

Navigating Political News: Analysis of youth attitudes and verification practices

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Abstract

In Malaysia, internet usage is rapidly growing, especially among young people who actively engage with new media platforms. However, the uncontrolled spread of information poses significant risks, especially in the realm of political news. This study conducts a descriptive analysis to explore how Malaysian youth perceive and manage political information in the digital landscape. By analysing responses from 190 students in a private university, this preliminary study examines their attitudes towards political news, their practices for verifying information, and their caution in sharing unverified content. The findings provide insights into the key factors influencing responsible information dissemination among youth.

Keywords: Fact-checking; political information; social media; youth

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1.0 Introduction

The advancement in communication technology has enabled people from all over the world to connect and share information through virtual social networks, also known as social media. Social media gained popularity after the founding of Facebook in February 2004, followed by the emergence of various other platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp. This widespread adoption has profoundly impacted internet usage globally, including in Malaysia. Howe (2024) reports that as of 2024, approximately 97.4% of Malaysians, or 33.59 million users, have internet connections, indicating a steady growth trajectory in digital connectivity.

Social media, a primary source of information during elections, increasingly shapes the political landscape of Malaysian youth as the digital landscape continues to evolve. However, this growing dependence introduces significant challenges regarding the accuracy and integrity of the information consumed. Young voters in Malaysia, particularly those aged 18 to 25, heavily rely on social media platforms for political information. The "Undi18" constitutional amendment, which extended voting rights to younger citizens, has influenced this demographic shift, bringing approximately 5.8 million voters, including 1.2 million first-time voters, into the electoral process, making them prime targets for political messaging and potential disinformation campaigns (Tan, 2024). However, young voters face challenges in political literacy and engagement. A study shows that only 40% of young voters have sufficient knowledge about the voting system, and just 42% understand the various political parties available to them (Hui, 2022).

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The Malaysian Youth Council emphasizes the responsibility of the youth to engage in mature political discourse and rectify misinformation (Bernama, 2023). Despite the potential influence of youth votes in elections, many young Malaysians remain politically undecided, with surveys revealing a lack of independent political thought. Most youth derive their political knowledge from family and friends, indicating a reliance on informal channels rather than structured education or verified information sources.

In parallel with these trends, social media has emerged as a significant political tool over the past decade, transforming both campaigns and governance. The advent of the Internet has spurred considerable interest in understanding how digital platforms impact the political sphere. Yet, the misuse of social media for spreading unverified and unethical political information remains a pressing concern. To address this issue, a study by Ayob (2018) underscores the necessity of verifying news before dissemination. Factors such as educational background, critical thinking skills, communication experience, and cognitive approach influence the thoroughness of such verification.

Furthermore, the rise of cyber troopers in Malaysia, particularly in the lead-up to elections, highlights another dimension of this challenge. These individuals, funded by political parties, aim to discredit opponents and sway public opinion. Their activities, including the propagation of sensitive and racially charged issues, contribute to misunderstandings and conflicts, often under the guise of anonymity.

In addition to these concerns, statistics reveal a dramatic increase in cybercrime complaints, with the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) reporting a 99.5 percent rise in complaints in 2020 and a 117.6 percent increase in fake news cases (Tamrin & Zulfakar, 2022). Given the rapid dissemination of information on social media, it is crucial for individuals, especially the youth, to practice diligent verification before sharing political news. However, there is limited understanding of how effectively young people engage in these verification processes. This study aims to address this gap by analyzing the attitudes and behaviors of youth towards political information, focussing on their verification practices and caution in sharing news.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 *Spreading of political fake news.*

The extensive use of social media has become a critical factor in the proliferation of fake news, particularly with the unrestricted flow of information across various platforms. In today's digital landscape, individuals predominantly rely on virtual interactions to acquire and disseminate information. However, time constraints often hinder thorough research and fact-checking, which fosters the development of incorrect perceptions and views. This lack of accurate information can lead to misguided decisions and misunderstandings, ultimately damaging both individuals and society. As noted by Ali Adeeb & Mirhoseini (2023), the dissemination of ambiguous news directly influences and shapes societal attitudes.

