

Post Political Content among Youth in Facebook

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Abstract

The vibrancy of information and communication technology has made it possible for interactive internet use in daily communication. Users' involvement in online interaction via social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn has specifically been seen to have some implications on communication and interaction. This research focuses on the use of new media as platforms to facilitate the dissemination of information, where access is unrestricted and users are free to voice out their opinions and increase their levels of political participation. The aim of this research is to explore the extent of youths' perceptions on national political climate via a social media platform which is Facebook. In-depth interviews with youths aged 15 to 30 years old were carried out to collect data. This research adopted the approach used in Media System Dependency Theory by (Ball-Rokeach, 1985). The findings from this research showed that new media i.e. Facebook was accepted as a democracy space for political information in which youths took active online political participation. The findings were supported by the responses from the respondents which showed youths' tendency towards using their image and display content on Facebook as reasons to use Facebook as a platform for political participation.

Keywords: Youth; Facebook; Media System Dependency Theory; political participation; social media

1. Introduction

Malaysia is a democratic country where people enjoy freedom of speech. Recent development shows that media and communication are interrelated in the dissemination of information. Everyone needs printed or electronic media as the intermediate for communication and information. Mass media is not just a powerful system which controls information resources for individuals, groups, social organizations and society who generally rely on media to fulfil their intended goals (Loges & Ball-Rokeach, 1993), but also catapults changes in its users' thinking, attitude and behaviors. One of the important studies in the field of communication is to identify the function of media from the users' perspectives including individual relationship and the impacts of the relationship.

The freedom to write in social media space in Malaysia has caused various language usage among youths in expressing their feelings and thoughts towards the government. Political protests are rampant in the cyber world; however, 'voices from within' which emerged from youths are potentially seen as a threat to Malaysian political landscape. This group seems to be very vocal in promoting changes in the political scenario of the country. They demand a reformed society and nation. Arguably, the relationship between the social media use reality and the social reality has coloured the political landscape of Malaysia. Thus, the idealism of the youths has been seen to be responsible for making the youths more controversial and negative. Consequently, readers' perceptions and thoughts are sometimes influenced by negative and unverified information. These perceptions towards the ruling government were manifested in the forms of writing as an attacking tool through social media.

It is undeniable that some users become too dependent on technology in their daily lives. This view is supported by Adamson and Shine (2003); Edison and Geissler (2003) who write that dependency on technology is created as a result of users' perception and attitude towards technology which eventually influence their lifestyle and behaviors. According to Severin and Tankard (2001), early human communication through various stages and developments starts with the traditional media system and it evolves to the latest technology with the emergence of the Internet which offers various applications such as social media websites, blogs and etc. The development of the Internet has been considered as a major change in communication after forty years since the invention of the television.

According to Papacharissi (2009), Facebook is an open social network instrument which offers various applications for its users. Generally, social network webs are used by people from various backgrounds including students, housewives, workers from the public and private sectors. They use the networks for different purposes such as to increase business and individual networks. The existence of social web networks such as Facebook, MySpace and Twitter has provided an alternative for cyber interaction and communication. This has attracted many users or Internet surfers to be actively involved in cyber interaction for various purposes as well as for satisfaction. This research focuses on the usage of social network websites among youths to explore the factors which influence their involvement in social interaction and explore how cyber space changes and influences communication patterns.

Research Questions

This research is guided by these questions:

1. How do youth perceive political climax (the number and the environment of the discussions related to political issues) on Facebook?
2. How do youths' perceptions towards political climate create their readiness to voice out their opinions regarding political issues on Facebook?

Research Objective

The general objective of this research is to explore why some youths resort to expressing their ideas regarding politics in social media and why do not. The specific objectives for this research are as follows:

1. Look at the extent of youths' perceptions towards Facebook climate (the number and the environment of the discussions related to political issues)
2. Identify youths' perceptions towards the climate of political issues and their readiness to voice out their opinions on Facebook.

