

# The Influence of Media Exposure, Political Engagement, Peer Influence, and National Identity on Ideological Beliefs among Malaysian Public University Students

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## Abstract

Ideological beliefs play a critical role in shaping political, social, and cultural dynamics, particularly among young adults who represent the future of civic and political engagement. In Malaysia, where a multicultural society interacts with a rapidly evolving political landscape, understanding the factors influencing ideological beliefs is crucial for fostering informed and engaged citizens. This study investigates the influence of media exposure, political engagement, peer influence, and national identity on ideological beliefs among Malaysian public university students. Using a sample of 407 participants, this research employed quantitative methods, including Pearson correlation and multiple regression analyses, to examine these relationships. The results revealed that political engagement was the strongest predictor of ideological beliefs, followed by media exposure, peer influence, and national identity. These findings underscore the importance of active political participation, media consumption, and social interactions in shaping students' ideological development, while national identity also played a significant role, though with a slightly weaker influence. The study's implications suggest that fostering political engagement, media literacy, and peer-driven discussions in educational settings can effectively contribute to the formation of informed ideological beliefs among young adults. The insights derived from this research offer valuable guidance for policymakers, educators, and institutions aiming to promote civic engagement and political awareness in Malaysia.

**Keywords:** Media Exposure, Political Engagement, Peer Influence, National Identity, Ideological Beliefs, Malaysian University Students

## Introduction

Ideological beliefs, encompassing political, social, and cultural values, play a vital role in

shaping individuals' perspectives and guiding their behavior in society. Among young adults, the formation of ideological beliefs is influenced by various factors, including exposure to media, political engagement, peer interactions, and a sense of national identity (Jost et al., 2009). As young people represent the future of civic and political engagement, understanding how these beliefs develop is essential for fostering informed and active citizenship, particularly in multicultural and rapidly evolving societies like Malaysia.

Malaysia's unique sociopolitical context, characterized by its multicultural population and diverse political landscape, offers a compelling setting for exploring ideological belief formation. Previous research on ideology has predominantly focused on Western settings, emphasizing individualism, secularism, and liberal democratic principles (Klingemann et al., 2006). In contrast, limited studies have investigated how ideological beliefs are shaped within collectivist and culturally pluralistic societies like Malaysia, where ethnic identity, religion, and community values play a significant role in personal and political ideologies.

While existing literature in Malaysia has explored broad themes such as political awareness and youth civic engagement (Rahman & Ismail, 2020; Chong & Lee, 2021), there is a gap in understanding the specific mechanisms through which media exposure, political engagement, peer influence, and national identity interact to shape ideological beliefs among university students. Furthermore, the influence of Malaysia's multicultural identity and its implications for ideological belief formation remain underexplored, particularly in the context of young adults who are increasingly exposed to global and digital influences.

This study seeks to address this gap by examining the factors contributing to the formation of ideological beliefs among Malaysian public university students. By investigating the roles of media exposure, political engagement, peer influence, and national identity, this research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how these variables interact in shaping students' ideological frameworks. This study not only contributes to the growing body of knowledge on ideology in non-Western contexts but also offers practical insights for educators, policymakers, and institutions seeking to enhance civic education and promote informed ideological development in Malaysia.

## **Literature Review**

### *Ideological Beliefs and their Formation*

Ideological beliefs, which encompass systems of ideas that influence political, economic, and social perspectives, have long been studied in the context of individual development. Ideologies help people make sense of the complexities of society by providing a framework through which they interpret information and make decisions (Jost et al., 2009). Research has shown that the formation of ideological beliefs is influenced by various factors, including family, education, and socioeconomic status, though these influences vary by region and culture (van Bavel & Pereira, 2018). In the Malaysian context, ideological beliefs are shaped by a unique interplay of multiculturalism, religion, and political history, which differentiates it from Western settings (Hamid, 2018). Understanding the factors that contribute to the development of ideological beliefs among university students in Malaysia is critical, as this group represents the future generation of politically active citizens.

