E–B
Environment - Behaviour
Proceedings Journal

ICIS2025PortDickson

https://www.icis.com.my/

The 6th International Conference of Information Science
Avillion Port Dickson, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia, 27-28 Jan 2025
Organiser: School of Information Science, College of Computing, Informatics and Mathematics, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Malaysia

Exploring the Interplay between Social Network Engagement and Traditional Predictors of Youth Voting Behaviour: Insights from Emerging Democracies

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Abstract
Youth voter turnout in Malaysia remains low despite Undi-18 reforms. While social media is central to political engagement, its impact on youth voting behaviour is underexplored. This study examines the moderating effect of social network engagement on the relationship between traditional voting behaviour predictors and voting intentions among Malaysian youth. Findings show that pre-election perceptions, subjective norms, and political awareness significantly shape voting intentions, but social network engagement does not moderate this relationship. These insights highlight the enduring role of traditional socialisation and guide policymakers in leveraging digital platforms to enhance electoral participation in emerging democracies.

Keywords: intention to vote, social network engagement, subjective norms, young voters

1.0 Introduction
Social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok have significantly reshaped political engagement among youth. These platforms enable political discourse, information sharing, and opinion formation, helping to bridge the gap between awareness and participation (Zulkifli et al., 2021; Odon, 2024; Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). While social media has mobilised youth during movements like the Arab Spring and Black Lives Matter, its impact on voter turnout in formal elections remains uncertain (Gagrčin et al., 2023).

In Malaysia, the 2019 Undi-18 amendment—lowering the voting age to 18 and introducing automatic voter registration—aimed to boost youth participation. Such reforms are linked to increased electoral involvement (Franklin, 2019), especially relevant in a country where youth represent nearly half the population (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2019). However, youth turnout in the 2022 General Election was low, raising questions about the initiative's effectiveness (Wenxuan & Osman, 2023). A likely factor is the disconnect between online political engagement and real-world voting, as social media activity has not consistently translated into electoral participation (Cheah, 2023; Shiratuddin et al., 2016).

Traditional predictors of voting behaviour, such as pre-election perceptions, subjective norms, and political awareness, have been well-documented in influencing voter intentions (Gasperoni & Mantovani, 2015; Stockemer, 2016; Muralidharan & Sung, 2016; Fieldhouse & Cutts, 2020). However, the moderating role of social media engagement in these relationships remains underexplored, particularly in emerging democracies like Malaysia. Examining how digital engagement interacts with traditional predictors is essential for improving voter turnout and strengthening democratic processes. Using the Theory of Planned Behaviour by Ajzen (1991) and the Theory of Social Media Engagement by Di Gangi and Wasko (2016), the current study aims to fill the gap by examining the moderating effect of social network engagement on the relationship between the traditional predictors of voting behaviour and voting intentions among Malaysian youth. The study's findings are highly relevant for policymakers, electoral commissions, and digital platform regulators to increase young voters' intention to vote. Understanding the interplay between social networks and traditional voting determinants can help stakeholders design more effective strategies for enhancing voter education and participation.

2.0 Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1 Youth Political Behaviour in Emerging Democracies
Youth political participation is vital for democratic sustainability, especially in emerging democracies where young people comprise a large share of the electorate. Globally, factors such as economic conditions, education, and institutional trust influence youth engagement. In Malaysia, the Undi-18 initiative added over 5.8 million young voters in 2022, raising hopes for increased participation. However, turnout among these voters was lower than expected, mirroring global trends of youth disengagement (Fong, 2023). In both Malaysia and Indonesia, many eligible young voters abstained from the 2024 elections due to political apathy and institutional distrust (Eckstein et al., 2024; Mulyadi et al., 2024). These findings suggest that voting rights alone are insufficient without targeted efforts to engage and motivate young voters.

2.2 The Role of Social Networks in Political Engagement
Social media has reshaped political participation by enabling widespread information sharing and interaction. Platforms like Facebook and X facilitate civic engagement and can increase youth voter turnout (Boulianne, 2020). In Nigeria and Malaysia, political actors use social media to mobilise voters, promote transparency, and sometimes spread misinformation (Obisesan, 2022; Cheah, 2023). Malaysian youth actively follow political content online, influencing their political involvement. However, social media's role interacts with traditional factors like political awareness and social norms, and its effects on turnout remain unclear (Fong, 2023). While it offers new avenues for engagement, excessive or inauthentic content can discourage participation (Tan, 2024; Ramdani et al., 2024), underscoring the need to understand its complex impact in emerging democracies.

