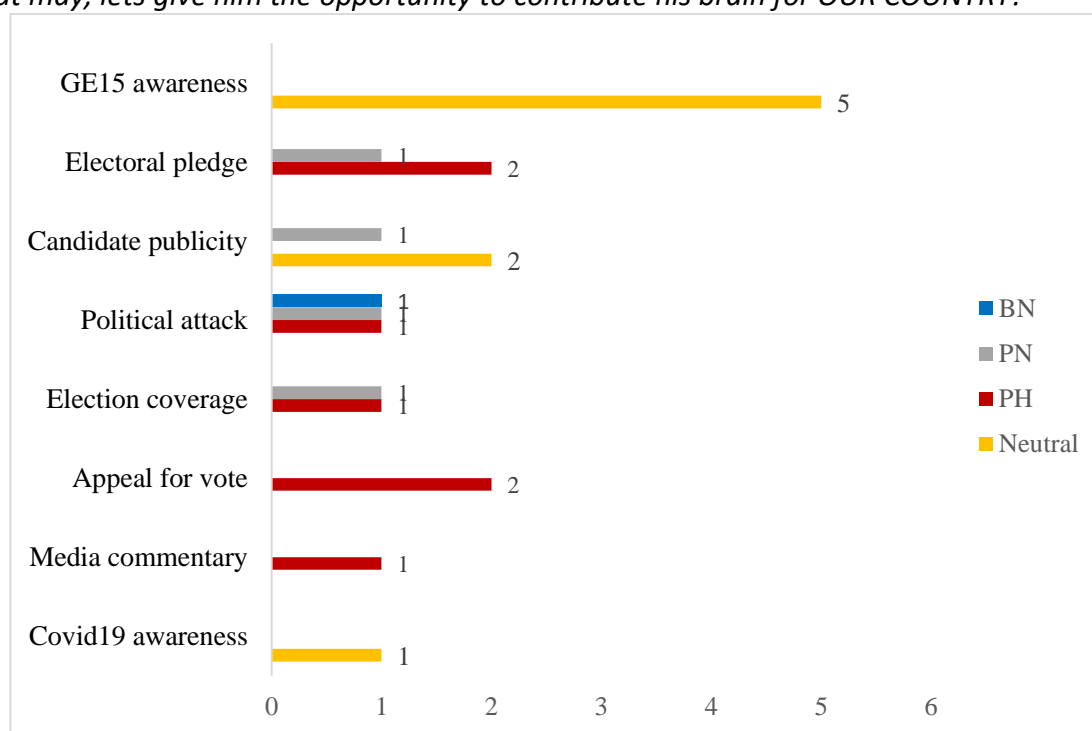


Figure 2 - GE15 Top Political Narratives on Twitter

Meanwhile, pro-Perikatan Nasional (PN) and pro-Barisan Nasional (BN) contents appeared to be somewhat lacking in comparison to pro-PH tweets. Perhaps, to an extent, it is reflective to the strong PH presence and influence on the platform, and a testimony that Twitter is more representative to the mood and sentiment of the pro-PH crowd which tend to be more urban

and liberal. However, despite the minimal use and presence on Twitter, pro-PN activists and propagandists used the platform well to promote their party, their candidate, as well as to politically attack PH. PAS official media @harakahdailyhd highlighted the academic background and the professional credentials of one of their candidates, Khairil Nizam Khirudin, an oil and gas engineer who was also formerly a senator. PN's top retweeted tweet (1039 retweets) was from the PN chairman himself, Muhyiddin Yassin, who posted a series of tweets which aimed at presenting the strength of PN:

Tujuan Perikatan Nasional bertanding dalam PRU 15 adalah untuk membentuk kerajaan tanpa perlu bergabung dengan Barisan Nasional atau Pakatan Harapan. (1/3) <https://t.co/xSV0QoGXLX>

Another interesting dynamic in the data was the number popular tweets that were in essence, politically neutral. GE15 awareness campaign such as those on voting guidelines and voters' rights were not just the top topics of discussions, but they were also the top retweeted or shared contents on Twitter. To a certain extent this reflects the general attitude of the younger generation which tend to be less partisan or more politically neutral, than the previous generation. Secondly, there is a strong indication that people are more comfortable in sharing neutral, non-partisan tweets. An in-depth analysis into the data shows that while there are more neutral tweets being shared on Twitter, interestingly pro-PH partisan tweets received greater shares when it comes to Likes. In other words, neutral and non-partisan tweet tend to attract more engagement and shares among the relatively young Twitter crowd.

