

Exploring Social Constructs in the Digital Era: A Look into Malaysian Youths

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DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v16-i4/28061>

Published Date: 26 April 2026

Abstract

The first quarter of the 21st century has shown how the internet and digitalization as a whole have transformed the way we access and process information, communicate and interact. For those growing up in an era of digitalized information, access to learning transcends borders, and exposes people to diverse cultures and modes of thinking. As digitalization expands, understanding how data is collected, processed, stored and interpreted becomes invaluable in viewing how ideas and identities are formed, and ultimately how information power is wielded. Drawing on data from Malaysian youths born between 1996 and 2011, we explored the role of communication technologies and digitalization in shaping social constructs. Building on a social constructivist perspective, we approached issues related to the use of digital platforms as a source of information. In this paper, we put forward the idea that technological advances in telecommunications have put both state and non-state actors on equal footing in terms of the power to share ideas, influence behavior and construct shared values. Hence, understanding the relationship between internet and digital media use and its influence on youths' perspectives and behaviors can provide insights towards the future of managing human capital development within an evolving digital landscape.

Keywords: Digitalization, Digital Media, Power of Ideas, Social Construct, Youth

Introduction

The internet and digitalization as a whole have transformed the way we access and process information. In today's digital environment, more and more people are able to view and learn about what goes on beyond their physical borders. Explosive technological advancements in telecommunications have not only expanded the sphere of communication but also created new forms of transmitting and receiving information. Due to these advancements, many countries have adopted policies that integrate digital technologies in communications, business, education, and many more sectors, to transform economies and quality of life of their citizens; and Malaysia is no exception. As reported by The Star Online (30 April, 2025), the Digital Minister of Malaysia, YB Tuan Gobind Singh Deo, stated that

“Malaysia’s Digital Economy agenda is focused on building a vibrant ecosystem that enables businesses to thrive, empowers communities through technology and ensures that the benefits of digitalization are felt across all layers of society”.

The landscape of communication in the 21st century is marked by the indispensable nature of the internet in people’s lives. It was reported by the Department of Statistics Malaysia that access to ICT equipment and services recorded overall in the year 2024 for the Internet was at 96.8 percent for Malaysian households; where both Internet access by urban and rural households showed an increase. It was also reported by DataReportal.com that there were 33.59 million internet users in the country at the start of 2024. For those growing up in the age where internet use is a staple, the near unlimited access to information exposes people to varying beliefs, values, and ways of thinking. Hence, it begs the question, how does digital communication technologies impact our reality? And as digitization of information continues, understanding how data is collected, interpreted, and shared becomes invaluable in viewing how ideas and identities are formed.

In this research, we collected data from Malaysian youths born between the years 1996 to 2011 to assess the way different generational groups approach the use of digital media to source information, with the aims to understand digital media and internet technology usage as a whole in their daily lives. Through this research, we investigate the prevalent sources of information accessed and preferred by Malaysian youths, and explore the role digital media has in developing their social constructs. We put forward the idea that technological advances in telecommunications have put both state and non-state actors on equal footing in terms of the power to shape ideas, influence behavior and construct shared values. Hence, it is proposed that understanding the relationship between internet and digital media usage and how it shapes the views and actions of our youths can help future employers understand and manage human capital development in keeping with the rapidly changing digital landscape.

The Power of Ideas

As one of John Donne’s famous writings says, “no man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main” (found in his 17th century works of poetry). Why is being a part of society important? How does it contribute or affect the development of our thoughts and behaviors? Herein lies the significance of social constructs.

Constructivism is an approach in social theory that draws on the identity principle, which can be used to explore how social interactions shape shared ideas and behavior. In this perspective, constructivism emphasizes the social construction of reality. “Human relations consist of thoughts and ideas, [and] everything involved in the social world of men and women is made by them” (Jackson and Sørensen, 2010, p.162). As such, the idea behind social constructivism is that individuals construct their reality based on observable facts as well as through communication among members of their society (Wolfers, 2024).

