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Digital Engagement, Political and Civic Participation: Mobilizing Youth in Marginalized Communities

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This paper examines the digital engagement, political and civic participation among Malaysian youth in marginalized communities. It also studies the relationship between digital engagement and two participation constructs. The framework of the study was based on mobilization theories, which suggested that previously unavailable technologies such as the Internet could mobilize members of underprivileged or underrepresented groups who lack socioeconomic resources.

Methodology: The data were obtained through a self-administered survey completed by 4,107 youths, aged from 15 to 25 years old, living in marginalized communities in six regions, namely Central, Eastern, Northern, Southern, Sabah, and Sarawak. Descriptive and factor analyses were used to analyze the data. Pearson correlation was also run to test the hypothesis that digital engagement is positively related to political and civic participation.

Results: The study found that while youths were digitally engaged, their engagement was still characterized by basic use of the Internet, such as communicating with friends. The study also found that their civic and political participation is low. However, the research found that digital engagement had a significant and positive impact on the youths' political and civic participation.

Implication: This research provides empirical data on the level of digital engagement, political and civic participation among Malaysian youths. The study expands on current literatures by examining the effects of Internet on youth participation. This paper offers insights to policy makers on implementing strategies and programs that promote participation among youth in marginalized communities. Its practical implication also includes contributing towards the development of specific policy and good practices on media to encourage youth participation in Malaysia.

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1. Introduction

The disengagement of young people from political and civic activities has been observed in both western and Asian countries. Malaysia is no exception. Nga et. al (2009) found that Malaysia struggles “with political inclusiveness and engagement by young people in the political process. Ismie et al (2011) observed that young people demonstrated continuous lack of engagement with the political process. Recent reports had shown that many did not register as voters. Compared to their counterparts in the Commonwealth countries, Malaysian youths were also among the least active in politics.

Election is part of the process to facilitate political socialization among young generation. Unfortunately, according to Malaysia Youth Index 2006 survey, political socialization among youth was found to be moderate. This spells trouble for a democratic country like Malaysia because its future leaders were not interested in political socialization activities. To make things worse, nearly half (13.4 million) of the Malaysian population are young people. Who will run and participate in the administration of the country in the future?

The same survey also indicated that the media penetration rate among Malaysian youth was ‘very good’, which means majority of them had a high exposure to media and information technology. Reports by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission and the International Telecommunication Union also showed that Malaysian youths were among the most active Internet users in the world.

The declining youth civic and political participation vis-à-vis increasing engagement with online activities led many researchers to explore the relationship between Internet and youth participation. Does Internet keep young people away from participating in civic and political activities? Or does it actually encourage participation because many traditional forms of civic and political participation can now be carried out online? If so, how effective is Internet in mobilizing young people to become more active participants?

In many parts of the world, Internet has showed unprecedented impact in recent elections. In the 2008 U.S. presidential elections, President Obama leveraged on the power of social media to communicate directly with young voters, who were heavy users of the Internet (Bakker & de Vreese, 2011). Coincidentally, in the same year, the Internet also played a significant role in the Malaysian political tsunami of 8 March 2008. The power of young voters, who were also heavy users of the Internet, was increasingly felt in the local political scene. Collectively, they could act as a force that decides on issues related to them and the nation (Rahim, 2007). Given this empirical evidence, it is therefore important to examine the potential of Internet to mobilize young people to become more active citizens in terms of civic and political participation.

2. Literature review

2.1 Digital Engagement

In their study on pathways to digital literacy and engagement, Helsper and Eynon (2013) defined digital engagement as “the ways in which people use and participate in different Internet activities, contents and platform.” Following this definition and the term “digital natives” (coined by the International Telecommunication Union to label active young Internet users), we conceptualize the various uses of Internet into a construct called “digital engagement.”

Digital engagement was operationalized into 16 surfing activities and 3 communication activities

(Bakker & de Vreese, 2011). The former comprised four categories: *Internet news use* (visit newspaper websites, visit news sites and news blogs, visit showbiz news sites); *services* (online banking, job searching, housing sites, looking for product information, holiday bookings, online shopping); *music* (download music and software, listening to music on PC); and *club/organization* (frequency visiting website of an organization or club as a member). The latter included email, social networking (chat and online communities) and forum.

