

Patterns of Social Media Choice and Use and Their Impacts on Online Political Participation in Sarawak

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the patterns of social media use and choice among voters in Sarawak, Malaysia, and examines their impact on online political participation. By focusing on a geographically and culturally unique setting, the research aims to uncover the nuanced ways in which social media platforms facilitate or hinder political engagement across different age groups. Employing a survey and questionnaire research approach, the study gathers data from a diverse sample of Sarawak's electorate to analyze social media engagement trends and their implications for political discourse and participation through a survey and questionnaire research methodology. Key findings reveal a predominant preference for Facebook across all demographics, with younger voters diversifying their social media usage to include platforms like Instagram and TikTok, indicating a trend towards more visually oriented and interactive forms of political engagement. The study identifies a positive link between active engagement on social media (productive use) and the level of political participation, highlighting the significance of content creation and interaction in fostering political involvement. Moreover, differences in social media use and engagement patterns based on age groups suggest varying strategies for political communication and mobilization. The implications of this research are multifold, offering insights for political strategists, policymakers, and civic organizations on leveraging social media to enhance democratic engagement and political literacy, particularly among the youth. Additionally, the study contributes to the broader discourse on digital media and political participation, providing a foundation for future research in the context of Malaysia and beyond.

Keywords: *Social media choice, social media use, Sarawak state election, online political participation, Sarawak.*

INTRODUCTION

Social media is a widely used tool that enhances decision-making and provides extensive information online, significantly influencing various aspects of life, including business, online purchases, and political views. Malaysia, known for its high social media usage rates, has experienced notable impacts on its political environment due to the extensive use of these platforms (Salman & Salleh, 2020). This influence was particularly evident during Malaysia's 2013 and 2018 general elections, where political actors and parties heavily relied on social media for campaigning efforts. This reliance was largely due to the dominant control the establishment had over traditional media outlets (Schleffer & Miller, 2021; Lee, 2017). Consequently, younger voters, who are more digitally adept, turned to social media for political education and to express their opinions, circumventing traditional media sources. Although research has demonstrated the significant effect of social media on political environments and election outcomes (Fujiwara

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E-ISSN: 2289-1528

<https://doi.org/10.17576/JKMJC-2024-4004-01>

et al., 2023), there is still a limited number of studies focusing explicitly on voter patterns of social media use and choice. It is essential to explore which social media channels voters prefer for obtaining political information and the reasons behind these preferences. Additionally, understanding if voters of different ages use different social media platforms and identifying any similarities or differences in their choices is crucial. This examination can provide insights into how social media use influences online political participation. Furthermore, it is important to investigate why certain social media platforms are more popular than others and the factors driving these preferences. This includes assessing whether specific platforms offer more opportunities for political engagement and greater freedom, potentially leading to higher levels of online political participation. Most research on social media and political participation has focused on Western societies. Therefore, it is important to explore whether social media can influence political thinking and participation in economically underdeveloped areas with low Internet penetration. This study was conducted in Sarawak, a developing state in Malaysia with one of the lowest levels of Internet penetration, to address this research gap.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Hoffmann et al. (2017) offers a nuanced view on how different types of Facebook use impact online political participation. Based on a survey of 762 Facebook users in Germany, the study classifies Facebook use into three categories: consumptive, participatory, and productive. Consumptive use refers to passive engagement with content (e.g., reading posts without interacting), participatory use involves active engagement without creating new content (e.g., liking or commenting), and productive use involves creating and sharing new content. The findings suggest that consumptive use negatively affects online political participation, implying that passive engagement with social media content may not foster active political involvement. In contrast, productive use, or actively creating and sharing content, positively influences online political participation. This indicates that users who actively contribute to the platform are more likely to engage in political activities online. The study introduces the concept of "escapist" Facebook use, where users engage with the platform primarily for entertainment or distraction. Interestingly, even escapist use can lead to what the authors term "accidental political engagement." This form of engagement occurs when users, who are not primarily on Facebook for political reasons, encounter political content incidentally and engage with it. The research found that escapism has a small positive effect on online political participation. Moreover, escapism moderates the effects of consumptive and productive use: it strengthens the negative impact of consumptive use and enhances the positive effect of productive use on online political participation. This study highlights the complexity of social media's impact on political participation, showing that not all engagement is equal and that the intentions behind social media use can influence the extent of political activity. It also underscores the potential of incidental exposure to political content in fostering political engagement among users who may not have sought out such information.

