

Credibility of Political Marketing on Social Networking Sites in Malaysia: Youth Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

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Youths are susceptible to external stimuli, and in the era of the internet, they are on its frontline. Youths are shown to be very close to social networking sites (SNS). In years past, through political marketing and propaganda, the idea of fake news and misinformation is widely debated by all sides on the internet. This paper explores the credibility of political marketing and propaganda via SNS in Malaysia through youth's perceptions. In this qualitative study, seven semi-structured interviews were used to assess youth's perceptions on the credibility of Political Marketing and propaganda on SNS. Through content analysis of the transcriptions, the study found that the participants were aware of fake news and were eager to question and verify political marketing and propaganda information they obtained from SNS. This study highlights the need for a common definition of SNS and the role of political parties and the government to use SNS ethically. Studies on a similar subject need to be expanded to cover greater youth representation across the country.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2019, youths within the age of 15-30 made up more than 28 percent of the Malaysian population (Ahmad, 2019). Malaysia has a high rate of internet penetration in the country (Nadzri, 2018), and in 2020, 90.1 percent of the population had access to the internet (The Star, 2020), they enjoyed easy access to SNS daily (Chinnasamy & Abdul Manaf, 2018; Yusop & Sumari, 2013). SNS has now become a medium to get new and updated information and exposure in a blink of an eye. As youths are younger in their biological age, they are subsequently susceptible to external stimuli (Gwon & Jeong, 2018). From the age of 10-24, the brain undergoes maturation, in which the prefrontal cortex is one of the last regions of the human brain to reach maturation (Arain, Haque, Johal, Mathur, Nel, Rais, Sandhu, & Sharma, 2013). Youths in this age group spend a lot of time using SNS, as in the case of those aged

17-18 years old in India (Arjun & Juna, 2015), 12th Grade (17-18 years old) in the United States (Twenge, Martin, & Spitzberg, 2018) and young adults (20-24 years old) in Malaysia (Yusop & Sumari, 2013). The age difference within these studies is seen as being within the brain maturation period and are within the age parameters of youths.

A study in 2014 in the United States of America showed that SNS was deemed to be the least credible source for political information. However, the study specifically focused on active internet users, not youths (Johnson & Kaye, 2014). In 2016, research on youth in Malaysia (referred to as the Y generation) found that the youths were largely skeptical of the new media. However, this research used the 2008 and 2013 General Election (GE12 and GE13) as the backgrounds (Shiratuddin, Sani, Hassan, Ahmad, Khalid, & Ahmad, 2016). Subsequently, the misinformation that was created through fake news related to political marketing and propaganda was found to have effects in creating wrong political support in an election, appointing people or party with the wrong credential, or even caused harm to individual and society (Li & Suh, 2015), making trust to be based on emotion and belief rather than facts (Pennycook & Rand, 2019). That said, one can argue that the power of social network sites can be observed through how it has contributed towards successful political campaigns in America and Malaysia (Chinnasamy & Abdul Manaf, 2018; Johnson & Kaye, 2014; Nadzri, 2018; Shiratuddin et al., 2016).

Building on the discussion, this study attempts to explore the credibility of political marketing via SNS among youth in Malaysia. Significantly, this study aims to highlight the multi-dimensional issue of youth connection between SNS, especially on a heavy tone to youth interaction with political marketing and propaganda that they have observed. The findings of the study would introduce ideas and information regarding how youth process political information that they obtained via SNS. The findings also would allow policymakers to be aware of the youth relations with SNS or fake news on a political stance as well as societal concern for developing and managing youths in this age of information. As the truth becomes increasingly vague due to the political wars done through political marketing and propaganda that bolsters fake news on SNS, along with the increase of political powers among the youths due to the lowering of voting age and automatic registration for elections, (Hassandarvish, 2020), this research would like to unravel the issue with the right research questions. Therefore, the research questions of this study are: 1) what are the youth perceptions on the credibility of political marketing and propaganda on SNS in Malaysia?, and 2) how would youth evaluate the credibility of political marketing and propaganda on SNS?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Political Marketing and Propaganda

