



Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities

**The Patterns of Social Media Use and Choice and Their Influence on
Online Political Participation Among Voters in Sarawak**

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The Patterns of Social Media Use and Choice and Their Influence on Online
Political Participation among Voters in Sarawak

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DECLARATION

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. Except where due acknowledgement have been made, the work is that of the author alone. The thesis has not been accepted for any degree and is not concurrently submitted in candidature of any other degree.



A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized 'G' followed by 'C' and 'A', with a horizontal dotted line extending to the right from the middle of the signature.

Signature

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ABSTRACT

Social media is an online community where people may interact and establish connections using different communication channels. It fulfils several functions, such as keeping in touch, exchanging private updates, advertising, keeping track of current affairs, and finding new job opportunities. Social media offers many benefits and has become crucial to modern communication. Politicians may now directly interact with voters and spread their agendas and policies thanks to the widespread use of social media in the political arena. It has also become a powerful tool for political action, allowing users to quickly spread information about social issues and mobilize support for their beliefs. Because social media can spread information quickly and foster communication among diverse groups, it significantly shapes public opinion and influences election results. Nevertheless, there are still many unanswered questions, such as how social media use and choice may affect political participation and whether there are any similarities or differences in these behaviours amongst people of different ages. The study sought to examine the patterns of social media use and choice among Sarawakian voters as well as the influence of these patterns on online political participation. A stratified sample strategy was used to choose 501 respondents from different areas for the study. A focus group discussion was conducted alongside a survey, with participants specially selected from urban, semi-urban, and rural locations. The study results show that as people get older, they typically show a drop in the use of various social media platforms. The data indicate that young adults are far more likely than older people to use social media platforms. This "social media generational gap" happens due to several factors, including the extensive use of social media, its

accessibility, familiarity with various social media platforms, and the medium on which it is utilized. It is clear from the data that adults and young people are more likely to utilize platforms like Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, TikTok, and so on. Older people usually do not seem excited about using various social media platforms. Social media is widely used daily, yet it has little effect on political action or the diffusion of political information. The study results suggest that the primary objective of employing social media is not to participate actively in political affairs but rather to acquire political information. This is valid for both online political participation and voter engagement on social media platforms. Social media platforms may pique users' interest in particular political issues, but this does not imply that they will become more involved in politics overall. This finding applies to the various age groups that the study examined.

Keywords: Social media, social media use, social media choice, online political participation, Sarawak

***Corak Penggunaan dan Pilihan Media Sosial serta Pengaruhnya Terhadap
Penyertaan Politik Dalam Talian dalam Kalangan Pengundi di Sarawak***
ABSTRAK

Media sosial ialah komuniti dalam talian di mana orang ramai boleh berinteraksi dan menjalin hubungan menggunakan saluran komunikasi yang berbeza. Ia memenuhi beberapa fungsi, seperti berhubung, bertukar-tukar maklumat peribadi, pengiklanan, mengetahui hal ehwal semasa dan mencari peluang pekerjaan baharu. Media sosial menawarkan pelbagai manfaat dan telah menjadi bahagian penting dalam komunikasi moden. Ahli politik kini boleh berinteraksi secara langsung dengan pengundi dan menyebarkan agenda dan dasar mereka ekoran penggunaan meluas media sosial dalam arena politik. Ia juga telah menjadi alat yang berkuasa untuk tindakan politik, membolehkan pengguna menyebarkan maklumat tentang isu sosial dengan mudah dan mendapatkan sokongan untuk kepercayaan terhadap mereka. Oleh kerana media sosial boleh menyebarkan maklumat dengan cepat dan memupuk komunikasi dalam kalangan pelbagai kumpulan, ia mempunyai kesan yang besar dalam membentuk pendapat umum dan mempengaruhi keputusan pilihan raya. Namun begitu, masih terdapat banyak soalan yang belum terjawab seperti bagaimana cara penggunaan dan pilihan media sosial boleh mempengaruhi penyertaan politik dan sama ada terdapat persamaan atau perbezaan dalam tingkah laku ini dalam kalangan orang yang berbeza umur. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji corak penggunaan dan pilihan media sosial dalam kalangan pengundi Sarawak serta pengaruh corak ini terhadap penyertaan politik dalam talian. Strategi sampel berstrata telah digunakan untuk memilih 501 responden dari kawasan yang berbeza untuk kajian. Perbincangan kumpulan fokus telah dijalankan bersama tinjauan, dengan peserta dipilih khas dari lokasi bandar, separa bandar dan luar bandar. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa apabila seseorang semakin meningkat umur,