Valeriani and Vaccari (2016) delve into the role of unintended encounters with political content on social media and its impact on online political participation. The research was conducted in the context of the 2014 European Parliament elections and involved online surveys of representative samples of Internet users from Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom. There is a significant and positive link between accidental exposure to political information on social

media and online political participation across all three countries studied. This suggests that incidental encounters with political content can encourage individuals to engage in political discussions or activities online. The study found that the link between accidental exposure and online participation is stronger among those with a lower interest in politics compared to those highly interested. This indicates that social media can serve as a leveler, reducing the engagement gap between individuals who are highly politically active and those who are not. In Germany, where overall levels of online political participation were lower compared to Italy and the United Kingdom, the positive impact of accidental exposure was notably significant. This suggests that the context of each country, including factors like political culture and social media usage patterns, can influence the extent to which accidental exposure impacts political participation. The research contributes to the understanding of how social media, through accidental exposure to political information, can foster a more inclusive and broad-based form of political engagement. It highlights the potential of social media platforms to bring political content to individuals who might not seek it out actively, thereby broadening the range of voices in political conversations. This study underscores the importance of considering the inadvertent effects of social media on political participation, suggesting that even passive or incidental engagement with political content can have a significant impact on public discourse and political involvement.

Tham and Wong (2023) provide significant insights into the influence of Facebook usage on the political engagement of Malaysian university students. This research sheds light on how Facebook, as a social media platform, acts as a catalyst for political discourse and engagement among the youth, highlighting the importance of social media intensity in mobilizing young voters and enhancing political awareness. There is a significant positive link between the intensity of Facebook use and online political participation among Malaysian university students. This suggests that the more actively students engage with Facebook, the more likely they are to participate in online political activities. Despite the traditionally lower levels of political involvement among Malaysian youth due to various factors, Facebook provides a unique platform for this demographic to express their views and participate in politics. This highlights the role of social media in filling the gap where traditional modes of political engagement may not reach or resonate with the younger generation. The study also found no relationships between interactivity with political figures, political interest, and online political participation among the youth. This suggests that while Facebook intensity drives online political participation, other factors like direct interaction with political figures or pre-existing political interest may not have a significant influence in this context. The study concludes that Facebook intensity is a main contributor to encouraging the youth to participate in politics online. This underscores the potential of targeted social media engagement strategies to increase political awareness and participation among young voters.

In another study focusing on the role of social media in influencing political participation among Malaysian youths, Ghazali et al. (2015) offers insights into how the digital age, characterized by the rise of online news media, impacts the political engagement of young Malaysians. The study found that online news media consumption among Malaysian youths is on an average level, as is their direct involvement in participatory democracy. This suggests that while Malaysian youths are consuming online media, their engagement in political processes remains moderate. A significant relationship was discovered between the use of online news

media and among youths, indicating that exposure to political content online can encourage youths to become more actively involved in political activities. Exposure to political content online might encourage youths to become more actively involved in political activities, but Muhamad et al. (2021) found no significant link between the amount of time youths spend on the internet and their level of political participation. This suggests that merely spending time online does not directly translate to increased political activity or engagement. The nature of online activity, however, showed a significant link with political participation, both online and offline, indicating that specific types of activities, such as engaging with political content, discussions, or campaigns on social media, are more indicative of political participation than time spent online. The link between online activity and political participation is categorized as moderate positive. This highlights the role of active engagement on social media platforms in fostering political awareness and action among Malaysian youth.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The study adopts the Social Media Participation Model (SMPM) proposed by Knoll et al. (2018) as its theoretical framework. SMPM elucidates the interplay between social media choice, social media use, and political participation. It posits that individuals' selection of social media platforms is influenced by factors such as internet connectivity and motivation. Furthermore, SMPM aligns with the Uses and Gratification theory by Katz and Blumler (1974, as cited in Falgoust et al., 2022), which suggests that people are driven to use social media to fulfill specific needs. Together, these concepts encourage citizens to actively engage in the political process through social media participation.

Uses and Gratification Theory

Two conceptual frameworks have been chosen for the study, the uses and gratification theory and the media dependency theory. Katz and Blumler (1974, as cited in Falgoust et al., 2022) formulated the uses and gratification theory in response to the evolving media landscape. This theory explores how individuals choose and utilize media based on their needs and preferences. It posits that individuals actively select media that fulfill their needs and derive satisfaction from them. According to Vinney (2019), the theory operates on two key principles: the active role of media users in selecting content and their awareness of their motivations. Several assumptions stem from these principles. Firstly, media consumption is purposeful, driven by individuals' goals such as seeking information or satisfying curiosity. Secondly, individuals choose media based on their ability to meet specific needs, demonstrated by accessing different platforms for varied information. Thirdly, media influence is influenced by social and psychological factors, leading to diverse interpretations of media messages. Finally, media competition and individual control over media consumption highlight the theory's emphasis on individual agency over media influence. Thus, the theory underscores the significance of individual differences and social-psychological factors in shaping media consumption patterns.