Politics and propaganda relationship is not new within the study of politics. Propaganda has been used many times to ensure the objectives of the people using it are achieved. This may involve war or even elections in democratic and non-democratic countries. Propaganda refers to things that might be considered untrue or misinformation, where the objective is persuasion and not truth (Baines & O'Shaughnessy, 2014). The main idea is to attract and paint a stronger version of a story or an issue to be in their favor. This is what is commonly known nowadays in some sense as fake news. The term 'fake news' is rather a new concept (Linden, Panagopoulos & Roozenbeek, 2020). Fake news in recent times has become ubiquitous and has been put into the highlight of politics and legal acts concerning it. The usage of untruthful information and smear to hurt the image of a political rival is propaganda, not political marketing (Baines & O'Shaughnessy, 2014) and it has become common to be used on SNS

(Goswami, 2018). As such is propaganda, the effect that it creates on the ‘victim’ will not be considered negative, but rather would be beneficial for the instigators.

In the meantime, one concept that is closely related to propaganda is political marketing. Political marketing refers to efforts to market candidates, ideologies, and values of a political party (Baines, 2012) while another definition for political marketing is defined as “using modern techniques of marketing with a goal of achieving political aims” (Kelić, Stilin & Tolušić, 2020). Political marketing can be seen very clear during periods of elections, where campaigns of political candidates and parties are splattered everywhere and this in the modern age will involve marketing in using a modern medium such as SNS. Political marketing for some would be hard to be separated and differentiated since the party or candidate could always lie in their marketing, hence will that be considered as political marketing or propaganda? This is very subjective. SNS has then become one of the most important social media platforms to evaluate political marketing effectiveness (Safiullah et al., 2017), and this is undoubtedly causing the many concern of political parties and the many stakeholders on the power of SNS to influence people, especially in elections in futures ahead.

2.2 Social Networking Sites

The rise of technology and the internet has led to many changes in human social interactions. It has helped in forging and connecting people from far away places to be seemingly instantaneous. Through the evolution of communication via the internet, we now can see social interactions using SNS. The terms of Social Networking Sites or Social Media are used interchangeably. Previous researches have used the terms to refer to essentially the same thing. For instance, a few pieces of research referred to Facebook as a ‘Social Media’ (Hamid & Rahman, 2018; Nadzri, 2018; Rahim, 2018; Shiratuddin et al., 2016), while other researchers called it as ‘Social Networking Sites’ (Johnson & Kaye, 2014; Yusop & Sumari, 2013) and some even called it ‘Online Social Media’ (Li & Suh, 2015). In some research, they used both terms interchangeably (Chinnasamy & Abdul Manaf, 2018) or ‘Social Media Websites/sites’ (Twenge et al., 2018). As a general rule of thumb, many did not make a distinction of the terms, preferring instead to use ‘social media’ (Obar & Wildman, 2015).

The variety of definition of usage to describe these new medium has been a sign of how much technology and media is changing alongside with the evolution of technology and social connection through the internet. Internet trends and sites are expanding mirroring the complexity of human social connection. Therefore, for this study, SNS can be defined as “a networked communication platform in which participants: 1) have uniquely identifiable profiles that consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and/or system-provided data; 2) can publicly articulate connections that can be viewed and traversed by others; and 3) can consume, produce, and/or interact with streams of user-generated content provided by their connections on the site” (Ellison & Boyd, 2013). Through this definition, many social networking sites can fall under this such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Google+. The power of SNS stated earlier in the paper suggests the power it has on the masses, in which, a study of post-GE14 in Malaysia suggested that politicians were keen to use SNS to gain support among young voters (Hamid & Rahman, 2018). Hence, showing the relevance of using SNS to market their political party or candidates or in some other way to promote propaganda for their political benefits. This signifies SNS as a medium or ‘weapon’ for political motives in the modern era.

2.3 Defining Youth

According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2013), Youth is defined as "...a period of transition from the dependence of childhood to adulthood's independence" (p.1). However, it is subjective to what point do we consider adulthood independence. This subjectivity in determining the period of transition from the dependence of childhood to adulthood independence is reflected in the many definitions of age for youths in the world, looking at the locality of context, it can either be within the age of 15-40 (Ahmad, 2019; UNDESA, 2013). In Malaysia, the new age range of youth is between 15-30 years old, while the former age range was at 15-40 (Ahmad, 2019; Yunus & Landau, 2019). However, with the change of government, the definition could as well change. The term 'young adult' was also used in a study to reflect those in the age group of 20-24 in Malaysia (Yusop & Sumari, 2013). The many ideas of the representation of different age groups to describe where 'youth' is supposed to be is also an indication of the changes in human society values, political connotations, psychological factors, and the relationship that we have with having a longer life span as compared to the olden days. The evolution might come to an end as the world is shifting to a globally accepted age group of youth.