mereka biasanya menunjukkan penurunan dalam penggunaan pelbagai platform media sosial. Data menunjukkan bahawa orang muda jauh lebih suka menggunakan platform media sosial berbanding orang tua. "Jurang Generasi Media Sosial" ini berlaku disebabkan oleh beberapa faktor, termasuk penggunaan secara meluas media sosial, kebolehcapaiannya, kebiasaan dengan pelbagai platform media sosial serta medium tertentu yang digunakan. Jelas daripada data bahawa orang dewasa dan orang muda lebih cenderung untuk menggunakan platform seperti Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, TikTok, dan sebagainya. Orang yang lebih tua biasanya tidak kelihatan begitu teruja menggunakan pelbagai platform media sosial. Media sosial digunakan secara meluas dalam kehidupan seharian, namun ia mempunyai sedikit kesan terhadap tindakan politik atau penyebaran maklumat politik. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa objektif utama menggunakan media sosial bukanlah untuk mengambil bahagian secara aktif dalam hal ehwal politik, sebaliknya untuk memperoleh maklumat politik. Ini juga dapat dilihat dalam hal penyertaan politik dalam talian dan penglibatan pengundi di platform media sosial. Platform media sosial mungkin menarik minat pengguna dalam isu politik tertentu, tetapi ini tidak bermaksud bahawa mereka akan lebih terlibat dalam politik secara keseluruhan. Penemuan ini berlaku dalam pelbagai kumpulan umur yang diteliti oleh kajian itu.

Kata Kunci: Media sosial, penggunaan media sosial, pemilihan media sosial, penyertaan politik secara atas talian, Sarawak

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LIST OF ABBREVIATION

ARPANET	Advanced Research Projects Agency Network
BN	Barisan Nasional
DAP	Democratic Action Party
GE13	13th General Election
GE14	14th General Election
GE15	15th General Election
GPS	Gabungan Parti Sarawak
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IRC	Internet Relay Chat
ISP	Internet Service Provider
JARING	Joint Advanced Integrated Networking
JENDELA	National Digital Network
LISTSERV	List Server
MA63	1963 Malaysia Agreement
MCO	Movement Control Order
MCMC	Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission
MIMOS	Malaysian Institute of Microelectronic Systems
NITA	National Information Technology Agenda
NITC	National Information Technology Council

PBDSB	Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak Baru
PED	Personal Electronic Devices
PKI	Parti Komunis Indonesia
PSB	Parti Sarawak Bersatu
RSS	Really Simple Syndication
SBN	Sarawak Barisan Nasional
SMPPM	Social Media Participation Model
SOP	Standard Operating Procedures
SUPP	Sarawak United People's Party
USA	United States of America
USENET	User's Network

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Social media is a digital platform that enables users to connect and engage with others through many means of communication. It offers a platform for individuals to disseminate their thoughts, experiences and personal encounters to a broad audience. Furthermore, social media sites frequently provide functionalities such as news updates, entertainment content, and the option to participate in communities or organizations centred around shared interests. Various forms of social media include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, Snapchat, and TikTok. Every platform possesses distinct characteristics and caters to a specific demographic. Certain social media networks prioritize facilitating connections between friends and family, while others are specifically designed for professional networking or sharing visual content. Individuals are free to select from diverse social media platforms that align with their specific requirements and personal inclinations for online social interaction.

Social media serves various purposes, including maintaining communication with family and friends, sharing personal updates and experiences, advertising businesses and brands, staying updated on current events, and discovering new career prospects. Moreover, social media offers a medium for users to showcase their artistic abilities by sharing photographs, films, and artwork. Additionally, it functions as a platform where groups may convene and engage in conversations about shared interests or concerns, fostering relationships and cultivating a feeling of inclusion. In general,

social media has become an essential component of contemporary communication and provides a diverse array of advantages.

Recently, social media has been widely utilized in the political sphere, enabling politicians to directly engage with their voters and disseminate their agendas and policies. Furthermore, it has emerged as a potent instrument for political activity, allowing users to effortlessly disseminate knowledge about societal concerns and rally backing for their convictions. Moreover, social media has exerted a substantial impact on moulding public sentiment and influencing electoral outcomes, owing to its capacity for swift information transmission and enabling dialogue across heterogeneous communities (Hamid & Abdul Rahman, 2018).

Notable examples of the widespread utilization of social media in politics include the presidential campaigns of Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012 (Bimber, 2014). During both campaigns, Obama's team effectively employed platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to interact with voters and rally grassroots backing actively. Political movements, like the Arab Spring, have utilized social media tools like Twitter to coordinate protests and disseminate information regarding governmental activities (Smidi & Shahin, 2017). These instances demonstrate the profound impact of social media on politics, enabling increased openness, citizen participation, and the possibility of societal transformation.