2. Literature Reviewed

2.1 Youths and their perceptions towards Facebook's political climate

Based on the above brief review, questions have arisen about how are youths going to face political expression in the context of Facebook. Despite several studies using surveys which suggested that most youths will be exposed to the political content of Facebook whenever a political issue emerges (Rainie et al., 2012), much less is known on how different audiences types, the potential of risking exposure to those who do not share the same political belief, and the possibilities of dealing with audience with conflicting views will influence the decision of what and which type of political content to be displayed on social media especially Facebook.

We explore these questions through in-depth interviews with youths. Besides the abovementioned questions on variety, disagreement, and audience, the research questions are developed to merge two traditions of different political discussions. First, we take into consideration how the perception of the political environment – not merely on the disagreement but on the number and the environment of political discussions – creates the desire to be involved in political discussions on the website (Kim et al., 1999; Noelle-Neumann, 1984). Second, we explore how political interaction perception on Facebook is molded by individual differences. Previous research, such as by Hayes et al., has shown that “not participating is, at least half of it, a social psychology phenomenon” (p. 261; also Matthes, 2013). Our second intention is to see if and how political perception on Facebook is dependent on motivational characteristics and individual personality.

2.2 Facebook as an alternative medium for political information

It has been established that statistics revealed by Alexa Web Information (2015) can be used as evidence that Facebook has become an important platform for cyber users to communicate and share textual information without face-to-face interaction. Alexa (2015) listed Google, Facebook, Youtube, Baidu and Yahoo as the five top social media platforms. Nonetheless, in June 2011, Facebook was reported to have recorded 750 million users. Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (2013) reported that, in 2008, the number of registered internet users was 3.92 million and the number increased by 302 percent in the subsequent five years. As a democratic country that allows freedom of speech, Malaysia is also affected by the social media phenomenon. In fact, interesting collaboration among information technology, telecommunication, and computer has been able to attract Facebook users to share information and exchange feedbacks on the country's political issues. Surprisingly, despite the use of written language, the forms are so much closer to spoken language which are more dynamic in nature. Furthermore, it has been shown that Facebook could be manipulated as a space for youths to express various emotions and desires for their needs.

Tiffany, Pempek, Yevdokiya, Yermolayeva, Sandra and Calvert (2009) wrote that *Facebook.com* was founded in 2004 to facilitate exclusive social interaction among college students. The website has now garnered 49 million users and can be accessed by anyone with a valid e-mail account. In the same vein, Hopkins (2012) and Ellison et al. (2007) note that Facebook “is mainly used as a tool to sustain an existing relationship rather than creating a new one” (p. 133).

Dalsgaard (2008) carried out a study from a different point of view regarding Facebook use and politics. The existence of this social website has enable individuals to be conspicuous by showing their relationships with others on the web. In addition, social media platforms can be used by politicians for mobilisation and recruitment as done by Obama-Biden in their campaign via *my.barackobama.com*, a campaign's social network created by Chris Hughes, the person who co-founded Facebook (Stirland, 2008 as cited in Dalsgaard, 2008). The applications on Facebook make it possible for individuals to create a web page which can be used to communicate with their friends, or in the contexts of politicians, they can use it to influence their online followers.

Meanwhile, in a research on how users perceive facebook popularity based on the number of friends, Tong et al. (2008) found that users who have too few or too many friends on Facebook are seen in a negative light, while those who have the optimum number of friends are considered socially attractive among students of a university in Midwestern, USA. In addition, the research has found that Facebook users put more value to third person messages than their own messages on the Internet. This shows that other people's perception is more influential in creating a social construct compared to personal presentation.

3. Methodology

For this research, the researcher has decided to apply a qualitative approach by conducting in-depth interview with the respondents. Qualitative research interview is utilized to describe the main theme and to understand them based on the related phenomenon studied. (Kvale, 1996). For the purpose of this research, the researcher used semi-structured questions to the informants in the interview session to enable the researcher to get accurate and specific information. The researcher then scrutinized the responses given by the informants during the in-depth interview sessions with the informants. All of the informants were Facebook users aged between 15 and 30 years old who showed partisan tendency towards the government or the opposition. The informants were selected among youths who could provide information on their exposure on political issues and their acceptance of political post content on Facebook. The interview process involved audio recording which was done after getting the consent from the informants. The researcher used thematic analysis system to identify the coding pattern of the interview.

