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Constructive Consciousness of Gen-pro: Transforming Political Engagement with a Proactive  
Behavior, a Progressive Attitude, and a Professional Mindset

by

Sing Hui Lee

Under the Direction of Andrew Wedeman, PhD

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2022

## ABSTRACT

Studies on young people's political engagement commonly fall along the binary of engagement or disengagement. Young people's political disengagement is typically captured by declining membership in political parties, low voter turnout, and political apathy. The engagement paradigm maintains that young people are increasingly turning to the digital space to engage politically. Though the representation of young people's disengagement in politics may seem clear, how today's young people understand politics, political engagement, and what meaningful political engagement means to them continue to be contested. Specifically in recent years, East Asian and Southeast Asian young people's relationship with politics is experiencing significant transformation. Young people in these regions are increasingly at the forefront seeking for political changes, standing up to authoritarianism, and demanding accountability from their leaders. They are exhibiting attitudes and behaviors that depart from the Asian Values concept that demands obedience to authority and political consensus over confrontation. Young people from Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Taiwan are ideal research participants considering the deep influence of the Asian Values concept in these societies. This study uses online focus group interview to gain a deeper understanding of young people's attitudes towards politics, political engagement, and digital engagement, how young people perceive the challenges to their political engagement, and what being politically engaged truly means to them. To understand if there is a difference between how young people and the older generation perceive politics and political engagement, this study recruits young people, non-Millennials, and non-Gen-Z participants for an online survey. The interviews reveal that while young people from different societies perceive politics differently, they largely associate political engagement with digital engagement. They share similar challenges to engaging in politics – institution-, personal-, and society-related

challenges. The online survey uncovers an interesting finding. Not only do young people and the older generation have similar perceptions of politics, but they also share similar perceptions of political engagement. This study proposes two policy recommendations to better include young people in politics. Today's young people represent a generation ready for opportunities. We must recognize them as agents of change, capable of making meaningful contributions.

**INDEX WORDS:** Political engagement, Political attitude, Political behavior, Digital engagement, Young people, Gen-pro

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2022

Constructive Consciousness of Gen-pro: Transforming Political Engagement with a Proactive  
Behavior, a Progressive Attitude, and a Professional Mindset

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August 2022

## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to all the women in my family, especially in memory of my eldest cousin, Kate Yew Gook Kuen, who passed away in 2010 battling cancer. Her support was the first step that has brought me to this very moment, writing a dedication page for my doctoral dissertation as I close this chapter of my graduate school journey – a journey that I could only dream of as a little girl but never thought that could come true one day. Her courage, love, confidence, bubbly character, generosity, and selfless spirit will always inspire me and remain in my heart as I continue to chart many exciting adventures, create cherished memories, and make a difference to the lives of others around me with all that God has blessed me with.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank the Almighty God for His blessings, grace, strength, wisdom, and guidance throughout my journey in graduate school. God has made what seemed like an impossible journey a possible one by blessing me with many amazing people along the way! This doctoral dissertation project would not have been possible without these amazing people who have been very generous with their love, support, encouragement, advice, and guidance. This project would also not have been possible without the financial support of Georgia State University Provost's Dissertation Fellowship Award.

I am very indebted to my Dissertation Chair Advisor, Dr. Andrew Wedeman, who inspired and guided me throughout the process of writing and researching for this project. Dr. Wedeman has been very supportive of my career goals and has shown me, by his example, what a good scholar and mentor should be. I would also like to express my sincere thanks to three wonderful professors on my Dissertation Committee, Dr. Ryan Edward Carlin, Dr. Kim Reimann, and Dr. Maria Repnikova, who offered advice and insights to this project.

I am grateful to many professors and friends with whom I have had the privilege to know and work with throughout my time in graduate school. I would like to express my sincere thanks and gratitude to Dr. Dalton Lin Kuen-Da (Sam Nunn School of International Affairs, Georgia Institute of Technology), Dr. William Long (Department of Political Science, Georgia State University), and Dr. Yinying Wang (College of Education and Human Development, Georgia State University) for their advice, encouragement, and mentorship along the way. Special thanks and gratitude to Professor Francis Nii Botchway who has been my long-time mentor since 2007. I would also like to thank my friend, Stephen Zhao Zheng, who generously offered his time and expertise in translation to help me with the Chinese translation of the online survey. Special



thanks to my good friends Fengjiao Lin, Doğa Cigdemoglu, Natalie Roth, Nimendra Mawalagedara, and Dr. Rachindra Mawalagedara for their friendship and support for which I cherish dearly.

To all the research participants who participated in this project, I greatly thank you for your time, patience, and views. In particular, I wish to thank the 33 participants who participated in the synchronous online focus group interview. Your willingness to explore and share your honest opinions and feelings has provided invaluable data for this project.

Nobody has been more important to me in the pursuit of my doctoral degree and this project than my family. Thank you very much to my dearest parents, Ch'ng Siew Lan and Lee Meng Foon, whose unconditional love, support, encouragement, faith, and prayers have always been with me in all that I do. I wish to thank my loving and supportive sister, Sing Rou, for taking over the role of “big sister” in providing and taking care of my parents (including me) while I pursue my dream. I am very blessed to have you as my sister. I could never thank you enough sis for everything that you have done!

Finally, to my favorite person in the whole wide universe, Fengjiao, whom I will forever be grateful and indebted to. You have given me so much in helping me make this journey a reality! Thank you for walking together with me since the day we met! I pray that God will bless us with have many more walks together as we continue to create “ama-Sing” memories and adventures in the next chapters of our lives. I am so thankful I found you!

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background

Young people's relationship with politics has always been a subject of vibrant discourse. Studies investigating young people's engagement in politics commonly fall along the binary of engagement or disengagement. Studies falling under the disengagement paradigm have argued that young people are often disenchanted with politics, do not vote, do not join political parties, display low levels of political interest, and distrust the government (Briggs, 2017; Cross & Young, 2008; Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000; Grasso, 2016a; Henn & Foard, 2014; Ilišin et al., 2013; Pickard, 2018; Quaranta, 2016; Sloam, 2013; Van Biezen et al., 2012; Warren, 2019). While the disengagement paradigm paints a bleak picture of young people's relationship with politics, the engagement paradigm offers a more encouraging outlook, maintaining that young people are turning to non-traditional forms of engagement, namely online participation (Dayican, 2014; Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013; Halupka, 2014; Kristofferson et al., 2014; Latzko-Toth et al., 2017; Norris, 2003; Sloam, 2007).

Moreover, despite the negative discourses surrounding young people's attitudes towards politics and their lack of engagement, recent global events defy this depiction. Particularly, across East Asia and Southeast Asia, we are witnessing young people's increasing engagement in politics. Young protesters of the 2014 Sunflower Movement unleashed a wave of youthful activism that profoundly shaped Taiwan's political landscape by ending the disputed free-trade proposal between Taipei and Beijing. In the same year, the world witnessed the Umbrella Movement, where young Hong Kongers took to the streets of Hong Kong to fight for universal suffrage that the city was promised under Hong Kong's Basic Law. Six years later, when Chinese lawmakers approved a proposal for the new national security law, young Hong Kongers

returned to the streets of Hong Kong to protest this new law that confers broad powers to Hong Kong and Mainland China authorities to investigate, prosecute, and punish dissenters. In July 2020, student activism in Thailand set off a growing protest movement demanding a new constitution, increased protection of human rights for vocal critics of the military and monarchy who have disappeared or killed, and more checks on the palace's power. Thai students are seen defying the taboo against criticizing the Thai monarchy and the government when photos of Thai students raising a three-fingered salute from "The Hunger Games" movies made headlines across the globe. During the COVID-19 pandemic, young people in Malaysia successfully organized a digital parliament (Parlimen Digital) that saw more than 200,000 viewers logged in to debate, vote, and pass bills addressing various issues affecting young Malaysians.

East Asian and Southeast Asian young people's relationship with politics is experiencing significant changes as they are seen taking center stage in seeking for political changes, government transparency, greater political freedom, and accountability from their leaders. Specifically, is this change a demonstration that the political attitudes and behaviors of young people in East Asia and Southeast Asia are undergoing transformation? If so, what is causing this wave of transformation that we are witnessing? How do these young people perceive politics? What is their understanding of political engagement? How do they see their opportunities and challenges for political engagement? Are these young people, as some have maintained, gradually turning towards non-traditional forms of engagement? If so, what behaviors or actions do they recognize as ways to engage in politics? Is there a difference between how today's East Asian and Southeast Asian young people and their older generation perceive politics and political engagement?

## 1.2 Objective

Given that more and more young people across East Asia and Southeast Asia are seen defying the depiction of recoiling from engaging in politics through proactive engagement and by using non-traditional forms of engagement, a better understanding of how these young people perceive politics and political engagement, as well as what behaviors or actions they recognize as constituting such engagement are needed than that captured by existing studies on East Asian and Southeast Asian young people's relationship with politics and pattern of political engagement. This study seeks to investigate and provide a better understanding of how young people in East Asia and Southeast Asia understand:

- 1) Politics,
- 2) The behaviors or actions that constitute political engagement,
- 3) Meaningful political engagement,
- 4) Their challenges for political engagement, and
- 5) The role of digital technology on their generation's opportunity for political engagement

Previous studies investigated Spanish youth's political participation (Sant, 2015), the understanding of citizenship among youth in Turkey and Italy (Ataman et al., 2012), the behaviors that are related to civic and political engagement among Swedish youth (Sveningsson, 2016), and how young people in United Kingdom and Portugal define political engagement (Pontes et al., 2018). Relatively few studies consider how young people in East Asia and Southeast Asia perceive politics, political engagement, and their opportunities and challenges to engage politics, including what engaging in politics means to them. This study proposes using Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Taiwan as case studies to investigate East Asian and Southeast Asian young people's (namely Millennials and Gen Z) perceptions of politics, political engagement,

and the behaviors or actions they recognize as political engagement, including how they understand the opportunities and challenges for them to engage in politics.

### **1.3 Significance of Study**

This study hopes to contribute to current research investigating East Asian and Southeast Asian young people's attitude towards politics, political engagement, and the role of digital technology on their generation's political engagement and youth citizenship engagement. The findings from the research could potentially be used to help political leaders and policymakers gain a better understanding of young people's perceptions of politics and their opportunities for engagement, including what behaviors or actions that they recognize as denoting political or citizenship engagement. Existing studies contend that young people distrust politicians and lose faith in the system. These phenomena stem from political leaders' lack of understanding of young people, the public's biases toward young people as being politically disinterested and less politically knowledgeable, and political institutions that appear to keep young people at arm's length. If political leaders understood how young people perceive politics and their opportunities for engagement, as well as what behaviors or actions today's young people recognize as constituting political or citizenship engagement, they could nurture this understanding to better the political system, process, and culture that would be inclusive of young people, gradually restoring young people's faith, trust, and confidence in politicians, political parties, and the system. Likewise, policymakers could integrate this understanding in its policy revisions to inform young people that their concerns are not being overlooked.

When young people see opportunities for meaningful engagement and discernible changes in the nation's political system, process, and culture, they would think less of resorting

to desperate measures to make their voices heard and presence seen, thereby avoiding unnecessary conflicts or clashes between them and the authorities. Instead, they would trust the system and work alongside political leaders knowing that their views matter and that they have a voice in the decisions that affect them and society at large. Over time, this could foster social cohesion leading to greater social and political stability, where not only young people but also all citizens would feel represented, be optimistic about politics, and regard political activity as something worthwhile.

#### **1.4 Research Question**

The disengagement paradigm underlines the argument with empirical findings that young people do not vote, are not inclined to join political parties, and display generally low levels of political interest (Cross & Young, 2008; Henn & Foard, 2014; Hooghe et al., 2004; Fieldhouse et al., 2007; Kimberlee, 2002; Quaranta, 2016; Sloam, 2013). Researchers have found that among the reasons that young people frequently display a low level of interest in politics are due to their frustration with the political system, particularly the process of elections (Henn & Foard, 2014), their disappointment with elected officials and political parties who are only interested in people's votes and not in their opinions (Henn et al., 2002; Mair, 2013; Warren, 2019), their perceptions of politics being disconnected with their lives (Bhavnani, 1994; White et al., 2000), their distrust in the government as they feel that their voices are not heard and they do not matter (Norris, 2011; Pharr & Putnam, 2000; Warren, 2019; White et al., 2000), and their claims that politicians are not inspiring young people to engage in politics (Warren, 2019). A study on young people's attitudes toward politics and political engagement across the United Kingdom revealed that British youth often narrate a struggle for recognition, vividly describing how they

were stereotyped as being incapable of having or expressing an opinion about important matters (Bright et al., 2018).

Contrary to the disengagement paradigm's depiction of young people's political attitudes and behaviors, some studies revealed that young people's forms of social and political engagements have become multifaceted, with increasing involvement in social activism, non-profit initiatives, global issues, and advocacy networks (García-Albacete, 2014; Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009). Young people are also increasingly turning to a new form of participation, namely online participation through social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter (Dayican, 2014; Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013; Halupka, 2014; Kristofferson et al., 2014; Latzko-Toth et al., 2017). From student activists in Los Angeles using Facebook and Instagram to convey their concerns with the *1033 program*<sup>1</sup> in their efforts to voice out against the militarization of school police and police violence in schools to the 2020 Hong Kong protest against China's imposition of the new national security law to young Mongolian's protest in Inner Mongolia against a new bilingual education policy that is threatening the Mongolian language to the outraged Baloch students marching to Islamabad asking the government to restore reserved seats and scholarships in Punjab universities – these are some recent instances that exemplify young people's increasing engagement in social and political causes, where they are becoming the protagonists in voicing for social, economic, and political changes.

This study seeks to investigate Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Taiwan young people's political attitudes and behaviors with the following research questions:

- 1) What are young people's attitudes towards politics?

---

<sup>1</sup> Through the Department of Defense Excess Military Equipment Program (commonly referred to as the 1033 program), the LASPD received 61 M-16 assault rifles, three grenade launchers, and a mine-resistant protective vehicle (Chokshi, 2014). The possession of these weapons created serious concerns for activists about the prospect that weapons would be used to arm police in schools, (LDF, 2014).

- 2) What behaviors or actions do young people recognize as political engagement?
- 3) What are young people's attitudes towards using digital technology to engage in politics?
- 4) How do young people understand the challenges for their political engagement?
- 5) To what extent is there a difference between the political attitudes of young people and the older generation?
- 6) To what extent is there a difference between how young people and the older generation understand political engagement?
- 7) To what extent is there a difference between the attitudes of young people and the older generation towards digital engagement?

### **1.5 Introducing Gen-pro, A Generation of People Ready for Opportunities with a Constructive Consciousness of the Contemporary World**

This study introduces the concept of Gen-pro (*Generation of People Ready for Opportunities*). The concept of Gen-pro represents a generation of young people characterized by three fundamental traits that are seen among a subset of Millennials and Gen Z – proactiveness, progressiveness, and professionalism. Gen-pro symbolizes a generation of young people who takes the initiative in making the changes they hope to realize (proactiveness), uses their creativity and innovation to express their voices (progressiveness), and aspires to be acknowledged as competent in what they seek out to accomplish (professionalism).

Thanks to technological evolution, members of Gen-pro become aware that they are capable of learning on their own if they so choose to; being able to learn something easily and readily and *knowing* that they can be good at it with just a click or a swipe. This leads to them developing a “do-it-yourself” (DIY) attitude, nurturing a proactive behavior with the realization

that they have the capability to learn and be good at something on their own. Additionally, digital technology (DT) has furnished users of technologies, such as smartphones, web applications, cloud services, and electronic identification, with the tools at their fingertips to leverage their imagination, creativity, and inventiveness. Take music for instance. With DT, we can search and build our own playlist of favorite songs according to music genres, artists, languages, regions, and music chart ranks from digital music streaming services, such as Spotify, Pandora, or YouTube Music. As the largest user of digital technologies, DT has enabled members of Gen-pro to customize or personalize almost anything from the music on their playlist to the shows they watch on Netflix to establishing their professional digital branding on social media platforms, such as Twitter, Instagram, or LinkedIn.

Arguably, technological evolution and digital transformation have, therefore, facilitated a proactive behavior, progressive attitude, and a professional mindset among members of Gen-pro, whereby they become conscious of the readily available tools at their disposal that can empower them to perform *almost* anything from the things that they do on a daily basis to engaging in social or political causes by expressing their concerns, rallying for support, and making the changes they hope to see. As such, presumably, Gen-pro could perceive that through their acts, however small or simple it may be, like clicking the “like” button or “hashtagging” for a social or political cause, they are, at the very least, *doing* something to initiate social or political changes.

In this age of information explosion, where the rapid dissemination and transmission of information will continue to increase, members of Gen-pro have come of age where it is hard or nearly impossible to hide anything. They are frequently overwhelmed with photos, news, and information of real-world concerns, such as unemployment, environmental degradation, police



violence, racism, sexism, social instability, and political repression. They are also showered with endless flow of news about politicians embroiled in corruption, having lavish lifestyles, protecting their own interests and those of the elites, including accounts of continuous squabbling between political parties rather than seeing politicians reaching across the aisle to try and work together. Arguably, this information explosion shapes their interpretation, perception, and understanding of the political and social realities around them. For example, they could interpret messages from political leaders as sugarcoated promises or a means to manipulate the public instead of honest communication, transparency, accountability, and credibility – qualities that they hope or expect political leaders to demonstrate or have but are lacking. Furthermore, Hollywood's infinite supply of dystopian movies, such as *The Hunger Games*, *The Giver*, *Divergent*, and *Snowpiercer* exposed them to the probability that people must overcome inescapable scenarios and proactively rise above the challenge to better the society. Consuming and processing this information, either of real-world concerns or as seen in movies, thereby construct their perceptions and interpretations of a world that is not happily ever after but one that is prone to uncertainty, inequality, chaos, and instability.

Accordingly, we see many young people across the world engaging in social and political causes by subscribing to creative and innovative ways of engagements. They sing protest songs and use graphic arts to share their visions and make their voices heard in public spheres (Gallant, 2018; Peñafiel & Doran, 2018). Young people also channel their dissent through innovative forms of demonstration such as flash mobs (Bertho, 2016; Gallant, 2018; Newburn et al., 2016; Poirier, 2017). They use social media to organize various social and political actions and spread social and political expressions on blogs, Twitter, and YouTube (Caron, 2014; Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013; Millette, 2015). Take Chile and Quebec for instance, where students used

social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter to call for night marches to protest the arbitrary nature of the repression carried out by police forces (Peñafiel & Doran, 2018). The “#MilkTeaAlliance” that trended on Thai Twitter not only brought young people from Hong Kong, Thailand, and Taiwan together but also young people across the world, with each offering solidarity to one another in support of the democratic movements across Asia.

Studies continue to contest whether these unconventional forms of social or political engagements, particularly tweeting, sharing, or “liking” a social or political cause on social media, constitute any meaningful involvement (Dayican, 2014; Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013; Halupka, 2014; Kristofferson et al., 2014) or are merely an illusion of being politically engaged (Morozov, 2009). However, take the “#Eye4HK” campaign that has successfully gained international momentum for instance. This hashtag campaign, which calls for people to cover their right eye and post a photo on social media to support the female volunteer who lost an eye during the peaceful protest against the Chinese extradition law, not only attracted Hong Kong activists, celebrities, and politicians to take part in this challenge but also people from South Korea, Thailand, and Poland who have vocally expressed their support for Hong Kong’s fight for democracy. Arguably, members of Gen-pro could interpret such behaviors or actions as sharing, tweeting, “liking”, posting, or “hashtagging” on social media platforms as being politically engaged. Gen-pro could also perceive social media as a tool that furnishes them with the opportunity for engagement if they perceived that the current political system or process denies them any feasible opportunities to engage meaningfully. As such, this could be how *they* perceive that by proactively using digital tools like the Internet and social networking sites to engage in politics, they could somehow be contributing to social, economic, or political changes.

## 1.6 Structure of Dissertation

In Chapter 2, I review the literature on political participation and political engagement. I look at how political participation and political engagement are conceptualized. In this chapter, I specifically focus on why young people turn away from politics and discuss the drawbacks in the study of young people's political engagement that this research seeks to address. Chapter 3 looks at the discourse surrounding the relationship between digital technology and politics. This chapter also reviews how the nature and characteristics of the current Web 2.0-based technology have helped to empower young people's political engagement today. Here, I also explore the skepticisms concerning the use of digital technology for political engagement. In particular, I propose a research direction into understanding the significance of digital technology on young people's political engagement to address the concerns raised on digital engagement.

Chapter 4 introduces two concepts developed for this study. The first proposed concept is the concept of "Gen-pro." Here, I propose that today's young people (presumably a subset of Millennials and Gen Z), characterized by the term "Gen-pro," are a *Generation of People Ready for Opportunities*. As members of Gen-pro, they possess an awareness or consciousness of today's complex, globalized world. Correspondingly, they subscribe to a proactive behavior, progressive attitude, and professional mindset in their approaches to and engagement in political or social matters. The second proposed concept is the concept of "constructive consciousness." Studies in social and political psychology propose that how individuals form their opinions is not only driven by their pre-existing values, beliefs, and attitudes but also by newly acquired information. Arguably, the ability to acquire new information is made increasingly easier, particularly in today's technologically matured world. In other words, how individuals make

sense of or interpret the world around them is a result of their acquisition of new information and social interactions, along with their pre-existing values, beliefs, and attitudes.

In Chapter 5, I introduce the proposed theoretical framework for this study and discuss the reasons for choosing Asia, with Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Taiwan as case studies for this research. Here, I pay specific attention to two factors, namely Asian young people exhibiting attitudes and behaviors that are increasingly “un-Asian” and the rising influence of digital technology and digital media across East Asia and Southeast Asia. Chapter 6 presents the research methodology for this study and discusses the research limitations present in this study.

Chapters 7 and 8 present and discuss the findings and results from the online survey and synchronous online focus group discussion for this study. In reflecting upon the findings and results from Chapters 7 and 8, I propose a two-point roadmap for policymakers and political leaders on how to achieve a Gen-pro-centered citizenship engagement in Chapter 9. The first proposal is a formal and open digital space for Gen-pro called Youth Engagement Space (YES) that will serve as an official and legitimate digital platform drawing upon the efforts of an independently established government body, young people, and non-profit organizations focusing on youth engagement working collaboratively to increase young people’s opportunities for meaningful political engagement. The second proposal is a Gen-pro-centered Citizenship Engagement Program (GPCEP) that focuses on developing young people’s understanding of politics, political engagement, and the government, including giving youth an opportunity to start building their political or activism journey at an early stage. Finally, Chapter 10 concludes the dissertation by recognizing members of Gen-pro as agents of change and legitimate political actors, having the capacity to catalyze positive and important changes and proposing a

collaborative effort towards building a Gen-pro-centered citizenship engagement environment that supports young people's political and civic engagement journeys.

## **1.7 Conclusion**

Today's young people represent a conscious generation who are ready for opportunities. They are increasingly and actively becoming protagonists to make their voices heard, their presence seen, and their values considered. We must recognize them as capable of making positive contributions in effecting social, political, and economic changes. Many young people, including members of Gen-pro, are social media and tech-savvy. They are a hashtag generation. They will continue to use progressive and creative approaches to engage in social and political issues. They will continue to be at the forefront in stewarding the change, potentially transforming citizenship engagement through their proactive behavior, progressive attitude, and professional mindset. It is important for scholars, policymakers, and leaders to understand what meanings today's young people give to politics and political engagement, how to include them as integral partners in political conversations, the growing significance of digital technology on their generation's political engagement, and how they recognize their challenges and opportunities in finding their place, identity, and voice in adult-dominated societies.

## **2 UNDERSTANDING YOUNG PEOPLE'S POLITICAL DISENGAGEMENT IN CONTEXT**

### **2.1 Chapter Introduction**

Young people's political engagement has been widely considered important in politics. Young people hold the key for the future functioning of our political systems, as well as the evolution of political cultures, norms, values, and expectations that shape political activities. They have the capacity to catalyze important and positive changes domestically as well as globally. Following this logic, young people's political engagement and disengagement have received considerable attention in academic research and policy studies (Brooks & Hodkinson, 2008; García-Albacete, 2014; Henn & Foard, 2012; Marsh, O'Toole, & Jones, 2007; Quaranta, 2016; Quintelier 2007; Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009; Sloam, 2013). To understand the discourse surrounding young people's low levels of political engagement or participation, it is fundamental to understand how political participation and political engagement are defined within the discipline. After reviewing how political participation and political engagement are defined in the field, the chapter continues with an overview of the discourse surrounding young people's lack of political engagement. The final section of the chapter discusses the drawbacks in the study of young people's political engagement.

### **2.2 Political Participation and Political Engagement**

Political engagement or participation is widely recognized as an essential part of modern democracies as it allows the people to hold their governments accountable (Dahl, 1973). By participating in politics, the people can influence the government and political decisions (Conway, 2000) and have a direct impact on the political system's impartiality (Rosenstone &

Hansen, 1993). Considering the significance of people's political involvement to the progress and growth of any given society, particularly to the democratic development of a nation, political engagement and political participation have consistently been a vibrant debate within the research community.

Over the decades, research on political engagement and political participation have received important developments to encompass different forms of actions, activities, or behaviors recognized as constituting political engagement or political participation. Consequently, the literature is rife with definitions and concepts explaining what forms of behaviors qualify as political engagement or political participation. In their well-recognized work on political participation, Verba and Nie (1972) put forward four typologies of political participation consisting of voting, participating in campaign activity, contacting public officials, and participating in cooperative or communal activities. In his empirical study of political participation, Olsen (1982) identified six dimensions of political participation – cognitive participation (knowledge and extent of opinion formation on issues), expressive participation (discussion of politics), electoral participation (holding a party preference, being registered and actual voting), organizational participation (membership and activity within political but non-partisan organizations or non-political special interest organizations), partisan participation (wearing a campaign button, contributing money, doing volunteer work for a political party or serving on a party committee), and government participation (writing letters to a public official or holding elective office). The definition of political participation continued to expand to include interactions between citizens and political elites (Brady, 1998) and such activities as consumer participation, contact activity, electoral participation, party-based activity, and protest

activity (Teorell et al., 2007). During the 90s, political participation witnessed the inclusion of civil activities, such as volunteering and social engagement (Van Deth, 2001).

Parallel to the developments of social norms and social situations, non-conventional forms of political engagement or participation gradually made their way into the literature with activities or actions, such as signing a petition, joining a protest, participating in demonstrations, writing political blogs, and painting political graffiti on buildings (Albacete, 2014; Ekman & Amnå, 2012; Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013; Van Deth, 2014). Recognizing that citizens' ties to political and civic organizations have increasingly become weaker with the widespread of new social movements and advocacy networks across Western Europe, García-Albacete (2014) went further to identify a distinction between two forms of political participation, namely institutionalized political participation (voting or party membership) and non-institutionalized political participation (protest or boycotting).

While the element of *behavior* is commonly found in most concepts or definitions of political participation, some scholars conceptualized political engagement to include a *psychological* dimension. For instance, Emler (2011) proposed that political engagement should be regarded as a form of *developmental* process, whereby the underpinning factor is some driver to pay attention to politics. One study maintained that engagement could be treated as a *pre-condition* to participation, where engagement not only includes one's behaviors but also one's cognitions and emotions (Barrett, 2012). A qualitative focus group study on British and Portuguese young people's political attitude conducted by Pontes, Henn, and Griffiths (2018) equally revealed that political engagement includes emotional and cognitive dimensions. Another scholar seeks to draw a distinction between the cognitive dimension of engagement and the behavioral aspect of engagement (Carreras, 2016). According to Carreras, the rationale



behind this distinction is that the cognitive element of political engagement represents a citizen's psychological attachment to the political system, affiliation with a political party, political interest, and whether they seek political information. Active political engagement, on the other hand, denotes a behavioral element that includes actions, such as attending political party meetings, contacting politicians, or participating in town public meetings (Carreras, 2016). These studies inform us that apart from focusing on people's political participation behaviorally, where such actions as voting or party membership are easily discernible or observable, we should not dismiss the psychological dimension of people's political engagement as people's emotions and cognition equally represent a form of engagement in politics.

Over the years, significant studies and developments on political engagement and political participation have contributed to our understanding of what types of actions, activities, or behaviors qualify as engaging or participating in the political realm. Conventional methods of engagement or participation, such as voting in elections, joining a political party, running for office, and contacting public officials continue to be the common and widely recognized forms of engagement or participation in the discipline. Unconventional forms of engagement or participation, namely demonstrating, protesting, boycotting, volunteering, and engaging in social activities gradually received recognition as ways for people to engage politically. Citizens' engagement or participation in politics, for adults and young people alike, not only involves an active participatory behavior, but also encompasses a cognitive state or process. People's interests in politics, attention to politics, knowledge about politics, or feelings about politics, all equally qualify as a form of political engagement. This demonstrates that besides being behaviorally engaged in politics, one could be cognitively or emotionally engaged in politics.

### **2.3 Why do Young People Turn Away from Politics?**

The disengagement paradigm underlines the argument with empirical findings that young people are disengaged from politics. Researchers have put forward a repertoire of explanations highlighting why young people frequently display low levels of political engagement. Some scholars have claimed that young people do not vote, are not inclined to join political parties, and display generally low levels of political interests (Cross & Young, 2008; Henn & Foard, 2014; Hooghe et al., 2004; Fieldhouse et al., 2007; Kimberlee, 2002; Quaranta, 2016; Sloam, 2013). One line of research explores young people's attitudes and emotions towards politics. According to this paradigm, young people are frustrated with the political system, particularly the process of elections (Henn & Foard, 2014). Their disappointment with and lack of confidence in elected officials and political parties who are only interested in people's votes and not in their opinions, further dampen any interests young people have in engaging in politics (Henn, Weinstein, & Wring, 2002; Mair, 2013; Warren, 2019). A study on young people's attitudes towards politics and political participation across the United Kingdom revealed that British youth often narrate a struggle for recognition, vividly describing how they were stereotyped as being incapable of having or expressing an opinion about important matters (Bright et al., 2018). Several studies have also found that young people increasingly distrust the government as they feel that their voices are not heard and that they do not matter (Norris, 2011; Pharr & Putnam, 2000; Warren, 2019; White et al., 2000). Young people equally claim that politicians are not inspiring them to participate in politics (Warren, 2019). Correspondingly, young people view politics negatively in which they perceive politics as being disconnected with their lives (Bhavnani, 1991; White et al., 2000).

