MIXED METHOD IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION RESEARCH: THE STUDY OF MEDIA USAGE AND VOTING BEHAVIOUR AS A CASE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The study of political communication has expanded in recent decades, concurrent with the emphasis on examining the state of the field, but neglecting the examination on the research methodology employed in the field. While previous work in this area has mainly utilised a particular single methodology of either a quantitative or a qualitative approach, this paper discusses the application of mixed methods in political communication, by reviewing an example from the authors' empirical study conducted on media usage and voting behaviour among youth in Malaysia. This paper discusses the advantages of using the mixed methods approach in political communication research, processes as well as challenges related to mixed method in relation to media and voting behaviour study. Implications of mixed method in political communication research are also discussed.

Key words: interview, media usage, mixed method, political communication, survey

INTRODUCTION

Political communication research has sparked attention among scholars and is widely covered in literature. However, previous works by scholars provide little focus on the research methodology employed in political communication. The discussion in the existing literature concentrates mainly on either building or testing new theories, neglecting methodologically oriented approach.

Since 1970s, research of political communication is dominated mainly by one particular research methodology (Karpf, Kreiss, Nielsen & Powers, 2015). Generally, quantitative researchers mainly employed contents analysis and survey in their studies. On the other hand, qualitative researchers prefer to use in-depth interviews or focus group interviews in their attempts to study about media and political behaviour. The utilisation of a single of either qualitative or quantitative methodology, which obviously has its own weaknesses, limits our understanding of a holistic political communication phenomenon. Apparently, mixed methods in political communication research covers the disadvantages offered in single method. In this paper, we will highlight the promise of field research—in combination with quantitative ones—by highlighting the crucial role it plays as an integral part of empirical work and theory-building in an older tradition of political communication research, which will expand our knowledge on political communication methodology.

In recent years, the explosion of new media besides the existing traditional media has changed the landscape of politics in Malaysia. Apparently, past studies highlighted that the

results of general elections in the country since 2008 demonstrates the powerful influence of media in people's decisions regarding voting. Election results were not much determined solely by social media, but it was political issues related to the high cost of living, government corruption, regardless of race or ethnicity, that are more important than the medium itself (Gomez, 2013). This paper discusses the application of mixed methods in political communication research with special reference to the study of media and political behaviour conducted by the authors and team in 2015.

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION STUDIES AND THE MIXED METHODS APPROACH

Only a handful of studies on political communication have utilized the mixed methodology approach. This may be due to the fact that mixed method approach is imposing in terms of challenges, as well time- consuming and demanding in terms of time and resources (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). One such study that utilized the mixed methods approach is a study by Marland and Giasson (2013). A main objective of their research was to examine political marketing campaign in Canada. The quantitative data on political marketing spending activity was validated through the use of semi-structured interviews with practitioners who held senior campaign positions in major political parties. Some of the major advantages in using mixed method mentioned by the researchers were they were able to balance, and substantiate data obtained from interviews (which may have been biased or less reliable) with more objective quantitative data, such as the campaign spending data, and vice versa. This is supported by other scholars, who have argued that using mixed method is advantageous and offers insight into richer data, as the advantages of each method will compensate the weakness of the other method so they provide a more comprehensive and complete set of data (McMillan, 2004).

Another study by Parmelee, Perkins and Sayre (2007) also used the mixed method approach; their research used the sequential transformative mixed methodology approach in examining the perceptions of college students on political advertisements. A focus group discussion was held to examine college students' interpretation of the value of political advertising, while the quantitative approach utilized a content analysis of more than 100 advertisements in the 2004 US presidential election.

Finally, a more recent study by Lee (2016) examined Twitter use and citizen's political information behaviour in Korea during the 2014 Seoul mayoral election, from the theory of information world's perspective. The qualitative approach utilized the in-depth interview technique using thee different modes (i.e. face-to-face interviews, e-mails and voice over Internet protocols) with 13 opinion leaders on Twitter were interviewed about their perceived social norms, and perception on the value of information that led to certain information sharing behaviours. The quantitative technique adopted the content analysis method, using the social network analysis by examining Tweets exchanged during the election period, to examine what information they shared and exchanged, and what types of collaborative information sharing behaviour they engaged in. A major rationale for choosing the mixed approach in this study is due to the complex nature of big data available on social media such as Twitter. Further, although social network analysis is useful for understanding Twitter users' position and relationship with other users' in terms of information behaviour, using SNA solely to interpret political information behaviour was not comprehensive, as SNA could not uncover, in greater detail, users' intentions, perceptions, and evaluations of the political information behaviour they employed in their interaction with others.