Several studies have highlighted that ideological beliefs among young adults are not static but are shaped through interactions with their environment, particularly as they transition from adolescence into adulthood (Federico et al., 2013; Baldassarri & Bearman, 2007). Higher education plays a crucial role in this process, as university students are exposed to a range of ideas and experiences that challenge pre-existing beliefs (Hatemi et al., 2014). In Malaysia, the intersection of cultural identity and political ideology is particularly significant, given the country's multi-ethnic population and diverse political landscape. Therefore, understanding how students form and align with specific ideologies provides valuable insights into how broader societal changes might influence future political trends.

Ideological polarization has also been a subject of growing interest among researchers. Some studies have suggested that increased access to diverse media sources and political engagement can exacerbate ideological divides, making it more difficult for individuals to engage in constructive dialogue (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2010). In contrast, others argue that ideological fluidity, especially among young adults, suggests that exposure to different perspectives during formative years can lead to a more nuanced understanding of politics (Feldman & Johnston, 2014). The tension between these two views highlights the need for more research, particularly in contexts like Malaysia, where the political environment is both diverse and evolving.

In sum, ideological beliefs among university students are shaped by a combination of internal and external factors, including socialization, education, and political engagement. As the Malaysian political and cultural landscape continues to shift, understanding the specific influences on students' ideological beliefs is essential for predicting future political behavior.

#### *Media Exposure and Ideological Alignment*

Media exposure has been extensively studied as a significant factor influencing political and ideological beliefs, especially among young adults. In the digital age, media consumption has evolved, with individuals increasingly relying on digital platforms, including social media, for information (Prior, 2007). Studies have shown that media exposure, especially to politically charged content, plays a role in reinforcing or shaping ideological beliefs (Stroud, 2010; Hamid, 2018). Selective exposure, in which individuals tend to consume media that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs, can contribute to the polarization of ideologies (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). In the Malaysian context, media consumption patterns have shifted, with social media becoming a dominant source of political information, especially among university students (Hamid, 2018).

Research on media exposure has highlighted the role of both traditional and new media in shaping public opinion. While traditional media, such as television and newspapers, have long been used to disseminate political messages, social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have become central to political discourse among young adults (Chadwick & Howard, 2010; Tucker et al., 2017). Studies indicate that exposure to political information on these platforms can both reinforce existing beliefs and introduce new ideas, depending on the nature of the content and the user's engagement with it (Bakshy et al., 2015). This is particularly relevant in Malaysia, where social media plays an increasingly important role in political campaigns and discussions.

Furthermore, the role of social media algorithms in curating content based on user preferences has been identified as a critical factor in shaping ideological beliefs. Research shows that algorithms tend to expose users to content that aligns with their existing views, reinforcing ideological silos (Tufekci, 2018). In the context of Malaysian university students, the role of algorithm-driven media exposure is particularly significant, as students increasingly turn to social media for political news and discussions. This raises important questions about the extent to which media exposure influences the ideological alignment of students and the potential consequences for political polarization.

In addition, as media plays a pivotal role in shaping ideological beliefs by influencing perceptions of political, social, and cultural issues (Prior, 2007), studies have shown that media consumption affects how individuals form and align with specific ideologies, especially when exposed to politically or culturally charged content. In Western contexts, the proliferation of digital platforms has amplified the effects of selective exposure, allowing individuals to seek information that aligns with their existing beliefs (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). However, in non-Western contexts such as Malaysia, media operates within a more regulated and culturally nuanced environment. While traditional media continues to play a significant role, the rapid rise of social media platforms has created new opportunities for youth to engage with diverse perspectives, challenging the dominance of state narratives (Ismail & Ahmad, 2022). There remains a gap in understanding how the interaction between traditional and digital media in Malaysia influences ideological beliefs, particularly among university students who are at the forefront of digital adoption.

#### *Political Engagement and Ideological Development*

Political engagement, which includes activities such as voting, attending rallies, and participating in political discussions, is strongly associated with ideological belief formation (Dalton, 2014). Previous studies in Western democracies have highlighted the role of political engagement in fostering critical thinking and aligning individuals with specific political ideologies (Verba et al., 1995). In Malaysia, political engagement has undergone significant transformation, particularly among youth, who have increasingly mobilized around issues of governance, corruption, and inclusivity (Rahman & Ismail, 2020). However, the ways in which political engagement shapes ideological beliefs within the Malaysian sociopolitical context remain underexplored. Malaysian youth often navigate political engagement through both formal channels, such as student unions, and informal platforms like social media, where political discourse is more dynamic and accessible (Chong & Lee, 2021). Examining the unique pathways through which political engagement influences ideological beliefs in Malaysia can provide a richer understanding of youth activism in multicultural settings.