In addition to studies that revealed young people's attitudes or emotions as the reasons why they have turned away from engaging in politics, other studies maintained the lack of knowledge on political matters among young people as the reason behind their political disengagement. For example, in an extensive study of young Australians, Print and colleagues (2004) found that approximately one in two high-school students surveyed expressed that they did not have sufficient knowledge of political issues, political parties, and the general knowledge to vote. Research that compared young people's political participation with that of the older generation concluded that young people tend to have less interest, involvement, or knowledge of traditional party politics (Bennet, 2007; Furlong & Cartmel, 2006). Besides displaying a lack of political knowledge, Quintelier (2007) argued that young people are less concerned with politics and do not participate in social or political activities. Some scholars found voting in elections and declining membership in political parties as indicators of young people's political disengagement (Cross & Young, 2008; Fieldhouse et al., 2007; Heath & Park, 1997; Hooghe et al., 2004; Jowell & Park, 1998; Kimberlee, 2002; Parry et al., 1992). Likewise, further studies revealed that as the rate of young people voting in elections decreased, so did their level of membership in political parties (Cross & Young, 2008; Fieldhouse et al., 2007; Hooghe et al., 2004; Kimberlee, 2002). While these studies associated young people's political disengagement with their lack of political knowledge or interest, a study conducted by Bessant (2004) revealed discriminatory practices that often marginalized young Australians, thereby creating barriers for them to engage in politics.

The debate surrounding young people's political disengagement have revealed the myriad of reasons why many young people have turned away from engaging in politics over the years. These reasons ranged from how they feel or think about politics to their lack of concern or

proper knowledge in politics to the discriminatory policies in place that have created barriers for them to engage meaningfully in politics. Norris (2004) articulated it well by reasoning that the conventional emphasis on citizenship activities that are intended for influencing elections, government's decisions, and public policy-making process in a country appears to be narrow. Following from this logic, arguably, young people could be understanding political engagement differently from the previous generations and thinking to themselves that how their parents and grandparents think about political engagement might not be working that well for them today. Specifically, many of today's young people are turning to digital technology to find their voices, discover their place or sense of purpose, and construct their identities in an adult-dominated world. Hence, as young people's political engagement continues to be vital to the future functioning of our political systems, it becomes increasingly critical to formulate research agendas where we listen to the voices of today's young people, thus allowing us to gain deeper insights into how they understand politics and political engagement. Such understanding could potentially help policymakers to come up with feasible means and to design strategies that would support young people's engagement in meaningful ways.

## **2.4 Drawbacks in the Study of Young People's Political Engagement**

The paradigm for citizens' political participation or political engagement have been firmly established within the discipline. Correspondingly, an active citizen is seen as an individual who displays visible mainstream participatory behavior, such as voting in elections, joining a political party, assisting in political campaigns, or running for office (Loader et al., 2014). In the previous discussion on political participation and political engagement, conventional methods of engagement or participation continue to be the common and widely

recognized forms of engaging or participating in politics. In other words, a *dutiful* citizens' political involvement falls under the domain of the conventional form of participation or engagement.

Considering the broad acceptance on the conventional form of political participation or engagement as a representation of an individual's *active* citizenship in a given society, research on young people's political participation or engagement naturally considers their voting behavior (Bean, 2007; Edwards et al., 2006; Print et al., 2004; Saha & Edwards, 2007) or their membership in political parties (Leighley, 1994) as depicting their active and meaningful participatory behaviors in politics. However, this conventional image of how young people *should* actively engage or participate in politics presents several drawbacks. First and foremost, how one should actively or meaningfully engage or participate in politics has been quite narrowly defined. As Farthing (2010) argued, the accusation towards young people's low levels of political engagement is centered on the older generation's definition of what constitutes political participation. Consequently, young people's political disengagement has been characterized by their "unwillingness to obey the law, to play by the rules, or to pay for the needs of others" (Mulgan & Wilkinson, 1997, p. 218). Research conducted by Gilliam and Bales (2001) found that media tends to frame young people as a group associated with incidents relating to sexuality and risk-taking. Such critiques seemingly portray young people as destructive, reckless, and cavalier. Conceptualizing political participation narrowly according to an adult-centric standard, conveniently results in a blanket generalization of young people's characters, potentially resulting in a tendency to fault young people's characters or attitudes for their lack of political or civic engagement.

A blanket generalization of young people's characters or attitudes sometimes results in an unconscious overlook of the dramatic changes that young people have undergone today.

Exposure to more education is one aspect. The latest data compiled by UNESCO Institute for Statistics on the global literacy rate of youth in 2019 was an astonishing 91.73%.<sup>2</sup> What this possibly indicates is that education can empower and equip young people with the “skills and information that could raise their expectations” (Atal, 2005, p. 13) on many things. This is evident by the rise of youth activism around the world with young activists, such as Greta Thunberg, Joshua Wong, Malala Yousafzai, Manu Gaspar, Weng Yu Ching, and Ye Wai Phyong all making headlines for their persistence and tireless efforts in voicing or fighting for causes like climate justice, democracy, educational rights for girls and women, economic and political structural changes, LGBTQ rights, and freedom of speech. The global rise of youth activism even prompted University World News, which is an online publication reporting on global higher education news and developments, to initiate a Special Report that investigates student movements and issues raised by young people.<sup>3</sup> Despite these incredible evidence attesting to young people's civic or political engagement globally, however, considering that having an education has become something so commonplace or ordinary in most societies today, the power and impact of education could easily slip people's minds. Another dramatic change young people have experienced is that they are growing up in an extremely globalized world. A world where information is fluid and within reach in a matter of seconds. A world experiencing continuous transformations due to technological innovations and advancements. A world that is constantly witnessing an integration of global cultures, customs, and norms. Following this logic,

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<sup>2</sup> The World Bank. (2020). *Literacy rate, youth total (% of people ages 15-24)* [Data set]. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.1524.LT.ZS?end=2019&start=1970&view=chart>

<sup>3</sup> University World News. (n.d.). *Student Activism and Issues*. Retrieved August 26, 2021, from <https://www.universityworldnews.com/special-report.php?publication=global&report=StudentActivism>

young people are growing up in a world very different than the ones their parents and grandparents grew up in (Arnett, 2002; Schlegel, 2001). As such, it would be unfair to subject young people to the same approach, standards, or expectations as the previous generations.

Having a narrow definition and adult-centric benchmark of what actions or behaviors qualify as political engagement or participation leads to another drawback, where other methods of political engagement or participation beyond the conventional form – such as boycotting, holding demonstrations or sit-ins, and protesting – often receive negative undertones or are frowned upon by society. This can be seen in the classic study of political action by Barnes and Kasse in the 70s, whereby “protest” was defined as the willingness of citizens to engage in dissent, participate in unofficial strikes, boycotting, petitioning, occupying buildings, mass demonstrating, and performing acts that are *violent* in nature. The 2014 Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, for example, which saw more than 800,000 people participating in a pro-democracy movement ‘Occupy Central’, with the hopes of pressuring Beijing into allowing Hong Kongers to choose their own Chief Executive by 2017, was coined as an act of civil disobedience by the Chinese government (Bhatia, 2015; Kaiman, 2014). Such unconventional forms of engagement or participation are equally seen as a disruption to the day-to-day life of a society (Piven & Cloward, 1977; Taylor & Van dyke, 2004). Why would the act of voting or joining a political party be regarded as conventional but collective demonstration or joining a protest (though generally accepted within the research community as ways to express one’s voice, opposition, or grievances) be deemed as an act of rebellion?

Another limitation within the literature relates to the lack of understanding as to how young people comprehend what engaging in politics truly means to them and how they see their opportunities for meaningful political engagement. Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart provided

us with the most extensive argument on how the processes of cultural change and globalization have further stretched the scope of and blur the distinction as to what types of activities fall within or outside the domain of the strictly “political” per se. Consequently, the older and narrow focus on citizenship participation, particularly in the democratic process, such as voting in elections or joining a political party, seems inadequate to capture political engagement or participation in today’s context. Overlooking the voice of young people in this regard likewise discounts the *real* challenges that young people encounter while trying to engage in politics, especially in adult-dominated societies. Sometimes, we fail to realize or notice that young people are often excluded from the social processes (White & Wyn, 2004, pp. 93-95), especially when we conveniently assume that progress in society has afforded everyone the opportunity to improve one’s life chances. Even in a democratic polity like Australia, Bessant (2004) successfully uncovered discriminatory practices that often marginalized young Australians, thereby creating barriers for them to engage in politics. In this regard, it would be unfair to evaluate young people’s political engagement without a deeper and meaningful understanding of how they see their opportunities for engagement, especially when viable structures, processes, or strategies for engagement in politics are not only inaccessible to them, but also made somewhat impossible. How could young people try to have “a voice” if the very democratic process that promises to give them a voice is *the* same process that limits their means to voice? How could we expect young people to engage politically when their voices are being silenced or ignored? Instead of clinging to a rigid concept of political engagement or participation, more attention or recognition should be given to young people’s ability to innovate, experiment, reform, invent, or create new ways to engage politically. Consequently, this would allow us to broaden our understanding of what being politically engaged truly means to these young people. Through this



way, policymakers and governments can design effective policies that will gradually support young people's political engagement and greatly enhanced their citizenship engagement.

## 2.5 Conclusion

Over the decades, studies within the field have demonstrated that there are many ways that people can engage in politics. Individuals can engage in politics through participatory behaviors, such as voting, joining a political party, contacting public officials, or running for office. At the same time, an individual could be cognitively or emotionally engaged in politics by paying attention to politics, having knowledge about politics, or simply showing interests in politics. As political engagement and political participation continue to experience transformation and evolution, the conventional definitions characterizing political engagement or participation can no longer fully or adequately capture people's engagement in today's context, particularly young people's form of engagement. Following this logic, political engagement or participation cannot be defined in a simple way or forced fit into a frame with strict requirements. Therefore, we should not gauge young people's political engagement through a narrow definition or the lens of the previous generations, but rather seek a better understanding of how young people understand political engagement in today's context and how they view their opportunities to engage meaningfully in politics. In this way, we can know how to *rightly* support young people's continued engagement in politics.

### 3 DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY: AN INFRASTRUCTURE EMPOWERING YOUNG PEOPLE'S POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

*“Youth are transforming our world through the power of information and communication technologies”<sup>4</sup> (Hamadoun Touré, ITU Secretary-General)*

#### 3.1 Chapter Introduction

Digital technology has become an integral and indispensable part of our lives in today's contemporary world. Digital technology has transformed the ways how people communicate, socialize, live, work, study, and learn. Illustrating this premise, DataReportal's Simon Kemp revealed in the Digital 2021 April Global Statshot Report that the total number of global Internet users stood at an astonishing figure of 4.72 billion just in April of 2021 alone, while 5.22 billion people use a mobile phone today. Of all the groups, young people have been the most ardent and fervent users of digital technology. This group, also identified as “digital natives,”<sup>5</sup> was the most active users of ICTs (Information and Communication Technology) according to the 2013 annual report conducted by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU).<sup>6</sup> In a similar study, the latest report by ITU's “Measuring digital development: Facts and figures 2020” revealed that nearly 70% of the world's young people are using the Internet. Given the ubiquitous nature and growing use of ICTs among people, particularly among today's young people, to what extent has digital technology transformed political engagement? Has the evolution and maturation of digital technology afforded young people with greater opportunities to engage in political matters? This chapter begins by reviewing some of the discourse surrounding the relationship between digital

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<sup>4</sup> Pfanner, E. (2013, October 21). *The Growing Tribe of Digital Natives*. Deccan Herald. <https://www.deccanherald.com/archives/cyber-space/starting-a-podcast-revolution-731152.html>

<sup>5</sup> Marc Prensky in 2001 coined the term digital native to characterize a generation of people who grew up in the digital age of computers and internet.

<sup>6</sup> The 2013 annual report conducted by the International Telecommunication Union researched on key ICT developments and tracked the cost and affordability of ICT services.

technology and politics. Following this, the chapter looks at how the nature and characteristics of the current Web 2.0-based technology have helped to empower young people's political engagement today. The discussion continues by exploring some of the skepticisms concerning the use of digital technology for political engagement. Considering existing debates on using digital technology for political engagement, the chapter concludes with a discussion on the shortcomings of the concerns raised and a proposed research direction into understanding the significance of digital technology on young people's political engagement.

### **3.2 Digital Technology and Politics in Context**

The role and potential of digital technology in bringing changes and driving improvements around the world have generated vibrant discourse and research among scholars, policymakers, politicians, and industry leaders. Specifically, the dynamism of the Internet-based technologies has drawn a significant amount of attention considering its role in furnishing Internet users with the space to discuss or share information on almost anything and everything, freely and openly (Grossman, 1995; Rheingold, 1993). Correspondingly, studies began to associate the role of digital technology in shaping sociopolitical environments and cultural values (Winner, 1998) and in providing people with the means to overcome economic and political challenges (Ferdinand, 2000). More significantly, the exponential growth, innovation, and development of digital technologies continue to provide people with far greater access to information. To further elaborate on this point, the Internet has enabled people to become creators, primary subjects, and active participants instead of passive spectators or consumers (Benkler, 2006). Accordingly, "a decentralised and unregulated internet was assumed a

technology that promoted freedom of speech, personal expression and the free exchange of political discourse among open societies” (Chen & Stilinovic, 2020, p. 2).

The increasing use of digital technology by people across the world – from ordinary citizens to activists to politicians – has attracted growing scholarly research on the relationship between digital technology and politics, and the potential of digital technology to help revitalize citizens’ interests to engage in politics. In the early 2000s, scholars started observing that in many countries, the Internet has gradually replaced newspapers and television as the main source of political information, especially for young people (De Zúñiga et al., 2009; Johnson & Kaye, 2003; Norris, 2002; Tolbert & McNeal, 2003). Further studies into the causal relationship between the increasing use of the Internet and political engagement revealed that online forms of electoral campaigning (Albrecht et al., 2007; Chadwick, 2006) and using the Internet to communicate political information (Lipton, 2009) have a positive effect on political engagement. Specifically, studies have found that the widespread use of the Internet and mobile technologies made substantial impact on electoral campaigns (Cornfield, 2005; Hara, 2008; Smith & Rainie, 2008). Findings from Smith and Rainie (2008) illustrate this point. Their study revealed that almost half of the American population used the Internet to keep abreast with political affairs. As new digital technologies and practices continue to spread, scholars began to recognize the growing significance of the Internet. Not only is the Internet an important tool to mobilize people to act or to generate dialogues between groups (Ferguson & Austin, 2007), but also valuable for political activists as it helps them to reduce the costs of organizing and mobilizing people and provides new ways to recruit potential activists (Earl & Kimport, 2011; Juris, 2008).

A slew of studies also explored the notion of “digital government” by looking at how government agencies can integrate and practice ICTs to improve citizens’ access to public

services, information, and policies. However, some of these studies researching on “e-government” projects in Europe and Asia reported poor digital practices and integration throughout the nation’s public sectors (Karim & Khalid, 2003; Kubicek et al., 2003; Yong, 2003). Accordingly, advocates of the idea of “digital government” argued that government agencies must modernize and implement a more decentralized system (Fountain, 2004), practice open-source information using Wikipedia as a template to democratize government decision-making (Noveck, 2009), and transition to ‘m-government’ in which government sectors utilize mobile technologies to increase citizens’ access to public services (Alrazooqi & De Silva, 2010; Kuschchu & Kuscu, 2003; Narayan, 2007). Following the premise of “digital government,” the concept of “digital democracy” began to acquire currency. Digital democracy or “e-democracy” is associated with Jürgen Habermas’s idea of a public sphere in which a public sphere is defined as “an arena...dedicated to rational debate and...is accessible to entry and open to inspection by the citizenry” (Webster, 1995, as cited in Postill, 2012, p. 166). In short, the concept of digital democracy denotes a way for citizens to become active participants in their engagement with elected representatives and the state (Chen & Stilinovic, 2020; Clift, 2004).

Additionally, scholars saw integrating digital technology with politics as a new or progressive approach to participatory democracy, mobilization, and civic engagement (Carty, 2010), where the low-barrier-to-entry participatory setting and convenience of using digital technology can potentially empower the people (Chadwick, 2008). One recent example was how the Taiwanese government utilized digital technology to respond to the burgeoning COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The Taiwanese government set up a decentralized system that conferred legitimacy on useful initiatives and information provided by ordinary citizens (Yen et al., 2020). Additionally, ordinary citizens and government officials were able to monitor news and

information about COVID-19 on the Internet, while “civic hackers” were encouraged to build tools in collaboration with the Taiwanese government to combat misinformation of the virus, such as live infection map tracking and bots (Yen et al., 2020). These collaborative efforts between the Taiwanese government and ordinary citizens, aided by the power of digital innovation, helped the small island nation to control the spread of Coronavirus.

The progressive development of ICTs and the growing use of digital technology by people in today’s contemporary world have contributed to a vibrant research program exploring the relationship between digital technology and politics. Studies have found that the emergence of digital technology has given new meanings to political engagement, despite instances of poor digital practices and integration by certain government sectors. In practicing the notion of “digital democracy,” governments started leveraging the power of digital technology that enables the people to gain easy access to public services and conveniently interact with government bureaucracies. Additionally, potential candidates cleverly leveraged the wide use of Internet and mobile technologies among the people to help with their electoral campaigns. As digital technology continues to experience unprecedented evolution, its impact and role on the attitudes and behaviors of political actors of all kinds will be ever more prominent. It is foreseeable that the research agenda on digital politics will continue to contribute to a thriving and robust discourse not only within the field of political science but also in other disciplines.

### **3.3 Web 2.0 Technology: Empowering Young People’s Political Engagement**

As digital technology continues to mature and develop, this digital evolution has enabled immeasurable possibilities to transpire. From the early Web 1.0-based technologies, where users were consumers of content and information was mostly static, the current Web 2.0 permits users

to use available online tools and platforms to generate content, share their perspectives or experiences, and collaborate with each other in an online community. As O'Reilly (2005) aptly defined it:

*Web 2.0 is the network as platform, spanning all connected devices; Web 2.0 applications are those that make the most of the intrinsic advantages of that platform: delivering software as a continually-updated service that gets better the more people use it, consuming and remixing data from multiple sources, including individual users, while providing their own data and services in a form that allows remixing by others, creating network effects through an "architecture of participation", and going beyond the page metaphor of Web 1.0 to deliver rich user experiences.*

In short, the current Web 2.0 environment has furnished many people with a convenient tool to connect, socialize, and network with people globally, access information effortlessly, stream live videos, listen to music, shop, collaborate, study, and even learn new skills in our modern-day world. Of all the groups, young people have been the most fervent users of digital technology. These digital natives represent a generation heavily influenced by the Internet and other modern forms of digital innovations, such as smartphones, computers, tablets, social media, voice assistant programs, virtual reality, augmented reality, and machine learning. It is not hard to imagine that young people today grew up in a world very much different from the ones their parents and grandparents grew up in.

Growing up in a Web 2.0-based technology world has, undoubtedly, transformed today's generation of digital natives into a generation that is more culturally, racially, ethnically, socially, and intellectually diverse than any previous generations. As the most fervent users of digital technology, it should come as no surprise if many of today's young people would

consider technology as an integral and necessary, perhaps even an inseparable, part of their lives. Accordingly, observations of social and political events across the globe would illustrate how digital technology increasingly serve as an important instrument empowering young people to engage for political or social matters. On January 25 of 2011, the power of Facebook and Twitter hashtag “#jan25” successfully mobilized massive crowds of young Egyptians across Egypt to call for the removal of President Hosni Mubarak. In December of 2011, hundreds of young netizens and activists worked together through blog postings, videos, and online forum discussions to protest the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) in the United States. The electronic advocacy campaign was successful, and the bill was eventually shelved.

During the 2014 Umbrella Movement, young Hong Kong protesters used the chat messaging app “WhatsApp” to quickly disseminate information about the demonstrations and to inform other fellow protesters about police whereabouts (Chen et al., 2014). The emergence of the audio conversation app “Clubhouse” saw thousands of young Chinese iPhone users flocked to this audio-chat app in January of 2021 to participate in uncensored, interactive audio conversations about taboo topics, such as detention camps in Xinjiang, cross-strait relations with Taiwan, and pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong. The popular hashtag “#MilkTeaAlliance,” which burst onto the Internet scene in 2020 due to a social media squabble between patriotic Chinese netizens and two Thai actors, quickly became a source of transnational solidarity for young people across Asia fighting for democratic reforms. Considering the growing intimidation and arrests of activists, students, and protesters in Myanmar this year, young activists took to Facebook as a channel to share counter-propaganda tactics and slogans. While not all of these events saw success in structural reforms or policy changes that these young people have hoped for, it is without question that digital technology has increasingly become an indispensable



infrastructure for young people to engage politically or civically, independently as well as collectively.

Consequently, young people's increasing use of digital technology for political or civic engagement has sparked growing scholarly debates and studies on the relationship between digital technology and youth political engagement. Research by Cohen and Kahne (2012) found that 16% of young Americans aged 15 to 25 commented on a news story or blog post about a political campaign, candidate, or issue and 17% forwarded or posted someone else's political commentary. A survey conducted by Wike and Castillo (2018) across 14 countries revealed that young people aged 18 to 29 are more likely to participate in online political discussions compared to older adults. Specifically, their study discovered that social networking sites users were more likely to take political action. Several studies revealed that during the 2008 U.S. presidential election, the unprecedented use of social media by Obama's campaign not only cause many young Americans to actively campaign for Obama (Ganz, 2009; Talbot, 2008), but also generated high voter turnouts among young Blacks and Latinos (Talbot, 2008). In a similar vein, findings from a study conducted by Smith and Rainie (2008) further confirmed that younger voters were more likely to use the Internet and mobile technologies during the 2008 U.S. presidential election. The successful campaign against the Stop Online Privacy Act/Protect Intellectual Property Act (SOPA/PIPA), which resulted in the bill being shelved, prompted an exploratory case study on electronic advocacy and lobbying tactics used by young activists and netizens (Brainard & Augeri, 2018). According to Brainard and Augeri (2018), these young activists leveraged the viral nature of the Internet to spread ideas and post information to spread awareness among ordinary consumers and motivate them to sign online petitions, send emails to Congress, and call their representative or senator to oppose the bill.

Scholars attributed the relatively low-barrier-to-entry participatory setting and low participation costs of using digital technology, such as the Internet and mobile phones, as reasons for young people's increasing digital participatory behavior (Bimber, 2003; Colombo et al., 2012; Negroponte, 1995). For Calenda and Mosca (2007), young people turn to online participation because they consider the Internet as a more appropriate channel to discuss various political issues and express more progressive and creative forms of communication and participation. Following this argument, Gerodimos and Ward (2007) reasoned that the traditional conceptualization of political participation could be too narrow, resulting in a tendency to overlook other forms of engagement undertaken by young people that could be regarded as political. In addition, Colombo and colleagues (2012) reasoned that the horizontal and interactive nature of the Internet could potentially "foster feelings of political efficacy and enhance engaged citizenship" (p. 104). This line of reasoning results from studies that have found that establishing horizontal, nonhierarchical relationships at school or workplace, which permit a relatively high degree of autonomy and involvement in decision-making, make people feel that they are more able to exert influence (Greenberg, 1986; Greenberg et al., 1996; Jian & Jeffres, 2008; Mason, 1982; Milbrath & Goel, 1977; Peterson, 1992; Torney-Purta, 2004; Sobel, 1993). Therefore, the horizontal, nonhierarchical nature of the Internet potentially makes young people feel that they have the capacity to influence politics when they see themselves *doing* politics, as they could openly and freely engage in vibrant discussions and interact with others on political matters. The interactive nature of the Internet, especially with the current Web 2.0 environment that is geared towards providing Internet users with an interactive user experience, allows Internet users to be active producers of information, collaborate with others, share their perspectives, and interact with one other. With these features, many of today's young Internet users would feel that they

possess a degree of *autonomy* and *control* over their ability to engage in politics and their opportunities for engagement are not restricted as they have different tools available at their disposal.

Castells' (2012) declaration that "Occupy Wall Street was born on the Internet, diffused by the Internet" (p. 168), eloquently sums up the relationship between digital technology and young people's political engagement. Today's young people are no longer passive recipients of whatever societies offer them or tell them to do. Equally, they are no longer passive consumers of information. The continuous maturation of digital technology and the current Web 2.0 environment have afforded many of today's young people with a space for free speech, self-expression, collective dialogues, collaboration, and exchanging diverse viewpoints on political and social matters on a global scale. Young people have taken to the digital space to raise awareness on issues that they care or matter to them. They are increasingly using digital technology to collaborate with people from around the world for social or political changes. Digital technology has transformed young people into innovative and creative individuals, proactively seeking opportunities to shape today's world for a better and progressive tomorrow.

### **3.4 Do You Hear Young People Speak? Yes, With Clicks, Likes, and Posts**

The innovation of information technology and arrival of Social Networking Sites (SNS), such as Facebook, Instagram, MySpace, Twitter, Weibo, and YouTube, have dramatically transformed how people consume, spread, and produce information. Previous studies on online communities found several factors that explained the growing use of SNS among people. Studies reported that people are motivated to use SNS because of shared interests or a sense of shared identity, experiences and needs, or strong social feelings of belonging (Preece, 2000; Rheingold,

1993, 2000; Waterson, 2006). SNS also enable users to have access to a large online user population and include the function of “user visibility” where SNS users are able to see who the other users are within the same online community (Diker, 2004; Kim, 2000). The function of feedback channels further allows SNS users to engage in such behaviors as commenting on news or post from other users, along with posting, sharing, forwarding, or retweeting all sorts of information, from news articles to photos to video clips (Diker, 2004; Kim, 2000). Another factor is the easy access and usability of SNS (Diker, 2004; Kim, 2000). This feature of the SNS enables users to effortlessly access all kinds of information with ease through a click of a button, by swiping their phones or tablets, or using voice-controlled intelligent personal assistants (for example, Siri, Google Assistant, Alexa, or Cortana). The low-barrier-to-entering these online sites or communities have also provided people the opportunity to freely and openly communicate and associate with one another (Diker, 2004; Kim, 2000; Richardson & Hessey, 2009), anywhere and anytime. The emergence of SNS has created a horizontal and decentralized environment of producing and consuming information and facilitated the rapid dissemination of information.

Protests, social movements, and political movements in recent years, such as the Arab Spring, the Occupy Movement, the Indignados in Spain and Greece, the 2014 Hong Kong Umbrella Revolution, Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, #MilkTeaAlliance, and Stop Asian Hate, attest to the significant role of social media websites in expanding their messages, capturing global attention to address contemporary issues, raising public awareness about their circumstances, and gaining support for their causes across the world. Specifically, the giant social media platform Facebook has received a burst of academic studies from various perspectives. These studies range from exploring the impact of using Facebook on social capital

(Steinfeld et al., 2009), health communications and promotions (Avery et al., 2010; Buis, 2011; Liang & Scammon, 2011; Schalchlin, 2009), education (Mazman & Usluel, 2010; Roblyer et al., 2010), and cultural values (Al Omoush et al., 2012) to investigating the power of Facebook in enabling people to collaborate and share information to fight the spread of HIV (Jaganath et al., 2012) and allowing people to express political views (Conroy et al., 2012). Research on activism also revealed how SNS facilitated activists in their causes. One study on activism revealed that activists recognize the power of social media, such as Facebook, in helping people to be more active politically and socially, as well as in promoting dialogues (Harp et al., 2012). Ibrahim (2019) explored how Egyptian women used online blogs and created the “#EndSH” hashtag, and shared tweets, particularly during the End Sexual Harassment campaign in Egypt, to raise awareness on sexual harassment, speak out against sexual harassment, and mobilize society to advocate against sexual harassment. In her study, Ibrahim (2019) argued that these digital spaces have provided these women with a platform to “share their own personal views and explain their feelings and struggles” (p. 178). Overall, she argued that social media and online technology have empowered Egyptian women by providing them a platform to raise society’s awareness on the gravity of the problem of sexual harassment that is largely ignored in Egyptian society.

Amidst criticisms against young people’s political disengagement and political apathy, the function of social media as a new medium moving young people to political engagement began to acquire significant attention, subsequently generating thriving scholarly debates and a flurry of research across disciplines. In refuting the accusation that young people are politically apathetic and increasingly failing their duty to engage in political or civic matters, Loader and colleagues (2014) acknowledged the potential role of social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, in influencing young people’s political and civic engagements. In their

article, Loader and colleagues (2014) described today's young people as *networked young citizen* as they observed that young people are far less likely to become members of political or civic organizations (p. 145). Instead, they argued that today's young people are inclined to participate in horizontal or non-hierarchical networks and their "social relations are formed through a social media networked environment" (Loader et al., p. 145). This simply means that the decentralized and non-hierarchical nature of SNS has opened an alternative avenue for young people to engage in politics by creating a low-barrier-to-entry participatory setting. Consequently, young people could share their thoughts and opinions and give comments on political matters to a far greater audience in comparison to traditional forms of engagement, such as becoming a member of a political party, whereby political parties could be reluctant to give young people a voice in political affairs, especially policy recommendations that the older party members deem as potentially radical.

More and more young people today are treating SNS as "a place for social interaction where they can share creations, tell stories, and interact with others" (Lenhart et al., 2007). The ability of social media to serve as a place for social interaction and to form social relations for young people further provide these tech-savvy generation the opportunity to connect with like-minded individuals from all over the world. This is because, like the Internet, social media also serves the role of connecting people from different geographical locations or socioeconomic backgrounds. Previous studies have revealed that belonging to an online network or community not only has a positive impact on interpersonal trust (Kobayashi et al., 2006), but also develops a sense of group consciousness that potentially improves people's engagement as citizens, internal political efficacy, and interest in politics (Andersen, 2005; Gurin & Epps, 1975; Gurin et al., 1989). For instance, treating or using SNS as a podium to interact or build connections has

enabled young protesters or activists across Asia fighting for democratic reforms and standing up to authoritarian regimes to find solidarity and support for each other, along with seeking inspiration and borrowing ideas from each other. Demonstrating this premise is the three-finger salute that stems from the popular “Hunger Games” movie franchise that was first used by Thai students seeking reforms to the Thai monarchy and was subsequently adopted by young pro-democracy campaigners in Hong Kong and young protesters in Myanmar.

SNS has given rise to a new direction for young people to engage in political matters. Their unique features have allowed young people greater convenience to connect, obtain information, create dialogues, build social relations, collaborate, and produce personal contents. Social media platforms have given them a podium for their voices and to share and discuss diverse political viewpoints freely and openly with each other. The growing social and political movements happening online and offline attest to how today’s young people leverage their tech savviness and expertise in using digital technologies to invent and innovate creative ways for civic or political engagement.