2.3 Factors Affecting Voting Intention among Young Voters
2.3.1 Pre-election perceptions
Perceptions of elections, particularly evaluations of candidates and parties, significantly influence voter intentions among youth. Traits such as trustworthiness, competence, and relatability shape voting behaviour (Rennó, 2020), with voters favouring candidates who reflect their values and communicate effectively (Mohd Dzaki, 2022). In Malaysia, parties that utilised social media to promote transparency and youth-oriented agendas were more successful in engaging young voters. Digital platforms enhance candidate accessibility, fostering trust and relatability. Recent studies confirm that authenticity and responsiveness on social media strongly impact youth political engagement (Mulyadi et al., 2024). Thus, the current study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: Pre-election perceptions positively influence the youth's intention to vote.

2.3.2 Subjective norms
In voting, subjective norms significantly influence young voters' intentions, as these norms often stem from family and peer expectations. For instance, youth are likelier to vote if they believe their family or close friends expect them to fulfil this civic duty (Fong, 2023). This is particularly evident in collectivist cultures like Indonesia, where community-driven expectations amplify the role of social norms in shaping voting behaviour (Intyaswati, Maryani, Sugiana & Venus, 2021). Recent research also shows that social media platforms have redefined the landscape of subjective norms, with influencers and digital communities increasingly acting as agents of social expectation and civic influence among youth (Harff & Schmuck, 2024). Drawing from the above discussion, the current study proposes the following hypothesis:

H2: Subjective norms positively influence the youth's intention to vote.

2.3.3 Political awareness
Awareness refers to knowledge and understanding that something is happening or exists (Azmi & Chinnasamy, 2019). A study by Van Gyampo and Anyidoho (2019) demonstrated that politically informed youth are more likely to engage in electoral processes, as their knowledge enhances their confidence in making informed choices. Similarly, Guzman and Medina (2023) found that increased awareness of political issues and candidates significantly boosts voter turnout among youth in the US. Moreover, Eckstein et al. (2024)

noted that political awareness increasingly stems from digital media ecosystems, where algorithmic exposure, meme culture, and peer discourse combined influence youth voting attitudes. Based on these premises, the current study proposes the following hypothesis:
H3: Political awareness positively influences the youth's intention to vote.

2.3.4 Social network engagement

Social network engagement—through active discussions, content sharing, and interactions on social media—has become a significant factor in shaping political behaviour. In emerging democracies like Malaysia, these platforms serve a dual function: providing unfiltered political information (Fong, 2023) and acting as digital community spaces where peer influence shapes pre-election perceptions. Intyaswati et al. (2021) note that social media often functions as an echo chamber, reinforcing existing views among youth. Malaysian youth, in particular, depend on these platforms for political discourse (Zulkifli et al., 2021). However, overexposure to fragmented content may also lead to political disillusionment and voter fatigue (Tan, 2024; Ramdani et al., 2024). Based on these insights, the present study hypothesises that:

H4: Social network engagement moderates the relationship between pre-election perceptions and the youth's intention to vote.

Besides, social network engagement also influences the relationship between subjective norms and voting intention among youth. Subjective norms, defined as the perceived social pressure to engage in specific behaviours, are shaped by family and peer expectations (Ajzen, 1991). The social media platforms extend traditional community spaces by reinforcing societal expectations through posts, comments, and shared political content (Zulkifli et al., 2021). Guzman and Medina (2023) observed that youth who frequently engage on platforms like TikTok are more likely to perceive voting as a socially expected behaviour, especially when exposed to peer-generated content emphasising civic duty. Building on this, recent studies indicate that digital influencers and youth-led online movements have become pivotal in shaping civic responsibility, utilising social media platforms to engage young citizens effectively (Harff & Schmuck, 2024; Chapman, 2023; Abdullah, Tuan Zaki, Ahmad & Omar, 2024). These evolving dynamics suggest that online spaces transmit and redefine normative expectations, highlighting the potential moderating role of social network engagement in the relationship between subjective norms and voting intention. Thus, the current study proposes the following hypothesis:
H5: Social network engagement moderates the relationship between subjective norms and the youth's intention to vote.