4. Results

4.1 Research Finding

Data were collected using face-to-face interview technique. The researcher started the interview session by asking several general questions on the respondents' background. Then, the researcher discuss the respondents' facebook contents to get a wider perception on their opinions on Facebook political climate. All questions used during the interview were based on the objective to find out the important elements which can help identify the informants' perceptions towards Facebook content.

The themes identified and analyzed in this research were image on Facebook and content displayed on Facebook. Both analyzed themes helped the researcher to answer the research questions. All informants provided feedbacks and specific answers to the questions asked during the interview.

4.2 Image on Facebook

Informants 2 and 3 reported that they were responsible and were required to disseminate information and regarding Non-Government Organization (NGO)s' activities to the youths so their readers could receive and share the information with others. Besides being a tool for information dissemination regarding political activities, Facebook is also used as a main platform for politicians to display their positive image in order to attract the interest of youths. Meanwhile, informant 4 reported that he identified himself as pro-government when it comes to political issues. He believed that he has the right to voice out his opinions on any issues. He used Facebook as a platform to provide arguments and evidence from the government's point of view on any political issues. This informant used Facebook as a medium to neutralise the public's political view on the political image he identified himself with. He did it by providing comments and counterarguments to the issues and by actively disseminating information regarding the issues to show which side he was on.

However, Informants 5 and 6 stated that they were responsible to provide information from a different perspective to enable their readers to get and share more information. These informants strongly believed that there is no restriction in information dissemination on Facebook. They saw Facebook as a platform which provided complete news without any restrictions. Furthermore, all issues which used to be concealed from the public are now easily available on Facebook. Readers can make their own judgement based on the news posted on Facebook.

4.3 Displaying Facebook Content

The finding from this research showed that Informants 2 and 3 looked for information and then shared news regarding social issues and NGOs' activities because of their position as youth leaders. Informant 2 considered Facebook as a space to share political news and activities of the parties he identified with. He would ensure he had total control of the news he shared on his Facebook site. In contrast, Informant 3 was less interested in sharing news related to politics on his Facebook wall. He was more focused on activities related to youths, NGOs and motivation. Informant 4, based on his position as public administrator, would scrutinize any political issues, especially on the recent and popular ones, before he shared the information on Facebook. Information 4 shared the same interest with Informant 3 who prefer news regarding NGOs. He would neutralise negative comments regarding local NGOs at the international level by doing some research on the related issues. The

findings from his research would be shared to the public on Facebook, Youtube, and other social media platforms.

Informant 1,5,6,7, and 8 reported that they would be more specific with the political issues. They would search for the most popular political issue (the most recent) such as the logging issue. They would search for news resources for the issue and then share them with the public. This was done because they hold certain job position in the society. Facebook content should educate its readers and feed them with real and beneficial news (informant 1,5,6,7, and 8). Facebook is often considered as alternative reading material for its readers to get true stories of various domestic issues especially stories which are related to politics. The informants made it a point to do a research to counterargue false news which is considered negative and aggressively disseminate the information to the public.

Discussion and conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, the research concludes that online community users regularly use and share mutual interests on news related to politics on Facebook. Thus, this would become sophisticated social norms which encourage online participation (Preece, 2001; Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2005) especially on social media. The researcher concurs with Preece (2001) who stated that social language in online community can encourage participation by making the community look active to newbies in online activities. Political contents related to political issues in Malaysia displayed on Facebook combine the use of common reference, and the use of news articles seem to verify the intention of using Facebook to increase youths' participation in politics through social media. Dizard (2000) wrote that the term new media refers to videos, audio, weblogs, social network websites and various other contents which can be streamed by users. Hyperlinks and search engines can connect all these media and offer various options to users to explore and share information.

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