Research has shown that political engagement is influenced by various factors, including education, socioeconomic status, and access to information. For university students, political engagement often begins in academic settings, where discussions about politics and social issues are common (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). In Malaysia, universities serve as a platform for political discourse, with students engaging in debates about national and international political issues (Hamid, 2018). Moreover, the rise of social media has provided students with additional avenues for political engagement, allowing them to participate in online discussions, share political content, and engage with political leaders and activists.

Moreover, studies indicate that political engagement is not only about participation in formal political processes but also includes informal activities such as attending protests, signing petitions, and participating in political movements (Dalton, 2014). For Malaysian students, these forms of engagement are increasingly accessible through digital platforms, which allow them to participate in political activism without being physically present. This raises important questions about the relationship between political engagement and ideological beliefs in an increasingly digital world.

#### *Peer Influence and Ideological Socialization*

Peer influence is a critical determinant of ideological beliefs, particularly during formative years when individuals are more likely to rely on social networks for validation and guidance (Brown et al., 2008). Studies in Western contexts have emphasized the role of peer discussions in reinforcing political attitudes and shaping ideological alignment (Klofstad, 2007). In Malaysia, where collectivist values prioritize group harmony and interdependence, peer influence may operate differently. For instance, Malaysian youths may feel compelled to align their ideological beliefs with those of their peer groups to maintain social cohesion (Khoo & Teo, 2021). Additionally, the intersection of peer influence and digital communication in Malaysia creates a hybrid dynamic where ideological discussions often span both offline and online environments. This underscores the need for further research to understand how peer influence interacts with cultural norms and digital engagement in shaping ideological beliefs within non-Western contexts.

Studies have shown that peer influence is particularly strong during university years, as young adults are more likely to engage in discussions about politics and social issues with their peers than with their families (Federico et al., 2013). This period is often marked by ideological fluidity, as students are exposed to new ideas and perspectives that challenge their pre-existing beliefs (Hatemi et al., 2014). In Malaysia, where political discussions are becoming increasingly prominent in university settings, peer influence is expected to play a substantial role in shaping students' ideological beliefs (Hamid, 2018).

Furthermore, research suggests that peer influence can lead to both ideological conformity and polarization. In some cases, individuals may adopt the dominant ideology of their peer group, leading to ideological homogeneity within the group (Klofstad et al., 2013). In other cases, exposure to diverse perspectives within peer groups can lead to greater ideological polarization, as individuals seek to differentiate themselves from opposing viewpoints (Feldman & Johnston, 2014). Understanding the role of peer influence in the ideological development of Malaysian university students is essential for understanding broader patterns of political polarization in the country in ways that align with the values of the population (Lim et al., 2022).

#### **National Identity and Ideological Beliefs**

National identity, encompassing an individual's attachment to their nation, significantly impacts ideological beliefs (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In Western societies, strong national identity often correlates with conservative or nationalist ideologies, emphasizing the importance of preserving cultural heritage and sovereignty (Huddy & Khatib, 2007). In Malaysia, national identity is deeply intertwined with ethnicity and religion, creating a complex relationship with ideological beliefs. For instance, Malay, Chinese, and Indian

communities often navigate ideological beliefs through lenses shaped by their ethnic identities, while simultaneously striving to align with a broader Malaysian identity (Chong & Lee, 2021). This dual dynamic highlights the unique challenges Malaysian youth face in reconciling individual cultural affiliations with collective national identity. Despite its significance, limited research exists on how national identity influences ideological beliefs in non-Western, multicultural contexts like Malaysia, particularly in an era where globalization and digital connectivity challenge traditional notions of belonging.