Taken together, these studies appear to demonstrate the usefulness of using mixed method in studying perceptions and attitude towards politics, as well as political behaviour. The mixed method approach seem to provide a more comprehensive picture of the data involved in studying political communication, and each method can be used to substantiate or offset the weaknesses of the other. However, because it is time consuming, and arduous in terms of time and resources, not many research in political communication choose to adopt the mixed methods approach.

A LOOK INTO THE STUDY OF MEDIA USAGE AND VOTING BEHAVIOUR USING MIXED METHODS

In 2015, the authors and several other researchers conducted a study on political communication in Malaysia. The study investigated media usage and voting behaviour among youths in Malaysia. The researchers conducted the study to explore how youths in Malaysia used traditional and new media; and to what extent that their exposure to media influences their perception about political parties, political leaders and their voting decision. A mixed method approach, combining both the qualitative and qualitative methodologies was employed in this research.

The combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies in this study allows for a comprehensive understanding of how youths used media and the extent to which media influences their voting behaviour, as the two methodologies were "integrative and reciprocal" (Keyton, 2000, p. 394). The use of mixed methods "can neutralize or cancel some disadvantages of certain methods" (De Vaus, 2005, p. 252). The obvious advantage of using qualitative research is that it can be effectively used to study "subtle nuances in attitudes and behaviours" (Babbie, 2008, p. 312); while the disadvantage of this method is that, unlike the findings obtained by a quantitative method, the findings obtained from a qualitative method cannot be confidently generalised to a larger population (Babbie, 2008). Thus, a combination of these two methodologies increases the validity of the findings.

In addition, the utilisation of mixed methods was necessary due to the exploratory and descriptive nature of this study. Among the common forms of mixed-method designs used by researchers are parallel, sequential exploratory and sequential explanatory mixed-method designs (Hesse-Biber, 2010). The utilisation of a particular different mixed-method design is usually determined by the purpose of a study. Parallel mixed-method design is commonly used when both qualitative and quantitative methodologies are given an equal emphasis in a study. Sequential mixed-method design is used when either qualitative methodology or quantitative methodology is given more emphasis than the other. This study was aimed at understanding media usage patterns among youth and their voting behaviours. As such, the sequential exploratory mixed-method design was utilised. In general, this study relies heavily on the survey findings while focus group discussion was used to develop the survey questionnaire. A summary of this design is illustrated in the following figure (Figure 1).
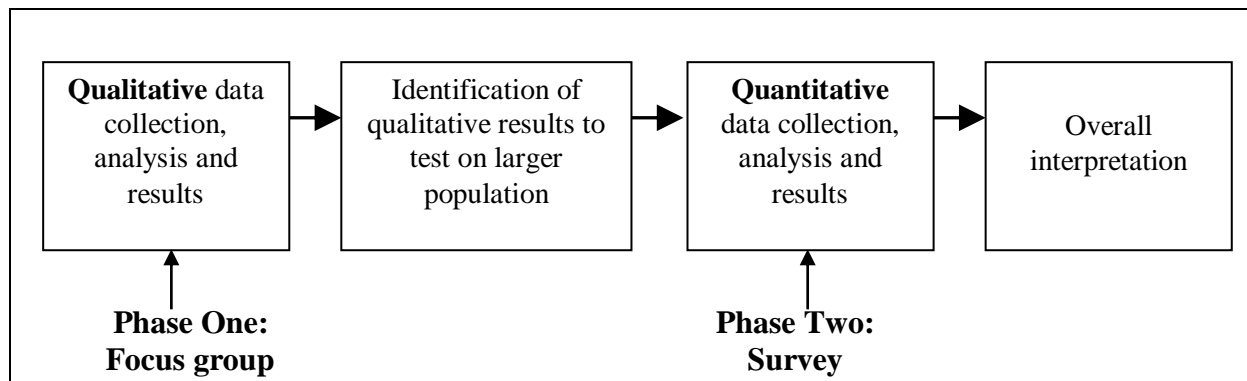
Figure 1: Sequential explanatory mixed-method design (Adapted from Hesse-Biber, 2010, p. 459)