The role of social media in political participation has also raised concerns, particularly regarding the propagation of negative behaviors. Acts such as provocation, organizing protests, circulating petitions, disseminating false information, defamation, incitement, creating political parody videos, distributing deepfakes aimed at politicians, and sharing manipulated images have been identified as forms of misconduct that can escalate criminal behavior (Hassan et al., 2020). Since Malaysia's 10th general election, youth have emerged as the demographic with the highest internet usage. This group demonstrates a remarkable ability to swiftly adapt to new social media tools and platforms. A study involving 126 students from Public Institutions of Higher Learning (IPTA), aged 18 to 23 years, highlights the active engagement of young people in new media for social interaction and online political involvement. In Malaysia, internet usage continues to rise each year, with youth being the most prolific users of new media.

2.2 *Factors influencing the spread of fake news.*

Research on the factors influencing the spread of political fake news has garnered increasing scholarly attention, particularly in light of the growing dependence on social media as a primary source of information. Several factors have been consistently identified as significant contributors to the dissemination of political misinformation.

One of the primary factors is cognitive bias, particularly confirmation bias, which leads individuals to accept and disseminate information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs, irrespective of its veracity. This bias fosters the spread of fake news, as individuals are more inclined to engage with content that reinforces their political perspectives, even when the information is inaccurate (Calosa et al., 2023).

Social media algorithms also play a critical role in the amplification of political fake news. According to Zimmer et al. (2019) these algorithms are designed to prioritize content that generates high levels of engagement, often resulting in the promotion of sensationalized or emotionally charged information. Consequently, online communities are more likely to quickly adopt fake news due to its strong reactions and widespread dissemination.

Additionally, the prevalence of low media literacy among the public has been identified as a significant factor in the spread of political fake news (Mason et al., 2018). A substantial portion of the population lacks the necessary skills to critically assess the credibility of sources and the accuracy of the information they encounter online. This deficiency makes individuals more susceptible to believing and sharing misinformation, thus contributing to its further dissemination.

In addition, Goyanes and Lavin (2018) identified predictor variables that influence the sharing of political fake news online, including demographics such as age, gender, political orientation, and income, as well as situational factors like the perception of the frequency of political fake news online, the unintentional sharing of fake news in the past, and the perception of responsibility among different agents. A study by Bryanov and Vziatyshva (2021) identifies three broad groups of factors contributing to individuals' belief in fake

news: message characteristics, susceptibility to fake news (people's cognitive styles, predispositions, and differences in news, and information literacy), and accuracy-promoting interventions.

2.3 Verification Practices and Information Sources

Social media is significantly shaping the political opinions of Malaysian youth. Recent studies indicate that platforms like TikTok are now primary sources of political information for young voters, overtaking traditional media like Facebook and television (Abdullah et.al.,2024). This change has altered how information is shared and influenced the views of political leaders and parties. While there is excitement and passion among first-time voters, concerns about misinformation and the quality of political content on social media persist.

Critics have criticized Malaysian political parties for their inadequate social media presence, which hinders their ability to effectively engage and educate young voters. Observers note that traditional campaigning methods have not sufficiently adapted to the digital landscape, leaving a gap in the dissemination of reliable electoral information.

In Malaysia, verification practices are essential for ensuring the legitimacy of political actors and their governance. The guidance on verification emphasizes the importance of identifying and verifying customers, which can extend to political contexts where the legitimacy of claims and identities is crucial. According to Rajandran and Lee (2023), this practice is vital for maintaining trust in political processes and institutions, especially in a diverse society like Malaysia, where issues of race, religion, and royalty (the 3R framework) play significant roles in governance and political legitimacy.

3.0 Methodology

This study employs a quantitative research design using a descriptive analysis approach to explore youth behavior in verifying political information on social media. A total of 190 respondents, aged 18 to 24, were selected using a simple random sampling technique. The study was conducted at a public university located in the state of Perak, representing youth from both urban and rural backgrounds. Data were collected through a self-developed questionnaire consisting of 13 items measured on a 5-point Likert scale. The items assess respondents' attitudes toward political information, their fact-checking practices, and their caution in sharing such information. The instrument underwent a process of face validity and reliability testing to ensure its appropriateness (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS to identify trends and patterns in the respondents' behaviors and attitudes (Pallant, 2020).

4.0 Findings

4.1 Demographic Characteristics

This study involved a total of 66 male students and 124 female students who were 20 years old and older. Referring to Table 1, the majority of students are in the final semester, which is semester 5 & 6 (57.8%) followed by semester 3 & 4 (25.7%), semester 7 & 8 (12.6%) and semester 1 & 2 (3.6%).