Figure 1 illustrates the study's theoretical framework, contingent on the factors affecting voting intention among young voters discussed above.
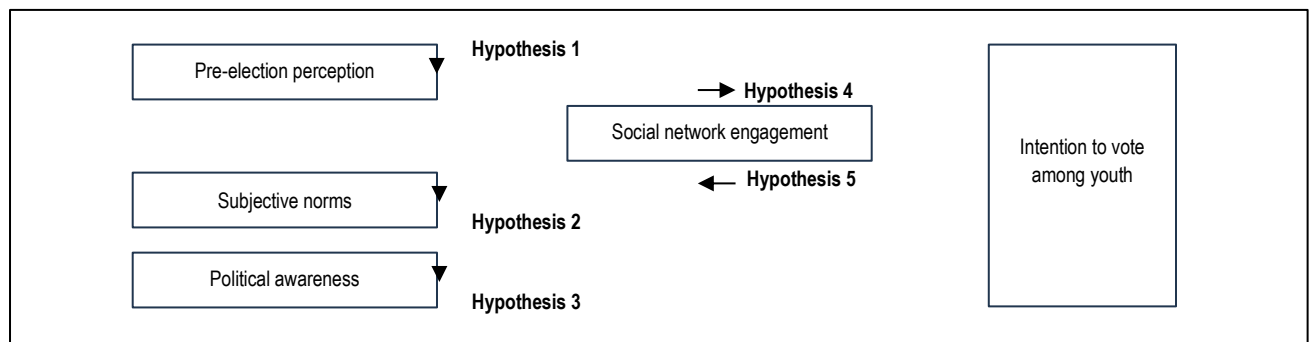

Fig. 1: Research Framework

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Sample and data collection

This study adopted a quantitative design to investigate the direct effects of traditional voting predictors and the moderating role of social network engagement on voting intention among Malaysian youth. The sample comprised UiTM students aged 18 to 29, with data collected via a Google Forms survey using convenience sampling, stratified across Malaysian states for broader representation. Ethical approval was obtained from the UiTM Research Management Centre. Although the minimum required sample size for Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was 170, the study obtained 422 valid responses, ensuring sufficient data for robust analysis.

3.2 Research instruments

The questionnaire consists of pre-election perceptions, subjective norms, and political awareness as independent variables, social network engagement as the moderating variable, and intention to vote as the dependent variable.

3.3 Data analysis

Data analysis was performed using SPSS for descriptive statistics and the Partial Least Square-Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) for inferential analysis. Data cleaning procedures were required to address missing responses and other quality issues and ensure

the robustness of the dataset. PLS-SEM utilises a variance-based method to estimate cause-and-effect relationships within a theoretically grounded model. Following the recommendations of Hair, Jeffrey, Sarstedt, and Ringle (2019), PLS-SEM was deemed suitable for this study as it focuses on examining predictive relationships, particularly in understanding the associations between traditional predictors of voting behaviour and the intention to vote among Malaysian youth.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Demographics
Table 1 shows the distribution of demographic details of respondents. As expected, the number of female respondents outweighed the number of male respondents (N=305 or 72.3%). Interestingly, most respondents are between 18 and 20 years old (N=338 or 80.1%), indicating a significant interest of young voters in voting behaviour in Malaysia. Of Most respondents (N= 291 or 69%) have at least voting experience as first-time voters. The responses showed that most respondents use social media to seek and update information on political situations. Instagram is the most common social media platform used by youth to access current news and information on political scenarios, indicated by 66.4% (N=280). It was followed by Twitter (N=194 or 46%), WhatsApp (N=193 or 45.7%), Facebook (N=112 or 26.5%), and Telegram (N=109 or 25.8%).