The qualitative method (i.e. focus group discussions) was employed in the study to gain "in-depth information and insider perspectives" (Oetzel, 2002, p. 133) in an attempt to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of media usage among youths, their perceptions and attitudes towards politics ranging from national issues, political leaders, political parties as well their voting behaviour. The results of the focus group were then tested on a larger sample through a survey. Basically, the findings gathered from FGD were used to assist researchers in constructing items in the survey questionnaire. In addition, the quantitative method (survey) was carried out to examine the respondents' patterns of media usage and to determine their voting behaviour in a larger population. The survey findings allow researchers to see the overall picture of the media usage and voting patterns among youth in Malaysia.

Qualitative Methodology

In the study, focus group discussion (FGD) was employed. Focus group discussion (FGD) is a convenient method in understanding an issue or a topic as "it essentially involves in engaging a small number of people in an informal group discussion (or discussions) focused around a particular topic or set of issues" (Wilkinson, 2004, p.177). Notably, the use of FGD in the study saves time, as researchers are able to collect data from multiple individuals simultaneously. Essentially, social science researchers often employ FGD as a mean to assist them in developing draft survey questionnaires (Freitas, Olieveira, Jenkins & Popjoy, 1998).

Role of Researchers in Data Collection

During this research, all researchers acted as moderator of FGD. We assigned each researcher with group/s based on his/her place of origin and his or her ability to conduct FGD using the dialects of the respondents' groups. Having similar place of origin and able to speak the same dialects of the respondents gave several advantages. Firstly, it helped to facilitate trust and confidence in the researcher-participant relationship and allowed rapport to be established with the participants during the data gathering process, providing access into their experiences in relation to media usage and political behaviour. A significant challenge faced in the study is to conduct FGD with non-Malays. Significantly, the main problem for ethnic diversity studies is the use of jargon, which may create difficulties to non-members to understand the language used by a specific group (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Patton, 2002). However, as all interviews were conducted in English and Malay, language difficulties did not exist. In addition, with the experience of being an academic and also a Malaysian, it was easy to understand the language and cultural referents the participants used, which provided greater access to their world without the need to constantly ask for clarification. However, realising

the risk of attributing meanings to certain words or jargon on which participants diverge (Minichiello, Aroni & Hays, 2008), hermeneutic alertness (van Manen, 1997) was applied during the data gathering process. At this juncture, it was important to be "out of the participants' box" to truly reflect on the meanings rather than putting preconceptions and interpretations on the issues explored.

Therefore, reflexivity was prevalent in designing this research and was practised during the data collection processes. Throughout research, it is suggested that to learn participants' meanings, researchers need to be reflexive about their own meanings and at the same time make an effort to step back so that an eye is cast on how everyday realities are experienced (Arber, 2006). Therefore, in order to gain a balance between researcher bias and the real participants' experiences, the FGD were audio recorded and a quantitative survey was conducted. Survey was considered as an appropriate method to avoid researcher bias as the respondents were anonymous and their personal identities were not available.

FGD processes

Focus group discussions were conducted in this study aimed to generate themes as a basis to develop survey instruments. As this study is exploratory, FGD were used as the primary method of data collection due to the reason that they provide in-depth information on the issues explored. The main purpose of FGD in this study is to explore and understand perceptions, attitudes and the views of youth regarding politics in the country, which are somehow shaped by their media usage. The reasons for conducting FGD in this study were to explore the experiences of Malaysian youth on media usage, to examine their perceptions about the current government, current issues of the country and issues related to politics and political leaders as well as their attitudes towards election in the country.