### **3.5 Digital Technology: Detrimental to Political Efficacy**

Discourses on whether digital technology positively impacts political participation and if digital engagement fits into the existing concept of political engagement continue to be an ongoing and vibrant debate (Dayican, 2014; Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013; Halupka, 2014; Kristofferson et al., 2014). Several scholars have demonstrated optimism on the ability of digital technology, such as the Internet and social media websites, to raise offline or conventional methods of political participation (Cho et al., 2009; Mossberger et al., 2008; Pickard, 2018; Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009; Shah et al., 2005; Xenos & Moy, 2007), mobilize people to

participate in conventional forms of political participation through the rapid dissemination of information on political activities and events (Ayres, 1999; Bennett et al., 2008), increase political knowledge (Xenos & Moy, 2007), stimulate political discussions (Mossberger et al., 2008; Shah et al., 2001), and foster civic engagement through social capital (Jennings & Zeitner, 2003; Norris, 2001; Shah et al., 2001; Valenzuela et al., 2009). Others, however, have expressed doubts on the positive influence or effect of digital technology on political engagement.

The most common criticism that has emerged against the use of digital technology for civic or political engagement is the behavior of “slacktivism.” Consumer and marketing studies scholars define slacktivism as an individual’s willingness to perform a relatively costless display of support for a social cause, with an accompanying lack of willingness to devote significant effort to bring about meaningful change (Davis, 2011; Kristofferson et al., 2014; Morozov, 2009). Critics apportion the prevalence of this “slacktivist” behavior among consumers, especially among young people, to the emergence and widespread use of the Internet, SNS, and mobile technologies. They argued that the presence of social media has made it increasingly easy for people to perform small token acts of support for certain causes without subsequently engaging in meaningful contributions to the cause (Khan & Dhar, 2006, 2007; Kristofferson et al., 2014; Mazar & Zhong, 2011; Monin & Miller, 2001; Morozov, 2009). Critics of digital engagement further contended that people can simply engage in such behaviors as signing a petition, wearing a bracelet or pin, joining a page on Facebook, or liking a post on social media websites without much effort (Kristofferson et al., 2014). According to Kristofferson and colleagues (2014), these behaviors are known as “token support” because they allow people to affiliate with a cause by merely showing their support to themselves or others with very little effort or cost (p. 1150). On the other hand, they explained that “meaningful support” denotes



behaviors that require a degree of effort or significant cost in making “tangible contributions” to a particular cause, for instance donating money or volunteering one’s time and skills. The argument here is that an individual’s behavior of performing token support may not necessarily lead to a greater prospect of engaging in meaningful support or contributions for a cause (Morozov, 2009). As such, the claim is that online participation is an illusion of being politically engaged with no impact on real-life political outcomes but only for the purpose of making people feel good about themselves (Morozov, 2009).

Another concern raised towards digital engagement is the issues of accountability. The argument here is that digital technology, particularly social networking sites or online communities, lack the capability to hold users or members accountable since they do not necessarily meet face to face and can choose to remain anonymous, including subscribing to multiple or even fake identities (Kolko & Reid, 1998; Nie & Erbring, 2000). Consequently, users who choose to keep their anonymity or maintain multiple identities are unlikely to make meaningful contributions, potentially upsetting any prospect for positive political engagement (Kolko & Reid, 1998). Scholars have expressed concerns that anonymity may further result in distrust (Graber 1996; Norris, 2001; Prior, 2007). Furthermore, the nature of the Internet in allowing people to gather, network, or socialize online may lack the ability to foster physical contact among people or require commitment from people (Putnam, 2000). The Internet is also regarded as detrimental to civic and political engagement as people use it mainly for entertainment or leisure purposes (Kavanaugh & Patterson, 2001; Putnam, 2000, 2002), thereby occupying most of people’s time for real-life civic or social activities (Putnam, 1995, 2000). While Internet users can no doubt access vast amount of information conveniently and freely on the Internet, however, political information available online that might be inaccurate or difficult

to handle could potentially thwart people's interests in politics (Graber 1996; Norris, 2001; Prior, 2007). This situation is even more concerning when there have been rampant instances of fake news on the Internet in recent years.

Another line of critique on digital engagement is that users who are actively engaging in online activities are only doing it to make them feel good about themselves and do not necessarily engage in meaningful acts to address political issues (Hindman, 2009; Morozov, 2009; Shulman, 2004). Following this argument, some scholars maintained that the Internet does little to mobilize people towards offline participation, namely conventional forms of participation, such as voting or joining a political party (Bimber, 2001; Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002). For instance, in his study on the effect of digital information on political participation, Bimber (2001) discovered that obtaining information from the Internet did not increase the likelihood of offline participation. In a similar research agenda, other studies also found weak links between the impact of the Internet on offline political participation (Jennings & Zeitner, 2003; Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002). Furthermore, it is argued that SNS act as an alternative agency for young people who are already interested in politics or engaged in politics (Bimber, 1999; Bonfadelli, 2002; DiMaggio et al., 2004; Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2004; Krueger, 2002; Norris, 2001; Polat, 2005; Weber et al., 2003). As such, SNS could hardly be considered as a tool capable of mobilizing a new audience or passive individuals to become engaged in institution-oriented activities or political expression (Keating & Melis, 2017), thereby contradicting the suggestion that the Internet could mobilize politically inactive individuals (Barber, 2001; Delli Carpini, 2000; Krueger, 2002; Ward, et al., 2003; Weber et al., 2003).

Scholars equally highlighted the concern that digital technology could be a tool privileging only the more highly educated members of society or those with higher occupational

status to engage in political matters instead of affording disenfranchised youth with the opportunity to find their voices (Schlozman et al., 2010). In a similar vein, Morozov (2011) challenged the premise that Internet-based technologies and mobile technologies are capable of advancing freedom of speech and promoting democratic discourse simply because ordinary citizens can use them to share, post, comment, and generate contents freely on political matters (Carty, 2010; Chadwick, 2008; Chen & Stilinovic, 2020; Clift, 1997; Shirky, 2009). Instead, Morozov (2011) argued that authoritarian regimes like China or Iran leverage digital technology not to empower ordinary citizens but to repress them instead. Consequently, there has been increasing concern over the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) use of the Internet and social media websites as a propaganda machine to propel the Party's narratives and breed Chinese nationalism domestically and internationally.

### **3.6 Let Young People Speak to What is “Real” or “Unreal” Engagement**

As Mason (2013) observed, today's young people have leveraged digital technology to a different level, “to outwit the police, to beam their message into the newsrooms of global media, and above all to assert a cool, cutting-edge identity” (pp. 76-77). Following this premise, understanding young people's digital behavior and their increasing use of digital technology to engage in political or civic matters becomes increasingly pertinent. While concerns raised on the influence of digital technology on political engagement are fair claims, however, they do not provide an accurate representation of young people's political engagement through digital means. Specifically, critics generalize the use of digital technology to engage in political or civic matters as a mode of “slactivist” behavior without grasping the complexity of individuals' cognitive and emotive dimensions, particularly among today's young people. Labelling online

participatory behavior as “slactivism” conveniently leads critics to pigeonhole online engagement behaviors, such as liking, sharing, clicking, or posting, as “low effort activities or actions that are incapable of achieving intended goals” (Shulman, 2009; Morozov, 2009). This line of criticism stems from young people’s growing use of social media to engage in political or civic matters. Consequently, performing such acts as liking a post, retweeting a tweet, or changing of profile picture on their social media accounts to show support for a cause are easily criticized as not willing to get their hands dirty. Arguably, young people could in fact be putting in substantial amount of time, effort, and energy when using a variety of digital innovations for online political engagement.

Additionally, applying the “slacktivist” label to online engagement also dismisses young people’s creative skills and talents in innovating new or progressive ways to engage in political or civic matters. The events that unfolded in Tunisia, Egypt, Hong Kong, Thailand, and Myanmar illustrate how young people creatively use art and digital media to produce “catchy slogans, memorable graffiti, and witty videos” (Kraidy, 2016, p. 5) to express their views and support the causes they care about. It would not be fair to quickly discount “online” methods of participation as capable of achieving any meaningful outcomes or regard online engagement as low effort activities when some of the conventional “offline” forms of political participation neither demand great efforts from ordinary citizens nor effectively achieve the desired political goals all the time. Arguably, liking or sharing a post on social media could require individuals to invest more effort as they might need to read and understand what they are potentially liking or sharing, while an individual making her or his way to the polling station to vote could merely be an act done out of pressure or to simply look good. Likewise, it would not be fair to assume that individuals who engage in “offline” political behaviors, such as voting or joining a political

party, possess more political knowledge than individuals who engage in “online” actions, such as liking or sharing a post on SNS. Why would sitting in front of a computer screen in the comfort of one’s home to engage in political matters be considered effortless and meaningless, while the act of travelling to a polling station to vote or joining a political party be seen as active and meaningful political participation?

Studies on Internet-based technologies that outline the space where online activities take place as “virtual” (Boellstorff, 2010; Dirksen, 2005; Ducheneaut et al., 2010; Fanson, 2002; Gluesing, 2008; Gray & Driscoll, 1992; LeValley, 1997; Maida, 1998; Murray & Sixsmith 1999; Wasson, 2006) has resulted in the dichotomy of “virtual” and “real” (Jones, 2004) to draw a distinction between online “virtual” engagement and offline “real” participation. Such a rigid dichotomy has led to the claim that participation or activities taking place in an online environment are imagined, a form of illusion, or less than anything real with hardly any capability of making real-life political outcomes (Morozov, 2009) or meaningful contributions (Khan & Dhar, 2006, 2007; Kristofferson et al., 2014; Mazar & Zhong, 2011; Monin & Miller, 2001; Morozov, 2009). Take online education for instance. Many institutions across the globe scrambled to adapt as classes were forced to move to online instruction when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. If we were to apply the preconceived notion of “real” interaction or participation to the case of online education, then we would regard online classes as an “unreal” method of learning or mode of education incapable of making “meaningful” contributions. Furthermore, following this preconceived dichotomy of “realness” and “unreal”, has led to a propensity to regard online participation as simply a means to make people feel good about themselves (Morozov, 2009) and nothing more. Such preconceived, rigid dichotomy conveniently overlooks

how young people cleverly leverage digital innovations for political engagement, particularly in adapting to the changing political climate in their nations.

Another reason why the rigid conceptualization of what amounts to “real” or “unreal” form of political engagement continues to acquire currency is because political participation is still centered on an adult-centric standard of what qualifies as “active” or “real” political participation. However, the conventional forms political participation – epitomized by such behaviors as voting, party membership, or campaign – are no longer the only way citizens can engage in politics today. Hence, subscribing to this rigid standard of what amounts to “active” or “real” political participation easily dismisses the diversification of how today’s young people decide to engage in political matters and overlooks their perceptions towards political engagement in today’s context. Likewise, the rigid standard of engagement potentially ignores young people’s understanding of what amounts to “real” or “unreal” form of engagement. Young people, whose daily activities are very much integrated in a Web 2.0 environment, could very well regard interaction, communication, or collaboration that occurs in an online space as *not* imagined or an illusion, but a form of “active” or “real” engagement capable of making meaningful contributions. It is pertinent to acknowledge this possibility as young people continue to navigate their way through a world that is rapidly transforming and evolving. It is commonly posited that young people possess fewer resources, such as time, money, or mental energy, that are believed to be the preconditions for political engagement (Verba et al., 1995). As a consequence of lacking such resources to engage politically, it has been suggested that online participation has become the compensatory mode of engagement for young people (Keating & Melis, 2017). While it is not entirely wrong to suggest that online participation requires fewer resources, however, suggesting that the low-barrier-to-entry and low-cost participatory features

of the Internet and social media websites as the reasons for young people to turn to digital engagement might oversimplify the underlying challenges young people continue to encounter when trying to engage in politics.

Another drawback within the scholarship is the obsession with the democratizing function of Internet-based technologies. Existing scholarships appear to have a fixation on the Internet and social media websites in promoting democracy, especially in authoritarian regimes (Huang & Yip, 2012; Morozov, 2011; Schlozman et al., 2010; Shirky 2009; Sullivan, 2014). Such obsession on the role of digital technology to bring about regime change or mobilize citizens conveniently leads to the conclusions that “the influence of the Internet has been exaggerated” (Huang & Yip, 2012) when online political activities fail in their regime-change efforts, particularly in the case of China, or that the “Internet or social media does not help much to mobilize citizens” (Bimber, 2001; Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002; Chen & Stilinovic, 2019) when traditional “offline” participation rate, such as voting or party membership, barely record significant increases. To a certain extent, these pessimisms are overstated and do not represent a balanced view. Many of the conventional “offline” acts of political participation do not necessarily always achieve the desired political outcomes or goals. History has shown us that these “offline” political efforts often went through a long and arduous journey towards realizing their goals. As such, it would not be fair to expect digital technology to act as a magical formula that can produce the desired political outcomes instantaneously or further political preferences swiftly, merely because of its capacity to reach a far greater audience or ability to disseminate information rapidly on a global scale. Such expectation tends to oversimplify the diverse activities that are taking place in the cyberspace today. Moreover, most people usually consider the impact of digital technology on society’s political engagement without as much as

contemplating the possibility of how young people could shape the development of digital technology for political engagement, especially when the current Web 2.0-based technologies have tremendously increased the space for users to explore and experiment with their imagination and innovative digital skills to be producers of contents and not merely consumers of information.

Seeing that young people are the most frequent and ardent users of digital technology and are increasingly employing digital technology for political engagement, it is only fair that we hear from young people themselves to obtain a balanced view of their digital political engagement. Moving forward, a more fruitful attitude would be to take a bottom-up approach by letting young people explain how they understand their generation's use of digital technology to engage in political matters, what they perceive as "real" or "unreal" mode of engagement, their motivation whether to use or not to use digital technology for political engagement, and what forms of engagement they consider to be helpful for them to engage meaningfully in political matters. It is equally pertinent to investigate whether there are differences *within* this generation of digital natives in using digital technology to engage in political matters, especially when there is a tendency to suggest that *all* young people most certainly subscribe to online engagement. Furthermore, most studies pay heavy attention to the political behaviors between *different* generations (the older generation vs. the younger generation) rather than within today's young generation. It is hoped that policymakers and leaders could leverage this understanding to address young people's concerns and challenges, foster government-youth partnership on resolving civic and political matters, and improve young people's opportunities for political engagement. Digital technology is here to stay, and it could be foreseeable that many young



people will increasingly refine their digital skillsets in using digital technologies to engage in political or civic matters.

### **3.7 Conclusion**

As technology progressively matures and advances, people-to-people interactions will increasingly shrink spatially and temporally, and information will travel in greater speed across continents. Specifically, the emergence of digital technology, such as the Internet and social networking sites (SNS), have furnished political actors of all kinds with a new agency for political engagement. Correspondingly, the discourse concerning the relationship between digital technology and political engagement has gained currency and generated a mixed bag of scholarships among researchers. Some have expressed optimism and expectations that digital technology would increase citizens' "offline" political engagement and positively impact the functioning of democratic nations. Others, however, have raised concerns and skepticisms by highlighting that digital technology may be detrimental to the functioning of democracy and virtual engagement hardly makes any meaningful impact on political efficacy. While the impact of digital technology on political efficacy continues to be contested, it is undeniable that the emergence of the Internet and social media websites have empowered many of today's young people to come up with creative and progressive ways to make their voices heard, seek support for their causes, build solidarity, and raise awareness on pressing political or social issues. It is only fitting that we hear what young people truly think about politics and how they understand their generation's political engagement in a globalized, digital age. The flurry of student movements and youth activism worldwide are sending the message that today's young people are eager to shape the future of *their* world. Their proactive behavior in taking action, forward-

thinking attitude for a progressive world, and efforts to be proficient in their undertakings demonstrate that they are no longer passive recipients of the past but active innovators capable of setting the course for the future *they* aspire to build and have.

## 4 “GEN-PRO” – A CONSCIOUS GENERATION OF PEOPLE READY FOR OPPORTUNITIES

### 4.1 A Renewed Approach to Understanding and Conceptualizing Young People’s Attitudes and Behaviors Towards Politics and Political Engagement

Prominent scholars on globalization maintained that many young people today grew up with a global consciousness (Giddens, 1991; Robertson, 1992; Tomlinson, 1999). Following this premise, arguably with a “global consciousness” of the contemporary world that they are living in, specifically with the aid of digital technology, would lead to many of today’s young people fostering a sense of awareness of the changing realities of our complex, interconnected world. As more and more young people become cognizant and sensitive to a world that has become increasingly complicated, arguably they would form different opinions than those held by the older generations. They would be forward-thinking in many of today’s transnational issues that continue to permeate national boundaries, such as climate change, employment, gender roles, marriage equality, migration, and urbanization. Possessing this consciousness of today’s world would result in young people wanting to be agents of change to shape a future they hope to build and have. This aspiration subsequently necessitates young people to subscribe to a proactive behavior in addressing political or social matters by using their skillsets to adapt, navigate, and bring about the changes they hope to realize. This study proposes the term “Gen-pro” (a *Generation of People Ready for Opportunities*) to characterize a subset of Millennials and Gen Z. Members of Gen-pro possess a “constructive consciousness” of today’s complex, globalized world. Correspondingly, they subscribe to a proactive behavior, progressive attitude, and professional mindset in their approaches and engagement in political or social matters.

## 4.2 Introducing Constructive Consciousness

Studies in social and political psychology propose that how individuals form their opinions is not only driven by their pre-existing values, beliefs, and attitudes, but also by new information they acquire (Alaminos & Panalva, 2012; Chaiken & Trope, 1999; Dalton, 1984; Lau, 1995; Lodge & McGraw 1995; Taber et al., 2001). Scholars reasoned that as individuals acquire new information and process them, they could potentially improve their understanding of the issues, hold more considered understandings, and have better reasoning, particularly when making political judgements (Druckman, 2004; Druckman & Nelson, 2003; Iyengar et al., 2003; Mansbridge, 1983; Page & Shapiro, 1992). The ability to acquire new information is made increasingly easier, especially in today's technologically matured world. While scholars rightly explain that individuals can form their opinions by acquiring new information, individuals equally make sense of the world they are in through the process of socialization. Individuals are social actors, socialized into the world they live in. As social actors, individuals experience socialization with other people. They make sense of the social world around them (Weick, 1969). They try to understand other people and in return, hope other people understand them (Goffman, 1969; Weber, 1964). This sense-making of the social world that they are in and of their socialization with other people implies interpretation. Interpretation entails a process of perceiving the other and one's interaction within symbolic frameworks to make sense out of what one and the other is doing (Weigert, 1981). In other words, how individuals make sense of or interpret the world around them is a result of their acquisition of new information and social interactions, along with their pre-existing values, beliefs, and attitudes.

In today's technologically matured world, access to information and interaction with others are simply a click of a button or a swipe away. This common everyday experience is

especially prominent among many young people who are fervent adopters and heavy users of digital technology. Through the maturation and advancement of technology that gave birth to the Internet and social media platforms, young people are increasing their socialization with others. Additionally, their interpretation of the world they are living in and experiencing is constantly evolving as they consume vast amount of information daily. While acquiring new information and socialization with others both help these digital users in forming their opinions of the world around them, it is equally important to consider how their self-regulated learning, experience, and understanding of the world they are in might direct them towards certain attitudes and behaviors that could contribute to their engagement in political or social matters. This is particularly so with the current Web 2.0 environment that has furnished many of today's Millennials and Gen Z with the opportunity to be *active* producers of information rather than passive recipient of new information. More importantly, this Web 2.0 environment has given them a degree of *autonomy* and *control* over their ability to self-learn, self-teach, and self-experience many things.

This study introduces the concept of *constructive consciousness* and defines it as “individuals’ cognitive and behavioral efforts towards understanding and engaging in the environment they are in.” This study postulates that members of Gen-pro construct their consciousness of the social reality they are in through self-learning, self-interactions, and self-experience within a “network of connections with people, media, and places” (Downes, 2007; Wang et al., 2014). This network of connections that construct their consciousness of the constant changing realities that are going on around them and how they seek to engage in this world is aided by three contemporary phenomena – technological evolution, digital transformation, and information explosion (see Figure 1). These three phenomena have enabled

members of Gen-pro to acquire vast amount of information, broaden their experiences, and expand their socialization with others through the physical and digital spaces. Arguably, the consciousness they constructed through these integrated networked nodes of people, media, and places potentially shape their views that they do not have to passively accept what society dictates or tells them how things ought to be done. Instead, their constructive consciousness could inform them that they could be innovators of the future they aspire to build and potentially directs them towards certain attitudes and behaviors. Accordingly, their constructive consciousness would foster a proactive behavior, progressive attitude, and professional mindset among these members of Gen-pro, a generation of people ready for opportunities.

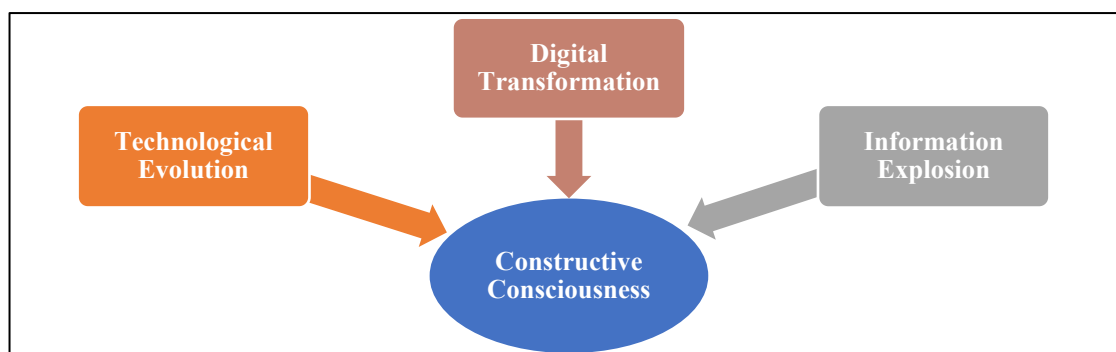


Figure 1: The Three Phenomena Shaping Young People's Constructive Consciousness

In the next section, this chapter discusses how the three phenomena – technological evolution, digital transformation, and information explosion – shape the constructive consciousness of Gen-pro and contribute to their self-regulated learning, teaching, understanding, and experience in this digital age. Following this discussion, the chapter continues with an introduction of the concept “Gen-pro” that this study proposes to characterize a subset of members of Millennials and Gen Z as a “*Generation of People Ready for*

Opportunities” and explore how their proactive behavior, progressive attitude, and professional mindset are potentially transforming political engagement because of their constructive consciousness.

#### **4.2.1 Technological Evolution**

The theory of technological evolution, proposed by Czech philosopher Radovan Richta (1963), describes the radical transformation of society through technological development. The evolution of technology has indisputably transformed our society radically, given us humans increased control over our environment. Take the concept of home automation (more commonly known as smart home technology) for instance. This Internet of Things (IoT) allows us to connect almost *everything* in our homes to the Internet –security cameras, lightings, television, thermostat, doorbells, computers, and other home electronic items to a digital hub – consequently, enabling these devices to communicate, send information, and take our commands via our smartphones. In short, the evolution in home automation technology has given us control of our homes. Equally, technological evolution has not spared its impact upon members of the Millennials and Gen Z who grew up with technology and were born into a techno-world. Generational study researchers labelled today’s young people as digital pioneers (Millennials) and digital natives (Gen Zers) (Fromm & Read, 2018; Seemiller & Grace, 2019; Stillman & Stillman, 2017). As digital pioneers and digital natives, members of Gen-pro live in a technologically advanced environment and a social landscape spanning the physical and digital worlds. This digital environment created multitudes of platforms that they can have quick access to; for instance, from learning courses readily available on Khan Academy to watching videos on YouTube on almost anything and everything. Consequently, this afforded them with the

opportunity to be able to learn things *easily* and *readily*, and subsequently being good or skilled at them.

Technological evolution has allowed members of Gen-pro to be able to learn things easily and readily. Consequently, the ability and capacity to self-learn would lead them to develop a “do-it-yourself” (DIY) attitude, subsequently encouraging a *proactive behavior*. Furthermore, growing up in and being born into a world that rapidly and constantly transforms itself due to technological advancement, these digital pioneers and digital natives are accustomed to a world that is continuously reinventing and transforming itself. Considering their awareness and experience of the reality of a world that is constantly progressing, they would recognize that when it comes to politics, they are still trapped in an “operating political system of 1.0” while other instances impacting their life circumstances have undergone tremendous changes and upgrades. To elaborate on this premise, let us consider current political leaders. If we observe closely, we will notice that many of the top political jobs are not only still dominated by members of the older generation, but also by men. China’s Xi Jinping, Russia’s Vladimir Putin, and Turkey’s Recep Tayyip Erdoğan are all in their late sixties. The current President of The United States, Joe Biden, is in his late seventies. Malaysia’s former Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, who resigned from the government in January 2021, is 96 years old. Therefore, with a political reality where governments are still run by members of the older generation and exclusively male-dominated, it should come as no surprise that members of Gen-pro would perceive the current political scene as somewhat stuck in time and out of touch with their generation. Arguably, knowing that they can proactively self-learn things and be good at them, together with their perceptions of politics, members of Gen-pro would proactively seek ways to



engage in politics to initiate the changes they hope to realize instead of passively waiting for things to happen or for others to make the change.

Technological evolution has fostered a sense of consciousness among members of Gen-pro that they are capable of self-learning things and self-teaching themselves, and eventually be good at them. Correspondingly, this has cultivated a proactive behavior among members of Gen-pro. Being exposed to a technologically evolved world where their environment and life instances are constantly experiencing changes and progress, members of Gen-pro would make comparisons and come to realize that politics appear to be stuck in time with slow transformation. With this political perception and self-learning approach in doing things, members of Gen-pro would form the opinion that they can choose to be proactive in transforming their political and social environments to create a better tomorrow instead of passively waiting for changes to transpire.

#### ***4.2.2 Digital Transformation (DT)***

Studies in information system (IS) describe digital transformation (DT) as the use of digital technologies, such as social media, mobile phones, analytics, or embedded devices, to radically improve a company's performance in operations and markets to enhance customer experience, create new business models (Bekkhus, 2016; Horlacher et al., 2016; Paavola et al., 2017; Piccinini et al., 2015; Singh & Hess, 2017), and provide novel ways to interact and engage with consumers (Haffke et al., 2016). In other words, DT is the accelerating transformation of business activities, processes, competencies, and models to fully leverage the changes and opportunities brought by digital technologies and their impact across society in a strategic and prioritized way (Demirkan et al., 2016). Consequently, DT has furnished users of technologies,

such as smartphones, web applications, cloud services, and electronic identification, with the tools at their fingertips to leverage their imagination, creativity, and inventiveness.

As the largest and heaviest users of digital technologies, many of today's Millennials and Gen Z are experiencing this digital marvel. One common scenario is music production. For young people who are interested in making music, digital transformation has made it possible for them to explore their own music creativity from the convenience of their smartphones, tablets, or computers, whether as beginners or up-and-coming musicians. With do-it-yourself (DIY) music apps, such as GarageBand, Beatwave, SoundCloud, Songify, and Animoog, these young users can learn how to mix and create sounds, add virtual percussionists, tune musical instruments, enjoy dozens of lessons on how to play different musical instruments, develop customized melodies or riffs, and publish albums, mixtapes, and podcasts. Digital transformation has helped many Millennials and Gen Z YouTubers, such as Sam Tsui, Justin Bieber, Shawn Mendes, Alessia Cara, and Ariana Grande, to showcase their musical talents and achieve success in the entertainment industry. Another common example is the behavior of "personalization." Many young people use digital technology to personalize or customize many things in their daily lives, from the music on their playlist to the shows they watch on Netflix to establishing their image for others to recognize on social media platforms. If we look at music for instance, we can see that digital transformation has enabled young people to search and personalize their own playlist of favorite songs according to music genres, artists, languages, regions, and music chart ranks from digital music streaming services, such as Spotify, Pandora, Apple Music, and YouTube Music. According to a study from the University of Texas, with personalization we are getting something *tailored* to us, and this gives us a sense of *empowerment* (Bright, 2008). In a similar research agenda, a study conducted by Northeastern University found that 72% of Gen Z believe

that colleges should allow students to design their own course of study or major.<sup>7</sup> From these empirical studies, we can infer that the outburst of digital transformation further promoted a sense of desire among today's young people in wanting to have *autonomy* on or to be in *control* of the things that potentially affect them.

As members of Gen-pro experienced the opportunities brought by digital technologies in empowering them to perform many things that impact their daily lives, arguably they would imagine how they could leverage these innovative tools to make them feel empowered when engaging in social or political matters, such as expressing their political or social concerns, rallying for political support, and making the changes they hope to see. Consequently, we have seen members of Gen-pro increasingly turning to social media platforms like TikTok, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to engage in political and social matters by using or creating symbols, memes, images, and satires. In a 2020 Pre-Election Youth Poll conducted by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), 64% of the participants (ages 18-29) surveyed reported that they feel more informed, heard, represented, and empowered when they create digital media content about politics.<sup>8</sup> Tyler Oakley, who is a YouTuber and vlogger, actively engaged in political activism by blog posting his support during the 2016 presidential campaign, uploading a video of himself and Presidential nominee Hilary Clinton on his channel, and encouraging students to participate in early voting. Furthermore, the emergence of social media websites has furnished these digital pioneers and digital natives with ease and convenience to find a community of people who share similar aspirations and opinions, empowering them to support one another. The #MilkTeaAlliance that started trending on Thai

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<sup>7</sup> 'Generation Z' is entrepreneurial, wants to chart its own future. (2014, November 18). News@Northeastern. <https://news.northeastern.edu/2014/11/18/generation-z-survey/>

<sup>8</sup> *Young People Turn to Online Political Engagement During COVID-19*. (2020, October 20). CIRCLE. <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/young-people-turn-online-political-engagement-during-covid-19>

Twitter brought members of Gen-pro from Hong Kong, Thailand, and Taiwan together, with each offering solidarity to one another in support of the democratic movements across Asia.

Digital transformation has furnished members of Gen-pro, including many of the Millennials and Gen Z, with the opportunity to leverage digital tools that potentially put them on the driver's seat to steer the direction they want to. Being able to be in control of the things that affect them makes them feel empowered. Accordingly, they would channel this sense of empowerment towards how they seek to engage in political or social matters. We have seen members of Gen-pro increasingly using digital technology, particularly social media websites and the Internet, for political and social engagements. We could interpret their digital behaviors of liking, tweeting, posting, sharing, and creating digital media contents as the means *they* see fit to engage in political or social matters. This is how *they* regard using digital technology as the progressive way forward that makes them feel empowered, heard, and represented as they engage in political or social matters. This perception of theirs stems from realizing how digital transformation can empower them to perform many things. Regardless of how society may view their acts of clicking a button or sharing a post as trivial or insignificant, members of Gen-pro are *conscious* that are in control and proactively doing something through their digital engagement.