GE15 Political Sentiment on Twitter

Figure 3 represents the distribution of political sentiments of the top users in the GE15 Twitter network. The sentiments are categorised into four main groups: Pakatan Harapan (PH), Perikatan Nasional (PN), Barisan Nasional (BN), and Neutral. Based on the network graph in Figure 1, interestingly, the Neutral category is the highest with 40 percent of the total tweets in the network, which indicates that a significant portion of tweets that were retweeted or shared, were non-partisan and neutral tweets. This is followed by pro-PH tweets with a significant 35 percent. To some extent the data substantiated the common perception or stereotype of the nature and the political demographics of Twitter which is largely pro-PH. Pro-PN and pro-BN tweets were at 20 percent and 5 percent respectively which points toward their low level of engagement and influence.

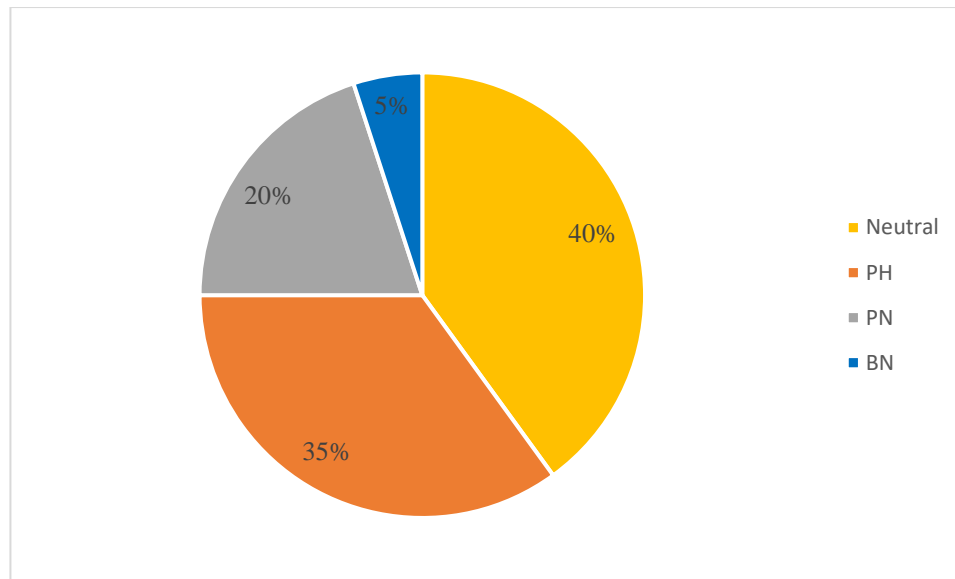


Figure 3 - GE15 Political Sentiment of Top Users on Twitter

While politically neutral tweets dominated the top users and their respective tweets on the GE15 Twitter network, a thorough analysis from the sample of 307 from the total list of 3,826 tweets showed a more nuanced result. Overall, PH had a stronger presence and influence during the election campaign. In comparison to the the top users as in Figure 3, overall, Figure 4 shows that there were more support and sympathy for PH than other political parties at 46 percent or 140 tweets, followed by neutral tweets, 29 percent (88 tweets), and pro-BN tweets, 16 percent (48 tweets), and pro-PN, 5 percent (17 tweets). The remaining 4 percent (15 tweets) consists of tweets from other regional and smaller parties such as Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS), Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS) and Parti Pejuang.