2.4 Credibility of Social Networking Sites

The credibility of news and information is nothing new in the eyes of politics. News and information are a source of credible information to many throughout the years. Credibility is defined as "the quality or power of inspiring belief" (Schroeder et al., 2020). Within this study, credibility is seen as how it would make one believe in new information that they have seen through SNS. However, in recent times, fake news and misinformation spread through SNS in an online political war caused credibility issues. A study in 2013 showed that SNS held little credibility (Johnson & Kaye, 2014). Li and Suh (2015) found that the more a person interacted in SNS, the more likely they would consider the information obtained as credible. Another study suggested that the more recent the updates made on the SNS, the more credible it became (Westerman et al., 2014). In Malaysia, web design, the influence of other internet users, and information sources were the factors to be seen as being credible (Shahibi et al., 2013). While another study found that the information on a blog was deemed more credible if the authors were journalists (Borah, 2015). Credibility would allow a person reading and receiving the information or news to accept it, and would affect their judgment and decision making in the future, and this has a political element in it if the political information obtained was deemed to be credible for the audience.

3. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative, descriptive case study. A descriptive case study is a study where the purpose is to describe a phenomenon in its real-world setting (Yin, 2018). It had obtained its primary data through in-depth interviews. Secondary data were derived from articles concerning the topic. The interviewees were selected based on their age, which is in line with Malaysia's new youth definition i.e. 15-30 years old (Yunus & Landau, 2019). The study was carried out during the heyday of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the movement restriction, convenience sampling method was deemed appropriate, which refer to the collection of information that is easily available (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). The interviewees were obtained based on a reference by people who they think was a willing participant to the study and fits the youth age. Through that process, seven willing interviewees were selected for the study. For qualitative research, the number of respondents can vary depending on the objective(s) of the study, in qualitative studies, a sample size of 12 and 60 with a mean of 30

is advised (Baker & Edwards, 2012), but it could also easily be between 1 to a hundred or more (Baker & Edwards, 2012; Tracy, 2012). However, due to time constraints and respondent's willingness to participate, the best number of respondents for this study as mentioned before falls to seven, which is still acceptable considering the circumstances and the subjectivity of qualitative research (Baker & Edwards, 2012; Tracy, 2012). It is noted that with the change of the government, the definition could also change. Taking that into account, the researcher had pegged the age between Malaysia's former age for youth which is 15-40, and according to the international standard, which is 15-24 years old (*Youth*, 2021), to 15-30 years old for the study. Following ethical standards, for those who were below 18-year-old, consent was obtained from their guardians beforehand. The in-depth interviews were conducted using semi-structured questions that were opinion-based and related to their own experience and knowledge. The interviews were conducted using phone calls and were recorded. The result of the in-depth interviews was transcribed and interpreted using content analysis. Content analysis is an observational research method that is used to assess the symbolic contents of recorded communications, where the text is coded into categories and then analyzed using conceptual and relational analysis (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016).

The interviews were conducted in English during April 2020. This is the time when the pandemic response initiative, called the Movement Control Order (MCO), was introduced in Malaysia. To ensure reliability and validation in this research, triangulation was used using observations and looking into relevant reports and articles. This allows for the cross-reference verification of data and reliability of data obtained. The observation of youth engagement on SNS regarding politics and as well reports regarding were used to verify statements or information obtained from the interview. A pilot interview was also conducted to refine and improve questions, which were deemed hard or unclear by the participants were simplified to ensure their understanding of the questions given, this later made clear communications during the official data collection session. Expanding from that, an interview protocol was created and approved by an expert (Ph.D. qualification) who knows about conducting such methods with previous studies that used a similar methodology.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Four themes were discovered by the study, which will be discussed in the following sections. Academic qualifications-wise, the working respondents have at least a Bachelors' Degree, while those aged 19 and above are doing their Diploma and Degree, and those aged 18 and below expect themselves to pursue tertiary education in the future. The interview respondents were within the age range of 15-30 with a mean age of 20. Seven Pseudo-real name combinations were used in this study with the respondents' permission. Table 1 shows the profiles of the participants.