2.2 Civic Participation

In their study on modeling Internet effects on civic participation, Shah et al. (2005) articulated the role of civic participation:

Civic participation represents a critical behavioral marker of community engagement and integration. It plays a central role in the health and functioning of democratic societies by channeling collective action toward community building. The experience of participating in community and voluntary work also reinforces the norms of reciprocity, encouraging faith in others (Ostrom, 1990). By supporting these norms, participation begets future participation. (p. 533)

Past studies have defined civic participation (or engagement) in both specific and generic terms, including *social capital* (Putnam, 2000), *civic literacy* (Milner, 2002), and club memberships. With the advent of Internet, the definition has been classified into two main categories: traditional (offline) and digital (online) participation.

Past researchers had long established the relationship between media consumption and civic participation. McLeod et al., 1996; Shah, McLeod, and Yoon, 2001 found that consumption of news media and interpersonal political discussion had an impact on civic participation. Norris (1998) and Shat et al. (2001) observed that civic participation was driven by informational uses of the Internet. Shah et al. (2002); Wellman, Haase, Witte, and Hampton, (2001) discovered that heavy Internet use encouraged participation in voluntary organizations. According to Davis (1999), Jones (1995) and Rheingold (1993), the flexibility of the Internet as a communication channel encourages civic participation. First, information can be accessed on demand. Second, news is disseminated up-to-the-minute; and third, users could have in-depth knowledge of important issues. This study only looked at traditional (offline) civic participation.

2.3 Political Participation

In a study by the Institute for Youth Research Malaysia, only 10 percent of youth respondents reported that their ideas were given attention by any political parties, and only 19 percent were aware of the existence and differences of political parties in the country. The data not only reflected the lack of political participation among the young generation but also their insensitivity towards their own political socialization process (Rahim, 2006).

Political participation has been defined in numerous terms – from participating in activities organized by political parties and distributing a petition to meeting a government official and wearing a badge to show support or protest over an issue. However, this study only looked at traditional (offline) forms of political participation.

3. Hypotheses

There were many empirical evidence on the impact of Internet on political participation. Tolbert and McNeal (2003) found that people who consumed online news were more likely to vote. Quintelier and

Vissers (2008) discovered a positive relationship between online news consumption and youth political participation. Bakker and de Vreese (2011) observed the same relationship when Internet was used as a medium to communicate and discuss issues. In line with these arguments, we hypothesized the following.

Hypothesis 1: Digital engagement is positively related to political participation

Similarly, citizens who used Internet for information were found to be more likely to engage with their communities and civic activities (Norris, 1998; Shah, McLeod, et al., 2001). Shah, Kwak, and Holbert (2001) found that when people used the Internet for exchanging ideas and consuming news, they had higher social and political engagement. Shah et al. (2005) also discovered a positive relationship between informational uses of the mass media and civic participation. These arguments led us to hypothesize the following.

Hypothesis 2: Digital engagement is positively related to civic participation

4. Methodology

This research has two objectives. First is to determine the level of digital engagement, political and civic participation among Malaysian youth. Second is to examine the relationship between youth digital engagement and their participation in political and civic activities. The independent variable is digital engagement and the dependent variables are civic and political participation. This study focused on Malaysian youth living in marginalized communities in six regions, namely, Central, Eastern, Northern, Southern, Sabah and Sarawak. The data were obtained through a survey completed by 4,107 youths aged from 15 to 25 years old. All questionnaires were self-administered by the respondents.

5.1 Measurement of Variables

5.1.1 Digital Engagement

Digital engagement was measured by how frequent the respondents used the Internet for various activities. The respondents indicated the number of times they carried out 13 online activities, measured from “no engagement at all” (1) to “very frequent engagement” (5).

5.1.2 Civic Participation

Civic participation was defined as how frequent the respondents carried out traditional (offline) civic activities. The respondents indicated the number of times they participated in seven civic activities, measured from “no engagement at all” (1) to “very frequent engagement” (5).

5.1.3 Political Participation

Political participation was defined as how frequent the respondents performed various traditional (offline) political activities. The respondents indicated the number of times they took part in four political activities, measured from “no engagement at all” (1) to “very frequent engagement” (5).