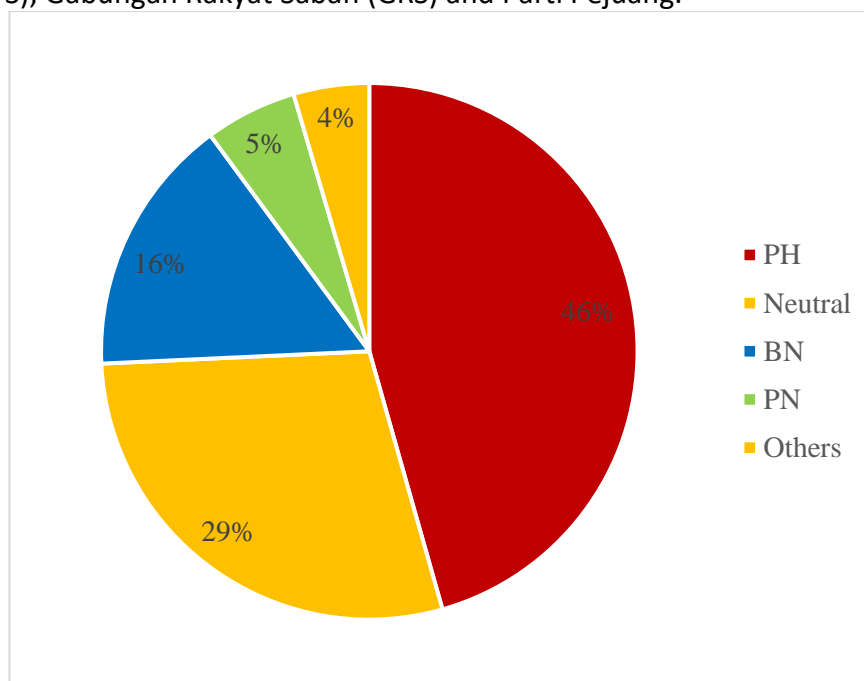


Figure 4 - GE15 Political Sentiment on Twitter

Another striking data point here is that, while pro-PN tweets were more visible, influential, and widely distributed across the Twitter network compared to pro-BN's, overall, BN had more support base on Twitter with 16 percent compared to PN with only 5 percent.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are four key observations related to the four interconnected variables; the GE15 network of clusters, the key actors or propagandists, the political narratives, and political sentiment. The mapping of the Twitter GE15 network has managed to reveal the political clusters, the connection between key actors, and the information flow in the entire network. Overall, the network shows the formation of 20 major political clusters and influential figures throughout the timeframe of the election campaign. The findings in the study have also substantiated the fundamental idea of participatory propaganda in that it is largely driven by active audience – those who do not merely consume information, but actively produce and propagate them. Political activist, @kuasasiswa, being the most influential figure in the network is a clear testament to the new shift in the flow of information and communication, and more importantly to the participatory nature of social media platforms like Twitter and the active role of the other participatory propagandists.

Secondly, the presence and influence of PH or pro-PH communities and supporters on Twitter corroborates the widely held perception and observation that Twitter is largely dominated by PH, whereas PN and BN were perhaps more influential in other social media platforms. To a small extent too, the data on Twitter which shows the strength of PH's influence, reflects the GE15 reality where PH won the greatest number of seats. This finding is consistent with previous studies by Salleh (2017) which have shown how predictive social media can be.

Thirdly, the proportionately high number of neutral or non-partisan tweets such as those on election awareness and candidate publicity validates the trend that more young people tend to be less partisan today than before, and shows that informative, well-reasoned, non-partisan contents tend to attract more engagement. It is no surprise that very few of the tweets in the major clusters were negative in nature, which dispels the myth that only negative content would get more high levels of engagement.

In conclusion, PH were able to score high engagement and amplify their election campaign narratives on social media, in setting the mood for change, which in turn would have likely led to a strong political awareness, opinion formation, and voter mobilisation in the course of the GE15 election campaign.

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