#### **4.2.3 Information Explosion**

Information explosion is the rapid increase in the amount of information available and the effects of this abundance of information (Hilbert, 2015). Members of Millennials and Gen Z grew up and were born into a world where any bit of information is literally a click or a swipe away because of this phenomenon. According to Stillman and Stillman (2017), being connected to information is like breathing air to these young people. Living in an information overload

environment where receiving any sort of information is like a 24-hour news cycle on steroids, it is practically impossible *not* to know anything, save for people who are living in an information-suppressed authoritarian regime.

As members of Millennials and Gen Z thumb their way across their multiple devices in an information overload world, they are often overwhelmed with stories, photos, news, and information of real-world concerns, such as economic crisis, unemployment, environmental degradation, police violence, racism, sexism, sexual harassment, social instability, and political unrest. Arguably, this information explosion would shape how members of Gen-pro make sense of the changing realities of today's world. In addition to all the doom and gloom that frequently color the news and media, Hollywood's endless supply of dystopian movies and TV shows, such as *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, *Snowpiercer*, and *The Maze Runner* further informed them that they would need to overcome inescapable scenarios and proactively rise above the challenge to create a better and more inclusive society. One prominent recent example is the sensational dystopian South Korean drama *Squid Game* that is a portrayal of the frustration and anxiety about upward mobility, class inequality, gloomy economic prospects, unemployment, and corrupt system that are felt among many young South Koreans today. Hence, with such a grim picture of today's social reality and the world they are experiencing, it is hard to imagine that members of Gen-pro or even their cohorts do not feel anxious or concern about the present circumstance and the uncertain future awaiting them. Consuming and processing such information, either of real-world concerns or as seen in movies, would lead them to interpret a world that is uncertain, unfair, broken, chaotic, and volatile.

This information explosion phenomenon not only constructs the consciousness of members of Gen-pro about the contemporary world, but also affects how they would perceive

politics. They are constantly showered with news about politicians embroiled in corruption, involved in scandals, having lavish lifestyles, and serving the interests of the elites. They also witness instances of squabbling between political parties rather than seeing politicians reaching across the aisle to try and work together. Another obvious example is the case of voting. Members of Gen-pro, including many of the Millennials and Gen Z, often hear news of voter fraud, foreign meddling in elections, domestic manipulation, or problems with the electoral process. In short, politics have never been put in a positive light for these young people. As such, it would not be surprising if they were to question the integrity of elections and ask themselves whether it is worth going to the polls to vote at all. Furthermore, their interpretation of the political situation with the information in hand, might inform them that their votes might not make a difference after all. The more information they consume, the more they would question the value of politics and wonder whether the conventional ways of engaging in politics are effective vehicles to get things done. Thus, if members of Gen-pro wished to initiate changes, they could resort to other means of political engagement that would allow them to be in control, such as creating digital media contents or taking advantage of social media websites.

The abundance of information and readily available digital tools at their disposal further present them with the opportunity to seek and try new means or ways they deem better for political or social engagement. Take the July 2020 Thai protest led by young activists for example. Thai students were seen giving a three-fingered “Hunger Games” salute, mimicking the sign of solidarity among the masses against an oppressive regime from the dystopian movie “The Hunger Games.” Most people might be quick to dismiss this behavior as a way to engage in politics and instead view such behavior as an act of defiance by a group of clueless, reckless, and naïve young people. Alternatively, we could interpret the three-fingered “Hunger Games” salute

in demonstration of solidarity against the Thai monarchy and government as a form of political engagement that today's progressive members of Gen-pro deem better and a form of political behavior that *they* believe to empower them.

The rapid dissemination and transmission of information will continue to increase. Political leaders and policymakers need to understand that in our present time of information explosion, members of Millennials and Gen Z have come of age where it is nearly impossible to hide anything. These young people do not like sugarcoated promises or messages from political leaders. Instead, they seek honest communication, transparency, accountability, and credibility from political leaders, including assurance from them that they will stand by the claims and promises they make to the people. We must decouple knowledge and age and stop writing off members of Millennials and Gen Z as ill-informed about current societal and political issues. We should recognize them as protagonists in the fight to make their voices heard, their presence seen, and their values considered.

### **4.3 Introducing “Gen-pro” – A Generation of People Ready for Opportunities**

Current studies in the field of generational study tend to focus on the United States (Fromm & Read, 2018; Seemiller & Grace, 2019; Stillman & Stillman, 2017). As can be seen in Figure 2 (taken from Fromm & Read, 2018, p.2), the events or circumstances used to define the different generations, from the Silent Generation to the Boomers to Gen X to Millennials to Generation Z (Gen Z), are largely centered around the United States or the West. It is important to take this into account because by defining the different generations using events or factors that are Western-centric or U.S.-centric, one could easily overlook the cultural, demographic, and historical backgrounds that are unique to other societies and conveniently gauge these different

generations in other societies using a Western-centric or U.S.-centric benchmark. One prominent example illustrates this point. Scholars describe Gen Z as the most unique generation because Gen Z is the first post-race generation (Fromm & Read, 2018; Seemiller & Grace, 2019).

Arguably, this characterization of Gen Z as the first post-race generation and the generation that is the most racially diverse generation stems from the growing trend of shifting demographics in the United States; with the United States population becoming more racially and ethnically diverse in recent decades. This point is echoed in the 2017 National Population Projection report, where the U.S. Census Bureau projected that the United States will be even more diverse in the coming decades, and much of the United States population will be non-White by the year 2050.

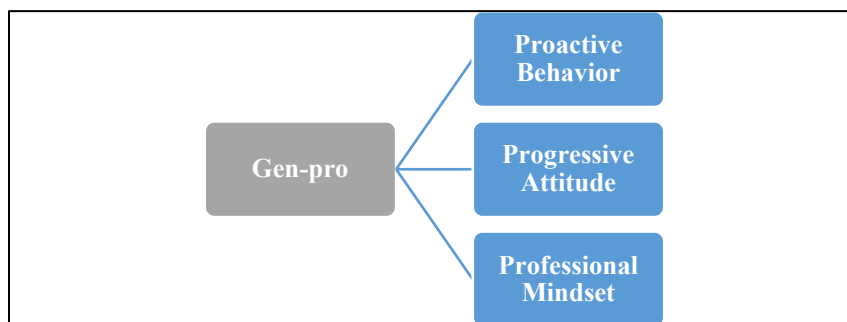
<b>Generation</b>	Silent Generation	Boomers	Gen X	Millennials (Gen Y)	Gen Z
<b>Birth year</b>	1925 to 1945	1946 to 1964	1965 to 1978	1979 to 1995	1996 to 2010
<b>Events defining a generation</b>	The Great Depression The Dust Bowl World War 2 McCarthyism	Vietnam Woodstock Civil Rights Movement President Kennedy's assassination Watergate Space exploration	Fall of the Berlin Wall The Challenger disaster AIDS MTV The Iranian hostage crisis Desert Storm	9/11 Columbine Google Social media Video games Y2K	The Great Recession ISIS Sandy Hook Marriage equality The first Black president Rise of populism

*Figure 2: The Events that Define a Generation*

However, through careful observations at other regions around the world, one could easily discern that there are racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse societies that already existed before 1996 (the birth year for Gen Z as stated by Fromm & Read (2018) and shown in Figure 2). Prominent examples include countries in the Southeast Asian region of the world, such as Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. Following this premise, members of Gen Z in



other nations could not be considered as the first post-race generation since these nations were already multicultural or multiracial before 1996. Hence, given that the rigid descriptions that define Gen Z are rooted in the conditions that are uniquely centered around the United States or the West, these descriptions do not adequately address or include circumstances relevant to members of Gen Z in other regions and thus, may not be a fitting characterization of Gen Z outside of the Western region. Apart from a rigid definition of Gen Z that is U.S.-centric, there is a lack of consistency between countries in defining the age categories for youth. The age definition of youth varies from 10-15, 15-24, or 10-35 years (Gale & Fahey, 2005, p.3). These variances in the age ranges demonstrate that there is no definite consensus or agreement as to when a given youth generation starts or ends.



*Figure 3: The Characters Defining Gen-pro "A Generation of People Ready for Opportunities"*

Considering the gaps in existing scholarships, this study proposes the concept of Gen-pro to characterize a generation of young people not strictly defined by the events or circumstances of a particular nation or region, but by three fundamental characters – proactive behavior, progressive attitude, and professional mindset – that could potentially characterize members of the Millennials and Gen Z (see Figure 3). Members of Gen-pro take the initiative to initiate the

changes they hope to realize (proactive behavior). Their growing “global consciousness” leads them to embrace diversity and progressive ideas (progressive attitude). They try to be competent and skilled in what they seek out to accomplish (professional mindset). With these three characters, members of Gen-pro represent a conscious generation of young people who are ready for opportunities to influence their environment, improve their current circumstances, and chart new frontiers.

#### ***4.3.1 Gen-pro: A Conscious Generation Proactively Shaping Their Future***

Individuals’ proactive behavior or personality have gained considerable currency within the disciplines of psychology, organizational behavior, entrepreneurship, and business management (Bateman & Crant, 1993; Becherer & Maurer, 1999; Crant, 1996, 2000; Crant & Bateman, 2000; Erdogan & Bauer, 2005; Grant et al., 2009; Hall, 1996; Huang, 2017; Mensmann & Frese, 2016; Meyers, 2020; Schneider, 1983; Segarra-Ciprés et al., 2019; Seibert et al., 2001; Parker & Bindl, 2016; Thompson, 2005; Trifiletti et al., 2009; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998; Van Scotter et al., 2000; Wu et al., 2018). Studies have shown that proactivity is very important in the workplace (Crant, 2000; Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Kanfer et al., 2001; Parker et al., 2006), for job performance (Crant, 1995), for organizational innovation (Parker, 1998), and for individual’s career building and success (Mirvis & Hall, 1996; Seibert, Crant, & Kraimer, 1999; Seibert, Kraimer, & Crant, 2001).

According to Bateman and Crant (1993), who introduced the “proactive personality” scale measuring an individual’s tendency to behave proactively, individuals with a disposition towards a proactive behavior possess several traits. These traits include identifying opportunities, taking the initiative, acting upon them, and striving to persevere until they produce meaningful

change (Bateman & Crant, 1993). Individuals who are highly proactive can achieve career success when they take the initiative to improve the current conditions, change their environments, or actively create new ones (Crant, 2000; Seibert et al., 1999; Terborg, 1981). Highly proactive individuals will also take action to guarantee constructive outcomes by using positive, problem-focused strategies (Cunningham & De La Rosa, 2008; Parker & Sprigg, 1999). An individual who has a proactive behavior will challenge the status quo and initiate change (Bateman & Crant, 1993). In short, being proactive means taking the initiative to improve one's circumstances or change one's environment rather than being passive recipient of one's role or passively waiting for change to happen.

Global events in recent decades are rife with examples that illustrate the proactive behavior of members of Gen-pro in seeking the change they hope for, improving the circumstances around them, and voicing their concerns on social and political issues. In 2014, young protesters of the Sunflower Movement unleashed a wave of youthful activism that profoundly shaped Taiwan's political landscape. Their proactivity ended the disputed free-trade proposal between Taipei and Beijing. In the same year, the world witnessed the Umbrella Movement – a series of sit-in street protests where young protesters took to the streets of Hong Kong to fight for universal suffrage that the city was promised under Hong Kong's Basic Law. The 2018 “March for Our Lives” movement in the United States not only inspired millions of Americans across the United States, but also people across the globe. These courageous members of Gen-pro expressed their voices to the world about their concerns on gun laws and their rights to attend school safely.

Disappointed with the abandonment of democracy by their governments, members of Gen-pro across East Asia and Southeast Asia are using the power of digital technology to seek

solidarity and support, share their struggles against authoritarian regimes, learn protest tactics, and raise global awareness of their causes. One such prominent example was when young Hong Kong protesters did not shy away from proactively fighting against Hong Kong's freedom-crushing National Security Law even if that means challenging the mighty "Goliath" Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Another case is the 2020 Thai student protest, using the "three finger salute" popularized by the Hunger Games movie franchise. The student activism in Thailand set off a growing protest movement that demanded a new constitution, increased protection of human rights for vocal critics of the military and monarchy who have disappeared or killed, and more checks on the palace's power. In a similar political climate, members of Gen-pro across Myanmar have stood up against the military takeover on February 1 of 2021. Their sheer grit and determination to end the country's military junta legacy attest to their persistency to change their current condition instead of being complacent or passively accepting the present circumstance. An Instagram campaign with the hashtag "#justicefornoor" organized by Pakistani feminist activist, Zahra Haider, following the killing of the 27-year-old Pakistani woman, Noor Mukadam, gained traction and brought visibility to cases of gender-based violence in Pakistan. Members of Gen-pro subsequently flocked to social media to post statements of solidarity and express support to fight for justice and oppression against women. When the world witnessed the surging of hate crimes towards the Asian community across the United States that was fueled by the Covid-19 pandemic, international graduate students at the University at Buffalo took the initiative to create a short film titled "Your Bias Hurts Me" to promote support for Asian and Asian American students and communities against biases, violence, and hate crimes.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Robinson, M. (2021, April 27). *International students create film to stop Asian hate*. News and views for the UB community. <http://www.buffalo.edu/ubnow/stories/2021/04/asian-hate-film.html>

While not all of these events saw success in structural reforms or policy changes that these members of Gen-pro have hoped for, however, we cannot dismiss that their proactive behavior has somewhat profoundly impact contemporary social and political matters. Correspondingly, it would not be fair to quickly pass judgement on young people's political disengagement as "unwillingness to obey the law or to play by the rules" (Mulgan & Wilkinson, 1997, p. 218). If Rosa Parks obeyed the law or played by the rules by obeying the buss segregation rule instead of refusing to give up her seat when asked to do so by the bus driver, then we would not have witnessed the historical civil rights movement sweeping across the United States and the impact of her defiant act on the wave of fundamental changes that would uplift the lives of future generations of African Americans. Like the story of Rosa Parks and many others who decided to initiate changes to their circumstances or environments, the proactive behavior of members of Gen-pro in engaging in contemporary social or political matters demonstrate that this conscious generation of young people do not merely sit back and passively wait for others to address those concerns or for the circumstance to take its own course. They step up to take the initiative and seize opportunities to improve their circumstances, influence their environment, and seek better changes.

The proactivity that we are witnessing among members of Gen-pro potentially inform us that today's young people are neither passively adapting to current conditions nor passive recipients of whatever beliefs, norms, ideas, or rules that the previous generations hand down to them. If having a proactive behavior is highly regarded as something of great importance in the workplace for individuals' career building and success and advancing organizations' innovative performance, then we should recognize that the proactive behavior among members of Gen-pro represents their willingness to take the initiative to engage in social or political matters in the

way *they* see fit to improve the present conditions or create better ones, and eventually in building the future *they* hope to have.

#### ***4.3.2 Gen-pro: A Conscious Generation Building a Better and Progressive Tomorrow***

Going over the pages of history, one could easily appreciate that we have experienced astonishing progress and advancements in many aspects of humanity – from freedom of thought to culture to science to medicine to technology to politics. One very recent discernible example is the Covid-19 pandemic. If the pandemic were to occur say a hundred years back, primitive medicine would probably not be able to develop the Covid-19 vaccines so quickly and ancient technology would not have the capability to distribute them to the global population swiftly. What is it that led to this flurry of staggering developments humanity has been witnessing and experiencing? According to writer and journalist, Seline Shenoy, the answer is people's drive for progress. Progress is not a foreign concept. We have seen how the Enlightenment era became a period of progressive intellectual movement that dominated Europe during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Thinkers and philosophers during the Enlightenment period, such as Hume, Kant, Locke, Montesquieu, Smith, and Voltaire, have gifted us forward-thinking ideas, such as liberty, freedom, progress, constitutional government, free market economy, and separation of church and state (Outram, 2006; Zafirovski, 2010). Consequently, their progressive ideas have contributed to shaping the modern world as we know of today.

Fast-forward from 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment to our contemporary world, the epoch of globalization has made the world we live in closer than ever before. This has led to greater people-to-people connectivity and information exchange that transcends national borders. The acceleration and maturation of technological development further escalate the speed of

transmission of global information and increase the convenience of human interactions. Members of Gen-pro, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, creed, and social backgrounds are living in and experiencing an interconnected ecosystem where no one part of the world is left untouched by globalization's relentless reach and influence. Accordingly, they are exposed to boundless information and ideas that potentially inspire their imagination, creation, innovation, and thinking. Additionally, their exposure to a globalized world also enables members of Gen-pro to be forward-thinking. One prominent contemporary subject that is gaining currency is the idea of diversity, equity, and inclusivity (DEI). This idea fosters an appreciation of diverse perspectives and recognition of the differences inherent in all among members of Gen-pro. It also influences how they see themselves in relation to their environment, perceive others, and understand the world around them. Compared to their parents' and grandparents' generations, members of Gen-pro are potentially more open to ideas, such as same-sex marriages, women serving in military, or gender-neutral education; ideas that are radical to the older generations but progressive to members of Gen-pro.

As a forward-thinking generation, members of Gen-pro also form a "we-centric" approach around today's social and political concerns, from issues on racism to sexism to climate change to women's rights to LGBTQIA rights. What this entails is that they do not view today's social and political issues as isolated instances impacting only a few affected parties. Therefore, rather than feeling detached from these issues that they see, read, or hear about, members of Gen-pro look at how they can play a proactive role in voicing their concerns, taking action, or expressing support for those afflicted. The hashtag "#MilkTeaAlliance" that took the Internet by storm illustrates how members of Gen-pro in East Asia and Southeast Asia came together to boldly fight against human rights abuses and authoritarian regime and stand up for

democratic freedom. The “Milk Tea Alliance” that started off as an Internet war between Chinese nationalist netizens and Thai youth in defending a famous Thai actor, subsequently turned into a movement that brought members of Gen-pro in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Thailand together. This “we-centric” attitude and concern for the collective were also seen when many young Taiwanese expressed solidarity and support for the democratic movements in Thailand and Hong Kong in a rally that took place at Taipei Main Station on August 16, 2020.<sup>10</sup> The situation in Myanmar also drew heavy support from members of Gen-pro, where this “we-centric” group of Millennials and Gen Z employed the influence of Twitter to raise awareness and express support for Myanmar’s ongoing struggles with military oppression and injustice through the hashtag “#WhatsHappeninginMyanmar.”

Besides being forward-thinking, members of Gen-pro are also using creative or progressive ways to voice for social, economic, and political changes. They constantly innovate and reinvent new ways to engage in social and political matters to reach a wider audience. For instance, members of Gen-pro subscribed to progressive political activism, such as crowdfunded advertisings, viral videos, and social media platforms to inspire Hong Kongers to fight for the city’s freedom and democratic values and increase awareness about their situation on the international stage. The “#Eye4HK” campaign, which calls for people to cover their right eye and post a photo on social media to support the female volunteer who lost an eye during the peaceful protest outside the Tsim Sha Tsui police station on August 11, 2020, and the ongoing extradition law protest, successfully gained international momentum. Not only did many Hong Kong activists, celebrities, and politicians took part in this challenge, but also people from South Korea, Thailand, and Poland also expressed their support for the city’s protests. Even though

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<sup>10</sup> Everington, K. (2020, August 17). *Democracy rally for Thailand, Hong Kong held at Taipei Main Station*. Taiwan News. <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/3988788>



they are not directly affected by the ongoing incident in Hong Kong, they posted their photos as a form of solidarity in support of Hong Kong's protests. Members of Gen-pro in Malaysia borrowed the "five demands, not one less" slogan from Hong Kong's protesters and created the hashtag "#KitaMintaLima" (we ask for five) to urge Malaysia's Sultan Abdullah Sultan Ahmad Shah, to take five steps to help the country amid anger and disappointment over the government's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic situation.<sup>11</sup>

Across the world, we have witnessed instances of members of Gen-pro courageously standing up to injustice, boldly challenging authoritarianism, persistently fighting for equality, and relentlessly advocating for democratic freedom. While not all of their social or political engagements would result in monumental changes, receive generous approval from society, or end up on the cover of world-famous magazines, it is important that we do not underestimate their contributions however small they may be. We should acknowledge that their forward-thinking attitude on many of society's issues today will serve as a compass in shaping an equitable and diverse future they hope to build and achieve. As those thinkers, philosophers, and inventors who graced the Enlightenment era were steadfast in their visions and ideas, these "progressive Gen-pro builders" of our modern-day world and future are not perturbed in the face of obstacles or failures. They are resolute in what they stand for and will proactively experiment with progressive ways to express their voices and bring about the changes they aspire to have. If the progressive ideas of the Enlightenment era were considered radical during that period but have become fundamental truths in our contemporary world, thus it is fitting that we think about how to be in genuine conversation with today's young people to gain a better understanding of

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<sup>11</sup> Sukumaran, T. (2021, February 9). *Echoing Hong Kong protests, Malaysia's 'five demands' to king over coronavirus go viral*. South China Morning Post. <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3121050/echo-hong-kong-protests-malaysias-five-demands-king-over>

their forward-thinking ideas and how to better support them in promoting and shaping a bold and progressive future together.

#### ***4.3.3 Gen-pro: A Conscious Generation with a Professional Mindset***

Young people are frequently placed in a negative light by the media as “self-centered, carefree, irresponsible, rule-breakers, and menaces to society.”<sup>12</sup> A study conducted by Mason (2011) echoed this point. In the study, Mason found that tabloids, broadsheets, and local newspapers across Scotland often discussed young people within a negative context. In a similar research agenda, a youth research project conducted by the Hertsmere Young Researchers found that the British media tended to portray young people negatively and this resulted in the public forming a bad perception of young people’s attitudes and behavior. It comes as no surprise that such negative portrayals or stereotypes of young people would conveniently create a “negative impression of young people” (Mason, 2011) and have a negative impact on how society views and treats them, including their status within their respective societies (Devlin, 2006).

Contrary to these negative media framings of young people’s attitudes and behavior, a study by Seemiller and Grace in 2017 revealed a notable finding. The purpose of their study, which was to learn more about how Gen Z thought about the future, revealed that members of Gen Z felt that their generation has to clean up such mess as environmental degradation, prejudice, and discrimination that are left to them by the older generations. Considering that members of Gen Z recognize that the onus is upon them to remedy the problems created by the older generations, arguably, they might lean on this understanding and feel that it is up to them to build a fair, inclusive, and sustainable future. The mushrooming of young activists across the

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<sup>12</sup> Sarkar, P. (2019, November 1). *How Realistic Is Media Portrayal Of The Youth?* shethepeople. <https://www.shethepeople.tv/home-top-video/how-realistic-is-media-portrayal-of-the-youth/>

world, such as Agnes Chow, Bana Alabed, Benji Backer, Miho Kawamoto, and Wai Wai Nu, demonstrates this point and contradicts the claim that young people are self-centered, ignorant, and irresponsible. Correspondingly, the appropriate perspective is to recognize that members of Gen-pro subscribe to a professional mindset when seeking to accomplish a task or goal.

According to the Cambridge online dictionary, the word professional means “having the qualities that you connect with trained people, such as being organized and showing a high standard of work.”<sup>13</sup> Researchers on professional identity and professionalism within the medicine, nursing, occupational therapy, pharmacy, and social work disciplines generally associate the concept of professional with knowledge, skills, accountability, and competency in one’s own profession, work, or field (Binyamin, 2018; Crigger & Godfrey, 2014; Dikmen et al., 2016; Forenza & Eckert, 2016; Gardner & Shulman, 2005; Manojlovich & Ketefian, 2002; Styles, 2005; van Oeffelt et al., 2018; Walker & Avant, 2019; Wiles & Vicary, 2019; Worthington et al., 2013). In addition to these general traits that usually define the concepts of professional, professionalism, and professional identity, this study proposes that members of Gen-pro with a professional mindset would have the following characters when working towards a purpose or goal – open to new or challenging ideas, inclined to seek solutions to problems, do not give up easily when facing difficulties, and work well with others.

If we pay close attention, we could see members of Gen-pro leaving professional footprints of themselves every day by being open to new or challenging ideas when doing things. Take their digital behavior for instance. Members of Gen-pro are constantly open to new or challenging ideas when it comes to digital technology. Consequently, they have become skilled and competent in using different applications (apps) or software to organize and personalize their

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<sup>13</sup> Professional. (n.d.), *Cambridge Dictionary*. Retrieved from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/professional>. Accessed December 4, 2020.

social media accounts to build their image, self-brand, and digital presence. They are also opened to try a variety of digital tools they could use at their disposal to help them create professional-quality type of videos on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. Being open to new or challenging ideas have also pushed them to build their resumés and career profiles on platforms, such as LinkedIn and Smartr, instead of using the conventional black and white paper resumés. Some have also created their own websites where prospective employers can easily access to view their personal profile, experiences, and achievements. This is because, in a competitive job market members of Gen-pro are aware that acquiring the necessary skills enables them to present themselves as professional and competent candidates with the skillsets that are most sought-after by industries. Consequently, they are always trying new ideas to hone their skillsets. One widely used method is through such digital learning platform as LinkedIn Learning Courses, where they can challenge and improve themselves by taking a variety of courses, from self-improvement to data analytics to business analysis to public speaking to leadership-building.

Perhaps, most people would not give much consideration on their use of mobile apps or software in these instances as something of value and might see such behaviors as insignificant. However, alternatively we could interpret these digital behaviors of theirs as them trying to demonstrate proficiency in what they do and striving to use new ideas to improve their digital skillsets to produce quality work; be it for their social activities or career-building. Since, they possess the digital know-how and skillsets, arguably they could use them to engage in civic or political issues. Such examples as creating the Stop Asian Hate website to raise awareness on Asian hate crimes, using the hashtag “#RepublicofThailand” to advocate for political reforms, and sexual assault survivors creating empowering TikTok videos to promote sexual violence prevention and education, demonstrate that members of Gen-pro subscribe to a professional

mindset when they use these new digital ideas or methods towards accomplishing their purpose or goal.

Individuals regarded as professionals would also have a problem-solving mindset. As members of Gen-pro are inclined to be proactive rather than passively waiting for changes to happen, presumably they will also have a professional mindset in doing things. Therefore, they are more likely to seek solutions instead of dwelling on problems. The virtual mock parliament known as Parlimen Digital exemplifies this point. Frustrated with the government's decision not to hold a virtual parliament sitting despite the pressing need to deliberate on how the nation can best recover from the pandemic, a group of young Malaysians successfully organized Parlimen Digital in July 2020. Just in the first 24 hours of registration alone, Parlimen Digital received 1,500 applications and subsequently grew to almost 6,300. More than 200,000 viewers logged in as participants to debate, vote, and pass bills addressing various issues affecting young Malaysians. The Parlimen Digital organized by those young Malaysians demonstrates that members of Gen-pro subscribe to a problem-solving, professional mindset when trying to accomplish a goal. They did not sit idly by and wait for things to happen on its own. Instead, they came up with ways to resolve the problem they were encountering.

Thirdly, individuals displaying a professional mindset do not give up easily when facing difficulties. This attribute can be seen in members of Gen-pro when they continue to voice for the causes they care about and do not compromise their values in the face of adversity. One example to illustrate this point is Hong Kong's young political activist, Agnes Chow. Famously labelled as the "real Mulan" by her followers, Chow protested against the National Security Law and demanded investigation into the use of force by the Hong Kong police force despite Beijing's relentless incursions into Hong Kong's political freedom and democratic values and

threats of deportation to Mainland China to face trial for national security crimes. Chow has been arrested several times for participating in Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement and was sentenced to 10 months in jail in 2020. Finally, their values on diversity and "we-centric" attitude in approaching many of today's social and political matters would indicate that members of Gen-pro could work and collaborate well with others, an important trait of professionalism. For example, the organization American Friends Service Committee's (AFSC) Youth in Action (YIA) created the "We Are Not At-Risk" global campaign to resist racism, colonialism, and imperialism.<sup>14</sup> The campaign saw a global network of youth coming together and working towards strengthening their ability to transform their respective communities.

Negative narratives of young people, such as carefree, ignorant, irresponsible, and self-centered, constitute an imbalanced representation of their attitudes and behavior. Contrary to these harmful framings, members of Gen-pro are aware of the social and political happenings around the world. This is especially so when research revealed that they recognized that they need to shoulder the responsibility to heal a broken world the older generations created. Moreover, it is hard to imagine them as an ignorant group with all the doom and gloom that frequently color the news and media. Furthermore, if we observe carefully, members of Gen-pro possess the digital know-how and are constantly trying new ideas to build their image and identity, as well as to sharpen their skillsets for career development and success. Therefore, we should interpret their digital behaviors and expert digital skillsets not as something of insignificance, but as a demonstration of their professional mindset in doing things. More importantly, members of Gen-pro could be seen to subscribe to a professional mindset when they engage in social or political matters. Many young activists and protesters do not give up despite

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<sup>14</sup> Burns, S. and Eubanks-Dixon, N. (2020, January 3). *Transforming how the media portrays young people*. American Friends Service Committee. <https://www.afsc.org/blogs/news-and-commentary/transforming-how-media-portrays-young-people>

facing setbacks. In taking action on pressing contemporary social or political issues, members of Gen-pro are putting on their professional-thinking cap by trying to find solutions to problems instead of passively waiting for changes to happen. These instances suggest that members of Gen-pro are “go-getters” capable of being and doing so much more than what they are being generally thought of.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

Many of today’s young people are no longer ill-informed of contemporary political and social issues. The phenomena of technological evolution, digital transformation, and information explosion have made these generations of digital natives and digital pioneers to be cognizant and sensitive to an increasingly complicated, globalized, and interconnected world. These instances play a role in constructing young people’s consciousness of our present-day world. With all the grim and gloom that today’s news and media paint our world, it would not be surprising for many young people to perceive today’s world as unfair, volatile, and chaos. Being conscious of the mess created by the older generations, members of Gen-pro would aspire for a better tomorrow. The mushrooming of young activists and growing youth-led political and social movements around the world indicates their efforts in stewarding the changes to their political, economic, or social circumstances. As such, members of Gen-pro would presumably be ready for the opportunity to build a more inclusive and equitable future. Their aspiration to build a world they aspire to have can be seen in their proactive behavior in taking the initiative for political or social engagement. Their “constructive consciousness” of our contemporary world leads them to embrace a progressive attitude in approaching some of the biggest transnational issues of our time. Contrary to the general stereotype of young people as reckless, irresponsible, and ignorant,

members of Gen-pro demonstrate a professional mindset when they try to be competent and skilled in what they seek out to accomplish. We need to recognize them as individuals capable of making significant contributions in effecting social, political, and economic changes. The future world will be the embodiment of their proactive behavior, progressive attitude, and professional mindset.