6. Results

Digital engagement comprised 13 online activities that the respondents performed. A factor analysis on the 13 items indicated three types of digital engagement namely, basic, intermediate, and advanced. Figure 1 shows that the respondents’ digital engagement was still characterized by basic use of the

Internet (67%).

Figure 1 : Three dimensions of digital engagement

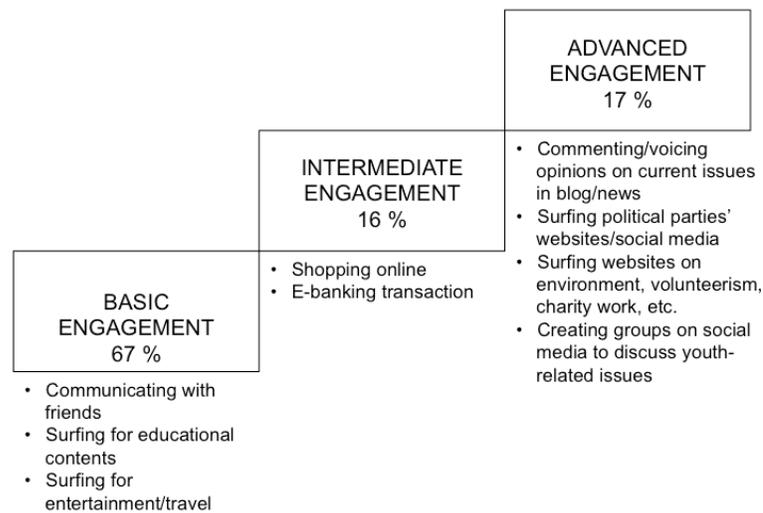


Table 1 shows the distribution of respondents according to their digital engagement. In terms of basic digital engagement, the results show that the most popular activity is communicating with friends (mean = 3.81), followed by surfing for educational contents (mean = 3.61). At intermediate level, the most popular activity is surfing government websites for jobs, paying license, and other related activities (mean = 2.66), followed by shopping online (mean = 2.62).

With regard to advanced digital engagement, the most frequent activity is reading current news, sports, or entertainment online (mean = 3.34). This is followed by surfing websites on environment, volunteerism, charity work and so forth (mean = 2.75), commenting/voicing opinions on current issues in blog/news (mean 2.72), and creating groups on social media to discuss youth-related issues (mean = 2.72) and. The least popular activity is surfing political parties' websites or social media (mean = 2.49).

Table 1 : Distribution of respondents according to digital engagement

Item (n = 4,107)	Mean	SD	
Communicating with friends	3.81	0.99	
Surfing for educational contents	3.61	0.98	
Surfing for entertainment/travel	3.29	1.08	
Shopping online	2.62	1.29	
Playing games	3.10	1.34	
E-banking transaction	2.36	1.29	
Surfing government websites for jobs, paying license, etc.	2.66	1.34	
Uploading pictures/videos	3.31	1.20	
Commenting/voicing opinions on current issues in blog/news		2.72	1.22
Reading current news/sports/entertainment online	3.34	1.15	
Surfing political parties' websites/social media	2.49	1.24	
Surfing websites on environment, volunteerism, charity work, etc.	2.75	1.18	
Creating groups on social media to discuss youth-related issues	2.72	1.23	

Note: 1 = no engagement at all; 2 = not frequent engagement; 3 = less frequent engagement; 4 = frequent engagement; 5 = very frequent engagement

Table 2 shows the distribution of respondents according to civic participation. The results also showed that the respondents were not frequently engaged (mean < 4.0) in civic activities such as getting involved in charity and welfare work (mean = 2.72), volunteering to help the poor/people with disabilities/natural disaster victims (mean = 2.72), and getting involved in recycle activities (mean = 2.80).

