HRMARS
Exploring Intellectual Capital

Political Voice of Young Malaysians: Online Political Participation among University Students

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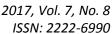Email: hajahgy@gmail.com

Abstract
The aim of this paper to provide insights on the extent of university students' participation in politics through online involvement. This is a case study where a quantitative research design was deemed appropriate. From a response rate of 78%, the findings showed a high level of online political participation among the students at Universiti Teknologi MARA, which were influenced by factors such as political interest, internet skills and communication through social media. The findings are significant in identifying future leaders in the political arena as well as to groom the youths for better contribution to the country's socio-economic wellbeing.
Keywords: Youth, e-Politics, e-Participation, e-Government, Social Media

Introduction
Globalization, the internet revolution and social media have impacted the younger generation's mindset with regards to their respective country's development and socio-economic growth. The evidences on youths' involvements are easily accessible from posts in various e-platforms, for instance, e-politics (Romm Livermore, 2012; Wattal, Schuff, Mandviwalla, & Williams, 2010). With postings, comments and feedbacks on any matter that involves a country's government and administration, the voices and social movements from youths are heard. Take for example Malaysia's annual budget. The Prime Minister's encouragement and requests for feedbacks and any innovative ideas for positive reformation to the country are welcomed. Such online participation have clearly impacted many of Malaysia's agenda, for example in youth entrepreneurship.

Therefore, this study focuses on the online political participation of young Malaysians, specifically, among students of Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Shah Alam. Specifically, the investigation on the factors that influence university or college students in online political participation. Consequently, by exploring the engagement of students in e-politics, that is, participation in politics using the Internet and social media as the enablers, new, emerging antecedents to pinpoint the extent of youths' involvement in the country's administration will provide helpful, democratic insights.

Background

In the era of information, the Internet becomes the most powerful channel for young people to seek information, communicate and socialize. However, it is the Internet that helps to encourage young Malaysian to participate in politics and to what extent does the use of Internet indirectly leads to online political participation among Malaysian youths. In the context of Malaysian politics, young people are more likely to use the internet as a platform for them to express and voice their concerns on the current political happenings. They post links to political articles, comment and express opinions about politics, search for political information and issues, and also listen to other online views. As is occurring worldwide, Malaysia has experienced political protests by young people. Series of street protests in Malaysia have been participated by young Malaysians concerned with social justice and political changes, for example, called Bersih 1.0, Bersih 2.0 and Bersih 3.0 where the crowd was congregated through online invitation to join the street protests, call for abolition of a decades-old law restricting their political activities movement and #KitaLawan rallies in support of the jailed Opposition Leader, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim that went viral via Internet (Sundara Raja, Rajasakran, & Sinnappan, 2013; Welsh, 2011). Apart from that, social and political issues including Aisyah Tajuddin's hudud criticism video, Tun Mahathir's criticism over Prime Minister, Dato' Seri Mohd Najib on 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) and Altantuya murder scandals and also the statement by the Deputy Finance Minister, Datuk Ahmad Maslan during a forum on goods and services tax (GST) briefing at UiTM Shah Alam received overwhelming criticisms and responses by young Malaysians through e-postings (Postill, 2014; Sani & Azizuddin, 2009; Ulicny, Kokar, & Matheus, 2010). The Malaysian political phenomenon nowadays illustrated that young people are actively involved in politics online. Even though young Malaysians seemed politically aggressive online than the conventional forms of politics, what are the major factors that influence youths to use the Internet for political involvement?

Problem Statement

Young people are future leaders of the nation and can contribute towards the development and political stability of the nation. Nevertheless, there have been countless criticism over the participation of young Malaysians especially university students in politics. In Malaysia, only 43 per cent of 18 to 29 year olds Malaysians voted in past general elections as compared to 87 per cent of those whose ages range from 50 years and older (Carle, 2014). The low level of participation among university students is related to the chronicle of Malaysian students' participation in politics in the past. This study also looked into the historical state of social and political activism among university students, the enactment of Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA) in 1971 - limiting students' rights to assembly, freedom to associate with political groups and student gatherings and whereby public speeches were monitored and controlled by the university authorities (Mei, Galea & Ngee, 2014). Apart from that, there is a decline in the traditional forms of political participation among young people in voting and enrolling as partisan members, hence, there is a need to research on the factors that limits youths' online political participation. To reiterate, the purpose of this study is to find out further

the level of participation of young people particularly students of UiTM Shah Alam in politics via online and also the factors that influence them to use the Internet in involving in the political activities.

Method

The basis of this study is to evaluate the online political participation among students of UiTM Shah Alam and also the factors that influence the students (the units of analysis) to be involved in online political activities. The study is guided by Van Deth's theory of political participation where four constructs were identified; political interest, internet skills, communication and online political participation (the dependent variable) (Van Deth, 2001). Therefore, the cross-sectional survey design was used by researcher as the research design for the purpose of study in order to answer research questions and research objectives. The sample size for this study is 500 students at the Shah Alam campus of Universiti Teknologi MARA. The instrument used for the survey is a questionnaire which were administered to the students through convenience sampling. Prior to the actual data collection, a pilot study was undertaken to ascertain reliability and validity of the instrument and data.

