

Voices Beyond Sound: Social Capital and Civic Engagement of the Deaf Community in Malaysia's Emerging Democracy

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Abstract

This study examines the civic engagement experiences of the Deaf community in Malaysia, with particular attention to their interactions with the hearing community. Guided by Social Capital Theory, the study focuses on three dimensions of social capital: trust, connection, and collaboration. An exploratory research design was adopted, involving 30 Deaf participants with experiences of engaging in civic activities with hearing individuals. The 12 statements were used and developed based on the Social Capital Theory. The findings indicate that trust between Deaf and hearing communities is still developing in Malaysia, while connections and collaboration require further strengthening. These findings suggest that although opportunities for interaction exist, meaningful and sustained relationships between Deaf and hearing communities remain limited. The study highlights the importance of strengthening bridging social capital through greater inclusion, mutual respect, social interaction, and collaborative participation. Strengthening these relationships may provide Deaf individuals with greater opportunities to participate meaningfully in civic life and contribute to a more inclusive democratic society in Malaysia.

Keywords: Deaf Community, Civic Engagement, Social Capital, Malaysia

Introduction

Emerging democracies are often characterized by ongoing efforts to build inclusive societies in which political, social, and civic rights are accessible to all citizens, including marginalized communities. Malaysia, a Southeast Asian nation that has undergone significant political, economic, and social transformation over the past several decades, provides an important context for examining the inclusion of marginalized communities in democratic processes. Despite formal commitments to equality and participation, the Deaf community may continue to encounter barriers to meaningful civic engagement. Examining the civic engagement experiences of the Deaf community therefore provides an important lens for understanding the extent to which an emerging democracy can promote meaningful and inclusive participation for all citizens. As Menocal (2013) notes, most countries across the developing

world are now practising democracies, although many remain imperfect and continue to face challenges in strengthening democratic institutions and ensuring meaningful participation. These emerging democracies are likely to remain an enduring feature of the developing world, making effective engagement with democratic institutions and processes an increasingly important dimension of the development agenda. Within this context, the inclusion and participation of marginalized communities are essential to ensuring that democratic development extends beyond formal political structures to encompass the diverse voices. In this study, the 'voice' is emphasized through sign language, representing the lived experiences, perspectives, and expressions of the Deaf community.

According to the 2022 statistics reported by the Department of Social Welfare Malaysia, 42,349 Malaysians were registered as having hearing disabilities. At the global level, the World Health Organization (2025) estimates that approximately 466 million people experience disabling hearing loss, representing around 6.1% of the world's population. This figure is projected to increase substantially, with nearly 700 million people, or approximately one in every ten people, expected to have disabling hearing loss by 2050 (World Health Organization, 2025). These figures highlight the growing significance of hearing disability as a social and public health concern and underscore the need for greater attention to the inclusion and participation of Deaf and hard hearing individuals in society.

Beyond their demographic significance, the experiences of the Deaf community in civic engagement are shaped by distinctive linguistic, cultural, and accessibility needs. Language barriers, limited access to information, and inadequate communication accommodations in public spaces and institutions may constrain Deaf individuals' ability to participate fully in civic and democratic processes. In Malaysia, Bahasa Isyarat Malaysia (BIM), or Malaysian Sign Language (MSL), is recognized under the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 in relation to communication and sign language. However, legal recognition does not necessarily translate into widespread accessibility or meaningful inclusion. BIM remains insufficiently understood and used among the broader public and within many governmental institutions. The limited availability of BIM interpretation, together with inadequate knowledge and training among public officials, service providers and society at large, may create significant barriers for Deaf individuals in accessing public services, obtaining political and civic information, participating in democratic processes, and exercising their rights as citizens.

The use of BIM remains relatively limited, particularly beyond Deaf-related social and community settings. Public use of BIM can be observed in Deaf organizations and, to a lesser extent, in selected cafes and restaurants in Malaysia, such as the Starbucks Signing Store and KFC outlets where a significant proportion of staff are Deaf (Starbucks Malaysia, 2024 & KFC, 2021). However, Deaf individuals are geographically dispersed across Malaysia and may have limited opportunities to meet and engage in regular social interactions (Chong Vee Yee, 2018). This limited opportunity for interaction may also influence their access to information, community networks, and opportunities for collective civic participation. According to Asaari & Mohd Rashid (2024), the failure of BIM to be integrated into educational policy and curriculum. This environment hinder the hearing communities to effectively engage with the Deaf. Although BIM is officially recognized, it has little usage in schools due to inadequate institutional support and teacher training (Khairuddin et al., 2024).