According to the Ministry of Youth and Sports of Malaysia, youth are those aged between 15 to 40 years old. But for this study, the threshold is confined to 18 to 35 years old. The study is interested in finding two categories of youth based on their work/study location or their place of living; rural and urban. The key definition of rural is that they live/work/study outside city. On the other hand, the key to defining urban is that they live and work/study in the city. Their experience living in the city and their corresponding exposure to high-speed internet is vital in understanding new media use. Urban also means that they have specific lifestyle that is associated to modern living such as familiarity with commercial and fast paced lifestyle. At the same time, to understand the urban youth, the demographic makeup must also include the different racial groups. As such the study was able to gather Chinese and Indian youth from the urban sample. The participants were gathered via purposive sampling. As the study has specified that it is focused on urban youth in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur, and rural youth in Kelantan, and Penang (mixture of rural and urban), the researchers had set out looking for participants that fit the requirements. They were identified through personal acquaintance, Facebook and phone calls for participation.

The focus group was conducted via a group interview. The round table interview was conducted in an informal manner whereby the participants were given the freedom to share and respond at anytime. Two moderators and a research assistant were there to ensure that everyone had the opportunity to participate and that the discussion was in line with the research theme. At least one of the facilitators moderated discussions in each FGD. To ensure reliability of data, moderators used a predetermined set of interview questions when conducting the discussions. The interview was guided by the research objectives that were

interested to understand – 1. Media use, 2. New media experiences, 3. Political behaviours and 4. Opinions on issues. Prior to FGD, a pilot study and several discussions were conducted to develop a reliable set of interview questions.

Focus group discussions were carried out at meeting rooms at hotels, restaurant and university, and the researchers were the ones who determined the venues. Despite being a passive observer, research assistants helped out the researchers in conducting FGD. The discussions began with moderator introduced themselves, the researchers and research assistants, informing the purpose of FGD, the rules of interviews and also the roles and rights of the participants. Each FGD session took between 80 minutes to two hours. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the research assistants to prepare raw data for the analysis. Researchers read the transcripts and analysed the data thematically based on the research objectives.

Overall, the study comprised of six FGD groups in which two of them were conducted in Kelantan, another two in Kuala Lumpur, and one each in Selangor and Penang. The numbers of respondents in each group range from six to ten. In total, the number of respondents for FGD is 50. To facilitate a comfortable discussion environment, researchers encouraged respondents to bring with them another one of their family members or friends to participate in the same group. In almost all FGD, respondents brought their wife, colleagues and friends along. FGD was held on 11 June 2015 in Penang, 12 until 13 Jun 2015 in Kelantan, 13 Jun 2015 in Selangor, and 14 Jun 2015 in Kuala Lumpur. (Refer Table 1):

Table 1: Respondents of focus group discussions

Location	Malay	Chinese	India	Total
Selangor	5	3	0	8
Kuala Lumpur	5	3	2	10
Kuala Lumpur	6	0	0	6
Pulau Pinang	5	1	2	8
Kelantan	8	0	0	8
Kelantan	10	0	0	10
TOTAL	39	7	4	50

Quantitative Methodology

Apart from focus group, a survey was also carried out in the study. The purpose of the survey was to crosscheck focus group findings in a larger sample. A survey research is appropriate to test the data obtained from interviews on a wider population. It allows a researcher to reach a large number of respondents in the population and at the same time, information about the same characteristics or variables of two or more cases can be compared (De Vaus, 2002; Babbie, 2010). Survey research design is considered as one of the most utilised methods by researchers in studies of group dynamics (Burn, 2004). This design enables researchers to tap into members' cognitions and attitudes about their communication practices (Poole, Keyton & Frey, 1999) as well as their perceptions about other group members' communication practices.

The quantitative methodology of this study was carried out using cross-sectional survey involving respondents in several states in Malaysia and a total of 1229 surveys were distributed to respondents, using the purposive sampling technique (refer to Table 2).

Table 2: Respondents for survey based on location

Location	Number of respondents
Selangor	229
Kuala Lumpur	194
Kedah	200
Penang	200
Johor	200
Kelantan	206
TOTAL	1229

Similarly to the focus group discussions, the survey was carried out in the six states: Johor, Selangor, Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Kelantan and Kedah. These states were divided to represent both rural and urban areas in each state. Research assistants were selected to represent each state, and to distribute the survey questionnaire in their designated areas. Prior to the data collection, these research assistants were trained on how to approach their respondents, and briefed on each item in the questionnaire. In selecting the survey respondents, the research assistant were instructed to select them based on specific demographic criteria, such as age group, gender, race, and location, i.e. whether urban or rural. The data collection period took place in the month of August 2015. After the data collection period ended, the data was then keyed in using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software. The data analysis of the study utilized both inferential and descriptive statistics.