### **Addressing Gaps in Non-Western Context**

Although extensive research on ideological belief formation exists in Western contexts, studies focused on non-Western societies, particularly Southeast Asia, remain limited. Malaysia's multicultural setting, coupled with its evolving political and social dynamics, offers a unique context for examining the interplay of media, political engagement, peer influence, and national identity in shaping ideological beliefs. By situating this study within the Malaysian framework, it addresses gaps in understanding how collectivist values, ethnic diversity, and the increasing role of digital platforms influence ideological development. This research contributes to the broader literature by providing insights into ideological belief formation in non-Western contexts, emphasizing the importance of cultural, social, and political factors that are often overlooked in Western-centric studies.

### **Method**

#### *Participants*

This study involved a sample of 407 Malaysian young adults, aged between 19 and 28 years, selected using stratified random sampling to ensure diversity in gender, socioeconomic status, and geographic location (urban and rural areas). Participants were recruited from public universities across Malaysia. The sample size of 407 was determined through a power analysis to ensure sufficient statistical power for detecting relationships between the independent and dependent variables. All participants were proficient in Malay or English and provided informed consent prior to participating in the study.

### **Procedure and Measures**

Participants were recruited through educational institutions using online platforms and in-person outreach. Before participating, all participants were informed of the study's objectives and ethical considerations, and they provided informed consent. Data collection was conducted through self-report questionnaires, which were made available in both paper and online formats to accommodate participants' preferences. The survey took approximately 15-20 minutes to complete.

#### *Media Exposure*

Media exposure was measured using a modified version of the Media Exposure Scale adapted from Eveland and Scheufele (2000). This scale assessed the frequency and type of political media content consumed by participants. It consisted of 8 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Never, 5 = Always), with higher scores indicating greater exposure to media content related to political ideology. Sample items included "How often do you read political news on social media?" and "How frequently do you engage with political commentary on television or radio?" In this study, the Media Exposure Scale demonstrated high internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.85.

### *Political Engagement*

Political engagement was assessed using a modified version of the *Civic Engagement Scale* by Doolittle and Faul (2013). This scale measured the extent to which participants engaged in political activities such as voting, participating in political discussions, or attending political events. The scale consisted of 10 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree), with higher scores indicating greater levels of political engagement. Sample items included "I actively participate in political discussions with my peers" and "I have participated in a political event or rally in the past year." The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.87, indicating strong reliability.

### *Peer Influence*

Peer influence was measured using an adaptation of the *Peer Influence Scale* developed by Clasen and Brown (1985), which assessed the degree to which participants' ideological beliefs were influenced by their peers. The scale consisted of 9 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree), with higher scores indicating a greater influence of peers on political ideology. Sample items included "Most of my friends share similar political beliefs to mine" and "I often change my political opinions based on discussions with my friends." In this study, the Peer Influence Scale demonstrated a Cronbach's alpha of 0.84.

### *National Identity*

National identity was measured using a modified version of the *National Identity Scale* by Cinnirella (1997). This scale assessed the strength of participants' identification with Malaysia and its cultural values. The scale included 10 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree), with higher scores reflecting stronger national identity. Sample items included "I am proud to be a citizen of Malaysia" and "My national identity is an important part of who I am." The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.86, indicating strong internal consistency.

### *Ideology*

Ideology was measured using a modified version of the *Political Ideology Scale* developed by Jost et al. (2003), which assessed participants' alignment with political ideologies such as conservatism and liberalism. The scale consisted of 12 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree). Sample items included "I believe in maintaining traditional societal values" and "I support policies that promote social equality." The Cronbach's alpha for the Political Ideology Scale in this study was 0.88, indicating high reliability.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize the levels of media exposure, political engagement, peer influence, national identity, and ideological alignment. Pearson correlation analyses were conducted to examine the relationships between the independent variables (media exposure, political engagement, peer influence, and national identity) and the dependent variable (ideological beliefs). Multiple regression analyses were employed to determine the predictive power of media exposure, political engagement, peer influence, and national identity on participants' ideological beliefs. The significance level for all statistical tests was set at  $p < .05$ .

**Results and Discussion**

The descriptive statistics for media exposure, political engagement, peer influence, national identity, and ideological beliefs are presented in Table 1. The results show that a significant portion of participants reported high levels of media exposure ( $M = 28.4$ ,  $SD = 3.70$ ), with 61.43% scoring in the high category. Political engagement ( $M = 27.6$ ,  $SD = 4.00$ ) showed moderate to high levels, with 59.21% of participants reporting high levels. Peer influence ( $M = 28.2$ ,  $SD = 3.80$ ) also had a significant proportion of participants scoring high, at 60.94%. National identity ( $M = 28.8$ ,  $SD = 3.90$ ) was similarly high, with 63.41% of respondents in the high category. Lastly, ideological beliefs ( $M = 27.9$ ,  $SD = 4.10$ ) were reported at moderate to high levels, with 60.44% of participants scoring in the high range.