In developing contexts, these challenges are further exacerbated by limited services for individuals with hearing disabilities, shortages of trained professionals, and inadequate public awareness of the needs and rights of the Deaf community (Mackenzie & Smith, 2009). Malaysia faces similar challenges in addressing hearing loss while ensuring this community have equitable opportunities for social and economic participation. Economic inclusion, for instance, can be strengthened through the effective implementation of the 1% employment quota, financial incentives for inclusive hiring, and expanded entrepreneurship programmes that provide accessible and affordable training, thereby contributing to the reduction of social and economic marginalization (Yusof & Ahmad, 2024).

Beyond economic inclusion, meaningful participation requires broader institutional and democratic reforms. Future policies should be grounded in human rights principles, informed by the lived experiences of Deaf individuals, and supported by robust legal frameworks, institutional accountability, and participatory governance mechanisms (United Nations Development Programme, 2024). Such approaches are particularly important in ensuring that Deaf community are not merely recipients of policies and services but are actively involved in the processes through which decisions affecting their lives are developed and implemented. Through more inclusive and participatory approaches, Malaysia has the potential to strengthen inclusion and democratic participation, contributing to systemic change that benefits the Deaf community and society as a whole.

Civic Engagement

Civic engagement is fundamental to inclusive democratic participation and social justice. It encompasses activities through which individuals and communities participate in public life, including voting, volunteering, community organizations, public consultations, and advocacy. Meaningful civic engagement ensures that marginalized groups, including Deaf communities, have opportunities to contribute to decisions affecting their lives. It also strengthens democratic governance by promoting diverse perspectives, accountability, and social inclusion (Harris et al., 2012).

Despite legal and policy efforts to protect the rights of persons with disabilities, Deaf communities continue to encounter barriers to meaningful civic participation. Limited recognition and use of sign language, inadequate accessibility, and insufficient availability of qualified sign language interpreters in public institutions and civic settings can restrict access to information and limit opportunities to express views and influence decision-making (Charles & Thomas, 2007). Thus, formal recognition of rights does not necessarily translate into substantive participation.

Inclusive civic engagement also requires the active involvement of the hearing community. Hearing communities, including public officials, educators, employers, community members, and civil society organizations, can contribute to inclusion by developing awareness of Deaf culture, supporting accessible communication, and creating opportunities for meaningful interaction. Engagement between Deaf and hearing communities therefore extends beyond removing communication barriers, it requires mutual understanding, respect, and shared responsibility in civic life. Among the key challenges face by the Deaf communities in Malaysia is the lack of government policies that promote the widespread use of BIM in education, healthcare, and public services, which significantly limits their ability to engage in civic life.

Harris et al. (2012) emphasize that meaningful civic participation among persons with disabilities requires both formal and informal support, including peer networks, civic education, accessible information, and appropriate technologies. For the Deaf community, these supports should be complemented by efforts to strengthen the capacity of hearing individuals and institutions to engage inclusively. Such reciprocal engagement can reduce social exclusion, strengthen community relationships, and contribute to a more equitable and participatory democracy in Malaysia.

Social Capital Theory

Social Capital Theory provides a useful framework for understanding how social relationships and connections influence civic engagement. Putnam (1993, 2000) argues that social connections can build trust, facilitate cooperation, and encourage collective action. From this perspective, civic engagement develops not only through individual participation but also through relationships that connect people and communities.

Putnam (2000) distinguishes between bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital strengthens relationships among people with shared identities or experiences, while bridging social capital connects people across different social groups. This distinction is particularly relevant to the present study. Within the Deaf community, shared language, identity, and experiences can strengthen connection and support, while relationships between the Deaf and hearing communities can create bridging social capital that promotes trust, communication, and collaboration.