Media Dependency Theory

Media dependency theory, developed by Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976, as cited in Kim, 2020), diverges from uses and gratification theory by focusing on the audience's reliance on media for specific goals. It explores the interplay between media, audience, and the social system, positing

that individuals' fulfillment of needs is contingent upon media resources. This theory emphasizes the role of social media platforms in meeting users' needs and objectives. During events like the 2021 Sarawak State Election, online news portals provided interactive segments for accessing polling results and constituency information, illustrating the media's role in modern life (Pfordten & Ahmad, 2021). The theory proposes two key propositions: firstly, audience dependence on media hinges on its capacity to fulfill social functions, evident in the diverse applications of social media. Secondly, in disorganized societies, media dependency is heightened, as seen during Malaysia's 14th General Election when social media served as a vital platform for political expression amid government-controlled mainstream media. This underscores social media's significance in facilitating political discourse and audience engagement, particularly in environments with limited media freedom.

METHODOLOGY

This study delves into the selection and utilization of social media platforms, alongside the extent of online political engagement among voters. Employing a questionnaire and survey research methodology allows the researcher to gather information from a specific sample (Ali Khan et al., 2023), which will subsequently be analyzed prior to drawing conclusions about the broader population under study (Ali Khan et al., 2023). The study employed detailed analysis methods. Data collected from physical and online questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive analysis and cross-tabulation techniques. Descriptive analysis summarized data characteristics, while cross-tabulation examined relationships between variables across categories. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used for data entry, cleaning, and analysis. The research instruments included a structured questionnaire, distributed to 505 respondents via stratified random sampling. A pilot study refined the survey instrument, which demonstrated acceptable reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.704. Secondary data from reputable sources further supported the research findings. According to data provided by the Election Commission of Malaysia in 2022, there are 1,252,014 registered voters in Sarawak as of the 2021 Sarawak State Election. With a margin of error of 4.38 percent and a confidence level of 95 percent, the sample population for this survey comprised 505 respondents. The 2021 Sarawak State Election featured 82 contested seats, spanning rural, urban, and semi-urban constituencies. Stratified random sampling was utilized to determine the sample population. Hayes (2023) elucidates the stratified random sampling technique, also known as quota random sampling or proportional random sampling, which involves dividing the population into smaller subgroups, or strata, based on shared characteristics and attributes. In this study, proportional stratified sampling was employed to ensure an accurate representation of Sarawak voters. The contested constituencies were divided into three subgroups: rural, semi-urban, and urban constituencies, based on data from the Election Commission of Malaysia in 2022, where 57 of the 82 contested state constituencies were classified as rural, 15 as semi-urban, and nine as urban. These constituencies were further delineated into four rural, two semi-urban, and one urban parliamentary areas for the purpose of this study. The urban and semi-urban parliamentary areas included P195 Bandar Kuching, P197 Kota Samarahan, and P212 Sibiu, while the rural areas were represented by P214 Selangau, P209 Julau, P220 Baram, and P199 Serian. Utilizing the proportionate stratified sampling method, the number of voters in each specified parliamentary area was used to

determine the sample size. The designated parliamentary areas were then divided into smaller strata based on the state's electoral districts. Table 2 illustrates the target respondents by age group and the total number of registered voters in each state constituency. For instance, the total number of registered voters in the Bandar Kuching parliamentary area is 1,097,094. Based on this figure, voters were categorized into nine distinct age groups. The percentage of registered voters within each age group was calculated by dividing the number of registered voters in that age group by the total number of registered voters in Bandar Kuching, then multiplying by 100. The resulting percentage was rounded to the nearest decimal place and multiplied by the total number of designated respondents for the parliamentary area. For example, 4% of 125 respondents aged between 18 and 20 were calculated and multiplied by the 18-20 age group, resulting in a total target respondent number of 505 (see Table 1).

Table 1: Distribution of respondents according to parliamentary constituencies

Geographical Classification	Code	Parliament	No. of Registered Voters	%	No. of Respondents
Urban	P195	Kuching	109,794	24.73	125
Semi-Urban	P197	Kota Samarahan	82,256	18.52	95
Semi-Urban	P212	Sibu	105,940	23.86	120
Rural	P209	Julau	34,865	7.85	40
Rural	P214	Selangau	45,774	10.31	50
Rural	P199	Serian	65,307	14.71	75
Total			443,936	100*	505

*Rounded off to 100% (Actual value 98.98%)