Table 1. Profile of Participants

No.	Name	Gender	Age	Status	Region
1.	Lina	Female	25	Working	West Malaysia
2.	Rima	Female	24	Working	East Malaysia
3.	Syazwan	Male	23	Student	West Malaysia
4.	Fadilah	Female	20	Student	East Malaysia
4.	Akmal	Male	19	Student	East Malaysia
5.	Ariff	Male	18	Unemployed	West Malaysia
7.	Fazera	Female	16	Student	East Malaysia

4.1 Youth and SNS Usage

The first theme developed was ‘youth relations to SNS’. To understand the youth relations to SNS, they were asked a straightforward question *“Do you use SNS? What are some Social Networking sites that you use often?”*. All the respondents said that they used SNS. The most popular ones were Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. Four out of seven respondents mentioned Twitter first, indicating that their primary preference for SNS was Twitter. This was supported by Ariff, who said *“most primarily Twitter”*, while two respondents did not mention Facebook at all (Twitter and Instagram only). Five respondents used examples in Twitter to express their interactions with Political Marketing and Propaganda credibility. This was further developed by the question of *“are social networking sites important to you? Why?”* For this question, the respondents opined ‘important’ and ‘very important to them, except for Rima who only viewed it as a *“medium importance”*. It was then expanded through the importance of connectivity, as mentioned by Syazwan, who said *“I received most of the information there...”* and echoed by Lina, *“...if you heard that someone does not have any social media, it is something that is really weird nowadays”*. The importance of connectivity was also important for youth as mentioned by the rest of the respondents. The personal placement of SNS was solidified in youth’s daily life, which Lina put it *“a lifestyle”*.

4.2 Awareness on Political Marketing and Propaganda on SNS

The second theme developed was ‘awareness of political marketing and propaganda on SNS’. When questioned *“Have you seen political marketing and propaganda through social networking sites that you used?”* All the respondents’ answers were positive, except for Fazera who said *“things like that will only pop in my timeline if I ever search for them. If a user doesn’t search that kind of topic, then the user might not see them anyway”*. This is largely because she was not interested in political matters that appeared on her SNS or in her own words *“most of the time I just scroll past the information because I’m not interested”*. When asked about their perception of youths being influenced by political marketing and propaganda on SNS through this question *“Do you think it can influence Youth? How?”*, all the respondents agreed. All respondents supported the idea that Political Marketing and Propaganda on SNS could influence the youths. For Lina and Ariff, a person’s education level and being less informed seemed to be contributing factors. This assumption may arise due to their perception those who are uneducated tend to lack the ability to question any dubious information that they get.

4.3 Attributes of a Credible Political Marketing and Propaganda on SNS

The third theme was ‘factors for considering the credibility of political marketing and propaganda on SNS. When asked on *“What factors do you take a look to consider the political information through social networking sites as being credible? Why?”* A few common answers given were the person factor. Lina said, *“If the person who says those things are, one, does not have any followers or friends which means that it’s a new account or it’s not really a person then I feel like I need to be careful with the information given out”*. Fadilah also seconded Lina’s opinion saying *“I take a look first who is the writer”*. For Ariff, this person factor depended on the person holding a credible position or in his words *“the Minister”*. Syazwan, similarly, said *“a political figure”*. Expanding on the person factor, two respondents said that they would refer to an expert person to determine the information’s credibility. The legitimate organization was also seen as a factor by Ariff who referred to it as *“The Ministry”*. Akmal extended it as *“The official account made by the government like*

KKM and MOF". Fadilah, on the other hand, preferred to read the public's comments on the comment section on the posting as a factor to see if the information was credible.

4.4 Perceived Credibility of Political Marketing and Propaganda on SNS

The last theme was 'Youth perception on Political Marketing and Propaganda Credibility on SNS'. As for the question "*Do you verify the information you get off the political marketing and propaganda through social networking sites?*", all of the respondents said yes, meaning to say that they did not see Political Marketing and Propaganda on SNS as something that should be taken without a second thought or accepting it blindly. As stated by Lina, "*I think it is supposed to become a responsibility for me to check*" and from Syazwan "*You cannot put 100% trust on information from the SNS*". This theme was further developed by the following question "*What is your perception of the credibility of political marketing and propaganda through social networking sites?*". For this question, there was a mixed response. Most respondents appeared to be hesitant, neither credible nor credible. Unlike others, Rima believed that political marketing and propaganda through social networking sites were based on credible sources. Rima noted, "*... as most of the marketing and propaganda cited directly from the politician or other reliable sources*". She did not explain her other reliable sources though. For Lina, it was complicated. As it was for Syazwan Ariff, Akmal, and Fadilah. All, however, contended that the degree of credibility depends on the individual.