These findings align with previous research suggesting that media exposure, political engagement, peer influence, and national identity are significant contributors to the formation of ideological beliefs among young adults (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Federico et al., 2013). The high levels of media exposure among Malaysian youth reflect the increasing importance of digital platforms as sources of political information, which may play a role in shaping political ideologies (Hamid, 2018). Similarly, political engagement continues to grow among university students, particularly with the rise of social media as a tool for political participation and discussion (Dalton, 2014).

Peer influence also plays a key role in the ideological development of university students. The high levels of peer influence found in this study suggest that young adults frequently discuss and form their political beliefs within their social circles, both online and offline (Klofstad et al., 2013). National identity, meanwhile, remains a significant factor, with many respondents expressing strong connections to Malaysian cultural values and heritage, which are likely to shape their political ideologies (Cinnirella, 1997).



Table 1

*Levels of Media Exposure, Political Engagement, Peer Influence, National Identity, And Ideological Beliefs Among Malaysian Young Adults*

Level	n	%	Mean	SD
<u>Media Exposure</u>			28.40	3.70
Low	53	12.78		
Moderate	105	25.80		
High	250	61.43		
<u>Political Engagement</u>			27.60	4.00
Low	62	15.23		
Moderate	104	25.56		
High	241	69.21		
<u>Peer Influence</u>			28.20	3.80
Low	50	12.29		
Moderate	109	26.77		
High	248	60.94		
<u>National Identity</u>			28.80	3.90
Low	49	12.04		
Medium	100	24.55		
High	258	63.41		
<u>Ideological Beliefs</u>			27.90	4.10
Low	56	13.76		
Medium	1105	25.80		
High	246	60.44		

A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between media exposure, political engagement, peer influence, national identity, and ideological beliefs among Malaysian university students (see Table 2). The results revealed that all independent variables were significantly positively correlated with ideological beliefs, indicating that higher levels of media exposure, political engagement, peer influence, and national identity are associated with stronger ideological beliefs.

The strongest correlation was observed between political engagement and ideological beliefs ( $r = .72, p < .001$ ). This supports previous research that highlights the importance of active political participation in shaping and solidifying individuals' ideological views (Dalton, 2014; Verba et al., 1995). Young adults who are more involved in political activities are more likely to develop and express clearer ideological stances.

Media exposure also demonstrated a strong positive relationship with ideological beliefs ( $r = .69, p < .001$ ). This is consistent with the literature showing that frequent exposure to politically charged media content, especially on digital platforms, reinforces ideological alignment (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2010). In the Malaysian context, where media plays a pivotal role in shaping political discourse, the strong correlation underscores the influence of media consumption on students' political ideologies.

Peer influence showed a significant positive correlation with ideological beliefs ( $r = .65, p < .001$ ), highlighting the role that social networks play in shaping political opinions among university students (Clasen & Brown, 1985; Klofstad et al., 2013). The social dynamics within peer groups, especially in university settings, foster discussions and exchanges that contribute to the formation of ideological positions.

National identity was also positively correlated with ideological beliefs ( $r = .64, p < .001$ ). This finding suggests that a stronger sense of national identity is associated with clearer ideological alignment, reflecting how cultural and national values can shape political ideologies (Cinnirella, 1997; Reeskens & Hooghe, 2010). In Malaysia, where national identity is closely tied to cultural heritage and political views, the correlation between national identity and ideological beliefs highlights the importance of cultural factors in political development.

These correlations provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing ideological beliefs among Malaysian university students. Political engagement emerged as the strongest predictor, followed closely by media exposure, peer influence, and national identity. The positive relationships between these variables and ideological beliefs suggest that multiple factors contribute to the political development of young adults, with engagement in political activities playing a particularly critical role.