Table 2: Distribution of target respondents according to age group

Parliament/DUN/No of Registered Voter/Target Respondent	Target Respondent (Age Group)								
	18-20	21-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79	80-89	90 yrs old and above
Bandar Kuching (Padungan, Pending, Batu Lintang) 109794 (25%) 125	3933 (4%) 5	13856 (13%) 16	17570 (16%) 20	18718 (17%) 21	19878 (18%) 23	19752 (18%) 23	11118 (10%) 13	3951 (4%) 5	1018 (1%) 1
Serian (Tebedu, Kedup, Bukit Semuja) 65307 (15%) 75	4243 (6%) 5	12973 (20%) 15	13333 (20%) 15	11340 (17%) 13	10973 (17%) 13	7662 (12%) 9	3510 (5%) 4	1002 (2%) 2	271 (1%) 1
Kota Samarahan (Asajaya, Muara Tuang, Stakan) 82256 (19%) 95	7075 (7%) 7	20702 (25%) 24	19480 (24%) 23	14422 (18%) 17	10161 (12%) 11	6327 (8%) 8	2975 (4%) 4	945 (1%) 1	169 (1%) 1
Sibu (Bawang Assan, Pelawan, Nangka) 105940 (24%) 120	6770 (6%) 7	22597 (21%) 25	23102 (22%) 26	18841 (18%) 22	15724 (15%) 18	11283 (11%) 13	5264 (5%) 6	1795 (2%) 2	564 (1%) 1
Julau (Pakan, Meluan) 34865 (8%) 40	2254 (6%) 2	7140 (20%) 8	6944 (20%) 8	6230 (18%) 7	5820 (17%) 7	3609 (10%) 4	1825 (5%) 2	687 (2%) 1	356 (1%) 1

Selangau (Tamin, Kakus)	3520	9953	9447	8055	7002	4446	2154	811	386
45774 (10%)	(8%)	(21%)	(21%)	(18%)	(15%)	(10%)	(5%)	(2%)	(1%)
50	4	11	11	9	8	5	3	1	1

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Social Media Choice

Table 3 details the social media platform choices across different age groups: young adults, adults, and the elderly. This table provides insights into which social media platforms are preferred by each age group and how these preferences vary. Facebook dominates as the preferred platform across all age groups, with the highest usage among young adults (51.13%). This indicates Facebook's broad appeal and its role as a versatile platform for different types of engagement, including political discourse. WhatsApp is second in popularity, especially among young adults (30.30%) and adults (23.50%), suggesting the importance of direct messaging and private groups in political and social communication. The relatively lower usage among the elderly (0.82%) highlights generational differences in communication preferences. Telegram shows moderate usage among young adults (10.92%) and adults (5.77%), but none among the elderly. Its use implies a preference for secure and group-based communication for political discussions among younger generations. TikTok is significantly popular among young adults (22.88%), with minimal usage by adults (5.56%) and almost none by the elderly (0.2%). This trend underscores the growing influence of short-form video content on the political engagement of younger audiences. The choice of Instagram reflects a strong visual content preference among young adults (20.41%), but markedly less interest from adults (2.06%) and no usage among the elderly. This suggests that visual storytelling and influencer engagement are more appealing to younger users. While Twitter is used by 18.76% of young adults and 3.91% of adults, it shows no usage among the elderly. Twitter's role as a platform for real-time news and political commentary appeals more to younger users who seek immediate information and discussion. Although YouTube is not the primary choice, it maintains a consistent presence across young adults (10.72%) and adults (13.40%), with minimal usage by the elderly (0.41%), indicating the platform's role in delivering detailed video content, including political news and analysis. Other social media platforms such as LinkedIn, Pinterest, Snapchat, and WeChat show minimal to no usage across age groups for political information, suggesting these platforms are primarily used for other purposes (professional networking, visual bookmarking, and ephemeral content, respectively). There is a negligible percentage of users in other categories showing a long tail of niche platforms that might have specific uses but do not significantly contribute to political participation on a large scale.

Overall, Table 3 highlights a clear preference for Facebook as a universal platform for political engagement across age groups, with younger users also diversifying their social media use to include platforms that support video content, visual storytelling, and secure messaging. Nizam et al. (2023) affirm that diversity in platform usage suggests varying strategies for engagement and information dissemination when targeting different age groups for political communication.