Trust is important because meaningful civic engagement requires individuals to feel respected and confident that their perspectives will be heard. Social connections can also provide access to information, support, and opportunities for participation (Coleman, 1988). For Deaf individuals, connections with both Deaf organizations and the hearing community may therefore create pathways to civic activities, advocacy, and decision-making.

However, social capital is not automatically inclusive. Limited connections between Deaf and hearing communities may restrict access to wider civic networks and institutions (Woolcock, 2001). Therefore, the quality of these relationships is important in understanding meaningful civic engagement.

Methodology

This study adopts an exploratory research design to examine the civic engagement experiences of the Deaf community in their interactions with the hearing community. The study is guided by Social Capital Theory, focusing on three dimensions: trust, connection, and collaboration. These dimensions provide a framework for understanding how relationships between Deaf and hearing communities may influence civic engagement and participation.

The study involved 30 Deaf participants in Malaysia. Purposive sampling used to select participants who have experience interacting with the hearing community through civic or community activities. Participants include individuals involved in community organizations, volunteering, advocacy, public activities, or other forms of civic engagement.

The study aims to provide an exploratory understanding of participants' experiences rather than generalize the findings to the wider Deaf population in Malaysia. Data collected through a structured questionnaire. The 12 statements were developed based on Social Capital Theory.

Table 1

The 12 Statements

No.	Statements
1	I feel positive when I can trust members of the hearing community.
2	I feel positive when members of the hearing community respect my opinions.
3	I feel positive when hearing people value my experiences and perspectives.
4	I feel positive when I feel accepted by members of the hearing community.
5	I feel positive when I have opportunities to build relationships with hearing people.
6	I feel positive when I participate in activities together with the hearing community.
7	I feel positive when I feel connected to the wider community.
8	I feel positive when my relationships with hearing people provide opportunities for civic participation.
9	I feel positive when Deaf and hearing people work together on community issues.
10	I feel positive when Deaf and hearing people share ideas and experiences.
11	I feel positive when Deaf and hearing people cooperate to improve the community.
12	I feel positive when Deaf and hearing people participate together in activities that benefit society.

Findings

The findings suggest that social capital between the Deaf and hearing communities remains at an early stage of development. Across the three dimensions examined, trust, connection, and collaboration indicate that relationships between the two communities have not yet developed to a level that supports fully inclusive civic engagement.

In terms of trust, the findings suggest that trust between Deaf and hearing communities is still developing. While participants may have some positive experiences when interacting with hearing individuals, these experiences do not yet appear to reflect a strong and consistent level of trust. This indicates the need for greater mutual understanding, respect, and meaningful interaction between the two communities.

For connection, the findings indicate that participants see opportunities to interact with the hearing community, but these connections need to be strengthened. Limited opportunities for sustained interaction may reduce the development of meaningful social relationships and access to wider civic networks. From the perspective of Putnam's (2000) social capital theory, stronger bridging connections between different social groups are important for building broader networks and encouraging civic participation.

Collaboration also requires further development. Although Deaf and hearing individuals may participate in some activities together, opportunities for sustained cooperation and joint decision making remain limited. Greater collaboration could provide opportunities for both communities to share experiences, address common concerns, and contribute collectively to community development.

Conclusion

This study highlights that civic engagement among the Deaf community cannot be understood solely in terms of participation, but also through the quality of relationships between Deaf and hearing communities. Guided by Social Capital Theory, the findings focus on three dimensions, which are trust, connection, and collaboration. The findings suggest that trust between Deaf and hearing communities is still developing, while opportunities for meaningful connection and collaboration require further strengthening.

Although Malaysia has made progress in promoting the inclusion of persons with disabilities, social stigma, limited interaction, and unequal opportunities may continue to affect the development of meaningful relationships between Deaf and hearing people. Strengthening these relationships is important because civic engagement depends not only on having opportunities to participate, but also on feeling respected, accepted, and valued within the wider community.

Therefore, greater efforts are needed to create opportunities for Deaf and hearing communities to interact, cooperate, and participate together in community and civic activities. Strengthening trust, connection, and collaboration can contribute to greater social inclusion and provide Deaf individuals with more meaningful opportunities to participate in Malaysia's democratic and civic life.

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