Table 2

*Correlations Between Media Exposure, Political Engagement, Peer Influence, National Identity, and Ideological Beliefs*

Variable	Ideological Beliefs	
	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
Media Exposure	.69**	.001
Political Engagement	.72**	.001
Peer Influence	.65**	.001
National Identity	.64**	.001

N = 431, \*\*  $p < .001$

The multiple regression analysis (see Table 3) revealed that all four independent variables—media exposure, political engagement, peer influence, and national identity—significantly predicted ideological beliefs among Malaysian university students;  $F(4, 402) = 189.21, p <$

.001. Among the predictors, political engagement emerged as the strongest predictor of ideological beliefs ( $\beta = 0.46, p < .001$ ). This finding aligns with prior research, emphasizing the role of active political participation in shaping individuals' ideological development (Dalton, 2014; Verba et al., 1995). Political engagement provides students with opportunities to analyze and align themselves with political ideologies, solidifying their beliefs.

Media exposure also demonstrated a strong predictive effect on ideological beliefs ( $\beta = 0.41, p < .001$ ). This supports the notion that frequent exposure to political content, particularly through digital media, significantly influences the formation of political ideologies (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2010). In Malaysia, where social media has become a dominant platform for political discussions, this finding highlights the critical influence of media consumption on students' political ideologies.

Peer influence was another significant predictor ( $\beta = 0.38, p < .001$ ), reflecting the role of social networks in shaping ideological beliefs. This result is consistent with previous studies that suggest peer discussions and exchanges contribute to the development of ideological stances, particularly in social environments such as universities (Clasen & Brown, 1985; Klofstad et al., 2013). Malaysian university students, who frequently engage in political discussions with peers both online and offline, are likely to be influenced by these interactions.

National identity also significantly predicted ideological beliefs ( $\beta = 0.35, p = .002$ ), though its influence was relatively weaker compared to the other variables. This finding highlights the role of national identity and cultural values in shaping ideological perspectives, particularly in diverse societies like Malaysia, where political beliefs are often intertwined with cultural heritage (Cinnirella, 1997; Reeskens & Hooghe, 2010).

Overall, the findings revealed that political engagement was the strongest predictor of ideological beliefs among Malaysian university students, followed by media exposure, peer influence, and national identity. This emphasizes the critical role of political participation and awareness in shaping the ideological frameworks of young adults in Malaysia.

The strong influence of political engagement can be attributed to Malaysia's dynamic and evolving political landscape, particularly in the context of recent political developments. Over the past decade, Malaysia has witnessed significant political changes, including the historic 2018 general election that ended six decades of single-party rule. Such events have heightened political awareness among youths, encouraging them to take an active role in discussions about governance, social justice, and national development. University students, in particular, have become more politically conscious, often participating in or initiating movements advocating for greater transparency, equity, and inclusivity in policymaking. This heightened political engagement provides them with a framework for interpreting and aligning with specific ideological beliefs.

Cultural aspects further amplify the impact of political engagement. In Malaysia, where collectivist values emphasize communal well-being and interdependence, political ideologies are often viewed through the lens of how they impact society at large. This cultural emphasis on the collective good aligns closely with the priorities of university students, who are at a

stage of life characterized by heightened social awareness and aspirations for societal improvement. As future leaders and contributors to the workforce, students perceive political engagement as a means to influence policies that will shape their immediate and long-term environments.

The influence of political engagement is also amplified by the role of universities as hubs for intellectual exchange and activism. In Malaysian universities, discussions about national policies, societal issues, and global trends often take center stage in academic and extracurricular activities. These institutions provide a space for students to critically evaluate political ideologies, debate contentious issues, and mobilize around causes they are passionate about. This exposure not only deepens their understanding of political concepts but also fosters alignment with ideologies that resonate with their values and aspirations.

Moreover, the interplay between political engagement and media exposure strengthens its impact. Social media platforms, widely used by Malaysian university students, serve as avenues for sharing political content, organizing events, and engaging in public discourse. The accessibility and immediacy of these platforms allow students to stay informed and participate in real-time discussions about political developments, further reinforcing the salience of political engagement in their ideological belief formation.