In literature, the terms constructivism and constructionism tend to be used interchangeably to explain how people’s thoughts, beliefs, culture and overall identity of self are formed. As explained by Andrews (2012), social constructionism focuses on the social aspect of how we define the nature of our reality. Reality can be based on the experience of

individuals, thus separating the concept of subjective reality from objective reality, and making interactions of individuals within society as the central idea of constructionism (ibid.; Gallimore, Goldenberg, and Weisner, 1993). People create socially constructed meaning from what we experience in our daily lives, based on our surroundings and the behavior of people around us. In a study by Gallimore, Goldenberg, and Weisner (1993) related to the significance of activity settings on forming people's subjective reality, they state that everyday activities, particularly of adult-child interactions, provide opportunities to learn and develop through participation in cultural activities. Direct, as well as indirect, interactions provide meaning to actions and experiences, and create a socially shared reality based on shared attitudes, beliefs and values that we have in common with others (Echterhoff and Higgins, 2017; Andrews, 2012; Jackson and Sørensen, 2010; Wolfers, 2024). Among the formative works on the idea of "construction of reality" includes those by sociologist Peter Berger and the philosopher Thomas Luckmann (Berger and Luckmann, 1991), and later by Couldry and Hepp (2018) of whom built on the ideas put forward by Berger and Luckmann, focusing on the influence of technology and media on communication and the construction of our reality. But who controls the media?

Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky argued in their book (entitled *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*) that the media have a strong tendency to promote the interests of large corporations, governments, and other institutions of power. Throughout his lifetime, renowned scholar Noam Chomsky has explored the role and influence of media on society's thoughts and behaviors. In a Master Class session, Chomsky covered issues related to the impact of social media on society, and proposes that "technology is continuously moving us towards being immersed in augmented and/or virtual realities, where people will be able to create exactly what they want to be a part of" (masterclass.com, 2025). This brings us to the question, how much control do we have over what we consume online?

Along similar lines, political scientist Ian Bremmer put forward the idea that the dominant actors with the power to shape geopolitics in today's digital age are technology companies, rather than governments, because tech companies have the tools and means to define our identities through their control of media. For instance, tech companies such as Google arguably have a strong presence in people's lives, such as that the company controls the default search engine for almost all Apple products. According to online statistics data retrieved in June 2025 from Statista (statista.com) and Statcounter (statcounter.com), Google is recorded as dominating the market in almost all countries. Whereas for social media platforms, Meta Platforms Inc. (Meta) owns various popular social network services including Facebook, Messenger, Instagram and WhatsApp. In Malaysia alone, numbers published in Meta's advertising tools indicate that Instagram had over 15.5 million users in Malaysia in early 2024. And according to Datareportal.com, Instagram continued its growth in the year 2025 in Central Asia along with its main top markets.

Stories shared by mainstream and alternative media, in particular social media, have been argued to have the power to influence public opinion and social dynamics (see Diehl, Weeks, and Gil de Zúñiga, 2016; Wohn and Bowe, 2016; Salleh, 2017). Social media's influence does not stop at shaping our views and attitudes, but it has the power to extend towards policy development (Ausat, 2023). With the ease and speed of technological

advancements, it is easier for people to find information that interests them and gravitate toward others who share their ideas. Chomsky once said that “social media tends to drive people into self-reinforcing bubbles” (masterclass.com, 2025). The ever-changing pace of communication technology also poses important questions regarding how messages are filtered to different audiences. We also cannot ignore the risks of algorithmic power controlling the rhetoric of these messages, which has the power to influence opinions, shape people’s identity, and even influence policies made by companies and governments.

The Digital Generation

It cannot be denied that the internet, and social media in particular, have a stronghold in many aspects of our lives. For those born in the latter half of the 1990s, when the internet and the World Wide Web became more mainstream, its use was readily assimilated by businesses, schools, and homes, and ultimately played a large role in shaping a generational culture. Generation-Y (millennials) and Generation-Z are among those synonymous with the digital age. What is a generational grouping? According to Serazio (2015), the concept of labelling generational groups, such as Gen-X, Gen-Y and Gen-Alpha, is a “product of subjective, collective memory as much as empirical, identifiable history” (p.600). Each generation also approaches technological engagement differently, which also affects their behavior (Calvo-Porrall and Pesqueira-Sanchez, 2020). Hence, for those born and growing up in the 21st century, the internet and the power of the web have played a major role in shaping these generations’ beliefs, behaviors, and subjective reality.

And as the years progress, so do technological advancements. Various platforms for information sharing via sites and applications are now available allowing users to keep abreast with current events and connect instantaneously, and sometimes uninhibitedly, with others across the globe. As stated by Hanna (2018) “digital technologies, infrastructures, platforms, applications, and big data are highly interdependent and should be treated as a dynamic ecosystem”. Attention should also be given to the rise of social media platforms evolving from just an avenue to share stories with friends and family to being used as mediums for various agencies, institutions, groups, and individuals to spread their ideas and generate support for their agenda.