Table 2 : Distribution of respondents according to civic participation

Item (n = 4,107)	Mean	SD
Involved in charity and welfare work	2.72	1.17
Volunteering to help the poor/OKU/natural disaster victims	2.72	1.16
Discussing with friends or family members on current issue published by the media	3.20	1.13
Involved in recycle activities	2.80	1.14
Reporting a crime in my neighborhood to the police	2.55	1.21
Lodging a complaint on service used/vandalism/unsatisfactory government service	2.49	1.19
Contacting the mass media to voice opinion on a certain issue (opinion/complaint/recognition/suggestion)	2.26	1.18

Note: 1 = no engagement at all; 2 = not frequent engagement; 3 = less frequent engagement; 4 = frequent engagement; 5 = very frequent engagement

Table 3 shows the distribution of respondents according to political participation. The results showed that the respondents were not frequently engaged (mean < 3.00) in political activities such as wearing a badge/sticker to promote/protest a certain issue (mean = 2.02), participating in activities organized by political party (mean = 2.07), and meeting district officer to resolve an issue/voice opinion (mean 2.07).

Table 3 : Distribution of respondents according to political participation

Item (n = 4,107)	Mean	SD
Meeting government official personally to resolve an issue	2.31	1.20
Wearing badge/sticker to support/protest a certain issue	2.02	1.15
Meeting district officer to resolve an issue/voice opinion	2.07	1.16
Participating in activities organized by political party	2.07	1.22

Note: 1 = no engagement at all; 2 = not frequent engagement; 3 = less frequent engagement; 4 = frequent engagement; 5 = very frequent engagement

Table 4 shows the correlation test conducted between the independent variable and two dependent variables. The results showed that there was a moderately positive and significant relationship between digital engagement and political participation ($r = 0.54$, $p = 0.00$) as well as with civic participation ($r = 0.54$, $p = 0.00$). Therefore, H1 and H2 were supported. Based on the results, it can be concluded that digital engagement would affect the political and civic participation of the respondents.

Table 4 : Correlation test between Independent Variable and Dependent Variables

Dependent variables	Digital engagement	
	r	p
Political participation	0.54	0.00
Civic participation	0.54	0.00

Conclusion and Recommendation

The study showed that Malaysian youths who participated in the survey were actively involved in various online activities. But more importantly, the study revealed that Malaysian youths are digitally divided between the basic users and the more advanced users. Confining to basic use of the Internet does not bode well for the future as Malaysia is striving towards an advanced economy and inclusive nation. In its strategy paper for the Eleventh Malaysia Plan, the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) wrote that this transformation will hinge on mindset and behavior change of businesses, citizens and the public service towards a data driven culture. Therefore, to make this transformation possible, Malaysian youths – who represent nearly half of the Malaysian population – need to change their online usage to one that extends beyond basic engagement.

The study also showed that in general, the respondents were not frequently engaged in both political and civic activities. In light of this finding, low citizen participation needs to be addressed to ensure a functioning and healthy democracy. To achieve a developed nation status, Malaysia not only requires economic prosperity but also political stability, especially considering the status quo. Lastly, the study found that youth's digital engagement has a moderately positive and significant relationship with their political and civic participation. The findings of this study have shown the power of Internet in mobilizing young people to become more involved in political and civic activities, even if they are just basic users. This is in line with past studies that established a positive relationship between Internet uses and participation. The challenge, therefore, is to turn basic users to advanced users so that the nation not only benefits from but also contributes to both sociopolitical and economic development.

This paper presents empirical evidence that the digital engagement of Malaysian youth can be categorized as basic and that their political and civic participation is low. Despite these pessimistic outcomes, the study found a significant relationship between the two. This evidence suggests that even with basic digital engagement, the Internet does help mobilize younger generation to participate in political and civic activities. How do we encourage them to use the Internet for purposes other than communication and entertainment? What can be done to ensure digital inclusion among the younger generation? When can, therefore, Internet effectively mobilize them to be active participants in the country's political and civic agendas? These are the question policy makers need to answer urgently. Especially since the concept of digital inclusion has now extended beyond providing access in rural and suburban areas. It also means, and requires, building knowledgeable and skilled society. Therefore, programs and policies need to be put in place to accelerate youth's digital engagement to intermediate and advanced level. This will help the younger generation to be more digitally included and thus, are able to compete in the knowledge economy. Citizen participation is the bedrock of democracy. More than ever, Malaysian youths must acquire advanced Internet skills and become active participants, socially and politically. This is no longer a choice, it is an absolute necessity.

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