In summary, the strong influence of political engagement among Malaysian university students reflects both the dynamic sociopolitical environment and the cultural emphasis on collective well-being. Recent political developments, coupled with the role of universities as spaces for activism and critical dialogue, amplify the significance of political participation in shaping young adults' ideological beliefs. These findings highlight the importance of fostering informed political engagement among students as a means of promoting active and thoughtful citizenship in Malaysia's multicultural society.

Table 3

*Regression Analysis for Media Exposure, Political Engagement, Peer Influence, and National Identity on Ideological Beliefs*

Variable	Ideological Beliefs			
	B	SE. B	Beta, $\beta$	<i>p</i>
Media Exposure	0.42	0.09	0.41	.001
Political Engagement	0.48	0.08	0.46	.001
Peer Influence	0.39	0.10	0.38	.001
National Identity	0.33	0.11	0.35	.002
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	.674			
<b>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup></b>	.669			
<b>F</b>	189.21			

$R^2 = 0.674$ , Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.669$ ,  $F = 189.21$  ( $p < .001$ )

## Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the significant influence of political engagement, media exposure, peer influence, and national identity on the ideological beliefs of Malaysian university students. While political engagement emerged as the strongest predictor, media

exposure also played a crucial role, reflecting the pervasive impact of social media platforms on modern ideological belief formation. Diving deeper into the mechanisms of media influence, the role of social media algorithms and echo chambers warrants closer examination.

Social media platforms, widely used by Malaysian university students, employ algorithms designed to personalize content based on users' past interactions and preferences. These algorithms create a feedback loop where users are repeatedly exposed to similar perspectives, reinforcing their pre-existing beliefs (Pariser, 2011). In the Malaysian context, this means that students engaging with politically charged or ideologically aligned content are more likely to encounter additional content that supports or amplifies these views. This phenomenon can deepen ideological alignment and reduce exposure to diverse or opposing perspectives, fostering the formation of echo chambers.

Echo chambers, or environments where individuals are surrounded by like-minded opinions, have the potential to amplify ideological polarization. In Malaysia, where political discourse is often charged and multifaceted due to the country's multicultural and multi-religious landscape, social media echo chambers may reinforce specific political or cultural narratives. For university students, these echo chambers provide a sense of validation and community but may also limit critical engagement with opposing viewpoints. As a result, social media can serve both as a tool for ideological reinforcement and as a barrier to ideological flexibility.

The implications of these dynamics are significant for ideological belief formation. On one hand, social media algorithms can enhance political engagement by keeping users informed and emotionally invested in causes they care about. On the other hand, the selective exposure fostered by these platforms can perpetuate biases and hinder balanced understanding. For Malaysian university students, who are navigating complex social and political environments, this dual impact underscores the importance of media literacy education. Equipping students with the skills to critically evaluate content, identify algorithmic biases, and seek diverse perspectives is essential for mitigating the potential negative effects of echo chambers.

Furthermore, the interaction between media exposure and peer influence amplifies the role of social media algorithms. As students share and discuss content within their peer networks, they contribute to the cyclical reinforcement of ideologies within their social circles. This dynamic is particularly relevant in Malaysia, where collectivist cultural values emphasize group harmony and shared understanding. The overlap between digital and offline social networks creates a hybrid space where ideological beliefs are continuously shaped and reinforced by both individual interactions and algorithmic structures.

In conclusion, the role of social media algorithms and echo chambers adds depth to our understanding of how media exposure influences ideological beliefs. While these mechanisms foster engagement and alignment with specific ideologies, they also present challenges in ensuring balanced and critical media consumption. Addressing these challenges requires a focus on media literacy and active engagement with diverse viewpoints, enabling Malaysian university students to navigate the complexities of modern media consumption while forming well-rounded ideological beliefs.

### **Implications for Ideological Beliefs: Policy and Practice**

The findings from this study carry important implications for understanding the formation of ideological beliefs among Malaysian university students. The roles of media exposure, political engagement, peer influence, and national identity as predictors of ideological beliefs suggest that both educational institutions and policymakers should focus on these areas to foster informed and engaged future citizens.

Political engagement emerged as the most significant predictor of ideological beliefs, highlighting the importance of encouraging active participation in political activities and discussions. Educators should integrate political engagement into curricula by fostering debate, discussion, and critical thinking about political issues in classrooms. Universities can provide platforms for students to engage in political discourse, participate in political clubs, and attend political forums, which could help solidify their ideological stances (Dalton, 2014; Verba et al., 1995). Additionally, policymakers should support youth participation in politics by promoting civic education and encouraging youth involvement in policy-making processes.