In the latest version of the web, Web 3.0, improvements have been made to its usability and performance. The main upgrade would be on the aspect of personalization. With the aid of artificial intelligence (AI) current web technology is able to recognize user preferences more effectively and use this information to suggest and deliver pertinent material related to their preferences. With the growing intelligence and power of Web 3.0, digital communication technology is becoming an increasingly dominant part of our decision-making process and daily routine activities.

The Malaysian Context

Current population estimates for Malaysia released by the Department of Statistics Malaysia on 31 July 2025, is 34.2 million, where roughly 26% of that population is estimated to be aged between 15 to 29 years old (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2025). As stated earlier, Malaysia has enacted various measures to empower its communities through technology in its efforts under the Malaysian Digital Economy agenda. This can be seen through the information and communications technology (ICT) growth. It was reported by

the Department of Statistics Malaysia that access to ICT equipment and services recorded overall in the year 2024 for the Internet was at 96.8 percent for Malaysian households; in which increased Internet access was recorded for both urban and rural households.

According to information published by DataReportal's website (datareportal.com/reports) Malaysia was home to 28.68 million social media users in January 2024, equating to 83.1 percent of the total population. For instance, digital media platforms such as YouTube had 24.10 million users in Malaysia in early 2024 according to Google's advertising resources. Meta's advertising sources also showed the popularity of its social media platforms usage in Malaysia, where Facebook was recorded to have 22.35 million users and Instagram had 15.70 million users in the country in early 2024 (ibid). DataReportal also provided data on other social media usage in Malaysia through its compilation. These included figures published in ByteDance's advertising resources that indicated that TikTok had 28.68 million users aged 18 and above, and X (Twitter)'s advertising resources that indicated that X had 5.71 million users in Malaysia in early 2024.

Malaysian Youths: Findings Analysis

Based on the speed of developments and adoption of digital technologies in today's society, we perceived the value of exploring the influence of digital technology adoption upon the lifestyle of Malaysian youths. As digitalization expands, understanding how data is collected, processed, and interpreted by our youths becomes invaluable in viewing how ideas and identities are formed, and ultimately how this may influence workplace behavior in the future.

In order to study this, we conducted a survey among Malaysian youths born between the years 1996 to 2011 in relation to their use of digital technology. We were able to collect data from 179 participants in total. Firstly, we identified the top five search engines used in Asia (including Malaysia) and asked participants to identify how often would they use these platforms to search for general information online. Among the choices given, the top three popular choices identified by the participants were Google, Bing, and Yahoo.

Of the top three most-used search engines by our participants, it was not a surprise that the majority said they "always" used Google (86.2%) as their main search engine for finding information online. Bing came in at a distant second at 18.6% for "always" and "almost always" being used as a search engine by the participants. Whereas Yahoo came in third place with 7.8% out of all the total respondents stating that they "always" and "almost always" use Yahoo as a search engine, showing that it still has a place amongst users even with Google dominating the market.

In a list compiled by reliablesft.net that identified the top ten best search engines in 2025 (ranked by popularity), Google, Microsoft Bing, and Yahoo were listed as the top three respectively (Chris, 11 February, 2025). There is a big gap between the percentage of users between Google and Bing. Where Google Chrome is the default web browser for most android mobile phones, Bing would be the default search engine on Windows PCs. Bing originated from Microsoft's previous search engines (MSN Search, Windows Live Search, Live Search) and holds 12.21% share of the global desktop market. As reported by electroi.com (2025), China contributes more than 25% of Bing's traffic globally, while the U.S. stands at

22%. Although being still far behind Google, over the years, Bing's popularity and usage has steadily grown globally where About 1.1 billion users are estimated worldwide, with the U.S. contributing around 627.8 million users, India 250.7 million, and Brazil 185.4 million, and other countries making up the remainder (ibid).

Participants were also asked to identify the social media platforms that they regularly use. Our survey findings indicated that almost all our respondents (98.8%) indicated that they use WhatsApp regularly as a means of communication and information sharing platform. This may be explained by the fact that in Malaysia, the use of WhatsApp is prevalent in almost all business and social relations' communications. For instance, it was reported in the NST online that the Department of Statistics: MyCensus 2020 report found that 13.8 million Malaysians in the country utilized the social messaging platform WhatsApp (nst.com.my/news, 2023). Closely following suit in terms of social media usage, among our 179 participants, were Instagram (91.6%), TikTok (91%), YouTube (89.3%), Telegram (81%) and Facebook/Meta (52%). Meta Platforms Inc. (Meta) owns WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram, whereas YouTube is under Google, and TikTok is owned by Chinese Internet company ByteDance.