## 5 LET US LISTEN FROM TODAY'S CONSCIOUS, TECH-SAVVY GEN-PRO

In Chapter Two, I highlighted the issues in the study of young people's political engagement. Mainstream studies of young people's political engagement continue to subscribe to a narrow conception and adult-centric benchmark of what behaviors qualify as political engagement or participation, which is heavily rooted in voting trends and memberships in political parties. When we witnessed a decline in voting rates and party memberships among young people, there is a tendency to immediately equate young people's political disengagement with an ignorant attitude, political apathy, or the lack of political knowledge (O'Toole et al., 2003; Pirie & Worcester, 2000). While young people's political engagement and disengagement continue to generate vibrant discussions within the discipline, I agree with the argument that studies on young people's *own* views on politics and political engagement continue to be underexplored and young people's political behaviors are heavily gauged according to adult-centric notions of political engagement (Harris et al., 2007; Marsh et al., 2007; Pontes et al., 2017). Consequently, how political engagement is thought of in existing studies does not sufficiently consider how young people perceive political engagement in today's context and how they view their opportunities to engage meaningfully in politics.

Chapter Three looked at how the effects of digital technology on political or civic engagement generated a flurry of mixed bag scholarships. One side expresses optimism that digital technology would further increase citizens' political engagement, while the other raises concern that digital engagement hardly makes any meaningful impact on political efficacy. Skeptics of digital engagement associate digital engagement with the behavior of "slacktivism" or "unreal" engagement (Davis, 2011; Khan & Dhar, 2006, 2007; Kristofferson et al., 2014; Mazar & Zhong, 2011; Monin & Miller, 2001; Morozov, 2009). Such negative connotations of

digital engagement stem from having a rigid template as to what types of actions or behaviors amount to political engagement that would *actually* lead to political efficacy. By maintaining the view that digital mode of engagement constitutes a form of “unreal” engagement or exhibits a “slacktivist” behavior, these studies seemingly overlooked young people’s use of their creativity and digital skillsets to engage in political matters and did not sufficiently account for young people’s *own* understandings of the role of digital technology on their generation’s opportunity to engage in politics.

The issues underscored in Chapters Two and Three potentially inform us that we are still *not* listening to and understanding young people enough. Without a clear understanding of how young people feel or think about politics and how they see their opportunities for political engagement, we would continue to equate their political disengagement with apathy (O’Toole et al., 2003; Marsh et al., 2007), associate their digital engagement as “slacktivist” behavior (Davis, 2011; Khan & Dhar, 2006, 2007; Kristofferson et al., 2014; Mazar & Zhong, 2011; Monin & Miller, 2001; Morozov, 2009), and misinterpret their attitudes, behaviors, and reactions directed towards political or social matters. These lack of understanding and misperception of young people’s attitudes and behaviors echo the argument put forward by White and colleagues (2000) that “without a clear understanding of how young people conceptualize political interest and engagement, it is difficult to know how they interpret such questions or the reasons for their responses” (p. 1). Considering the issues surrounding the discourse on young people’s political attitudes and behaviors, in Chapter Four I proposed an approach to understanding and conceptualizing young people’s attitudes and behaviors towards politics and political engagement by introducing the concepts “constructive consciousness” and “Gen-pro.” This chapter continues with the introduction of the proposed theoretical framework for this

dissertation project. Following this introduction, the chapter proceeds to state the reasons for choosing East Asia and Southeast Asia, with Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Taiwan, for this research.

## 5.1 Proposed Theoretical Framework

Tens of thousands of young people marched on the streets of Glasgow with banners and chants of slogans, urging political leaders and delegates attending the United Nations climate conference COP26 to take action for climate change.<sup>15</sup> An outpouring of young people demonstrated across Algeria, Sudan, Tunisia, Iraq, and Libya against their ruling elites and corruption in their respective nations. Young Hong Kongers protested against China's imposition of the new national security law. Youth in Inner Mongolia spoke up on a new bilingual education policy threatening the Mongolian language. Outraged Baloch students marched to Islamabad demanding the government to restore reserved seats and scholarships in Punjab universities. Young people are disappointed with political leaders making sugar-coated promises without acting. They are frustrated with a system that continues to marginalize them. They are upset with the inequities, injustices, and discrimination that continue to plague contemporary societies. They are concerned about the future. They are speaking up.

More and more young people across the world are subscribing to innovative and creative ways of engaging in political or social matters. They sing protest songs, carry out “*caceroleos*”<sup>16</sup> (banging on pots as a form of displaying popular discontent), and use graphic arts to share their

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<sup>15</sup> Nugent, C. (2021, November 5). ‘*Generation Now.*’ *The Story of How Young Climate Activists Tired of Waiting for Change Took Action.* TIME. <https://apple.news/AzwTa106IQJCDaRNxfYMU6Q>

<sup>16</sup> Caceroleos are a form of displaying popular discontent (also called cacerolazos in Argentina and elsewhere), which simply consists of banging on pots. This form of popular public expression was first used by the Chilean right-wing against Salvador Allende's Popular Unity government. A decade later, the pots changed allegiance and served to repudiate the military regime. In August 2011, after many weeks of student conflict, the *caceroleos* reappeared, recalling the time of the *Protestas* (national protest movement) against the dictatorship.

visions and make their voices heard in the public spheres (Gallant, 2018; Peñafiel & Doran, 2018). They also channel their dissent through innovative forms of demonstration such as flash mobs (Bertho, 2016; Gallant, 2018; Newburn et al., 2016; Poirier, 2017). They use social media to organize various social and political actions and spread political expressions on online blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube (Caron, 2014; Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013). Take Chile and Quebec for example, where students used social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter to call for night marches to protest the arbitrary nature of the repression carried out by police forces (Peñafiel & Doran, 2018). In Hong Kong, websites, such as 4chan and Hong Kong Golden, and activists network like Anonymous played a crucial role in the Occupy Central Movement, in mobilizing large numbers of people to occupy key streets in the city (Watts, 2018). Student activists in Los Angeles used Facebook and Instagram to announce upcoming events and actions, share pictures of student activism, and convey their concerns with the “1033 program”<sup>17</sup> in their efforts to voice out against the militarization of school police and police violence in schools (Mesinas, 2018). This rising global trend towards a digital mode of engagement is further spurred by rapid maturation and evolution of the current Web 2.0 environment that have allowed these young digital users to collaborate, share their perspectives, seek solidarity, interact with others in real-time, and be active producers of information. From using music to art to digital technology, regardless of the mode of engagement used, young people today are making waves on the political and social climates within their societies by engaging in ways *they* see fit.

What do these global political and social events, along with young people’s current attitudes and behaviors potentially tell us? They inform us that many of today’s young people are

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<sup>17</sup> Through the Department of Defense Excess Military Equipment Program (commonly referred to as the 1033 program), the LASPD received 61 M-16 assault rifles, three grenade launchers, and a mine-resistant protective vehicle (Chokshi, 2014). The possession of these weapons created serious concerns for activists about the prospect that weapons would be used to arm police in schools, (LDF, 2014).

not politically or socially apathetic but are increasingly conscious of the political and social happenings around them. They inform us that today's young people are far from being politically or socially disengaged but are proactively trying new and different approaches to engage in political and social matters that *they* see fit and are meaningful to them. These inferences on young people's current attitudes and behaviors towards political and social matters raise five pertinent questions:

1. What explains young people's growing consciousness of the political and social happenings around them?
2. What are young people's attitudes towards politics?
3. What are young people's attitudes towards political engagement?
4. What challenges do they face when engaging in politics?
5. As heavy users of digital technology, what are young people's attitudes towards using digital technology to engage in politics?

In view of the political and social instances that we are witnessing, greater attention should be given to how today's diverse young people understand politics, the world they live in, and their opportunities for engagement in political matters. This is particularly so, when the rapid technological advancement has diversified many of today's young people, with regards to their views, values, identities, and experiences, along with how they wish to go about engaging in political and social issues. Furthermore, as young people continue to subscribe to innovative and creative modes to engage in political matters, definitions of political engagement or participation should adequately recognize or include newer and progressive modes of engagement that are increasingly common among young people today. By allowing young people to speak for *themselves*, we can potentially clear any misunderstandings or misperceptions surrounding the

claims of their political apathy, “slacktivist” behavior, and “unreal” form of political engagement.

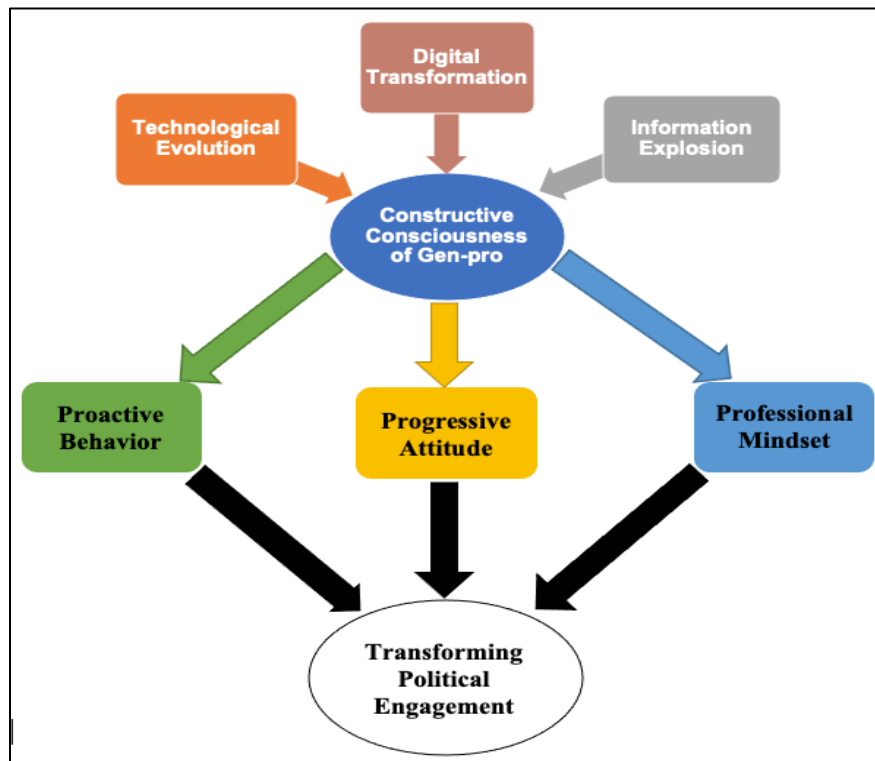
In this study, I postulate that many of today’s young people possess a “constructive consciousness” of the world around them due to three contemporary elements – technological evolution, digital transformation, and information explosion. These three elements have fashioned a generation of young people that is globally connected through digital technology and media. Without question, they have transformed the ways how young people communicate, socialize, live, study, learn, and work. They equally help to construct young people’s consciousness of the world they are experiencing and living in. They have a bearing on how young people make sense and perceive the social reality around them. Consequently, many of today’s young people are globally exposed, making them the most culturally, socially, and intellectually diverse generation. As mentioned in Chapter Four, these three contemporary elements have served as significant instruments not only in empowering and inspiring members of Gen-pro to engage in political and social matters, but also in furnishing them with new and diverse ideas for political and social engagement, specifically in using digitally based technologies.

The three contemporary elements of technological evolution, digital transformation, and information explosion combined to have a bearing on how members of Gen-pro would potentially respond to political and social issues, by fostering certain attitudes and behaviors among them that serve as impetus for them to seek the changes they aspire to have. Recent events, such as the COP26 demonstration, the pro-democracy protests in Thailand and Myanmar, and the TikTok “Ghen Cô Vy” handwashing dance challenge to raise awareness on COVID-19 prevention, demonstrate a *proactive behavior* among members of Gen-pro to engage in political

or social matters. Instead of passively waiting for changes to happen, members of Gen-pro are increasingly proactive in taking the initiative to seek the change they hope for, improve the circumstances around them, and voice their concerns on contemporary issues. Their exposure to an interconnected-globalized world equally inspires their imagination, creation, innovation, and thinking. This factor subsequently fosters a *progressive attitude* among members of Gen-pro on some of the biggest and challenging issues of our time, such as environment, equality, gender, identity, immigration, and sexuality. Contrary to the general stereotypes of young people as reckless, irresponsible, and ignorant, members of Gen-pro tend to demonstrate a *professional mindset* when they leverage their creativity and skillsets in trying to be competent in what they seek out to accomplish. The TikTok “Ghen Cô Vy” handwashing dance challenge presents one good example of how members of Gen-pro display their competence by leveraging their digital skills and creativity in making a video to spur collective awareness on how to fight a global pandemic.

The bottom line is that since young people’s political engagement continues to be considered important in politics (Brooks & Hodkinson, 2008; García-Albacete, 2014; Henn & Foard, 2012; Marsh, O’Toole, & Jones, 2007; Quaranta, 2016; Quintelier 2007; Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009; Sloam, 2013), more research agendas should endeavor to better understand young people’s attitudes and behaviors by exploring how young people *themselves* perceive politics and political engagement in today’s context. With a research agenda that is youth-centric where we seek to better understand how today’s diverse young people perceive the world, we could potentially gain better insights into how they think about politics, the issues that confront them in today’s complex world, how they see their opportunities for meaningful political engagement, and how they perceive the use of digital technology in transforming the ways of and expanding

the prospects for their political engagement or socialization. This study equally hopes that these insights could potentially inform policymakers and political leaders on how best to include today's tech-savvy young people in political conversations, create opportunities for them to participate in the policymaking process, and ultimately to have meaningful engagement with young people as they continue to find their place, identity, and voice in adult-dominated societies.



*Figure 4: Constructive Consciousness of Gen-pro: Transforming Political Engagement with A Proactive Behavior, A Progressive Attitude, and A Professional Mindset*

Their proactive behavior in taking action, progressive attitude in hoping for a more inclusive and equitable world, and professional mindset to be proficient in their undertakings demonstrate a today's young people as a "Generation of People Ready for Opportunities" (Gen-



pro). Their proactive behavior, progressive attitude, and professional mindset subsequently influence the approaches they seek to engage in political issues. Figure 4 illustrates the theoretical framework underpinning this dissertation project.

## **5.2 There is More to Asia than Meets the Eyes**

Studies have looked at youth political participation in Eastern European countries (Ådnanes, 2004; Burean & Badescu, 2014; Letki, 2004; Roberts, 2003; Slomczynski & Shabad, 1998) and Northern European countries, such as Denmark (Torpe, 2003), Sweden (Coe et al., 2016), and Finland (Nygård et al., 2016). Scholars equally investigated youth political participation in New Zealand (Wood, 2012) and Spain (Sant, 2014; Sant & Davies, 2018), including Muslim youth engagement in the United States (Jones-Correa & Leal, 2001) and Australia (Omar, 2016; Ozalp & Ćufurović, 2021). There have been studies that explored the understanding of citizenship among Turkish and Italian youth (Ataman et al., 2012), the behaviors that are related to political engagement among Swedish youth (Sveningsson, 2016), the impact of television viewing on political participation among Belgian adolescents (Quintelier & Hooghe, 2011), and how young people in the United Kingdom and Portugal define political engagement (Pontes et al., 2018). A recent study in 2020 explored the strategies used in London, Belfast, and Dublin to engage urban young people in civic and political life and the challenges associated with these efforts (Brady et al., 2020).

Scholars have also conducted comparative studies of Western youth political participation, attitudes, and behaviors. A study by Cammaerts and colleagues (2014) found that the lack of youth political participation in Austria, Finland, France, Hungary, Spain, and the United Kingdom mainly stemmed from young people's beliefs that the existing political

structures, discourse, and practice exclude them and ignore their needs and interests. In a similar research agenda, Timmerman (2009) found that most local authorities in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom merely pay lip service to the idea of allowing young people to engage in the democratic process but do not actually involve young people. To examine the stability of adolescents' political attitudes and behaviors into adulthood, Hooghe and Wilkenfeld (2008) compared survey data of adolescents from eight European countries.

The outburst of digital activism among young people have equally spurred a flurry of research on youth online political participation in Western societies. Scholars have researched on youth online political participation across European countries (Calenda & Meijer, 2009; Espinar-Ruiz & Gonzalez-Rio, 2015; Theocharis, 2011). Studies have also sought to examine the effects of social media on political participation among young people across the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia (Xenos et al., 2014), explore the link between Internet use and youth political attitudes in fifteen European nations (Colombo et al., 2012), and investigate the role of new media on Australian youth's political engagement (Chen & Stilinovic, 2020). Similarly, scholars have looked at the effects of using Facebook among American undergraduate students on the 2008 U.S. presidential election (Vitak et al., 2011), the impact of digital media literacy education on civic and political participation among American high school students, and the relationship between news consumption through digital media and political participation among American youth (Edgerly et al., 2018). While studies on the relationship between American youth and online engagement have greatly informed our understanding of youth political and civic engagement, Klotz (2004) made a compelling argument that "since the internet is a global communication infrastructure, no work on the internet should be complete without a consideration of the situation outside the United States" (p. 189). Likewise,

considering that technologies are rapidly evolving and spreading out in geographic context and impacting political actors of all kinds across the world, no studies on the relationship between digital technology and political engagement could be comprehensive without consideration of cases outside of the West.

While the number of studies exploring Asian youth's political attitudes and behaviors and the relationship between Internet use and youth political behaviors in East Asia and Southeast Asia have been developing in recent years (Abdulrauf et al., 2017; Advani, 2019; Ahmad et al., 2019; Cheng & Jacobs, 2019; Hassan et al., 2015; Hassan et al., 2020; Ho, 2018; Joo, 2018; Kallio, 2020; Khan et al., 2019; Ku, 2019; Lam-Knott, 2019; Lam-Knott & Cheng, 2020; Landgraf, 2020; Lim, 2013; Sinpeng, 2021), nonetheless, much of the core works within the discipline continue to largely focus on understanding young people's political attitudes, behaviors, and engagement in the West. Considering the disproportionate number of works that concentrate on youth in Western societies, research agendas should endeavor to explore young people's political attitudes, behaviors, and engagement in Asia, particularly East Asian and Southeast Asian young people. There are two motivations that necessitate this objective in helping us to better understand what explains the driving force behind Asian young people's growing engagement in politics in recent years and how today's diverse Asian young people perceive politics, political engagement, and the use of digital technology to engage in political matters in a world that is increasingly borderless in the digital realm.

### ***5.2.1 The "Un-Asian" Attitudes and Behaviors of Asian Young People***

The first motivation is the transformation of Asian young people's attitudes and behaviors. In recent years, we have witnessed young people's growing engagement in political

and social issues across Asia. In comparison to the West, political and social movements are considerably slower in Asian societies. Arguably, this is attributable to the famous “Asian values” concept; a concept that emerged in the 1990s. Contrary to Western values that advocate for individualism, personal freedom, universal human rights, transparency, and accountability (Boll, 2001), the Asian Values concept emphasizes the principles and practices of consensus, communitarianism, social order, harmony, unity, discipline, respect for elders, and paternalistic government (Boll, 2001; Han, 1999; Jenco, 2010; Tan, 2004; Thompson, 2001, 2004; Welzel, 2011). The Asian values concept was also championed by Asian leaders, most notably former Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad and the late Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, to counter the spread of Western ideals, such as individual freedom, democracy, human rights, and representative government (Tan, 2004). Furthermore, Asian values were used to respond to Western criticism of Asia, legitimize a regime’s authoritarian rule, and protect Asian traditions against Western influence (Han, 1999). However, the rising engagement of young people in political and social issues across Asia in recent years demonstrate a growing departure from the practices of the Asian values concept among these young people, a populace so globally and digitally connected. More and more young people across Asia are vocally expressing their concerns on political and social issues, making efforts to engage their governments in political dialogues, and courageously standing up against injustices, inequalities, and authoritarianism.

A wave of youth-led initiatives on political and social matters have taken Asia by storm. Many young people across Asia are seen vocally expressing their views on issues related to gender identity, sexual harassment, government accountability and transparency, climate change, race, and politics. Equally, we have seen these young people proactively advocating for same-sex

marriage, LGBTQ rights, democracy, political and social equality, women's rights, and free speech. Particularly, more and more young people in East Asia and Southeast Asia have been vocally expressing their concerns and interests onto the political agenda of their nations. In 2014, young Taiwanese protesters of the Sunflower Movement unleashed a wave of youthful activism that helped to increase public scrutiny of closer economic ties between Taiwan and Mainland China. South Korean students initiated the Candlelight Demonstrations against then-President Park Geun-hye for allegations of a corruption scandal and her immediate resignation. In Hong Kong, the world saw the Umbrella Movement, a series of sit-in street protests where young Hong Kongers courageously voiced for universal suffrage. In 2019, a proposed extradition bill that would have allowed extradition from Hong Kong to Mainland China sparked a second wave of youth protest in Hong Kong. During the 2018 Cambodian general election, Cambodian youths utilized the "#CleanFingers" online campaign on social media to express their protest against Hun Sen's ruling party and to boycott the election. In Myanmar, the military coup d'état that happened in February of 2021 saw the nation's youth courageously fighting for the country's freedom and democracy despite the arrest of thousands of anti-coup protestors. The three-fingered "Hunger Games" salute, popularized by the Hunger Games movies franchise, became an avantgarde symbol for young people across Myanmar and Thailand to challenge authoritarian regimes in their countries.

Considering that more and more East Asian and Southeast Asian young people are exhibiting attitudes and behaviors that are increasingly "un-Asian," it is crucial to further explore the significant causes that contribute to this rising phenomenon and to what extent these causes construct their perceptions of the world they are experiencing and living in, shape their understandings on politics, and have a bearing on how they seek to engage in political issues.

Additionally, the mushrooming of these youth-led political and social initiatives across East Asia and Southeast Asia warrants a deeper understanding of young people's political attitudes, behaviors, and engagement in these regions.

### ***5.2.2 The Influential Wave of Digital Technology and Media across Asia***

The second motivation is associated with the rising influence of digital technology and media across Asia. Data on Internet usage and social media growth rates have shown Asia as the region topping the list as the largest Internet and social media users worldwide. According to the *Internet Users Distribution in the World* report published by Internet World Stats, Asia alone made up 53.4% of the world's total Internet users during the first quarter of 2021.<sup>18</sup> A report published by Backlinko on social media usage and growth showed that Asia leads the social media growth rate in 2019-2020 at 16.98%.<sup>19</sup> In 2021, East Asia accounted for almost 1.2 billion of the world's Internet users, followed by South Asia with 951.11 million users and Southeast Asia coming in third place with 495.95 million users (Statista, 2021).<sup>20</sup> With the growing impact of digital technology and media across Asia, consequently, the phenomenon of digital activism has become a trend that is gaining popularity and momentum among East Asian and Southeast Asian Millennials and Gen Z, especially among members of these two digital pioneers and natives who are Gen-pro.

Members of Gen-pro across East Asia and Southeast Asia are subscribing to digital tactics to engage in politics. During the 2014 Umbrella Movement, young Hong Kong protesters used WhatsApp, the chat messaging app, to quickly disseminate information about the

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<sup>18</sup> Internet World Stats. (2021, July 3). <https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>

<sup>19</sup> Dean, B. (2021, October 10). *Social Network Usage & Growth Statistics: How Many People Use Social Media in 2021?*. Backlinko. <https://backlinko.com/social-media-users>

<sup>20</sup> Johnson, J. (2021, September 29). *Number of worldwide internet users in 2021, by region*. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/249562/number-of-worldwide-internet-users-by-region/>

demonstrations and to inform other fellow protesters about police whereabouts (Chen et al., 2014). Hashtag activism is also becoming a trend among these young people. Several notable examples demonstrate this growing trend. Netizens from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Thailand formed an online pro-democracy solidarity movement using the “#MilkTeaAlliance” hashtag. Not only has this online solidarity movement become a transnational digital network for young people to communicate and support each other in their fight against authoritarianism, but also serves as a significant symbol that mobilizes citizens to seek for political changes across East Asia and Southeast Asia. Myanmar’s “#WhatIsHappeninginMyanmar” seeks to raise international awareness of the current situation in Myanmar and helps people to know more about the post-coup scenario of Myanmar. The 2018 “#CleanFingers” campaign in Cambodia was a form of youth protest to boycott Cambodia’s fraudulent election and Cambodian youth’s fight against an authoritarian regime. In Thailand, the “#FreeYouth” campaign, which was initially launched by Tattap “Ford” Ruangprapaikitseree and Panumas “James” Singprom on their Facebook group “Free Youth” page, helped spark one of the largest anti-government protests in Thailand (Sinpeng, 2021). Malaysia’s “#Bersih4” was a political movement that called for the removal of former Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak, who was accused of a corruption scandal. The “Bersih 4” campaign witnessed a huge success of solidarity gatherings of Malaysians in 70 cities around the world with rallies in Malaysia.<sup>21</sup>

Given the existing data that demonstrate Asia’s lead in the number of Internet and social media users worldwide and the growing trend of hashtag activism across Asia, more studies should endeavor to explore the rising force of digital technology and media on Asian young

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<sup>21</sup> Ng, E. (2015, August 29). *Bersih 4 takes off worldwide in solidarity with rallies in Malaysia*. The Malaysian Insider. <https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/bersih-4-takes-worldwide-solidarity-rallies-malaysia-0>

people's engagement in political and social matters, especially among East Asian and Southeast Asian Millennials and Gen Z.

### **5.3 Conclusion**

Considering the rise of youth-led initiatives on political and social matters across East Asia and Southeast Asia in recent years and the rapid growth of Internet usage and social media networks throughout these regions, more research agendas should endeavor to better understand how young people from these regions perceive politics, political engagement, and the role of digital technology on their generation's political engagement. While having more case studies would have been ideal, unfortunately the on-going situation with the COVID-19 pandemic presented difficulties in conducting fieldwork and in-person interview, along with securing additional research funding. Therefore, this dissertation project proposes to select Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Taiwan for this study and focus on members of Millennials and Gen Z from these three places, with Hong Kong and Taiwan representing East Asia and Malaysia representing Southeast Asia. Additionally, the author's familiarity with the cultural and social backgrounds of these three places and ability to speak their local languages and dialects further support their selection for this study and potentially aid in the focus group interviews of participants from these three places. To gain a better understanding of the political attitudes and behaviors of East Asian and Southeast Asian young people, this study carefully explores how Millennials and Gen Z from Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Taiwan (1) perceive politics, (2) political engagement, (3) the role of digital technology on their generation's political engagement, (4) their opportunities for political engagement, and (5) the challenges they face in engaging in politics.



## 6 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 6.1 Chapter Introduction

The rise of youth-led initiatives on political and social matters around the world in recent years defies the conventional image that young people recoil from civic or political engagement and are disinterested in social and political issues. Specifically, as discussed in Chapter Five, young people from East Asia and Southeast Asia are exhibiting attitudes and behaviors that are increasingly “un-Asian” when they vocally express their views on various political and social issues, organize protests and rallies, and advocate for greater political equality. Their actions in recent years are demonstrating a significant departure from the highly cherished “Asian values” concept that emphasizes the principles and practices of consensus, social order, discipline, respect for elders, and paternalistic government. Despite this phenomenon, much of the core works within the discipline continue to largely focus on understanding young people’s political attitudes and behaviors in Western societies. Following this premise, a deeper understanding of what shapes East Asian and Southeast Asian young people’s perceptions of politics and political engagement, including the factors that have a bearing on why and how they seek to engage in political matters are needed than that captured by existing studies on their patterns of political engagement. More research agendas should endeavor to carefully explore how young people from East Asia and Southeast Asia perceive the world they live in, politics, political engagement, and the role of digital technology and media for political engagement.

In conducting this dissertation project, I hope the outcome of the study would furnish us with a better understanding of how members of Gen-pro from East Asia and Southeast Asia perceive politics, political engagement, the challenges for political engagement, and their opportunities to engage in politics. Furthermore, it is equally important to understand the factors

that shape these perceptions of theirs and to what extent they have a bearing on how they seek to engage in political matters. This study also hopes to explore whether young people's constructive consciousness, because of technological evolution, information explosion, and digital transformation, nurtures certain attitudes and behaviors among them that serve as impetus for them to seek the political and social changes they aspire to have. This dissertation project seeks to explore East Asian and Southeast Asian Millennials' and Gen Zers' understanding of politics and political engagement and perceptions of the role of digital technology and media on political engagement by focusing on Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Taiwan. It is important to underscore that although three different places are proposed for this research, the rationale is to demonstrate that ultimately the outcome of this study could have value beyond one nation case and is not particular to one specific regional, cultural, historical, social, or political context.

## 6.2 Youth-centric Study

Today's young people belong to a diverse group of individuals. According to CIRCLE, a non-partisan, independent research organization that focuses on American youth civic engagement, young people in America are incredibly diverse in many aspects. Studies conducted by CIRCLE on youth civic education and engagement in the United States reveal that American youth are diverse in their identities, experiences, opinions, values, goals, and visions for the country, including the ways they seek to engage in social matters.<sup>22</sup> Since young people are not a monolith but are diverse in many aspects, three simple motivations call for increased youth-centric approach research agenda. The first motivation centers around the rigid concepts on political engagement or participation that continue to dominate most research on youth

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<sup>22</sup> CIRCLE. *Understanding Youth Attitudes and Beliefs*. <https://circle.tufts.edu/our-research/understanding-youth-attitudes-and-beliefs>

participation. As highlighted in Chapter 2, these terms that are mostly defined by adults tend to produce misleading conclusions (O'Toole et al., 2003, p. 48) that generate unfair assumptions about young people's political attitudes and behaviors. Most notably, the common assumptions surrounding young people's political attitudes and behaviors assert that young people do not seem to care about politics and are politically ignorant. A youth-centric study would provide us with a better understanding of young people's perceptions of politics and political engagement, the challenges inhibiting them from engaging in politics, and the different types of political issues they seek to engage in. This understanding could then serve as a forwarding guide to innovate studies on youth political attitudes and behaviors that could provide further solutions and opportunities for young people to meaningfully engage in the political process of their nation.