Media exposure also demonstrated a significant predictive effect on ideological beliefs, underscoring the influence of digital platforms in shaping students' political ideologies. Given the growing reliance on social media and online news for political information, it is crucial to foster media literacy among university students. Universities and public institutions should offer media literacy programs that teach students to critically evaluate the reliability and bias of information from various media sources (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2010). These efforts will help students form more balanced and well-informed ideological views.

Peer influence was another important predictor of ideological beliefs. The findings highlight the need for universities to create environments where diverse political views can be shared and discussed openly among peers. Programs that promote respectful dialogue, student-led discussion groups, and peer engagement initiatives could allow students to explore and refine their ideological beliefs through social interaction (Clasen & Brown, 1985; Klofstad et al., 2013). Encouraging such peer-driven political conversations can help students develop more nuanced and robust ideological beliefs.

National identity also played a significant role in shaping ideological beliefs, although its influence was slightly weaker compared to the other variables. This result suggests that cultural values and a sense of belonging to the nation can still impact students' political ideologies. Educational institutions and policymakers should emphasize the role of national identity in political development by promoting programs that explore Malaysia's cultural diversity, history, and civic responsibilities (Cinnirella, 1997; Reeskens & Hooghe, 2010). Engaging students in national issues from a culturally informed perspective can help strengthen their connection to their country and influence their political ideologies.

### **Practical Applications for Educational Institutions and Policy Makers**

The relationships revealed in this study offer clear guidance for practical applications in both educational settings and broader policy initiatives. Educational institutions should focus on integrating political engagement and media literacy into their curricula, equipping students with the tools to critically engage with political content and participate in civic activities. By fostering environments that encourage open dialogue and diverse political perspectives,

educators can help students solidify their ideological beliefs through social interactions and critical thinking.

Policymakers should support youth involvement in political decision-making by creating spaces for political participation and ensuring that young people have access to balanced and diverse media content. Additionally, policy initiatives that emphasize national identity and cultural values can help reinforce students' connection to their country, further shaping their ideological development.

Social media platforms, given their significant influence, should also be leveraged by governmental and non-governmental organizations to promote civic engagement and political discourse. Creating campaigns that encourage responsible media consumption, provide fact-checked information, and foster respectful political dialogue can ensure that youth are better equipped to form balanced and informed ideological beliefs.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

While this study provides valuable insights into the factors influencing ideological beliefs among Malaysian university students, several limitations must be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causal relationships between the independent variables and ideological beliefs. Future studies should adopt a longitudinal approach to track changes in students' ideological development over time and examine how sustained exposure to media, political engagement, and peer influence impacts their political ideologies (Federico et al., 2013; Dalton, 2014).

Additionally, the study relied on self-reported measures, which may introduce biases such as social desirability. Future research should consider employing mixed-method approaches, including interviews and focus groups, to gain a deeper understanding of how students form their ideological beliefs through social interactions and media consumption (Klofstad et al., 2013).

Moreover, this study focused specifically on Malaysian university students, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other cultural contexts. Future research could explore how similar factors influence ideological beliefs in different cultural settings, particularly in societies with varying degrees of political freedom, media access, and cultural diversity (Cinnirella, 1997; Reeskens & Hooghe, 2010).

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this study highlight the significant roles of political engagement, media exposure, peer influence, and national identity in shaping the ideological beliefs of Malaysian university students. Political engagement emerged as the strongest predictor, suggesting that active participation in political activities is crucial for solidifying ideological stances. Media exposure and peer influence also play important roles, reinforcing or challenging ideological beliefs through digital platforms and social interactions. National identity, while slightly less influential, remains an important factor in shaping political ideologies, particularly in a culturally diverse society like Malaysia.

These results have clear implications for educators and policymakers, who should focus on promoting political engagement, media literacy, peer-driven political discourse, and national identity to foster informed and engaged future citizens. Future research should continue to explore these relationships, particularly in diverse cultural contexts, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that shape ideological beliefs in young adults.

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