

## **SOCIAL MEDIA DISCOURSE IN SARAWAK: AN ANALYSIS OF POPULAR ISSUES AND THEIR CORRELATION WITH THE GABUNGAN PARTI SARAWAK MANIFESTO IN 2021**

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**Published online:** 12 March 2024

**To cite this article:** Hafizan Mohamad Naim and Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani. 2024. Social media discourse in Sarawak: An analysis of popular issues and their correlation with the Gabungan Parti Sarawak manifesto in 2021. *Kajian Malaysia* 42(Supp. 1): 93–124. <https://doi.org/10.21315/km2024.42.s1.6>

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.21315/km2024.42.s1.6>

### **ABSTRACT**

*Social media, notably Facebook, has been reported to be actively used by all, particularly when expressing opposing perspectives on various matters related to Sarawak and Sarawak's interests. The debate became more interesting during the period of political change in 2018 when Sarawak began to realign its position within a shifting political landscape. Consequently, the realignment had also influenced the framing of the Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS) manifesto during the 2021 Sarawak State Election (SSE21). The article attempts to identify the popular issues circulated in social media and to correlate them with the highlighted issues embedded in the GPS manifesto in SSE21. Data was collected from Facebook from 20 December 2018 to 26 January 2019 through historical data retrieval process. About 197 high-engagement posts were selected as the dataset. Thematic analysis was used in the analytic methods, which was carried out using QSR NVivo 12 Plus. Six main topics were identified that served as focal points of discussion for online discourse in Sarawak: sociocultural topics; economic topics; political topics; development topics; constitutional and legal topics; and border and security topics. Among the topics, three main issues have been identified to be crucial for Sarawakians: (1) constitutional and legal issues – issues that are related to Sarawak rights, Malaysia Agreement 1963 (MA63), and federal and state constitution; (2) sociocultural issues – regional sentiments that are related to*

*the ideals of being a Sarawakian; and (3) political issues – issues of federal-state relations. It is suggested that as the online discussion of the issues gains traction, Sarawakians are observed to be more engaged in topics within the framing of their perceived position within the federation, specifically relating to the preferred position of their identity as Sarawakian first as opposed to Malaysian first. The formation of GPS as a local-based coalition has immensely benefited GPS since it is consistent with its agenda of “Sarawak First”. The study’s findings imply that there is consistency between the topics raised by Sarawakians during Sarawak’s term as an opposition state in 2018 and the themes contained in the GPS manifesto during the SSE21.*

**Keywords:** 2021 Sarawak State Election, online discussion, Sarawak First, Facebook, metrics

## INTRODUCTION

Social media plays an essential role in shaping political discourse (Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan 2013). It opens up a space for deliberating political issues (Dahlberg 2001; Mohd Azizuddin 2014; Papacharissi 2004) whilst exposing users to many different points of view relevant for vibrant democracy (Kasmani, Sabran and Ramle 2014). Undeniably, social media creates a stimulating public sphere where users are allowed to express their views and ideas actively. It encourages users’ access to a multitude of information, thus sparking the democratisation of information faster than the mainstream media (Dutta and Bhat 2016). On the flip side, social media may inadvertently create a sort of echo chamber. Instead of exposing users to diverse perspectives, it limits the exposure of users to diverse perspectives by reinforcing shared narratives (Cinelli et al. 2021) through users’ capacity to be selective towards information (Messing and Westwood 2014). Users tend to consume information that adheres to their preferred narratives. As such, users that exhibit selective exposure prefer to focus their attention on information offered by a small number of sources (e.g., news outlets), despite the existence of a large number of alternatives (Cinelli et al. 2020). These situations show that social media hold a complex ability to either engage or disengage users.

Sarawak is an interesting case study for delving into the complexity of social media and its ability to engage and disengage. Sarawak has a fascinating history of social media utilisation for both mobilisations of movements such as the Sarawak for Sarawakians Movement (S4S) (Ting 2021), electoral politics such as the usage of YouTube videos (Hah 2018), and Facebook posts by major political parties contesting in state elections in Sarawak (Nadrawina 2018).