The second motivation stems from political leaders' lack of understanding of young people and the public's continued biases towards young people's attitudes and behaviors. A youth-centric study could potentially furnish us with a clearer understanding of the various facets of their attitudes and behaviors, how they perceive the world, how they interpret the political and social realities confronting them in today's complex world, and the reasons for their reactions. Political leaders could leverage this understanding to improve upon the current political system, process, and culture that would eliminate the barriers that keep them at arm's length and ultimately be inclusive of young people. This would in turn gradually restore young people's faith, trust, and confidence in the government and the political system. Likewise, policymakers could integrate this understanding in its policy revisions that would inform young people that their political leaders do listen to them and the issues that they are concerned about are not being overlooked. Furthermore, such understanding could lessen public's biases towards young people

and provide the much-needed awareness about young people's diverse perspectives that could eventually help institutions, such as schools, civil society organizations, or non-governmental organizations, on how best to support young people's engagement in politics and civic life.

Thirdly, today's young people grew up with and are heavily exposed to artificial intelligence tools, computers, the Internet, machine learning development, smartphones, and social media. As a diverse group of individuals experiencing and living in a globally connected world through digital technology and media, a youth-centric study would allow us to understand the extent to which digital technology and media play in fostering certain attitudes and behaviors among them that serve as impetus for their diverse reactions or approaches to contemporary political and social issues. This is particularly important as more and more young people are turning to the digital world, which is providing young people with greater opportunities to engage in political and civic matters and an accessible space where previously marginalized young people can voice their views (Keating & Melis, 2017; Kim & Amnå, 2015). With this understanding, scholars, schools, governments, and civil society organizations can meaningfully involve young people in various political and civic activities, especially in leveraging young people's digital skillsets and media creations for these engagements. Furthermore, in-depth knowledge about young people's increasing use of digital technology and media could help governments in legislating laws, policies, and regulations to improve the security of the digital space that would further create a safe, inclusive, and equitable environment for young people to voice their views, develop their skills, seek cross-border collaboration on civic and political activities, and initiate dialogues of political and social concerns.

The increasing youth-led initiatives on political and social issues across the globe in recent years demonstrate that young people today are far from the common biases or stereotypes

that typically color their attitudes and behaviors. These initiatives of theirs inform us that young people are conscious about the political and social realities confronting them and do care about the world they live in. With a research agenda that is youth-centric, where we seek to gain a clearer and deeper understanding of how today's diverse young people perceive the world, we could potentially gain better insights into how they think about the issues that confront them in today's complex world, perceive politics, see their opportunities for meaningful political engagement, and understand the use of digital technology and media in transforming the ways and expanding the prospects for their political and civic engagement. These insights could potentially inform policymakers and political leaders on how best to include today's tech-savvy young people in political conversations as they continue to find their place, identity, and voice in adult-dominated societies. Understanding young people's diverse perspectives and attitudes marks a crucial step to continue seeking and initiating meaningful ways to engage and include them as integral partners of society in building a better, more inclusive, and more equitable future world. Not only are young people's voices crucial for the continued health of a robust civil society, but also an indispensable aspect of liberal democracy that aspires to endow people with power.

### **6.3 Research Design**

In taking a research agenda that is youth-centric, this study proposes a mixed method research, using online survey and synchronous online focus group interview. The following section discusses the research design for this study and the research limitations present in this study.

### **6.3.1 Online Survey Research**

Online surveys (also known as web-based surveys or web surveys) are becoming an increasingly popular method of gathering information about people's preferences, values, beliefs, ideas, and perceptions (Andrews et al., 2003; Bachmann & Elfrink, 1996; Harlow, 2010; Stanton, 1998; Witmer et al., 1999; Wood & Smith, 2001; Van Selm & Jankowski, 2006; Yun & Trumbo, 2000). It is also one of the most used research tools in the social sciences (Fife-Schaw, 2006). Online surveys are less expensive to administer (Spitz et al., 2006), help researchers to save costs (Bachmann & Elfrink, 1996; Couper, 2000; Llieva et al., 2002; Watt, 1999; Witmer et al., 1999; Wright, 2005; Yun & Trumbo, 2000), allow researchers to reach more respondents in a short amount of time (Bachmann & Elfrink, 1996; Garton et al., 2003; Llieva, et al., 2002; Taylor, 2000; Yun & Trumbo, 2000), and has the potential to access hard-to-reach populations (Garton et al., 1999; Muhtaseb, 2004; Regmi et al., 2016; Wellman, 1997). Online survey also provides convenience and flexibility to the respondents, where they can take the survey at their own convenience, complete the survey according to their own pace, by taking the survey in multiple sessions (Regmi et al., 2016). Many large cross-country studies have been using online questionnaire surveys through survey platforms, such as SurveyMonkey, Qualtrics, and Google Forms (Regmi et al., 2016).

#### **6.3.1.1 : Data Collection and Participant Recruitment**

This study used Georgia State University Qualtrics survey platform to design the questionnaires for the online survey. Responses were anonymous and no personal information, such as names, mailing addresses, email addresses, and government issued identification number, that would identify the respondents was collected in the online survey. Female and male

participants aged 18 years old and above from Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Taiwan were invited to participate in an online survey from July 2021 to January 2022. The survey took approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete. Before taking the survey, respondents indicated their consent to participate in the survey via an online informed consent form on the first page of the online survey. Survey respondents were randomly recruited via Cint, a paid online panel platform. Respondents received redeemable points valued at \$3.00 (Hong Kong), \$2.10 (Malaysia), and \$2.00 (Taiwan), which they could use to redeem online rewards on Cint's insights exchange marketplace for their participation in the online survey.

Data recorded on the Georgia State University Qualtrics platform was exported into Excel (password protected) and csv file format (password protected), which was used for data analysis. The survey data obtained was analyzed using Power BI, Microsoft Excel, and statistical software R. The sample size was calculated using recommendations by Krejcie and Morgan (1970), Alreck and Settle (1995), and Adam (2020), with a 95% confidence level and 5% confidence interval (margin of error). The online survey consisted of 5 sections, with a mixture of multiple-choice questions and Likert scale questions:

1. Digital Attitude and Behavior – this section investigated respondents' online activities and how obtaining information through technology has influenced their views or understanding about politics.
2. General Perceptions on Politics, Political Engagement, and Political Behavior – this section investigated respondents' general view of politics, opportunities for political engagement, and what types of activities they would consider to be engaging in politics.
3. Personality – this section investigated respondents' proactive behavior, progressive attitude, and professional mindset.

4. Political Awareness – this section investigated respondents’ awareness of current political or social issues.
5. Demographic – this section asked respondents some basic questions about themselves.

#### *6.3.1.2 Research Limitations*

While there are advantages to using online surveys to gather information about a desired population’s attitudes, ideas, and preferences, researchers have highlighted concerns in using web-based surveys. The drawback of online surveys and online data collection is self-selection bias since there are individuals who are more likely than others to participate in an online survey (Anderson, 2010; Caplan & Turner, 2007; Chase & Alvarez, 2000; Eysenbach & Wyatt, 2002; Mann & Stewart, 2000; Stanton, 1998; Tates et al., 2009; Thompson et al., 2003; Witmer et al., 1999). Secondly, as online survey requires prospective participants to have access to the Internet, there could be a biased population with regards to age, gender, race, and income (Selwyn & Robinson, 1998; Spitz et al., 2006). Consequently, it has been argued that online surveys are not representative of the population as they tend to exclude non-Internet users and that the data collected may over-estimate the significance and size of the effects (Boulianne, 2009, p. 204).

While these concerns are not without justification, however, the cost of owning computers and mobile phones have become increasingly affordable to all and easily accessible for all (Akiyoshi & Ono, 2008; Crabtree et al., 2003; Kavehrad, 2010; Nie et al., 2002; Rashid & Elder, 2009), and the global population’s access to the Internet has increased dramatically over the last few decades. According to DataReportal, the state of the world’s population use of the Internet in October of 2021 alone stood at 4.88 billion Internet users globally, which is



approximately 62% of the global population.<sup>23</sup> The report further suggested that this number continues to grow, with DataReportal's data showing that nearly 222 million new Internet users were reportedly coming online over the past 12 months in 2021.<sup>24</sup> These facts lessen the concern raised regarding the lack of representation of the population surveyed, since people are able to access the Internet more conveniently and easily today. Additionally, data on Internet usage and social media growth rates have shown that Asia tops the list with the largest Internet and social media users worldwide, with East Asia accounting for almost 1.2 billion of the world's Internet users, followed by South Asia with 951.11 million users and Southeast Asia coming in third place with 495.95 million users in 2021 (Statista, 2021).<sup>25</sup> This fact makes administering web-based surveys to participants in East Asia and Southeast Asia feasible and fitting for this study. Furthermore, while it would be desirable to directly observe participants' political behaviors and the political situations in Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Taiwan, however, considering the uncertainties surrounding the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and travel restrictions in place that have frustrated any feasibility of travelling to Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Taiwan to gather data in-person, it was more appropriate and convenient to administer web-based survey to collect data for this study.

### **6.3.2 *Online Focus Group (OFG) Study***

As one of the well-established and widely used qualitative research methodologies, focus group study is a popular research tool that researchers use to explore research participants' attitudes, beliefs, opinions, feelings, concerns, preferences, and perceptions on a specific product,

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<sup>23</sup> Kemp, S. (2021, October 21). *Digital 2021 October Global Statshot Report*. DataReportal. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-october-global-statshot>

<sup>24</sup> (see Footnote 2).

<sup>25</sup> Johnson, J. (2021, September 29). *Number of worldwide internet users in 2021, by region*. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/249562/number-of-worldwide-internet-users-by-region/>

item, service, concept, issue, idea, or event (Ashbury, 1995; Carey, 2016; Kenny, 2005; Kite & Phongsavan, 2017; Kitzinger, 1995; Krueger, 1994; Nyamathi & Shuler, 1990; Parker & Tritter, 2006; Peek & Fothergill, 2009; Rabiee, 1999; Stewart et al., 2005). With focus group studies, researchers can interview the research participants and at the same time observe the research participants' behaviors, emotions, and reactions and how they interact as a group (Plummer-D'Amato, 2008). In short, focus group studies allow researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of research participants' knowledge and experiences in an open-ended format, capitalize on interpersonal communication, and gather research participants' insights and perspectives around specific topics (Kitzinger, 1995). While focus group studies can yield valuable insights about research participants' opinions, perspectives, and feelings on a specific area of interest, this method of data collection presents several drawbacks. These disadvantages include difficulties in reaching out to geographically dispersed populations, the concern of incurring extra costs of finding an appropriate location to conduct the focus group study, and the inconvenience of having participants travelling to the focus group study location that could be time consuming (Schneider et al., 2002).

The maturation of technology has allowed researchers to capitalize on the plethora of capabilities and conveniences that technology affords in the research process. One such convenience is using the Internet as a tool to facilitate focus group studies (Abrams et al., 2015). Online focus group studies take place within an online environment that uses online tools, such as conference calling or chat rooms, to collect information about research participants' perspectives or preferences on specific topics or issues (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005). While traditional in-person or face-to-face (FTF) focus group studies require participants to travel to a designated location to participate in the study, unconstrained by location and time, online focus

group (OFG) affords both research participants and researchers the flexibility to engage in the focus group study from a convenient location anywhere in the world without having the need to travel (Schneider et al., 2002; Tates et al., 2009; Woodyatt et al., 2016). Furthermore, OFG incurs less cost for researchers as they do not have to pay for an ideal location to conduct the focus group study and for participants as well, since they do not have to travel to the designated focus group study location (Landreth, 1998; Maddox, 1998; Miller, 1994; Reid & Reid, 2005). Online focus groups (OFGs) also compensate the difficulty of recruiting hard to reach populations inherent in traditional in-person OFGs (O'Connor & Madge, 2003). Consequently, OFGs have become an attractive and increasingly popular research tool among researchers to collect information about participants' perspectives, feelings, opinions, or preferences. (Abrams et al., 2015; Birnbaum, 2004; Burton & Bruening, 2003; Fox et al., 2007; O'Connor & Madge, 2003; Reid & Reid, 2005; Thomas et al., 2013).

There are two types of online focus groups (OFGs) that researchers can choose to use to collect information about research participants' perspectives or preferences around specific issues. These two types of OFGs are synchronous and asynchronous groups (Abrams et al., 2015; Tates et al., 2009; Thrul et al., 2017; Watson & Newby, 2013). According to Thrul and colleagues (2017), synchronous OFGs are conducted as a real-time discussion (p. 106). On the other hand, asynchronous OFGs or non-real-time OFGs allow research participants to answer the questions at their own time and pace (Rolls et al., 2016). Focus group researchers conclude that synchronous OFGs have the advantage of resembling the experience of traditional in-person or face-to-face (FTF) focus group studies (Kite & Phongsavan, 2017; Smithson, 2008) as research participants can respond to visual and aural clues (Kite & Phongsavan, 2017), thereby leading to a greater expression of emotions (Fox et al., 2007, p. 539). A study conducted by Brügger and

Willens (2009) that compared OFGs and in-person focus groups further revealed high degree of similarity between these two methods in terms of their breadth, depth, efficiency, group dynamics, non-verbal impressions, and respondent attitudes. Based on these advantages present in synchronous OFGs, this study will use synchronous OFGs to interview research participants.

#### *6.3.2.1 Data Collection and Participant Recruitment*

Since collecting in-depth data in qualitative studies could be unpredictable throughout the course of the project (Robinson, 2014), it has been suggested that researchers monitor the data collection and alter the sample size accordingly as the study progresses (Silverman, 2013). Scholars suggested using Grounded Theory as it allows flexibility on the sample size for the study as the research progresses (Glaser, 1978; Corbin & Strauss, 2014). According to Corbin and Strauss (2014), with Grounded Theory research, collecting and analyzing the data at the same time will allow the researcher to make real-time judgements as to whether additional data collection would be necessary to contribute further to developing the theory.

It is also suggested that researchers continue with the data collection until there is a clear pattern observed in the data collected, whereby further interviews of the participants will not likely produce any additional or novel information but only repetitive information (Krueger, 1994) or that additional data collection will not contribute to the theory development process (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). When this happened, the researcher will stop collecting data. In applying Grounded Theory for the synchronous OFG study, I collected and analyzed the data simultaneously while the OFG study was ongoing and ceased the OFG study when a clear pattern was observed, or additional data collection did not contribute further to the theory development process.

Focus group study has “the primary aim of describing and understanding perceptions, interpretations, and beliefs of a select population on a particular topic or issue from the perspectives of the group’s participants” (Khan & Manderson, 1992, p. 57). Following this premise, focus group study would allow me to capture a deeper understanding of how Millennials and Gen Z from Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Taiwan perceive politics and what engaging in politics actually means to them. With focus group study, I would be able to explore how research participants from these three places construct their consciousness about political matters and the world they are living and experiencing in, and whether a similar pattern of this consciousness is present across participants from Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Taiwan. This is significant as the construction of people’s perceptions of the social reality around them and the world they live in, in view of their consciousness, is an abstract concept that cannot be easily quantified.

Current literatures suggest limiting the group size to around four to five participants per focus group study, since limiting the number of each focus group to not exceeding five participants ensures that all participants have the opportunity to engaged in the discussion (Guest, et al., 2017; Kite & Phongsavan, 2017). Other scholars suggested having three to four participants per focus group session to keep the procedures and context surrounding data collection and analysis consistent to enhance methodological rigor (Coenen et al., 2012; Guest et al., 2017; Hagaman & Wutich; 2017). Considering the recommendations suggested by scholars, this study allocated three to four participants for each synchronous online focus group session.

Following the procedures recommended by Krueger and Casey (2015) and administered by Pontes et al. (2018) when conducting focus group study, each focus group discussion started off with a general question exploring the participants’ views on politics, whereby participants

were asked to state three to four words to describe their thoughts and feelings about politics. This was followed by questions designed to further explore their digital behavior and attitude, their understanding of political engagement, their previous engagement in political matters, the challenges they faced in engaging in politics, the behaviors they perceive as constituting political engagement, and any political or social issues that in their views are not making enough progress. This study applied the data collection methods used for focus group studies as suggested by Stewart et al. (2007), namely audio and visual recording of the discussion, note-taking during the discussion, and participant observation. The synchronous OFG study data was analyzed in the qualitative data analysis (QDA) software, NVivo, using thematic content analysis by identifying common themes or patterns across the data set. I began to familiarize the data by going through the interview and started taking notes and transcribing parts of the interview pertaining to political perspectives, opportunities for political engagement, and actions or behaviors representing political engagement. The next step was to assign codes to the data, which allowed me to search for the themes or patterns. The following step was to collate the codes into broader themes. After reviewing and refining the themes (going back and forth between the codes and themes), I identified any contradictions to see if the themes overlap. The final step was to finalize a set of themes that are coherent and distinctive, with clearly defined themes.

Female and male participants aged between 18 and 40 years old were recruited to participate in the synchronous online focus group (OFG) study from July 2021 to January 2022, using a two-step process. For the first stage of the recruitment process, participants were invited to participate in the synchronous OFG study through a recruitment poster shared on two social media platforms, namely Facebook and LinkedIn. The method of recruitment was that of

voluntary response sampling as the recruitment for participation was on my Facebook page and LinkedIn page. The recruitment poster included a brief introduction of the research, the study population, the duration of the OFG study, the incentive participants will receive for participating in the study, and the QR code that participants was instructed to scan to contact me through my Georgia State University email account. For the second stage of the recruitment process, upon scanning the QR code to express their interest in the synchronous OFG study, participants were automatically directed to the meeting schedule website, “When is Good,” where they chose the date and time that best fitted their availability from a range of proposed dates and times. Upon choosing the preferred date and time, participants received a Webex video conferencing link for the synchronous OFG study.

Webex Meeting was chosen as the web conferencing service because it is supported by Georgia State University’s online learning system and the “Free Webex” personal account is available in Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Taiwan. The rule of thumb for the duration of a focus group study is approximately one to two hours, depending on the complexity of the topic under investigation, the number of questions, and the number of participants (Nyumba et al., 2018). Since “Free Webex” personal account only limits the web conferencing to be no more than 50 minutes, the duration of this synchronous OFG study was ideal to avoid participants from experiencing fatigue when discussions become too long.

Two days before the scheduled synchronous OFG study, participants received an email notification reminding them of the focus group study. The email also included a digital copy of the informed consent form approved by Georgia State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) that participants can keep and a Qualtrics link for a short demographic questionnaire that participants had to complete prior to the scheduled synchronous OFG study. Before the start of

each online focus group study, I reminded participants of the confidentiality information and visually reinforced this reminder via PowerPoint slides. I also informed the participants that they can stop the synchronous OFG study and withdraw from the study at any stage of the discussion process. To protect the identity of the participants, a study number assigned to each participant was used throughout the focus group study and when making references to the participants' opinions in the discussion chapter of this dissertation project. The assigned study number was automatically generated by Qualtrics when participants completed the short demographic questionnaire. No personal information, such as names, mailing addresses, email addresses, and government issued identification number, that would identify the participants was collected in the synchronous OFG study.

#### *6.3.2.2 Research Limitations*

While there are merits to using online focus groups (OFGs) as a qualitative research tool, focus group researchers have also highlighted the drawbacks of using online focus groups. One concern is with the issue of underrepresentation of the overall population. Since OFGs are conducted through an online environment, only Internet users would be able to participate, thereby excluding potential participants who do not have access to the Internet (Schneider et al., 2002). Even for research participants who participated in OFGs, they might encounter technical issues that would cause them to lose their Internet connection (Abrams et al., 2015; Dubrovsky et al., 1991; Schneider et al., 2002) and subsequently dropping out in the middle of the interview or discussion while the focus group study is ongoing (Abrams et al., 2015). Another disadvantage with OFGs is the possibility of no-show from participants, whereby there would be many



participants that initially agreed to participate but do not show up in the chat room eventually during the scheduled online focus group study (Weissman, 1998).

Self-selection of participants from a non-random sample pool may further decrease the external validity of the study (Tates et al., 2009). As participants were recruited using voluntary response sampling, this could also result in convenience sampling whereby participants were recruited based on their availability and accessibility (Anderson, 2010; Krueger, 1994; Nyumba et al., 2018) which could lead to volunteer bias (Ibekwe et al., 2010; Meyer & Wilson, 2009). Furthermore, there could be a possibility of snowball sampling occurring, where participants who completed the OFG study could potentially share the recruitment information with their friends or acquaintances to participate in this study, thus biasing the sample as the sample may not be truly representative of the population. Despite these drawbacks, focus group study has “the primary aim of describing and understanding perceptions, interpretations, and beliefs of a select population on a particular topic or issue from the perspectives of the group’s participants” (Khan & Manderson, 1992, p. 57). OFG study could result in a “Hawthorne effect”, where participants could change their behavior or might not be honest in their responses (McDermott, 2002). There was also the concern of research participants offering socially desirable answers (Paulhus, 2002, 2017) due to the presence of the researcher as the moderator for the OFG study and other participants in the focus group discussion. This could potentially reduce the internal validity of the outcome of the study.

However, considering the uncertainty surrounding the ongoing situation with the COVID-19 pandemic that was likely to continue posing risk to the safety of the research participants and the researcher, including the travel restrictions imposed to travel to Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Taiwan to conduct in-person focus group study, it was not possible to travel to

Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Taiwan. The increasing attack on freedom of speech and democratic freedom in Hong Kong by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that resulted in the arrest of hundreds of academics, activists, pro-democracy demonstrators, journalists, lawmakers, and politicians equally pose risk to the safety of the researcher to travel to Hong Kong to conduct interviews that are of political in nature. Given these concerns, this research proposes to conduct synchronous online focus group (OFG) study. Furthermore, given that the Internet has become a popular communication tool among today's young people (Fox et al., 2007) and this study focusing on investigating Millennials' and Gen Zers' perceptions on politics, political engagement, and digital technology, it is thus fitting to use synchronous online focus group to explore the meanings, values, and beliefs that Millennials and Gen Z from Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Taiwan ascribe to politics and political engagement today.

## 7 ONLINE SURVEY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 7.1 Survey Participants' Demographics

3173 survey participants participated in the online survey. 2256 participants belonged to the Gen-pro group (aged 18 to 41 years old) while 917 participants belonged to the Non Gen-pro group (aged 42 years old and above) (see Figure 5). The demographic characteristics of the survey participants are summarized below and shown on their corresponding figures:

- 891 survey participants were from Hong Kong, 1199 were from Malaysia, and 1083 were from Taiwan (see Figure 6).
- 1702 survey participants were male, 1411 were female, 51 preferred not to say, and 9 preferred to self-describe (see Figure 7).
- 1710 survey participants earned a bachelor's degree, 836 graduated with a high school diploma, 473 earned a master's degree, 113 earned a doctorate degree, and 41 survey participants indicated other types of education attained (see Figure 8).
- For survey participants from Malaysia, there were 697 ethnic Malays, 392 ethnic Chinese, 67 ethnic Indians, and 43 self-described as Eurasian or indigenous people in Malaysia, such as Dusun, Kadazan, Bajau, or Iban (see Figure 9).

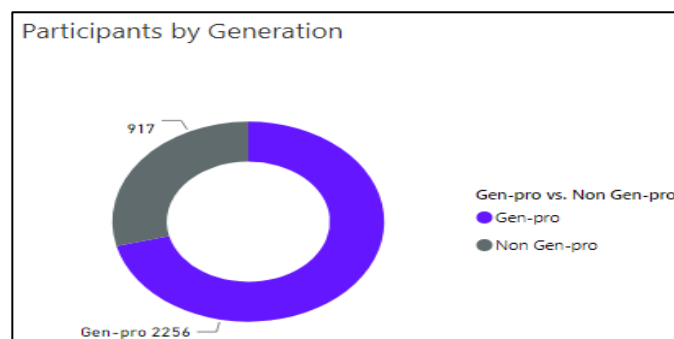


Figure 5: Survey Participants by Generation (Gen-pro vs. Non Gen-pro)

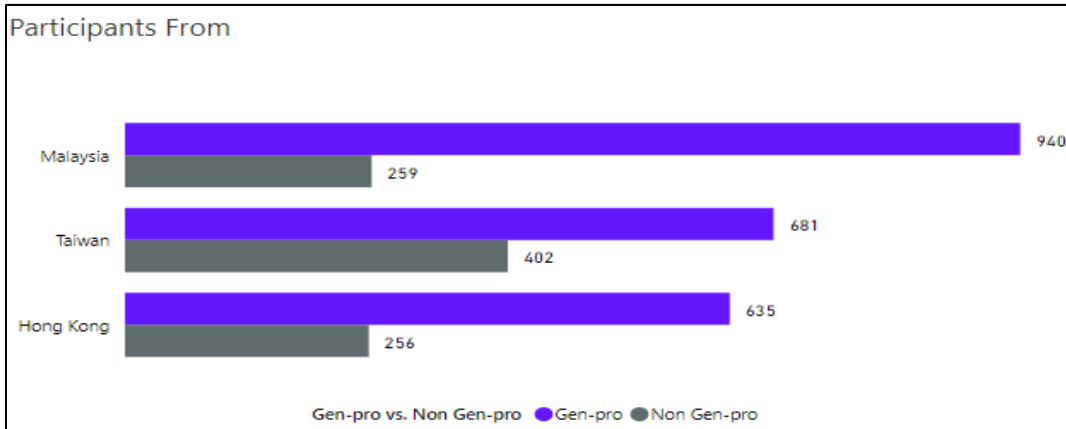


Figure 6: Survey Participants by Place of Origin

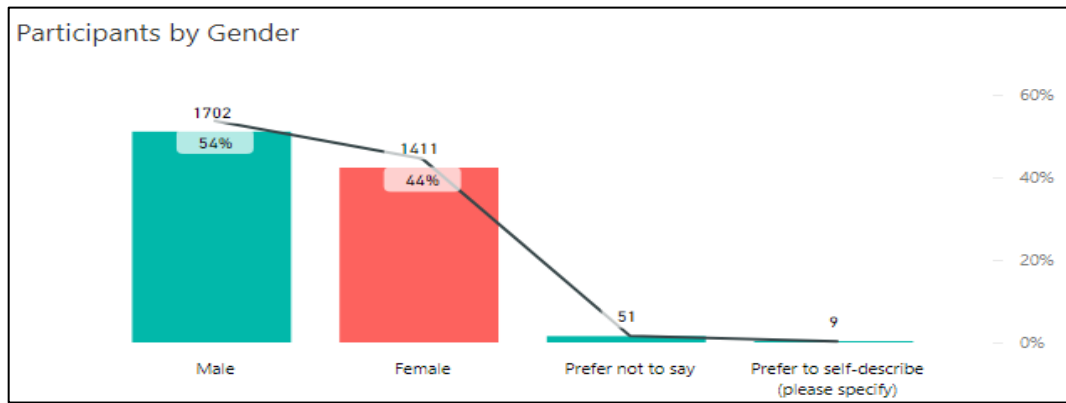


Figure 7: Survey Participants by Gender

**Education Level**

Gen-pro vs. Non Gen-pro Highest Education	Gen-pro		Non Gen-pro		Total	
	Headcounts	%CT	Headcounts	%CT	Headcounts	%CT
Bachelor's degree	1255	56%	455	50%	1710	54%
Doctorate degree	89	4%	24	3%	113	4%
High school diploma/secondary education/senior high school (e.g., SPM, HKDSE, GED)	555	25%	281	31%	836	26%
Master's degree	331	15%	142	15%	473	15%
Other (please specify)	26	1%	15	2%	41	1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>2256</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>917</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>3173</b>	<b>100%</b>

Figure 8: Survey Participants' Highest Level of Education

Participants Ethnicity								
Participants From	Hong Kong		Malaysia		Taiwan		Total	
	Ethnicity	Headcount	% CT	Headcount	% CT	Headcount	% CT	Headcount
Chinese			392	33%			392	12%
Does Not Disclose	891	100%			1083	100%	1974	62%
Indian			67	6%			67	2%
Malay			697	58%			697	22%
Other (please specify)			43	4%			43	1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>891</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>1199</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>1083</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>3173</b>	<b>100%</b>

Figure 9: Malaysian Participants by Ethnicity

## 7.2 Findings and Discussion

Survey participants' responses were organized into four categories. The following section discusses the results and findings in each category.

### 7.2.1 Digital Behavior and Attitude

Figure 10 shows the comparison of digital behavior between Gen-pro and Non Gen-pro survey participants based on how frequently they use eight common types of social media platforms, namely Facebook, Instagram, Line, Tik Tok, Twitter, WeChat, WhatsApp, and YouTube. Results from Figure 10 shows that the most frequently used social media platform among members of Gen-pro is YouTube with 1258 survey participants indicating always, while 378 Non Gen-pro survey participants responded that they always use Facebook. Of all the eight social media platforms, the least frequently used social media platform for both Gen-pro and

Non Gen-pro survey participants is Tik Tok, with 852 Gen-pro survey participants and 434 Non Gen-pro survey participants indicating that they never use Tik Tok.