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics (N = 190)

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	66	34.7
Female	124	65.3
Age		
20-23	107	56.3
24 and above	83	43.7
Semester		
Sem 1&2	7	3.6
Sem 3&4	49	25.7
Sem 5&6	110	57.8
Sem 7&8	24	12.6

(Source: Author's data generated using SPSS v26.0)

4.2 Demographic Characteristics

The analysis of youth attitudes towards political information reveals a strong emphasis on accuracy and thorough engagement with content Table 2. A significant 64.2% of respondents strongly agree that accurate information is crucial for acting on a solid foundation of truth, resulting in a high mean score of 4.58. Additionally, 48.9% of the respondents agree that they do not merely skim headlines but also read the full content, reflecting a mean score of 4.33. This indicates a conscientious approach to consuming political information, further supported by the 45.8% who strongly agree that they will not easily believe something without verification, leading to a mean score of 4.39.

Table 2. Youth Attitudes and Behaviors towards Political Information: Verification, Caution, and Reporting Practices

	Percentage (%)
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Statement	1	2	3	4	5	Mean
Attitudes Towards Political Information						
Accurate information enables us to act on a strong foundation of truth.	0.5	0.5	3.7	31.1	64.2	4.58
I read not only the headlines but also the information itself.	0.5	0	7.9	48.9	42.6	4.33
I will not readily believe something without verification.	0.5	1.6	15.3	36.8	45.8	4.39
Information Verification Actions						
Disseminating information without prior investigation is a mistake.	1.6	1.6	3.7	27.9	65.3	4.54
News received via social media should be investigated first.	0.5	0.5	4.2	28.4	66.3	4.59
I will not disseminate information without checking its sources.	0.5	1.6	15.3	36.8	45.8	4.26
I will obtain news from authoritative sources before sharing it.	0.5	3.2	12.6	32.6	51.1	4.31
Caution when Sharing Information						
Not all information we obtain should be shared.	1.6	0	6.3	30.0	62.1	4.51
I take care in sharing political news.	0.5	2.1	26.3	41.1	30.0	3.98
I will not share unverified political news.	0.0	0.5	7.4	30.0	62.1	4.54
I will not allow my family to share unverified news.	1.1	3.7	23.7	47.4	24.2	3.90
Reporting and Consulting						
I will report to authorities if the political information shared is incorrect.	0.0	2.1	12.6	39.5	45.8	4.29
I will consult experts if there is confusion about political information.	0.0	1.6	5.8	34.2	58.4	4.49

(Source: Author's data generated using SPSS v26.0)

The results show that the majority of young people value verifying information before sharing it. 65.3% strongly agree that sharing information without checking it first is a mistake, with a mean score of 4.54. Similarly, 66.3% strongly agree that news from social media should be verified before sharing, resulting in the highest mean score of 4.59. This indicates a strong consensus on the importance of fact-checking in the digital age. Furthermore, 51.1% strongly agree that they prefer to get news from credible sources before sharing, with a mean score of 4.31 highlighting their reliance on trustworthy information sources.

In terms of sharing information, participants show responsibility. The mean score of 4.51 indicates that 62.1% believe not all information should be shared, emphasizing selective sharing. However, caution in sharing political news shows a moderate mean score of 3.98, with 30.0% strongly agreeing. Nevertheless, 62.1% strongly agree that they won't share unverified political news, evident from a mean score of 4.54. This cautious behavior is supported by a commitment to reporting incorrect information to authorities (mean score 4.29) and consulting experts when confused about political information (mean score 4.49), suggesting that young people are both cautious and proactive in maintaining the accuracy of political information.

On the other hand, in terms of verification actions, the youth display a strong commitment to investigating information before dissemination. With a mean score of 4.54, 65.3% of respondents strongly agree that disseminating information without prior investigation is a mistake. Similarly, the highest mean score observed was 4.59, with 66.3% strongly agreeing that news received via social media should be verified first. This reflects a strong consensus on the necessity of fact-checking in the digital age. Moreover, 51.1% strongly agree that they prefer to obtain news from authoritative sources before sharing, leading to the highest mean score of 4.31, further underscoring their reliance on credible information sources (Hassan & Azmi, 2021).