Findings

As previously noted, the returned response was 78% (390 from 500), from which the summary of the demographic profiles of the respondents are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of Demographic Profile of Respondents

Category	Type/Group	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	39	10
	Female	351	90.0
Age (Years)	18-21	101	25.9
	22-25	253	64.9
	26-29	29	7.4
	30-33	7	1.8
Programme Taken at University	Science and Technology	230	59.0
	Social Science and Humanities	146	37.4
	Business and Management	14	3.6
Hours Spend for Surfing Internet Daily	Less than 1 hour	17	4.4
	1-2 hours	96	24.6
	3-4 hours	141	36.2
	5-6 hours	58	14.9
	More than 6 hours	78	20.0
Purpose of Internet use	Business	9	2.3
	Education	153	39.2
	Entertainment	66	16.9
	Games	11	2.8
	Politics	36	7.7
	Social Networking	105	26.9
	Others	16	4.1

Based on Table 1, the 90% of the respondents are female students while the male students make up only 10% of the overall return responses. In terms of age, four age categories were delineated where 64.9% are in the range of 22 to 25 years old, followed by 25.9% in the age range of 18-21 years old, 7.4% are aged between 26-29 years old and 1.8% in the age group of 30 to 33 years old. On programs taken by respondents at UiTM Shah Alam, 59% are from Science and Technology (S&T) such as engineering, applied science, computer science and mathematics, dentistry, sport science and architecture programme. Another 37.4% of the respondents are from the Social Science and Humanities programs, for example, administrative science and policy studies, law, applied language, art and design, mass communication, education and also from applied language studies while the remaining 13.6% are from Business and Management programs including Muamalat and business administration. From the demographic information obtained, most of the respondents, 141 (36.2 per cent) spend 3 to 4 hours daily for surfing the Internet and only 17 (4.4 per cent) of respondents that spend less than 1 hour. Therefore, this finding indicated that UiTM Shah Alam students are active Internet users through the time spend daily for surfing the Internet. In term of the purpose of Internet use, respondents are mainly used Internet for education purpose as the respondents are students in which the total numbers are 153 (39.2 per cent) respondents. Apart from that, there are about 105 (26.9 per cent) of respondents that use Internet to go online for social networking; entertainment 66 (16.9 per cent); politics, 36 (7.7 per cent); others, 16 (4.1 per cent); games, 11 (2.8 per cent) and for business about 9 (2.3 per cent). The next section will discuss the implications of the findings and the recommendations for further research.

Discussions and Recommendations
Based on the findings, the social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Web 2.0 have become the main platform for Malaysian youths to participate in online politics-based activities such as to discuss and share their views on public and political matters. Nevertheless, how far their voices are heard and noticed by the government with regards to the national policy agenda. Youths need an official online channel that may help them to exercise their civil and political rights where they can contribute towards various decision making processes. For that reason, one of the recommendations is to enhance online political participation of youths through the establishment of a specific social media group. This channel will become the platform for youths to have direct communication with government to discuss and voice out their concerns on public and political issues and also matters that are related to youths' wellbeing. Youth online political channel operates by providing and keeping their generation updated with information on national issues and government policies that are related to youths' development and then soliciting and recording youths' responses respectively to be viewed by the government. This will result in a better two-way communication between the government and that segment of society as this only main channel for the government to be updated on the needs of youths and the nation's socio-political agenda. Apart from that, this channel also provides opportunities for youths to demonstrate and share their views on politics with their peers for further e-forum and discussions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, youths online activities include reading about politics, comment on politics, share political videos and articles, and discussions about politics online, follow politics and politicians' blogs and webpages and other activities that directly and indirectly lead towards political participation. The Internet continues to become the most powerful platform for youths to voice out and raise their concerns on public, political and youth related issues. Young people become popular over the Internet as a "keyboard warrior" due to their quick comments and status update on political and public issues. This shows that young Malaysians are alert and aware of the nation's current political situation. However, in voicing out their political standings, the youths have to be more intellectual by giving sound and positive views and ideas in order to give contribute towards better developments. The government then should continue to recognize the Internet for social and e-inclusion. Even though online political participation may not sound powerful as being physically present through formal platforms, if government notices and counts the political voice of youths through active online discussions, hence this new form of political participation will become meaningful towards the development of youths leadership as successors. There is a need for a strong support and commitment from all stakeholders towards the development of youth participation in politics online especially from those government agencies that are directly responsible in Information Communications Technology (ICT), politics and youth development. From the researchers' viewpoints, the fundamental element that needs to be addressed on young political participation is trust towards the government. As is evidential, today's generation's distrust and disappointment towards the government are more to do with political structures and corruption issues. Young Malaysians disinterest in joining any political party is due to the political scene of Malaysia that practices partisan politics. Therefore, the government should take action over these issues in order to regain trust from young Malaysians by continued support and empowering youths' in e-political participation.

Acknowledgement

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