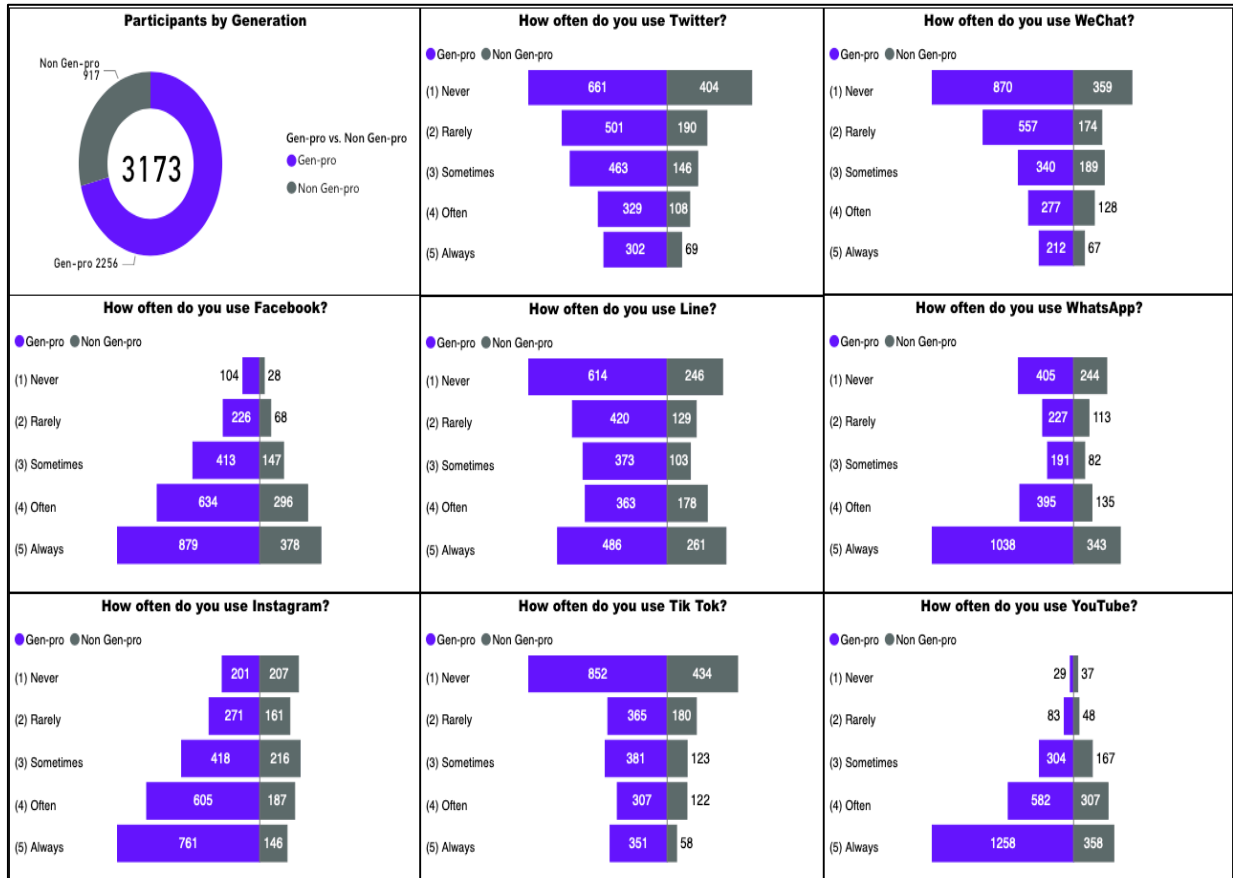


Figure 10: Survey Participants' Social Media Habit

It is possible that YouTube is the most frequently used social media platform among Gen-pro survey participants because YouTube serves many different purposes compared to the other seven social medial platforms. Specifically, YouTube provides audio and visual representation for its users, a feature that aligns with the likes, attitudes, and preferences of the Millennials and Gen Z. Users of YouTube, particularly young people, could use YouTube to obtain all kinds of readily available information and news. Users of YouTube also use this

multipurpose social media platform to learn new things or acquire new skills. This potentially demonstrates that members of Gen-pro who frequently use YouTube could tend to focus on self-improvement and progress. Users of YouTube could also use this social media platform to create their own self-channels to promote their message or raise awareness on certain issues. As for Non Gen-pro survey participants, Facebook is the most frequently used social media platform among all the social media platforms, as they could presumably be using Facebook to seek opportunities to connect and network with others, rather than using a multipurpose social media platform like YouTube that is comparatively more popular among Gen-pro survey participants to perform a variety of functions. In other words, YouTube is the most frequently used social media platform among Gen-pro survey participants as they could capitalize on the various tools that this multipurpose digital platform affords its users.

Figure 11 shows the impact of using digital technology on Gen-pro and Non Gen-pro survey participants on six aspects. Majority of Gen-pro and Non Gen-pro survey participants agreed that using digital technology empowers them to take action for political or social issues, allows them to keep up with political or social issues, increases their awareness of political or social issues, exposes them to diverse ideas, and expands their social network. Of all the six aspects, the one asking survey participants the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that technology exposes them to diverse ideas received the highest number of survey participants from both groups expressing their agreement on it, with 970 Gen-pro survey participants and 465 Non Gen-pro survey participants. Specifically, the survey results revealed an interesting finding. Despite both Gen-pro and Non Gen-pro survey participants (with 825 Gen-pro survey participants and 317 Non Gen-pro survey participants) agreeing that digital technology empowers them to take action for political or social issues, however, when asked to state the

extent to which they agreed or disagreed that digital technology gives them more opportunities to engage in politics, majority of the survey participants from both groups were neutral, indicating that they neither agreed nor disagreed that digital technology gives them more opportunities to engage in politics. While majority of Gen-pro survey participants (38%) stated that they neither agreed nor disagreed that digital technology gives them more opportunities to engage in politics, 33% of Gen-pro survey participants agreed that digital technology gives them more opportunities to engage in politics.

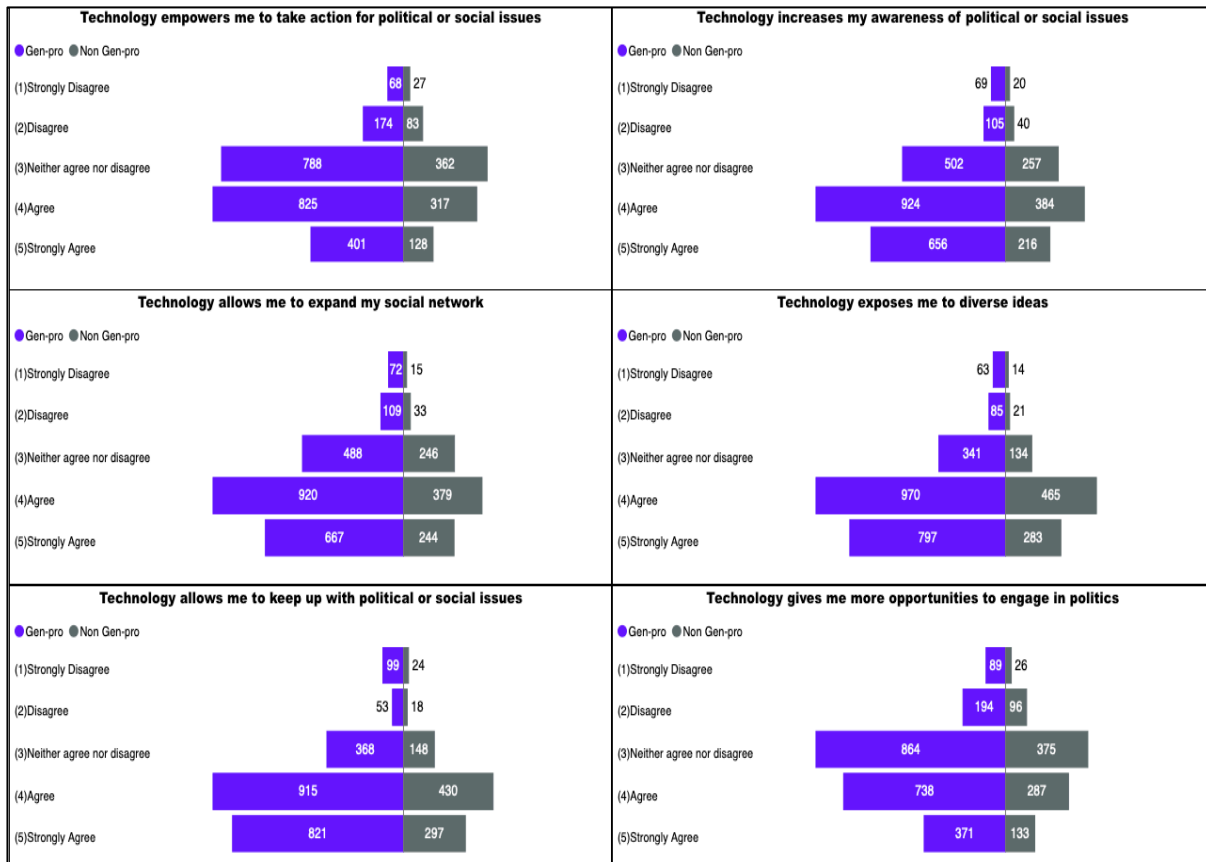


Figure 11: The Impact of Using Digital Technology on Survey Participants

Figure 12 shows the extent to which survey participants agreed or disagreed whether learning information about political or social issues through digital technology impact their



attitudes. Results indicated that majority of Gen-pro and Non Gen-pro survey participants agreed that learning information about political or social issues through digital technology increases their acceptance of diversity, interest to know more about political or social issues, awareness of what is happening in the world, and their knowledge of political or social issues. Using digital technology to obtain information about political or social issues not only has a significant impact on the attitudes of members of Gen-pro but also members of Non Gen-pro. However, both Gen-pro and Non Gen-pro survey participants neither agreed nor disagreed that information about political or social issues obtained through digital technology increases their interest to engage in politics (see Figure 12). In other words, an impact on their attitudes in no way affects their interest for political engagement.

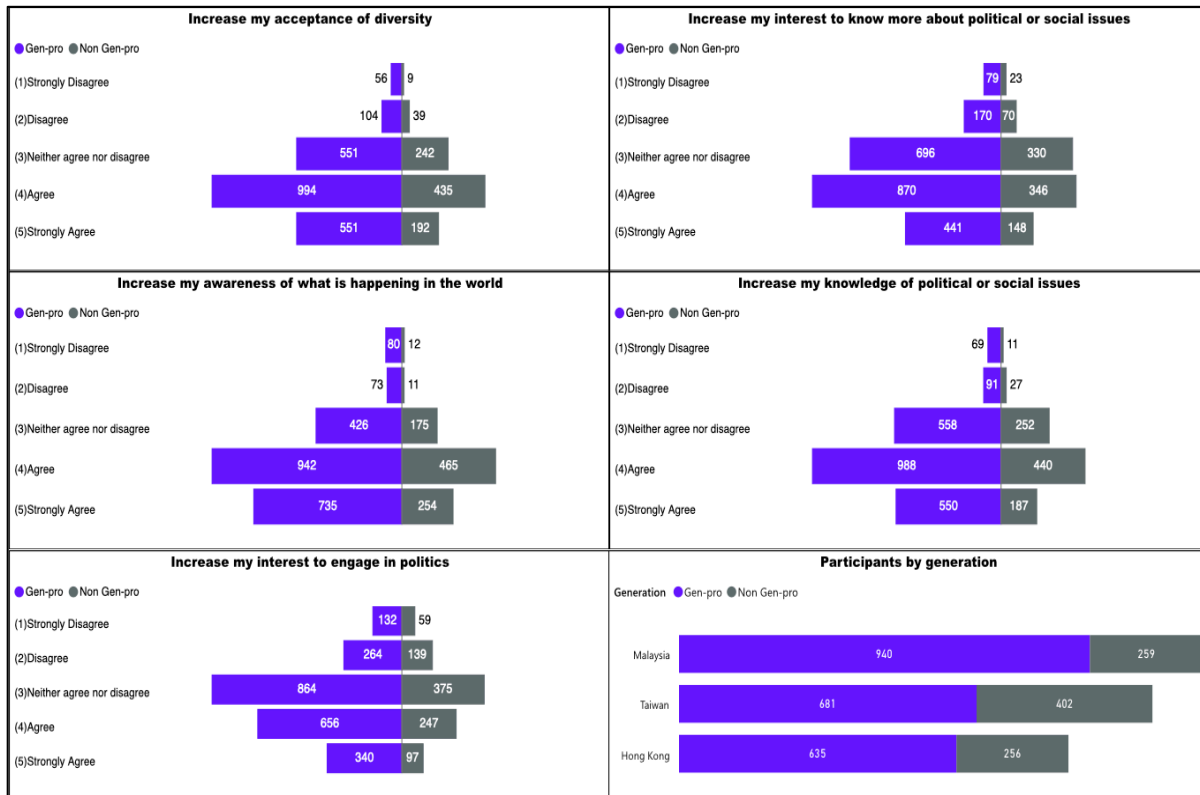


Figure 12: The Impact of Using Digital Technology on Survey Participants' Attitudes

Figure 13 and Figure 14 display how frequently survey participants use digital technology to engage in political or social issues.

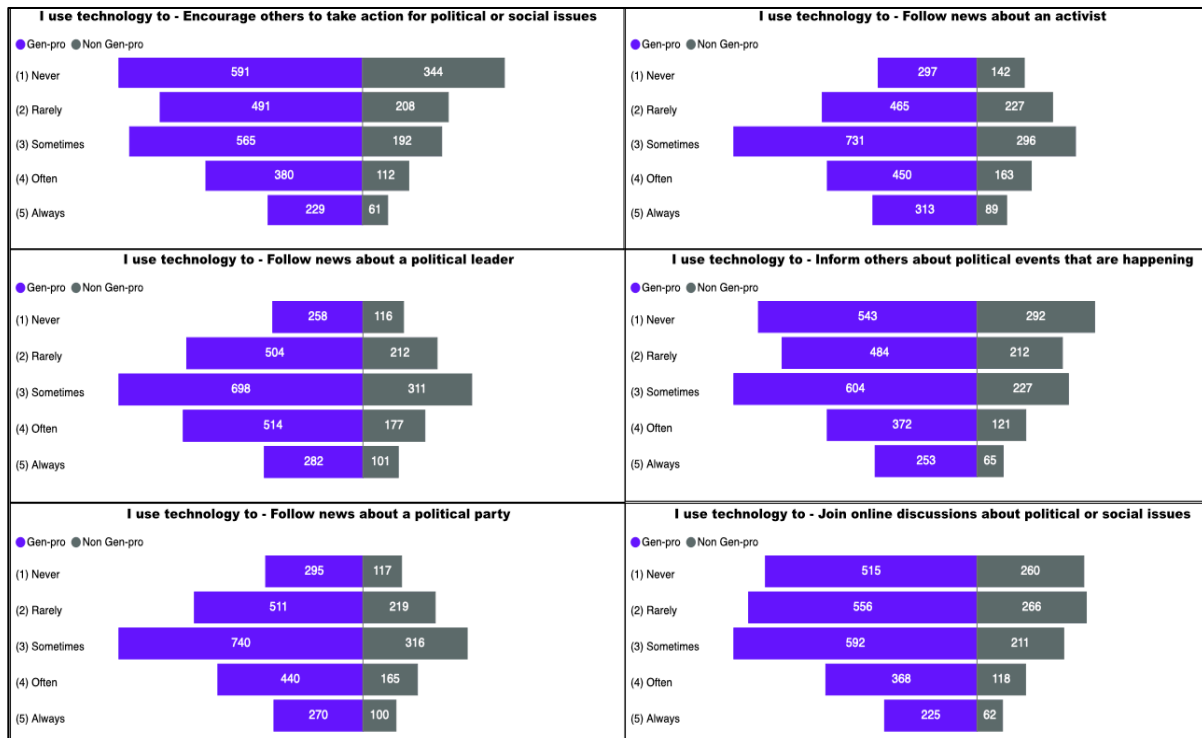


Figure 13: Survey Participants' Digital Behavior

While both Gen-pro and Non Gen-pro survey participants in general agreed that using digital technology empowers them to take action for political or social issues, allows them to keep up with political or social issues, and increases their awareness of political or social issues (see Figure 11), however, when asked to state their frequency on using digital technology to perform activities that correspond to those behaviors, their responses appeared to be mixed (see Figure 13 and Figure 14). Results showed that both Gen-pro and Non Gen-pro survey participants frequently use digital technology (choosing the answers “sometimes,” “often,” or “always”) to follow news about a political leader (see Figure 13), search information about

political or social issues, watch videos about political or social issues, and read news or materials about social or political issues (see Figure 14). However, both Gen-pro and Non Gen-pro survey participants indicated that they “sometimes,” “rarely,” or “never” use digital technology to post or share information about political or social issues on social media, sign online petitions for political or social causes, listen to podcasts on political or social issues, join online discussions about political or social issues, encourage others to take action for political or social issues, follow news about a political party, and inform others about political events that are happening. Overall, both Gen-pro and Non Gen-pro survey participants frequently use digital technology to obtain information, news, and materials on political or social issues.

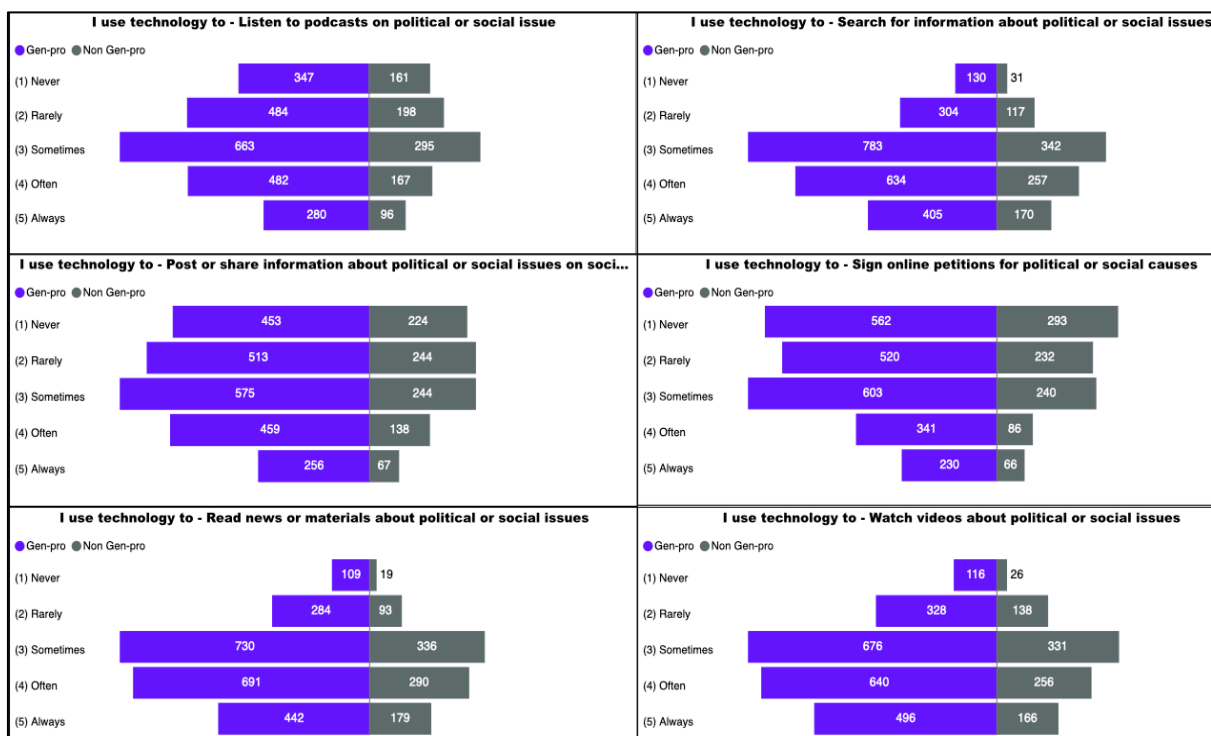


Figure 14: Survey Participants' Digital Behavior

**7.2.2 General Perceptions of Politics, Political Engagement, and Political Behavior**

Figure 15 shows survey participants’ confidence level on voting bringing positive changes to the society. Generally, results indicated that both Gen-pro and Non Gen-pro survey participants expressed confidence that voting would bring positive changes to society. 839 Gen-pro survey participants (37%) and 343 Non Gen-pro survey participants (37%) responded “probably yes.” Survey participants who responded “definitely not” were relatively low, with only 140 Gen-pro survey participants (6%) and 75 Non Gen-pro survey participants (8%).

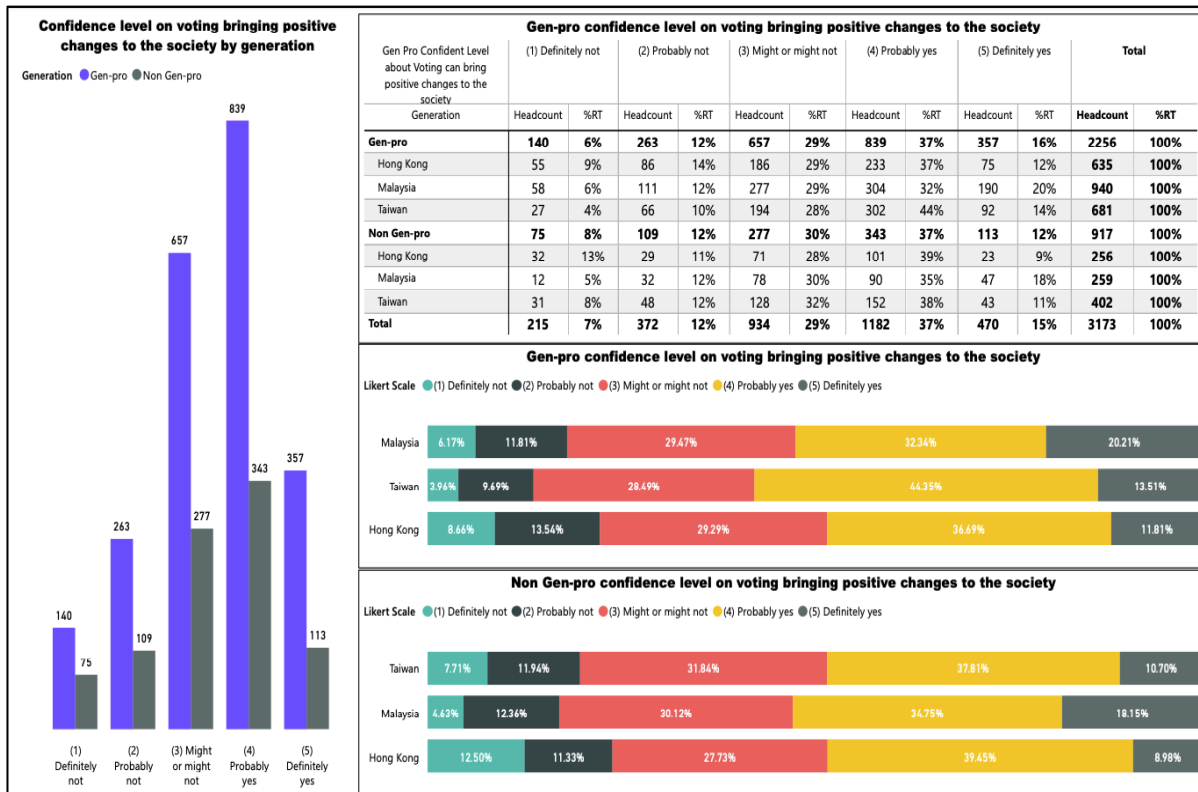


Figure 15: Survey Participants' Confidence Level on Voting Bringing Positive Changes to the Society

Among Gen-pro survey participants, those from Taiwan demonstrated the highest level of confidence on the efficacy of voting in bringing positive changes to society, with more than half

of the total Taiwanese Gen-pro survey participants (58%) responded “probably yes” (44%) and “definitely yes” (14%). Their confidence on the efficacy of voting could be attributed to the vibrant democratic atmosphere in Taiwan and how the Tsai administration effectively handled the COVID-19 pandemic. In comparison with their Taiwanese and Malaysian cohorts, Gen-pro survey participants from Hong Kong were the least confident with almost 9% responded “definitely not” and 14% responded “probably not.” Hong Kong survey participants’ lack of confidence could be associated with the current clamping down on free speech, democracy, and free elections in Hong Kong.

When asked to express their views on the importance of political engagement, most Gen-pro survey participants viewed political engagement more important compared to Non Gen-pro survey participants, with 705 Gen-pro survey participants responded “moderately important” while 295 Non Gen-pro survey participants responded “slightly important” (see Figure 16). Presumably, since more and more young people recognize the importance of political engagement, they could be more interested in politics now. Arguably, this finding could potentially contradict the general perception of young people’s political attitude, namely that young people are apathetic to politics.

Among Gen-pro survey participants, the results revealed an interesting finding. While Taiwanese Gen-pro survey participants demonstrated a high level of confidence on the efficacy of voting in bringing positive changes to society (see Figure 15), they did not think that engaging in politics is important in comparison with their Malaysian and Hong Kong cohorts. Malaysian Gen-pro survey participants considered political engagement to be “very important” (28.83%) and “extremely important” (12.77%), while Taiwanese Gen-pro survey participants who considered political engagement to be “very important” and “extremely important” only

accounted for 17.33% and 9.69% respectively. Furthermore, despite Taiwan having a healthy democratic political climate where Taiwanese have a lot of political freedom, compared to Hong Kong where political freedom is currently restricted, more Gen-pro survey participants from Hong Kong considered political engagement to be “very important” (22.05%) in comparison to their Taiwanese cohort (17.33%). What this presumably entails is that, since there is much political freedom in Taiwan compared to Hong Kong, members of Gen-pro in Hong Kong could probably appreciate the importance of political engagement more instead of taking it for granted.

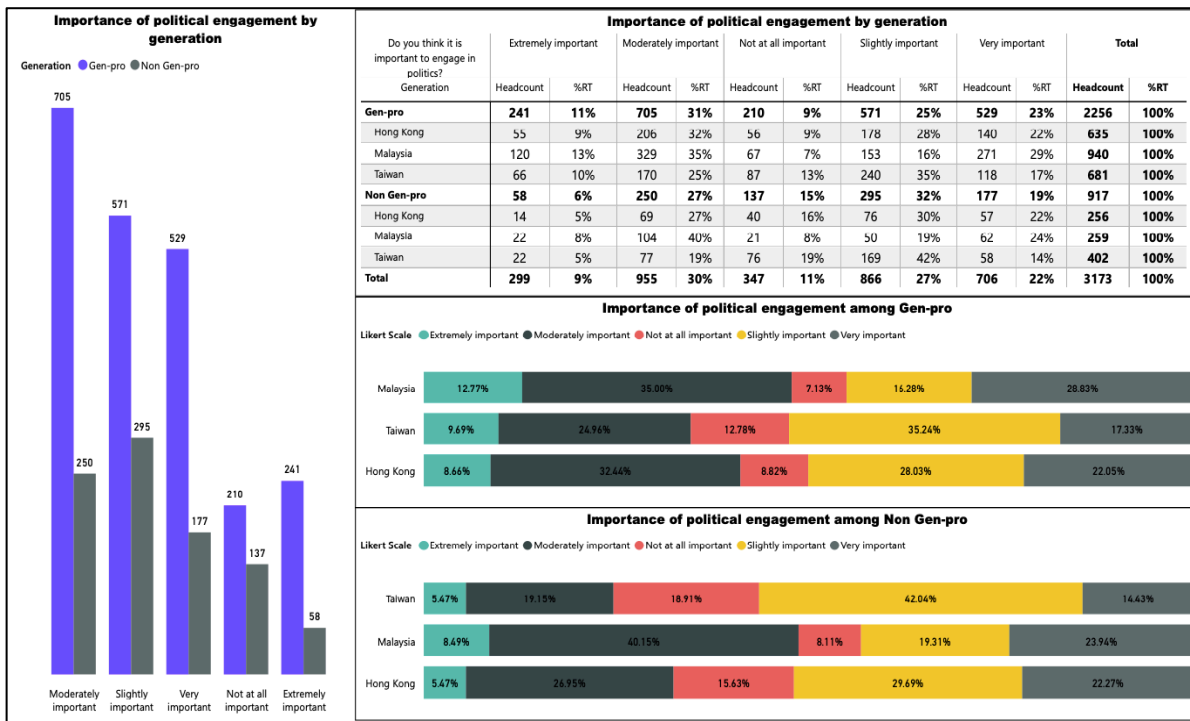


Figure 16: Importance of Political Engagement

Figure 17 displays survey participants’ general views on politicians. Results indicated that both Gen-pro and Non Gen-pro survey participants were inclined to view politicians negatively on four aspects, namely the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that politicians

abuse their power, protect the interest of the rich, keep their promises to the people, and care about winning people’s votes. More than half of Gen-pro (60%) and Non Gen-pro survey participants (67%) “agreed” and “strongly agreed” that politicians abuse their power (see Figure 17). On whether politicians protect the interest of the rich, both groups were also in agreement with this view. 37% of Gen-pro survey participants “agreed” and 23% of Gen-pro survey participants “strongly agreed” that politicians protect the interest of the rich (a combined total of 60%). 62% of Non Gen-pro survey participants agreed with this view, with 39% expressing agreement and 23% expressing strong agreement (see Figure 17).



Figure 17: Survey Participants' General Views on Politicians

Although 37% of Gen-pro survey participants and 35% of Non Gen-pro survey participants mostly “neither agree nor disagree” that politicians keep their promises to the

people, both groups were more inclined to “disagree” and “strongly disagree” that politicians keep their promises to the people, with a total of 41% of Gen-pro survey participants and nearly half (49%) of Non Gen-pro survey participants expressing disagreement and strong disagreement with this view (see Figure 17). On whether politicians care about winning people’s votes, both groups were more inclined to “agree” and “strongly agree” that politicians care about winning people’s votes (see Figure 17). 63% of Gen-pro survey participants expressed agreement that politicians care about winning people’s votes, with 34% agreed and 29% strongly agreed with this view. As for Non Gen-pro survey participants, 70% agreed with this view, with 38% agreeing and 32% expressing strong agreement.

For the remaining four aspects, namely the extent to which survey participants agreed or disagreed that politicians can be trusted, protect the interest of marginalized groups, care about what young people think, and listen to the people’s voices, most survey participants from both groups took a neutral position, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with these views. On whether politicians can be trusted, 39% of Gen-pro survey participants and 40% of Non Gen-pro survey participants neither agreed nor disagreed with this view (see Figure 17). However, results showed that Gen-pro survey participants trusted politicians slightly more than Non Gen-pro survey participants. 13% of Gen-pro survey participants agreed and 7% strongly agreed that politicians can be trusted in comparison with Non Gen-pro survey participants with only 9% agreeing and a low 4% strongly agreeing with this view. This is a rather surprising result, considering that existing research on political attitudes has revealed low levels of trust in politicians among young people compared to the older generations. Both groups also demonstrated neutral positions on their views on whether politicians protect the interest of



marginalized groups, care about what young people think, and listen to the people’s voices (see Figure 17).

When survey participants were asked to express their views on the ease or difficulty for them to engage in politics, most survey participants from both groups generally indicated that voting in elections is “easy” for them (see Figure 18). Particularly, survey participants from Taiwan expressed that it is very easy to vote in elections in Taiwan, with 33% of Gen-pro and 33% of Non Gen-pro survey participants conveying this view.