The survey questionnaire was designed based on feedback obtained from the focus group discussions. The survey questionnaire was divided into four major sections including demographic background (i.e. age, gender, race, occupation, marital status, education level, religion, monthly income), media usage (i.e. usage of old and new media, reasons for using old and new media), perceptions on media and politics, as well as perceptions on the government and leadership.

From the 1229 respondents, more than half were male (59%). From the findings, almost three quarters of the respondents were aged between 18-32 years old. In line with the racially diverse Malaysian population, about half of the respondents were Malays (54%). Based on the data, the Malaysian youths selected for this study were relatively well educated; 38% had at least a degree, while 23% had completed From 6 and/or had a diploma. Based on their occupation, 36% of them worked in the private sector, 15% worked in the public sector, while 7% was self-employed. The respondents, although mostly gainfully employed, due to their young age, did not earn high incomes. About one third of them obtained a monthly income of below RM 2000 (34%), and only 22% earned more than RM4000 in a month.

The quantitative approach using the survey methodology was not without some problems and challenges. Although the focus group discussion had assisted the researchers in forming more succinct items in the survey questionnaire, some respondents still complained that the survey was too long. Also, because of the relatively young age of the respondents, some did not want to entertain the research assistants due to their busy schedule, i.e. work and/or study. In certain areas (i.e. Penang), it required research assistants to master local dialects (either Chinese or Tamil), as not knowing the local dialect may impede the data collection process. Thus, in certain areas it required research assistants that are not only familiar with the survey questionnaire, they also had to be bilingual. Further, as with any other social sciences research that utilized survey questionnaire, respondents were also subject to social desirability bias. Social desirability bias is a "response determinant that refers to the

tendency of people to deny socially undesirable traits or qualities and to admit to socially desirable ones" (Phillips & Clancy, 1972, p. 923). Therefore, the survey respondents may have been giving inaccurate responses, as they were susceptible to pleasing the research assistants, and may not have been completely truthful in answering certain questions (for example, which political party they support, or perceptions on certain political leaders). Because politics is also a sensitive topic in Malaysia, in which some people maybe reluctant to discussing, as it's a conversational taboo, their perceptions on politics and perceptions on the current government may not have been completely accurate, or may have been greatly exaggerated. Additionally, items on media usage may also have been subject to recall issues; respondents were just giving an estimate of their media habits and consumption based on their memory.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In summary, based on our experiences in conducting a mixed methods study, the mixed methodology has been particularly useful in expanding our understanding of methodology employed in political communication research. From previous studies employing the use of mixed methods, it is also apparent that the mixed method approach allows for deeper understanding and a more comprehensive picture of political attitude and behaviours, such as voting decisions, information exchanged, and perceptions towards political campaign.

Also, with the rapid development in media and communication technology, it may be necessary to adopt the mixed method approach in studying political communication, as using solely the quantitative approach (i.e. such as surveys) may not be adequate as the qualitative approach may help supplement the quantitative approach in terms of obtaining information that is below the surface.

Further, politics is a sensitive topic in many cultures, thus respondents maybe reluctant to reveal or disclose their views on the topic. As such, using the mixed method approach managed to overcome this problem. In addition, the utilisation of mixed methods in political communication studies in general, and the study of media and political behaviour conducted by authors, in particular, allows for the researcher to gain a more complex understanding of the topic, rather than just a quantitative approach to political issues and how it affects communication behaviours.

In this paper, the analysis was only confined to one political communication study. Therefore, the case analysis cannot possibly be generalised to other context. As such, further analysis could be applied in different contexts. Additionally, results in this particular election year could differ significantly with future election results, depending on the political climate in Malaysia, and as such further comparative analysis could be drawn from the upcoming 14th general election. Besides, this paper only discusses the sequential exploratory mixed methods design in the analysis. Further study could benefit using the mixed method approach by using other designs in the mixed method approach.

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