Table 1. Demographic details

Item	Sub-item	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	117	27.7
	Female	305	72.3
Age	18 to 20 years old	338	80.1
	21 to 23 years old	79	18.7
	24 to 26 years old	4	0.9
	27 to 29 years old	1	0.2
Occupation	Students	405	96
	Employed	3	0.9
	Unemployed	14	3.1

4.2 Normality and bias assessment
Mardia's multivariate analysis was conducted to assess the dispersion normality of research data and justify the selection of SmartPLS as the tool for analysing the research data (Hair, Sarstedt, Hopkins & Kuppelwieser, 2014; Rosman, Ismail & Masrek, 2023; Wulandari, Sutrisno & Nirwana, 2021; Zhang & Yuan, 2018). An online tool, WebPower, was utilised and is available at https://webpower.psychstat.org/models/kurtosis. Findings indicate that the research data is slightly abnormal (skewness β=310.754, p=<0.01; kurtosis β=1595.084, p=<0.01), thus meeting the requirement for PLS-SEM. A further analysis of Common Method Bias (CMB) resulted in VIF values between 1.352 and 5.433, confirming that there are no issues of CMB within the research data (Hair et al., 2017).

4.3 Measurement model
The first step in PLS-SEM is establishing the measurement model by achieving internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity (Ramayah, Cheah, Chuah, Ting & Memon, 2016). There are five (5) first-order variables involved in this study, namely pre-election perception (CDT), Subjective Norms (SN), Political Awareness (AWR), Social Network Engagement (SNE), and Intention to Vote (INT). Seven (7) runs were conducted before the study fulfilled the internal consistency, reliability, and convergent validity requirement, as illustrated in Table 2. The finding indicated that all thresholds have been fulfilled (Factor loading ≥ 0.7*; AVE ≥ 0.5; CR ≥0.7) as suggested by Ramayah et al. (2016) and Hair, Hult, and Ringle (2017).

Table 2. Convergent Validity

Construct	Factor loading		CR	AVE
Pre-election perception (CDT)	CDT1	0.684	0.771	0.529
	CDT3	0.757		
	CDT4	0.738		
Subjective norms (SBN)	SBN1	0.639	0.843	0.574
	SBN2	0.810		
	SBN3	0.775		
	SBN4	0.796		
Political awareness (AWR)	AWR1	0.700	0.802	0.575
	AWR5	0.801		
	AWR6	0.769		
Social network engagement (SNE)	SNE1	0.798	0.801	0.507
	SNE2	0.813		
	SNE5	0.613		
	SNE6	0.595		
Intention to vote (INT)	INT1	0.823	0.801	0.505
	INT2	0.622		
	INT3	0.768		
	INT5	0.605		

. Factor loading below 0.7 is accepted if the AVE value meets the threshold

4.4 Discriminant Validity

Once convergent validity has been ascertained, the next step is to assess discriminant validity. Table 3 shows the study's Fornell-Larcker Criterion, whereby all the significant values do not exceed the square root of the indicators, confirming that there are no discriminant validity issues.

Table 3. The Fornell-Larcker Criterion

	CDT	INT	AWR	SN	SNE
CDT					
INT	0.575				
AWR	0.398	0.659			
SN	0.395	0.755	0.622		
SNE	0.211	0.551	0.826	0.493	

A further analysis was conducted based on the HTMT suggested by Henseler, Ringle, and Sarstedt (2015). Table 4 shows the HTMT results, with no indicators above 0.9, thus confirming the achievement of measurement model analysis.

Table 4. The Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT)

	CDT	INT	AWR	SN	SNE
CDT	0.727				
INT	0.354	0.711			
AWR	0.240	0.437	0.758		
SN	0.259	0.563	0.428	0.758	
SNE	0.150	0.387	0.559	0.391	0.712

4.5 Structural Model Analysis

A total of 5 hypotheses were tested for the study. Table 5 shows the result of the study. In summary, the study indicated that three (3) hypotheses were accepted (H1: Supported, t= 4.705, p<0.042; H2: Supported, t=6.201, p<0.000; H3: Supported, t= 3.395, p<0.001). The result also contributes to the body of knowledge by confirming that social network engagement does not have a moderating effect on the relationship between pre-election perception and Intention to Vote (H4: Not supported, t= 0.215, p>0.05), as well as subjective norms and intention to vote (H5: Not supported, t= 0.697, p>0.05).

Table 5. Structural Model Assessment

Hypothesis	Relationship	t-value	p-value	Result
H1	CDT ⯈ INT	4.705	0.042	Supported
H2	SN ⯈ INT	6.201	0.000	Supported
H3	AWR ⯈ INT	3.395	0.001	Supported
H4	CDT ⯈ SNE ⯈ INT	0.215	0.830	Not supported
H5	SN ⯈ SNE ⯈ INT	0.697	0.486	Not supported

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Normality and bias assessment

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