Social media has also impacted Malaysia, especially during the 2018 general election. Chinnasamy and Manaf (2018), in a study on social media as a political hatred mode in the 2018 Malaysia general election, discovered that political hatred is rooted in

political disagreements channelled through social media. In this sense, in the 2018 Malaysia General election, the study by Chinnasamy and Manaf (2018) highlights the following issues that spike debates on social media: Goods and Services Tax (GST), the reputation of candidates and the promises made by candidates, often unfulfilled, emerging influence of opposition parties on social media, Mahathirism, conflicts within and inter-political parties and preservation of the special rights of the Malays. This led to the exertion of social media as a substantial influence in galvanizing young voters and disseminating alternative perspectives, thereby questioning the traditional media narrative. It served as a medium to express their concerns, exchange information, and ensure that officials were held responsible for their acts. The extensive utilization of social media in Malaysia's political arena has fundamentally transformed the methods of campaigns, leading to a fresh era of political consciousness and engagement among the populace (Leong, 2015).

Numerous studies have been conducted on the implications of social media in the political domain, including its influence on political polarization, the dissemination of false information, and the possibility of encountering online harassment and abuse (Colomina et al., 2021). These studies emphasize the influence of social media in moulding popular sentiment and impacting political results. Additionally, multiple studies have been conducted on the impact of social media on political engagement, including its capacity to mobilize and include citizens in political conversations, enhance voter turnout, and assist grassroots movements (Zhuravskaya et al., 2020). These studies indicate that social media can promote the democratization of political processes by

offering a venue for marginalized voices to express themselves and cultivating a feeling of community among those who share similar beliefs.

Nevertheless, there are still many unresolved gaps, including the degree to which social media use and choice can impact political engagement and potential parallels and disparities in social media use and choice across individuals of varying age groups. Conducting a study on the social media use and choice of voters is crucial due to many factors. Which social media platforms do voters commonly like for acquiring political information, and what are the reasons behind this preference? Moreover, if voters of varying age groups utilize distinct social media platforms, are there any resemblances or disparities that may be identified among these preferences? Furthermore, it is vital to comprehensively comprehend the determinants that influenced voters in their choice of specific social media platforms. Various social media platforms are available, but what factors contribute to their varying popularity?

Further exploration is needed to examine how social media usage patterns and preferences can provide insights into the degree of online political engagement among voters. This is among the numerous crucial inquiries that warrant additional investigation. Can people engage more actively in politics through dedicated social media platforms that offer enhanced opportunities, increased autonomy, and higher capacity?

The study aimed to analyse the trends of social media use and choice among voters in Sarawak. Additionally, it sought to analyse the influence of social media use and choice on online political engagement. The study was conducted in Sarawak and

involved 501 participants. The participants were selected using a stratified sample technique from various geographical locations. In addition to a survey, a focus group discussion was also carried out, with specifically chosen participants from urban, semi-urban, and rural areas.

The study's findings indicate that individuals tend to decline their participation level with different types of social media as they age. Based on the data, young adults are markedly more inclined towards utilizing social media platforms than older individuals. This results from the widespread use of the Internet, the specific medium used, the familiarity with social media platforms, and the accessibility of social media. For example, elderly voters lacking proficiency in contemporary technology may face difficulties utilizing social media sites.

Based on the social media use and choice trends among voters in Sarawak, it is evident that young people and adults exhibit a higher propensity for utilizing platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube. Conversely, the elderly are not enthusiastic about utilizing diverse social media platforms. Despite the widespread everyday use of social media, its impact on political activity and the dissemination of political information could be more significant.

The study's findings indicate that social media's primary purpose is not to engage in political events actively but rather to gather political information. This holds for both voter engagement on social media platforms and online political participation. While social media platforms may generate enthusiasm among users for specific political matters, they still need to increase their engagement or involvement in

the political process. This observation is consistent among the several age groups analysed in the study.

1.1 Background of Research

The evolution of digital communication channels has enhanced and expanded the use of social media platforms worldwide. This transformation has significantly altered the landscape of political communication and voter engagement, positioning social media as a vital platform for information dissemination, political discourse, and mobilization. These factors collectively shape online political participation among voters (Al-Odat et al., 2023). This study explores the choice of social media, its use, and its impact on online political participation. Accordingly, this section briefly discusses the subjects of this study: social media choice, social media use, and their influence on voters' online political engagement.

In this study, social media choice refers to voters' preferences for specific social media platforms for interaction and content consumption. There are a variety of social media platforms, each offering different functionalities, content formats, and user experiences (Halpern et al., 2017). Several factors influence voters' choice of social media, primarily concerns about generational gaps. These factors include digital literacy, age demographics, whether the users are from rural, urban, or semi-urban areas, personal characteristics and traits, social networking skills, and platform specificities (Chen & Peng, 2023). Each platform has distinct characteristics that foster unique political ecosystems, facilitating varying levels of political engagement, information diversity, and community dynamics (Al-Odat et al., 2023).