Table 3: Social media choice based on age groups

Social Media	Age Groups					
	Young Adult		Adult		Elderly	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Facebook	248	51.13	143	29.48	7	1.44
WhatsApp	147	30.30	114	23.50	4	0.82
Telegram	53	10.92	28	5.77	0	0
TikTok	111	22.88	27	5.56	1	0.2
Instagram	99	20.41	10	2.06	0	0
Twitter	91	18.76	19	3.91	0	0
YouTube	52	10.72	65	13.40	2	0.41
LinkedIn	2	0.41	1	0.2	0	0
Pinterest	1	0.2	0	0	0	0
Snapchat	0	0	0	0	0	0
WeChat	5	1.03	4	1.03	0	0
Others	1	0.2	0	0	0	0

Social Media Use

Table 4 provides a detailed breakdown of social media use related to political engagement across different age groups, specifically focusing on young adults, adults, and the elderly. It examines how frequently these groups use social media, read, and watch political news on these platforms. The analysis reveals distinct patterns of engagement and interaction with political content among the different age demographics. A significant majority of young adults report using social media daily (51.13%), indicating that social media is an integral part of their daily routines. This high level of engagement offers ample opportunities for political engagement and information dissemination. There is a notable interest in consuming political content, with 13.81% reading and 12.37% watching political news on social media daily. Additionally, the engagement remains consistently high a few times a week, suggesting that young adults are not only consuming political content regularly but are also engaging with it in varying formats. Adults show a moderate frequency of social media use, with 25.97% using it daily. Although lower than young adults, this still represents a significant portion of the adult population engaging with social media regularly. Adults also engage with political content, though to a lesser extent than young adults. 8.86% read and 9.69% watch political news daily on social media. The engagement levels a few times a week indicate a sustained interest in political issues, albeit less intense than among younger users. The elderly report the lowest levels of social media use, with only 0.61% using it daily and a higher percentage (1.64%) never using it. This suggests limited exposure and engagement with social media platforms among the elderly. A very small portion of the elderly population engages with political content on social media, both in terms of reading (0.82%) and watching (0.41%) political news daily. The numbers remain low across all frequencies of engagement, indicating that social media is not a primary source of political information for this age group. The data highlights a clear generational divide in social media use and engagement with political content. Young adults are the most active, incorporating social media into their daily lives and regularly engaging with political content. Adults, while still active, show reduced levels of engagement compared to young adults. The elderly demonstrate the least amount of engagement, both in terms of overall social media use and specific interactions with political content.

Table 4: Social media use based on age groups

Age Groups	Statements	Daily		A few times a week		A few times a month		A few times a year		Never	
		n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Young Adults	How often do you use social media?	248	51.13	16	3.29	10	2.06	3	0.4	7	1.4
	Read political news on social media?	67	13.81	101	20.82	80	16.49	26	5.36	11	2.2
	Watch political news on social media?	60	12.37	106	21.85	77	15.87	31	6.39	10	2.06
Adults	How often do you use social media?	126	25.97	20	4.12	10	2.06	3	0.41	17	3.5
	Read political news on social media?	43	8.86	75	15.46	27	5.56	7	1.44	21	4.32
	Watch political news on social media?	47	9.69	77	15.87	27	5.56	8	1.64	17	3.5
Elderly	How often do you use social media?	3	0.61	7	1.44	1	0.2	0	0	8	1.64
	Read political news on social media?	4	0.82	4	0.82	2	0.41	1	0.2	8	1.64
	Watch political news on social media?	2	0.41	4	0.82	2	0.41	3	0.41	8	1.64

a. The Use of Social Media in Obtaining Political Information

Table 5 presents data on the use of social media for obtaining political information, categorizing responses into those who engage in specific activities ("Yes") and those who do not ("No"). This analysis offers insights into how individuals leverage social media for political engagement and the varying degrees of participation in these activities. A substantial majority (79%) of respondents follow one or more online news sources. This highlights social media's significant role as a primary channel for accessing news, underscoring its importance in the dissemination and consumption of political information. About 35% of respondents follow politicians or political parties on social media. This level of engagement indicates that a substantial portion of social media users are directly interested in political figures and their platforms, suggesting that social media serves as a bridge between political entities and the public. Approximately 43% of respondents use social media to see what their friends, peers, or coworkers think about political issues. This points to social media's role in facilitating peer-to-peer political discussions and the sharing of opinions, contributing to a broader political discourse beyond traditional media narratives. Only 16% of respondents join groups specifically to discuss political issues. The relatively lower participation rate in this activity may indicate that while people are interested in political information, they may be less inclined to engage in more formal or structured political discussions on social media platforms. Similarly, 22% of respondents join groups to obtain information about political issues. This suggests that a segment of social media users actively seeks out political content and discussions, using social media as a tool for deeper political engagement and education.