Additionally, some youth nowadays seem to be aware of fake news. As mentioned by Ariff "*I believe that a news being given out can be twisted*, which was parallel to an opinion by Syazwan that said "*Verify any information you get on the SNS, because, it can be a fake news, it can be true*" as well as Lina "*On Facebook you see a lot of adverts on spreading fake political messages*". It gives the impression that fake news is rampant on SNS, and the youths are actively engaging their ability to question or trust them.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

All youth in the study showed that SNS connected them in socializing and getting information. It was in line with previous studies, which showed that youth were much more connected to SNS (Chinnasamy & Abdul Manaf, 2018; Shiratuddin et al., 2016; Yusop & Sumari, 2013). Twitter was used more often by the respondents to show their interactions with politics, thus confirming that Twitter usage had political associations to it (Hamid & Rahman, 2018; Shiratuddin et al., 2016).

The idea of youth would be influenced easily by their environment was identified in this study, where the youth in the study noted that their peers are easily influenced by the information they received on SNS. This view is supported by previous findings that youths were more likely to be influenced by their environment (Gwon & Jeong, 2018; Perry & Singh, 2016). It may be attributed to youth being influenced by external stimuli easily (Gwon & Jeong, 2018) and high connection with SNS. The study highlighted that most of the youth interviewed had seen political marketing and propaganda in their SNS. Thus, these become beacons of faint signals of the danger SNS posed if they are used for the wrong purpose.

The factors for considering the credibility of political marketing and propaganda on SNS that was mentioned by the respondents is similar to previous studies such as person factor (Borah, 2015; Ismail & Latif, 2013; Lamb et al., 2012). As indicated in this study, respondents observed at who was sending the political information or would refer to those who they deemed as having better knowledge for guidance. On top of that, the organization factor (Ministry or public body of the Government) is considered relevant because they represent the

authoritative source, where this authoritative source is considered as being more believable (Xia et al., 2015) and trustworthy (Lamb et al., 2012). This can also be seen in terms of how public sectors are moving towards SNS as a medium of communication (Lee & Kwak, 2012) where many, public agencies have official accounts on a platform such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. While looking for the public comments on the comment sections to see credibility can be considered as being influenced by other internet users, this seems to be also a credibility factor in previous studies (Li & Suh, 2015; Shahibi et al., 2013). Although those studies did not focus on the youths, youth perceptions seem to be quite similar in attributes. Most importantly, this study shows that most youth nowadays seem to be aware of fake news but reluctant to accept SNS as a credible source for political marketing and propaganda. These, to a certain degree, match other studies' findings that saw internet users on political information on SNS as not credible (Johnson & Kaye, 2014). Thus, it can be deduced that youths are conscious of their environment and interactions in SNS, especially from the context of political marketing and propaganda. Thus, there is a need for political figures to be responsible, ethical, transparent, and sincere in their work.

One of the implications of this study is to be able to reveal the latest youth perceptions on the political realm through SNS post-GE 14 and the collapse of the PH Government in early 2020, thus would allow for verification of previous studies that are similar to it. Furthermore, another implication is that the study shed light on political parties to utilize their machinery in campaigning through SNS to capture the youth audience. But perhaps the most important implication is the importance of the Government as a factor in providing credible news and information through SNS to the general public. This study emphasised the ethics of using SNS to the general public to ensure information is not twisted for the benefit of the party. As for limitations of the study, future researches can consider including youth who are not formally educated, who are not in academic settings, and other generational cohorts to get a broader sense of their perceptions. There is a need to differentiate, classify and give proper working definitions to SNS and their derivatives. The terms are rapidly evolving in the literature as well as real-life contexts. Even communication platforms such as WhatsApp and Line are slowly mirroring SNS. These communication platforms have proven to be the new media for youth to engage the world. This engagement can almost always cover everything in their whole life.

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