The next question asked related to exploring how our youths were getting their news. We asked, "how do you keep updated about the national (Malaysian) news?" and the respondents were allowed to identify more than one information source in their answer. We should note an interesting result here where the majority of respondents, i.e. 163 (91%) out of 179 respondents, stated that their main source to knowing local news came "from random social media feeds" or stories shared over the social media platforms that they come across on. It was also found that 101 (56.4%) respondents kept updated on current news "from personal conversations (with friends and family)". As for those who still rely on conventional news sources, only 92 (51.3%) respondents stated that they "watch the news on TV" and 64 (35.7%) respondents added that they also do specific searches on the internet for specific types of news/stories that they are interested in.

As a continuance to that question, we also asked respondents to identify all the ways they received news and updates about both national and international affairs. Here, once again, we also see the evidence of social media popularity as 141 (78.7%) respondents stated that they kept abreast of local and international news through the stories shared by friends, family, and individual content creators on social media. The vast majority of respondents (71.5%) also stated that they stayed informed about current events through the Web, specifically via official online news and magazine websites. Unsurprisingly, a very small number of respondents, only 12.8%, still get their news through printed media (e.g. newspapers and magazines) and only 45.8% from TV broadcasting stations.

From the results of our survey, we can see a strong reliance on digital communication technology and a network of friends and family as information sources for our youths. Interestingly, it was also pointed out by Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, and Ardèvol-Abreu (2017) that although technological advancements provide greater avenues for the general public to engage in learning, the type of information sought still highly depends on content preferences, interest, and usage patterns of the individual. They stated that, "with social media at the forefront of today's media context, citizens may perceive they don't need to

actively seek news because they will be exposed to news and remain well-informed through their peers and social networks” (p.118).

Concluding Thoughts: Social Constructs in the Digital Age

Immanuel Kant, a forerunner of social constructivism, stipulated that although people can gain information and knowledge of many things, “but it will always be subjective knowledge in the sense that it is filtered through human consciousness” (Jackson and Sørensen, 2010).

Building on constructivism and social constructivist perspectives, we approached issues related to the use of the web and digital engagement as information sources among youths in Malaysia. From our findings, it was apparent that the younger generation rely less and less on formal media outlets as sources of information. Instead of televised news and official news agency materials, many are opting to get their information from family and friends through social media feeds, as well as internet posts that are shared through algorithms based on their history of searches. As for the algorithms, these are primarily decided by the respective AI technologies of the companies that control them. It can be surmised that with technological developments in the digital sphere, the power to share information and ideas is no longer limited to only the state but also companies and individuals. Hence, in this paper, we put forward the idea that technological advances in telecommunications have put both state and non-state actors on equal footing in terms of the power to share ideas, influence behavior, and construct shared values.

When more and more people take part in a common idea or shared belief, this has the power to influence an organization’s strategic decisions, create policies and even shape national laws. Information shared over the web and online communities of like-minded individuals can also have the ability to alter perceptions of youths across various fields. It can shape everything from ideologies to attitudes, from lifestyle choices to workplace behavior. If institutions and companies are able to monitor and harness information of what the youth values, and how these values are shaped, it can allow for better human management practices. For example, it can allow for better staffing strategies, creation of talent development programs, as well as updating compensation packages that fit the needs of the times.

Nevertheless, digitalization of information can also be a double-edged sword in the sense that unfiltered misinformation can mislead the public and falsified information be spread easily. With the ever-evolving AI technology, it cannot be denied that algorithms have a strong hand in steering our thoughts through the presentation of materials that feed into our biases. Attention should also be given to the entities that control these platforms. Because although content creators include independent individuals as well as organized institutions, there is still room to wonder how independent these digital information platforms actually are?

As we have presented in this paper, scholars have shown that communication media has the power to influence the construction of our reality. In an age where digitalization and application of AI technologies in our lives are becoming the norm, it can be argued these conditions are creating digital and tech-dependent human capital in our youths.

We are not here to debate the pros and cons of technological developments, but rather to explore and understand how society's values and norms are adapting to these developments and the amount of influence it can have in shaping our views of reality. The generation growing up in an era of digitalized information, such as Gen-Z, are distinguishable from others prior to them because of the unprecedented level of access to information technology. Such an environment can have an important impact on defining one's reality. Hence, understanding the relationship between internet and digital media use and its influence on youths' perspectives and behaviors can provide insights towards the future of managing human capital development within an evolving digital landscape.

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