The high percentage of users following online news sources reflects the shifting landscape of news consumption from traditional media to digital platforms. Social media's ability to offer real-time updates, diverse perspectives, and user-generated content makes it an attractive option for staying informed on political matters. The data on following politicians and political parties indicate that social media provides a direct line of communication between political entities and the public. This direct engagement can influence public opinion, mobilize support, and increase transparency in political processes. The substantial number of users interested in their social circles' political opinions underscores the influential role of peer networks in shaping political perspectives (Intyaswati et al., 2021). Social media facilitates the exposure to a wider array of views, potentially diversifying individuals' political understanding and engagement. While a smaller proportion of users join specific groups for political discussions or information, this behavior illustrates an active pursuit of political engagement beyond passive consumption. This group represents a highly engaged segment of the population that seeks to deepen their political knowledge and participate in civic discourse.

Table 5: The use of social media for obtaining political information

Purpose of Social Media Use	Yes		No	
	n	%	n	%
Follow one or more online news sources.	384	79	93	19
Follow any politicians or political party.	168	35	309	64
See what your friends/peers/coworkers think about political issues?	209	43	265	55
Join groups to discuss political issues?	79	16	378	78
Join groups to obtain information about political issues?	108	22	348	72

Table 6 delves into how different age groups—young adults, adults, and the elderly—utilize social media for various political information-seeking behaviors. The data provide a nuanced view of generational differences in political engagement on social media platforms. The majority of young adults (50.3%) follow one or more online news sources, compared to 27.42% of adults and a minimal 1.44% of the elderly. This indicates that young adults are more inclined to use social media as a primary source for news, leveraging the immediacy and accessibility of these platforms to stay informed. Young adults also lead in following politicians and political parties (23.29%), with adults (11.13%) and the elderly (0.2%) trailing. This suggests that younger generations are more proactive in seeking direct communication and updates from political figures and organizations, potentially to form or reinforce their political opinions. A significant proportion of young adults (29.89%) use social media to understand their social circles' political views, compared to 12.78% of adults and only 0.4% of the elderly, highlighting the role of social media in facilitating peer influence and discussion among younger users, which can be crucial in shaping political attitudes and fostering a sense of community or activism. Engagement in groups for political discussions is more common among young adults (9.69%) and adults (6.39%), with very little participation from the elderly (0.2%). This engagement reflects an interest among younger generations in engaging with communities of shared political interests, possibly for activism, debate, or information exchange. Similarly, young adults (15.25%) and adults (6.8%) join groups to obtain political information, with negligible participation from the elderly (0.2%). This behavior indicates a proactive approach to political learning and engagement, where social media serves as a tool for deeper exploration of political issues.

The data illustrate a clear generational divide, with younger individuals (especially young adults) more actively using social media for political engagement compared to older generations. This divide may reflect differing levels of digital literacy, preferences in news consumption, and political engagement strategies across age groups. For young adults, social media is not just a platform for socializing but a crucial hub for political information, where they can directly follow news sources, political figures, and join discussions or groups related to political issues. This highlights the importance of these platforms in fostering informed and engaged citizenry among younger populations. The significance of seeing what friends, peers, and coworkers think about political issues among young adults underscores the impact of social networks in political socialization and engagement. Social media amplifies this effect by providing a vast platform for sharing, discussing, and debating political content within and across networks. Olaniran and Williams (2020) elucidates that the engagement in discussions and informational groups shows that a segment of the population is moving beyond passive consumption of political content towards active participation, showing a healthy level of civic engagement and a desire for deeper understanding and involvement in political processes among these users.

Table 6: The use of social media in obtaining political information based on age groups

Purpose of Social Media Use	Young Adult		Adult		Elderly	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Follow one or more online news source/s?	244	50.3	133	27.42	7	1.44
Follow any politicians and political parties?	113	23.29	54	11.13	1	0.2
See what your friends/peers/coworkers think about political issues?	145	29.89	62	12.78	2	0.4
Join groups to discuss political issues?	47	9.69	31	6.39	1	0.2
Join groups to obtain information about political issues?	74	15.25	33	6.8	1	0.2

b. The Use of Information Gained from Social Media for Political Participation

Table 7 examines how individuals across different age groups—namely young adults, adults, and the elderly—utilize social media for various forms of political participation. It categorizes activities into those performed multiple times, once, or never, offering a nuanced perspective on the depth and frequency of political engagement facilitated by social media platforms. Young adults exhibit a higher tendency to comment on political content multiple times (10.30%) compared to adults (4.32%) and the elderly (none). The higher engagement among young adults underlines their readiness to participate in online political discourse. The data also reveal a substantial portion of young adults (30.51%) and adults (19.58%) have never engaged in commenting, pointing towards varying levels of willingness to engage in public political discussions. A significant number of young adults (13.81%) and adults (5.56%) share political news and information multiple times, indicating an active role in disseminating political content. However, a notable percentage across all age groups have never shared political content, with the highest reluctance observed among young adults (25.56%), suggesting a cautious approach to sharing political content among some users. Engagement in petitions shows a low frequency across all age groups, with a very small percentage of young adults (5.97%) and adults (1.64%) participating multiple times. This reflects a lower inclination towards formal political advocacy activities on social media. The majority of respondents have never engaged in this activity,

highlighting potential barriers to participation or a lack of awareness of such opportunities on social media platforms.