When it comes to caution in sharing information, respondents demonstrate a considerable level of responsibility. A mean score of 4.51 indicates that 62.1% believe not all information should be shared, emphasizing selective dissemination. However, the caution exercised in sharing political news reflects a moderate mean score of 3.98, with 30.0% strongly agreeing. Nonetheless, a notable 62.1% strongly agree that they will not share unverified political news, as evidenced by a mean score of 4.54. This cautious behavior is complemented by a commitment to reporting incorrect information to authorities (mean score 4.29) and consulting experts when there is confusion about political information (mean score 4.49), suggesting that the youth are not only cautious but also proactive in maintaining the integrity of political information.

5.0 Discussion

The findings from the analysis of youth attitudes towards political information underscore a strong emphasis on accuracy and conscientious engagement with content. The data reveals that the majority of young people prioritize acting on accurate information, reflecting a commitment to building their opinions and decisions on a solid foundation of truth. This attitude is further exemplified by their tendency to thoroughly engage with the full content of political information rather than merely skimming headlines, indicating a deliberate approach to news consumption.

A significant theme emerging from the results is the youth's strong inclination towards verifying information before sharing it. The emphasis on the importance of fact-checking, especially in the context of social media, highlights a widespread recognition of the risks associated with disseminating unverified information. This behavior suggests that young people are highly aware of the potential consequences of spreading misinformation and are committed to ensuring the accuracy of the information they share (Abdullah et.al.,2024).

The findings also suggest that young people demonstrate a high level of responsibility in their approach to sharing political news. There is a clear understanding among the respondents that not all information should be shared, pointing to a selective and discerning approach to information dissemination. While there is some variability in the level of caution exercised when sharing political news, the overall trend indicates a strong commitment to avoiding the spread of unverified information. This cautious behavior is complemented by a proactive stance in maintaining the accuracy of political information, as evidenced by their willingness to report incorrect information to authorities and to consult experts when faced with uncertainty.

In summary, the findings reflect a conscientious and responsible approach among young people towards political information. Their strong emphasis on accuracy, thorough engagement with content, and commitment to fact-checking indicate a deep-seated concern for the integrity of the information they encounter and share. This suggests that the youth are not only aware of the challenges posed by misinformation in the digital age but are also actively engaged in practices that promote informed and accurate political discourse (Hassan et al., 2020).

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendation

The analysis indicates that young people exhibit a generally cautious and responsible approach to handling political information, as reflected in the consistently high mean scores related to verification and careful sharing behavior. This suggests a strong awareness among the majority of respondents regarding the importance of verifying information before dissemination, which is a positive sign for the integrity of political discourse in the digital age. However, the moderate score in the specific area of sharing political news highlights a potential gap in media literacy, suggesting that while young people are aware of the need for caution, they may not consistently apply this level of scrutiny to all types of political content.

This study also underscores the positive attitudes and behaviors of young people towards political information, particularly in terms of their commitment to verification and responsible sharing. The findings suggest that while youth are generally careful in their approach, there remains a need for further enhancement of media literacy skills, especially concerning the dissemination of political news. Addressing this gap could help to mitigate the risks associated with the spread of misinformation and ensure that young people are fully equipped to navigate the complexities of the digital information landscape.

This study is limited by its small sample size from a single university and using descriptive analysis, which may affect generalizability. Future research should aim to include a larger and more diverse sample from multiple universities to improve generalizability. Additionally, employing more sophisticated statistical techniques, such as inferential analysis, could provide deeper insights and strengthen the findings.

Given these insights, future research could usefully explore the effectiveness of various media literacy programs in bolstering these positive practices among youth. Such studies could examine how targeted interventions might improve young people's ability to critically evaluate political information, particularly in high-stakes contexts such as elections or periods of political unrest. The role of schools, social media sites, and policymakers in encouraging a critical engagement with political content could also be looked into. This could help with the creation of complete media literacy programs that meet the needs of today's digital natives.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper contributes to the field of political communication and media studies by providing a nuanced understanding of how youth in Malaysia engage with political information in the digital age. By analyzing their attitudes towards accuracy, fact-checking, and responsible information sharing, the study offers valuable insights into the behaviors and motivations that influence the spread of political news among young people. The findings highlight the critical role of media literacy and the importance of fostering a culture of verification in combating misinformation. This research not only adds to the existing literature on youth media consumption but also informs strategies for promoting more informed and discerning political engagement in an increasingly digital and information-saturated environment.

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