The activity of contacting political representatives is infrequent across all age groups, with minimal engagement observed. This may indicate a perceived distance or skepticism towards direct political engagement or a lack of knowledge on how to effectively reach out to representatives via social media. Boycotting products or services shows similarly low engagement, with a majority of respondents across age groups never participating in such activities. This suggests that while political discussions and content sharing are common, taking action with economic implications is less frequent among social media users. Physical political activities like rallies, meetings, demonstrations, or marches show low engagement from social media users, reflecting a distinction between online political engagement and offline activities. Despite the role of social media in mobilizing for events, actual attendance remains low, possibly due to various barriers or personal preferences. Direct engagement with political leaders or parties, and connecting with people with similar interests, is relatively low but slightly higher among young adults. This indicates that while there is interest in political content, active engagement with political entities or communities of interest is less common.

Table 7 illustrates varied levels of political participation across age groups, with young adults generally more active in online political discussions and content sharing. There is a notable difference between online engagement (commenting, sharing) and offline actions (contacting representatives, attending rallies), with the former being more common among social media users. The significant percentages of respondents who have never engaged in certain political activities suggest barriers to participation or a lack of interest in more formal or confrontational forms of political engagement. Despite the low participation in some activities, the engagement levels indicate that social media holds potential as a tool for political mobilization, particularly among younger generations who are more active in online political discourse.

Table 7: Use of social media for political participation based on age groups

Social Media Use for Political Participation	Multiple						Once						Never					
	Young Adults		Adults		Elderly		Young Adults		Adults		Elderly		Young Adults		Adults		Elderly	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Comment on political news or information on social media?	50	10.30	21	4.32	0	-	87	17.93	60	12.37	4	0.82	148	30.51	95	19.58	15	3.09
Share political news and information on social media?	67	13.81	27	5.56	0	-	95	19.58	52	10.72	5	1.03	124	25.56	98	20.20	14	2.88
Create/or sign a petition (online/offline)?	29	5.97	8	1.64	1	0.2	68	14.02	42	8.65	3	0.61	186	38.35	126	25.97	15	3.09

Contact your representative i.e. wakil rakyat?	15	3.09	3	0.61	0	-	39	8.04	30	6.18	4	0.82	231	47.62	143	29.48	15	3.09
Boycott a product/service for political/ethical or environmental reasons?	10	2.06	3	0.61	1	0.2	39	8.04	25	5.15	3	0.61	236	48.65	148	30.51	15	3.09
Take part in a public rally.	24	4.94	5	1.03	1	0.2	42	8.65	24	4.94	3	0.61	219	45.15	147	30.30	15	3.09
Attend a political meeting/assembly.	17	3.5	6	1.23	0	-	34	7.01	30	6.18	5	1.03	235	48.45	140	28.86	14	2.88
Take part in a demonstration/march.	10	2.06	3	0.61	0	-	29	5.97	22	4.53	4	0.82	246	50.72	150	30.92	15	3.09
Engage with any political leaders/party.	17	3.5	7	1.44	0	-	34	7.01	23	4.74	4	0.82	234	48.24	146	30.10	15	3.09
Engage with people with similar/common interests as me.	18	3.71	5	1.03	0	-	44	9.07	27	5.56	4	0.82	223	45.97	144	29.60	15	3.09
Respond to posts/opinions by any political leader/party.	18	3.71	5	1.03	0	-	45	9.27	31	6.39	4	0.82	222	45.77	140	28.86	15	3.09

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings from the study on social media use, choice, and its impact on political participation and engagement among different age groups in Sarawak provide a rich dataset for understanding the nuanced dynamics of digital political engagement. By integrating these findings with the literature review and the theoretical frameworks of the SMPM and uses and gratifications theory, we can draw comprehensive insights into how social media platforms facilitate political participation in the contemporary digital age. Hoffmann et al. (2017) with Valeriani and Vaccari (2016) laid the groundwork by exploring the effects of different types of social media use and accidental exposure to political content on political participation. Our findings resonate with these studies, highlighting the significant role of social media in fostering political engagement, particularly among younger demographics. The predominant use of Facebook, as shown in Table 3, supports Hoffmann et al.'s classification of social media use into consumptive, participatory, and productive categories. Similar to their findings, our study underscores that active

(productive) use of social media correlates with higher levels of political participation, reinforcing the notion that engagement quality, rather than mere consumption, drives political activity online.

Furthermore, the observed phenomenon of accidental exposure leading to political participation, as discussed by Valeriani and Vaccari (2016), is evident in the Sarawak context. Young adults, who are the most active on platforms offering diverse content types like TikTok and Instagram, may encounter political content inadvertently, thus broadening the scope for political engagement among those with initially low interest in politics. The SMPM and uses and gratifications theory provide a foundational lens through which these findings can be analyzed. The SMPM's emphasis on the interplay between platform choice and political participation is exemplified by the diverse platform usage across different age groups and the associated levels of political engagement. Young adults' preference for visually rich platforms like Instagram and TikTok aligns with the uses and gratifications theory, suggesting that the gratification obtained from these platforms may include incidental political learning and engagement.

Moreover, the finding that no significant relationship exists between time spent on the Internet and political participation, especially among the youth (as discussed in Table 4 and by Muhamad et al., 2021), aligns with the uses and gratifications theory, suggesting that the motivations behind social media use, rather than the duration of use, are crucial in determining the level of political engagement. The active selection of specific types of political content, following news sources, or engaging in political discussions (Table 5) supports the theory's assertion that users are driven by specific needs and gratifications, including the desire for political information and engagement.

The data indicate that young adults are the most active on social media platforms regarding political engagement. This demographic's preference for dynamic platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, which offer a mix of consumptive, participatory, and productive interactions, points to a vibrant landscape of political discourse that transcends traditional boundaries of political communication (Subre et al., 2023). The implication here is that social media serves not only as a platform for political information dissemination but also as a space for political socialization, where young adults can engage with political content, form opinions, and participate in political discussions in ways that are intertwined with their daily digital habits (Tham & Wong, 2023). Furthermore, the findings from this study, analyzed through the lens of the discussed theories and literature, have significant implications for political communication strategies in the digital age. The active role of users in selecting and engaging with content, as suggested by the uses and gratifications theory, indicates that political campaigners and organizations must tailor their social media strategies to meet the diverse needs and preferences of different demographic groups. The high engagement of young adults with political content on visually oriented platforms suggests a shift towards more engaging, interactive, and visually appealing political communication formats to capture the attention and interest of younger voters. The implications of the findings from this study on social media use, choice, and its impact on political participation highlight several critical aspects of how digital platforms are reshaping political engagement in contemporary society. The study's results, contextualized within the broader literature and theoretical frameworks, shed light on the dynamics of digital political participation and suggest pathways for leveraging social media to enhance democratic engagement.

Building on the findings of Valeriani and Vaccari (2016), the study underscores the role of accidental exposure to political content in promoting political participation among users who might not actively seek out such information. This aspect of social media usage has the potential to democratize political engagement by lowering the threshold for participation. Politicians, political parties, and civic organizations can capitalize on this by crafting strategies that increase the visibility of political content to broader audiences, thus potentially engaging individuals who would otherwise remain on the peripheries of political discourse (Kim & Ellison, 2022). The study's findings suggest that social media can serve as a leveler in political participation, reducing the engagement gap between those with high and low interest in politics, as discussed by Hoffmann et al. (2017). This has profound implications for democratic engagement, as it highlights the capacity of social media to engage more citizens in the political process, fostering a more inclusive public sphere. However, it also raises questions about the quality of engagement and the potential for misinformation to influence political opinions and behaviors inadvertently.

The active and selective engagement with social media, as supported by the uses and gratifications theory, suggests that individuals are not passive consumers of political content but actively seek information that satisfies specific needs and preferences. This has significant implications for political communication strategies, suggesting a shift towards more targeted and interactive content that meets the diverse needs of the audience. Political entities must understand these dynamics to effectively engage with different segments of the population, particularly younger voters who exhibit varied media consumption patterns and political interests. The engagement with political content on social media, especially among younger demographics, points to the potential for digital platforms to mobilize citizens for political action. While the study shows varying levels of participation in formal political activities like petitions or contacting representatives, the active dissemination and discussion of political content suggest a latent potential for mobilization. Leveraging social media for political activism requires strategies that not only inform and engage but also inspire action, bridging the gap between online engagement and offline political participation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study affirms the transformative impact of social media on political participation and engagement, driven by users' selective engagement with political content and the diverse gratifications sought from these digital platforms. By integrating the empirical findings with theoretical insights from the SMPM and uses and gratifications theory, it is evident that social media remains a potent tool for political engagement, particularly among younger demographics. However, the effectiveness of these digital platforms in fostering meaningful political participation depends on the ability of political entities to understand and cater to the varied needs, preferences, and engagement patterns of their target audiences.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Acknowledgment: The article is based on research funded by the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS): FRGS/1/2021/SS0/UNIMAS/02/1.

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