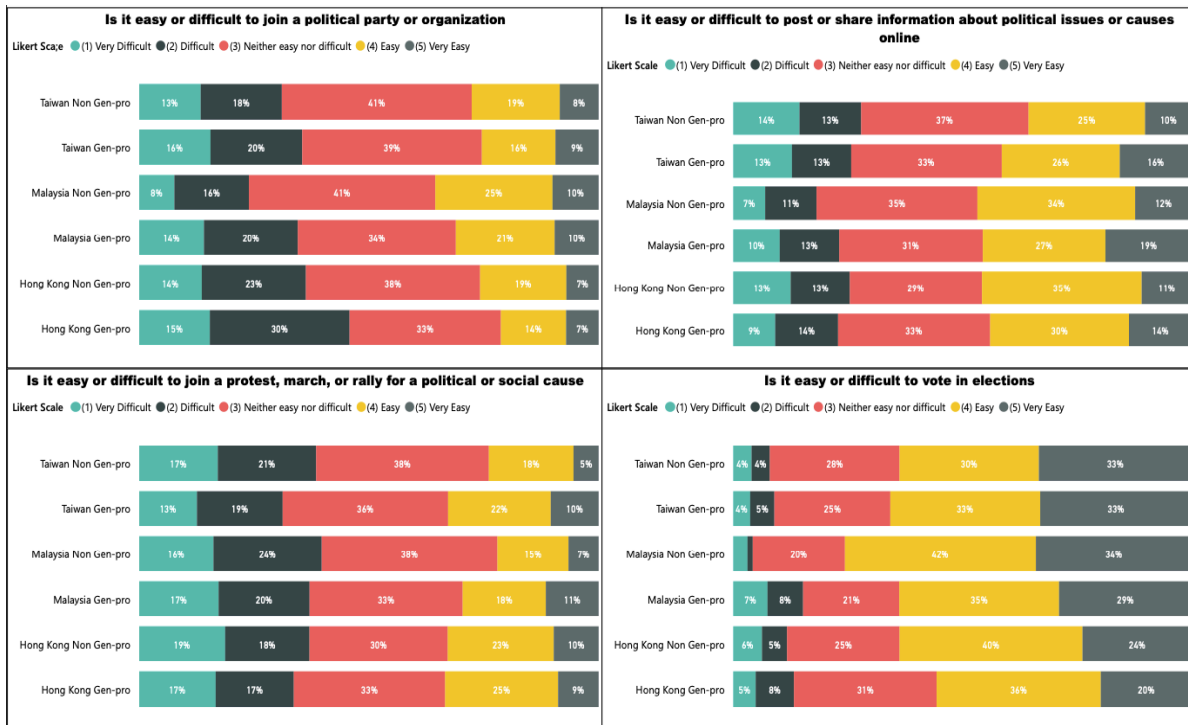


Figure 18: Challenges to Political Engagement

Interestingly, while Hong Kong survey participants indicated their lack of confidence on the efficacy of voting in bringing positive changes to society (see Figure 15), 36% of Gen-pro survey participants and 40% of Non Gen-pro survey participants regarded voting in Hong Kong

elections to be easy. This potentially informs us that while Hong Kongers may not face any challenges to voting in elections, they do not appear to regard Hong Kong elections as capable of producing positive changes to the Hong Kong society.

Apart from voting, survey participants were asked to indicate how easy or difficult it has been for them to engage in politics, such as joining a non-governmental organization, contacting politicians to express their concerns or views, joining a political party or organization, posting or sharing information about political issues or causes online, joining a protest, march, or rally for a political or social cause, and expressing their political views online (see Figure 18 and Figure 19).

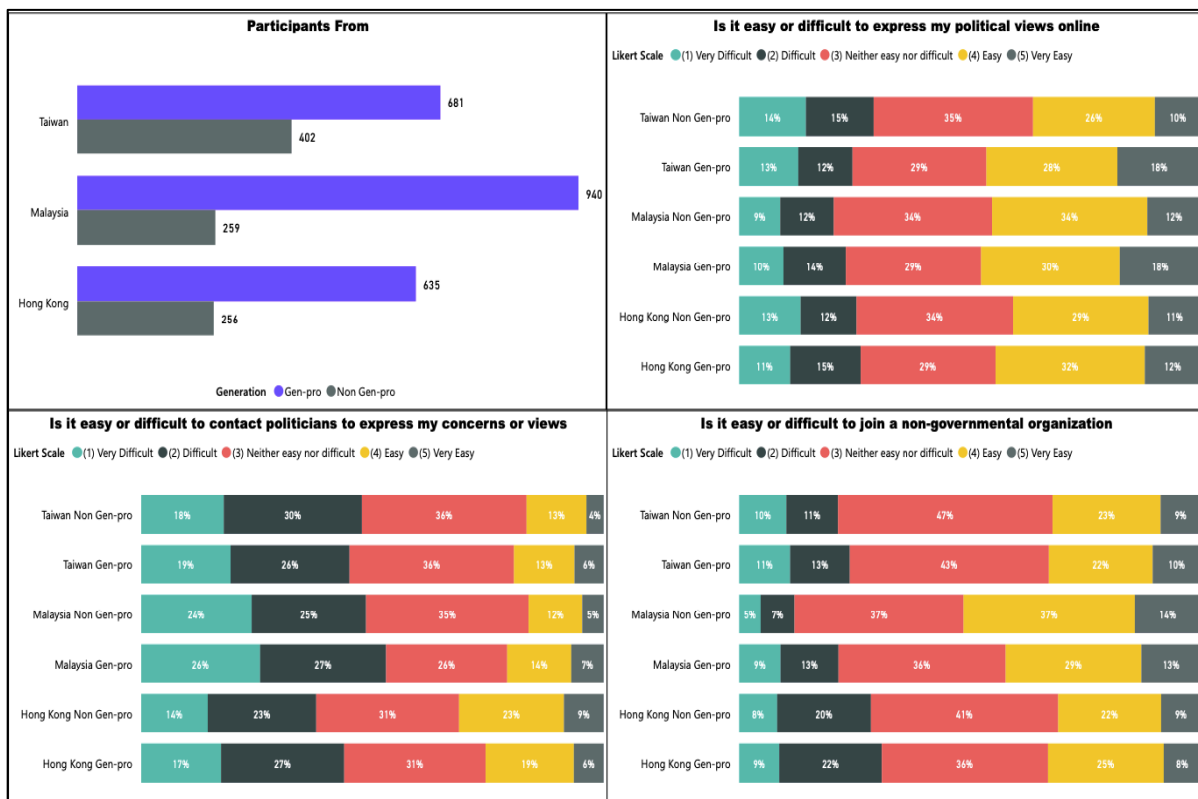


Figure 19: Challenges to Political Engagement

Results indicated that both Gen-pro and Non Gen-pro survey participants did not express any challenges for them to engage in politics through digital means, such as expressing their political views online and posting or sharing information about political issues or causes online (see Figure 18 and Figure 19). Presumably, Gen-pro and Non Gen-pro survey participants could be finding it easy to engage in politics through digital means due to the relatively low-barrier-to-entry participatory setting and low participation costs of using digital technology, such as the Internet and mobile phones. What could be inferred from this result is that the older generations could presumably be turning to digital technology for political engagement. With regards to other means of political engagement, most Gen-pro and Non Gen-pro survey participants neither considered it easy nor difficult to engage in such activities as joining a non-governmental organization, contacting politicians to express their concerns or views, joining a political party or organization, and joining a protest, march, or rally for a political or social cause (see Figure 18 and Figure 19).

In the online survey, survey participants were asked to describe their general perceptions of politics by selecting three words from a list of 10 given words to describe how they feel or think about politics in general. The list of words contained five negative descriptions and five positive descriptions (see Figure 20). The results revealed that both Gen-pro (65%) and Non Gen-pro (71%) survey participants, regardless of their place of origin, largely selected negative words to describe their feelings or thoughts about politics in general (see Figure 21). In Hong Kong, this could presumably be attributable to the current political climate in Hong Kong, where political freedom is increasingly constrained by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) with the clamping down of free speech and increasing arrest of pro-democracy activists, student groups, lawyers, and lawmakers. In Malaysia, it could presumably be associated with the continued

discriminatory racial policies inherent within the Malaysian political system. As the findings from the synchronous online focus group (OFG) discussion revealed in Chapter 8, many of the Malaysian participants associated their disappointment with Malaysian politics to cases of corruption, racial policies, and practices of nepotism among Malaysian political leaders who are predominantly made up of ethnic Malays. When asked to discuss their perceptions of politics during the synchronous OFG, almost 67% of Malaysian participants (14 Malaysian participants out of a total of 21 Malaysian participants) spontaneously used the word “racism” to describe their feelings and thoughts about politics in Malaysia (see Figure 31).

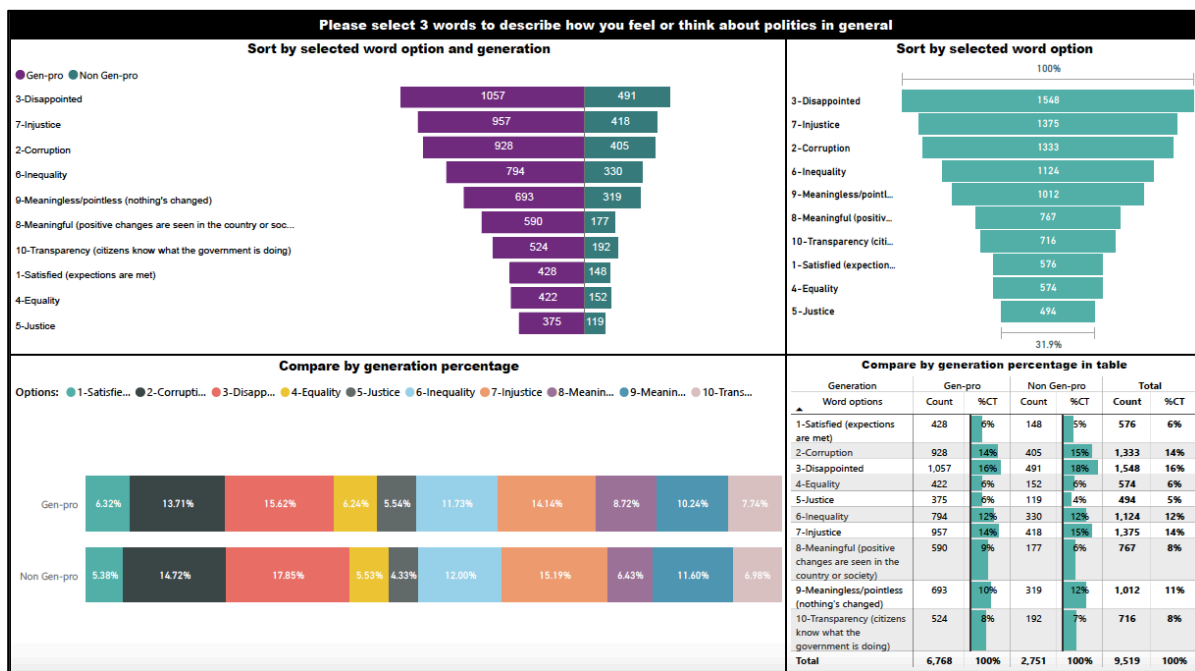


Figure 20: Survey Participants' General Perceptions of Politics

While the political climates in Hong Kong and Malaysia have not exactly been encouraging, particularly with the increasing incursion of the CCP on Hong Kong’s democracy and Malaysian former Prime Minister Najib Razak who was embroiled in a corruption scandal

that was a national embarrassment, what is rather surprising is that despite enjoying much political freedom and having a vibrant democratic political environment compared to Hong Kong and Malaysia, 69% of Taiwanese survey participants expressed negative sentiments and perceptions towards Taiwanese politics (see Figure 21). Presumably, these negative sentiments and perceptions could be related to several factors raised by Taiwanese participants during the synchronous OFG discussion (see Chapter 8). The factors that Taiwanese participants raised during the synchronous OFG included the political polarization in Taiwan and the power and privilege bestowed upon Taiwanese politicians that seemingly allow them to influence or manipulate the Taiwanese public (see Chapter 8).

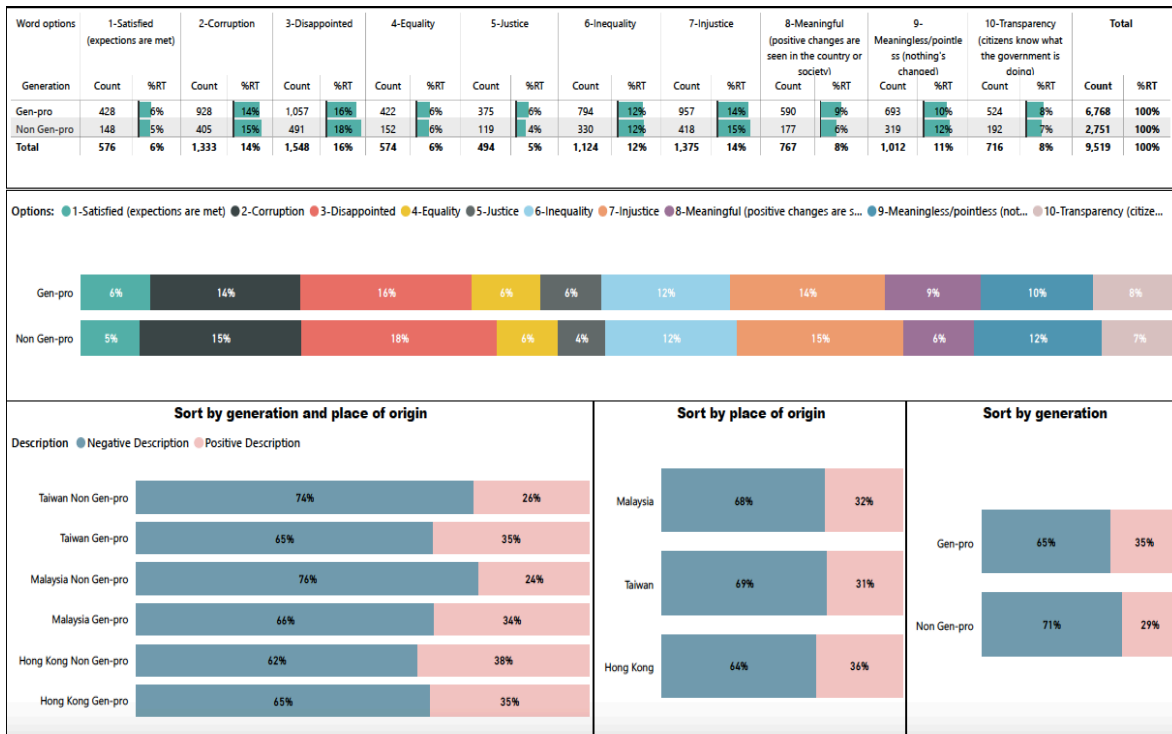


Figure 21: Survey Participants' General Perceptions of Politics by Place of Origin

Figure 22 shows survey participants' responses on their perceptions of politics according to their respective places of origin. 54.7% of Malaysian survey participants (656 Malaysian survey participants out of a total of 1199 Malaysian survey participants) perceived politics to be corrupted. This perception corresponds to Malaysian participants who participated in the synchronous OFG study (see Figure 31). During the synchronous OFG discussion, all 21 Malaysian participants used the word “corruption” to describe their feelings or thoughts about Malaysian politics in general (see Figure 31). Malaysian survey participants and Malaysian participants participating in the synchronous OFG equally perceived Malaysian politics to be disappointing and unfair (see Figure 22 and Figure 31). While 377 Taiwanese survey participants perceived Taiwanese politics to be corrupted (see Figure 22), however, during the synchronous OFG study, no Taiwanese participants mentioned corruption to describe their feelings and thoughts about politics in Taiwan (see Figure 31).

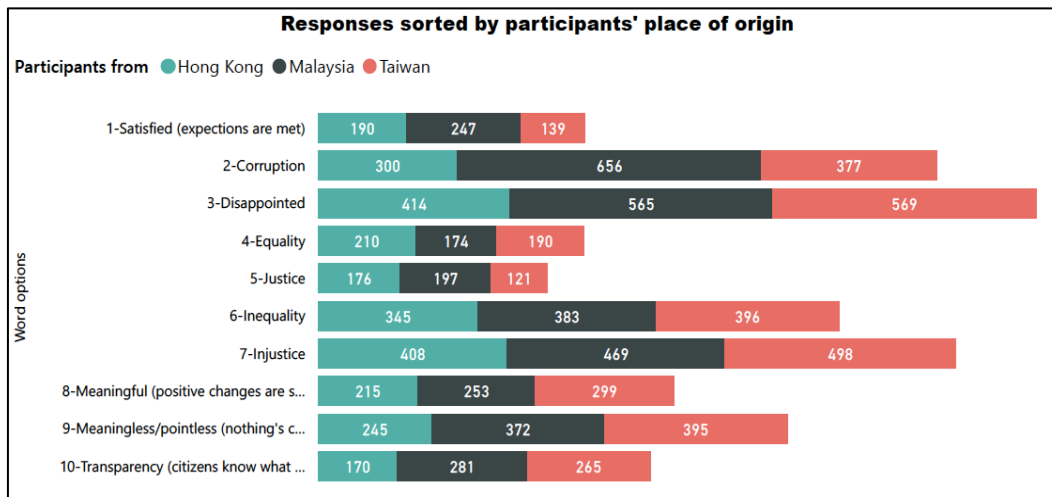


Figure 22: Responses Sorted by Participants' Place of Origin

Figure 23 and Figure 24 show survey participants' perceptions on the extent to which they would consider 10 different online activities as ways to engage in politics.

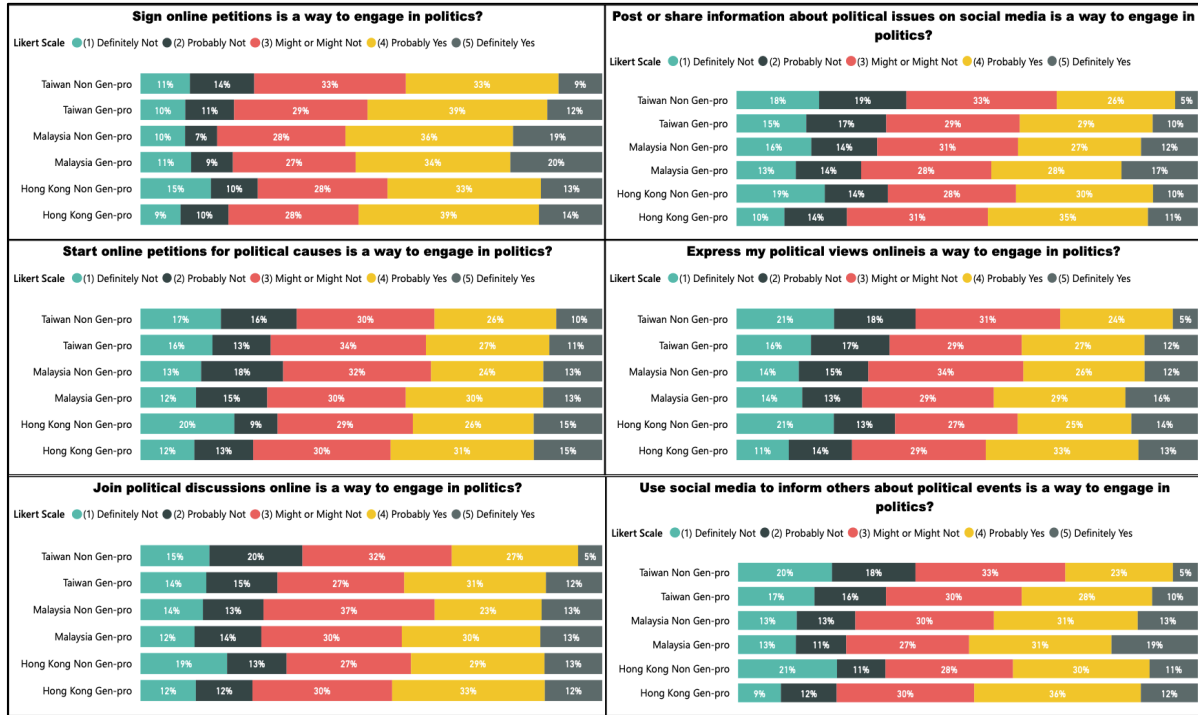


Figure 23: Survey Participants' Perceptions on Digital Political Engagement

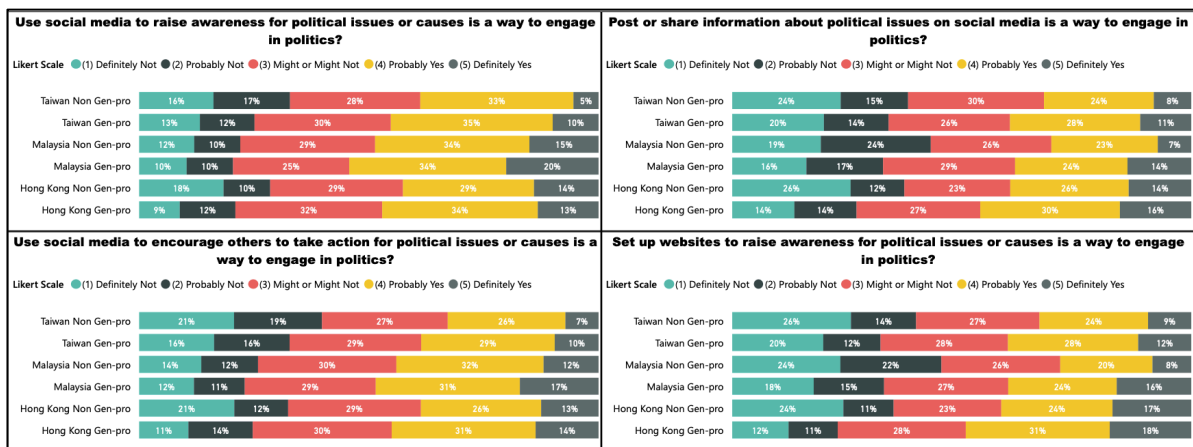


Figure 24: Survey Participants' Perceptions on Digital Political Engagement

While it is posited that members of Gen-pro would likely consider online activities as ways to engage in politics, such as using social media platforms, signing online petitions, joining online political discussions, or creating websites to raise awareness for political issues, the results revealed that Non Gen-pro survey participants equally share similar sentiments with Gen-pro survey participants, indicating that they would probably (Likert scale of “probably yes”) regard such online activities as ways to engage in politics. This pattern is seen across Non Gen-pro survey participants from Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Taiwan. In short, both Gen-pro and Non Gen-pro survey participants appear to recognize using digital technology for political engagement. This finding warrants a further deeper investigation on how the older generations in East Asia and Southeast Asia perceive digital political engagement.

### ***7.2.3 Proactive Behavior, Progressive Attitude, and Professional Mindset***

Figure 25 shows survey participants’ self-assessment of their proactive behavior. In the survey, survey participants were asked to indicate to what extent the four given proactive behaviors, namely learning new things to improve oneself, trying to resolve challenges first, looking for opportunities to improve oneself, and taking action for issues that one cares about, describe their behavior. Results revealed that both Gen-pro and Non Gen-pro survey participants generally regarded that the four given proactive behaviors described them “very well.” While it is hypothesized that members of Gen-pro would demonstrate a proactive behavior, by taking initiative to make changes instead of passively waiting for changes to happen, self-assessing one’s proactive behavior positively might not truly reflect survey participants’ proactive behavior. This is because, there could be the possibility of response bias where participants gave socially desirable answers (Paulhus, 2002, 2017) or that participants might not be honest in their



responses (McDermott, 2002). This limitation in the current study warrants further investigation, such as by conducting an experiment, to explore the extent to which the awareness among members of Gen-pro of the world they are living in and experiencing would cause them to take the initiative to make political or social changes.

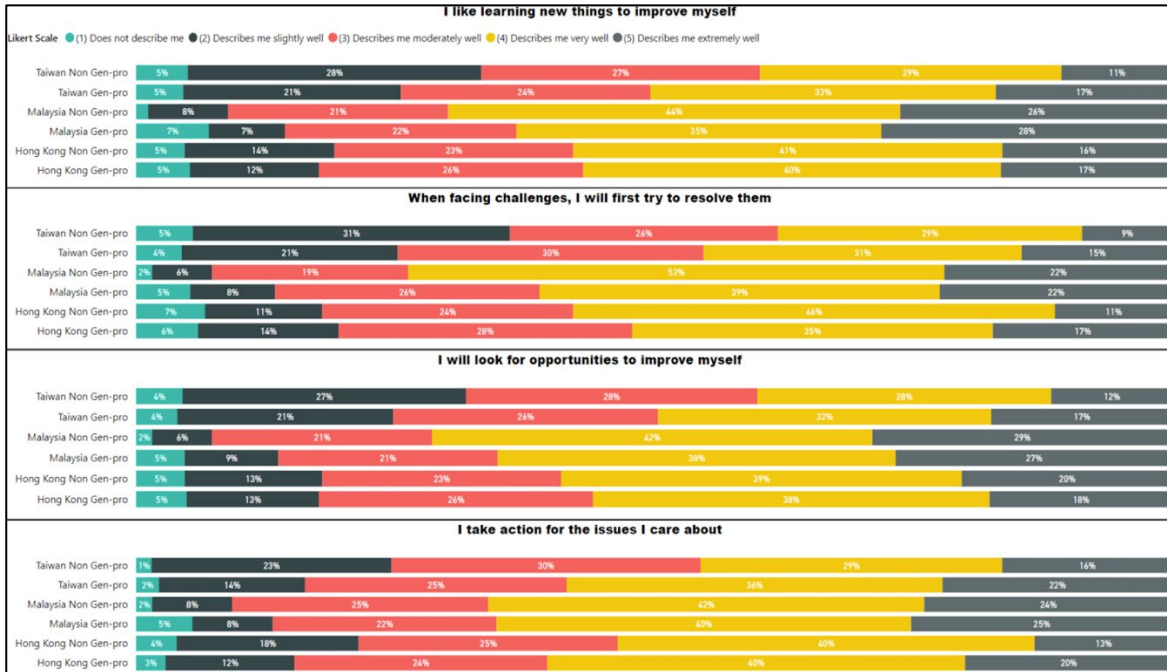


Figure 25: Survey Participants' Self-Assessment of Their Proactive Behavior

When survey participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they could accept four progressive ideas, namely women serving in military, legalizing same-sex marriage, giving equal rights to all, and leaders belonging to the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) group, most Gen-pro and Non Gen-pro survey participants could accept women serving in the military and giving equal rights to all people regardless of gender, ethnicity, race, religion, or other characteristics (see Figure 26). However, on the ideas of legalizing same-sex marriage and having leaders who belong to the LGBT group, Gen-pro and Non Gen-pro survey participants

expressed different levels of acceptance (see Figure 26). On the idea of legalizing same-sex marriage, 41% of Taiwanese Gen-pro survey participants expressed their acceptance, the highest percentage among all survey participants (see Figure 26). This somewhat higher level of acceptance among Taiwanese Gen-pro compared with Gen-pro survey participants from Hong Kong and Malaysia could be attributable to the fact that Taiwan is the first nation in Asia to legalize same-sex marriage.

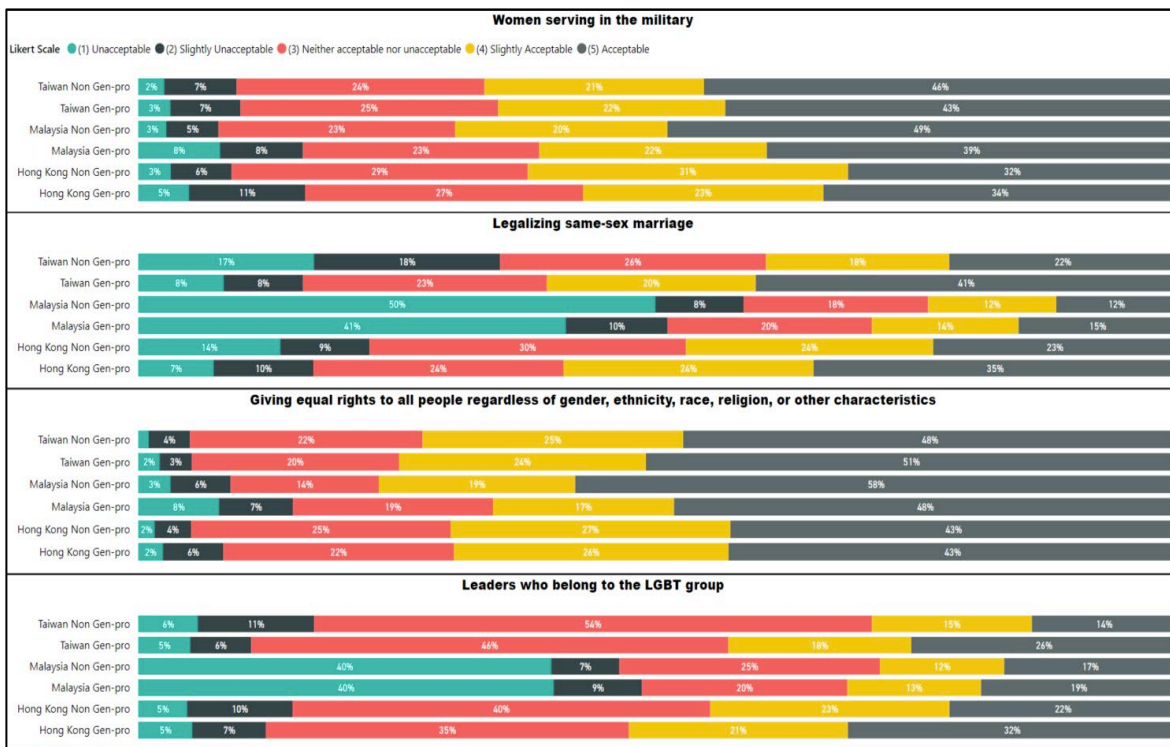


Figure 26: Survey Participants' Self-Assessment of Their Progressive Attitude

Of all the survey participants, Malaysian Gen-pro (41%) and Non Gen-pro (50%) survey participants found the idea of legalizing same-sex marriage unacceptable (see Figure 26). Presumably, this result could stem from the fact that in Malaysia, the LGBT community continues to be seen as a taboo. In Malaysia, the Syariah Courts (Criminal Jurisdiction) Act (Act

355) imposes heavy penalties on the LGBT community. Such punishment was seen in 2018 and 2019. In 2018, a caning sentence was imposed on two women who were accused of attempted same-sex relations and in 2019, five men were sentenced to fines, imprisonment, and caning for same-sex relations.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, as an Islamic nation, religion could potentially play an influential role on the types of progressive ideas that are acceptable or unacceptable to the Malaysian society in general. Considering these factors, Malaysian Gen-pro appears to be less acceptable of same-sex marriage compared with Taiwanese Gen-pro and Hong Kong Gen-pro. Likewise, Malaysian Gen-pro (40%) and Non Gen-pro (40%) survey participants found the idea of having leaders who belong to the LGBT group to be unacceptable. In short, homosexuality is still a taboo in Malaysia. While Taiwanese Gen-pro survey participants found legalizing same-sex marriage to be acceptable, however, only 26% of Taiwanese Gen-pro survey participants could accept leaders who belong to the LGBT group (see Figure 26). This result is somewhat interesting and warrants further deeper investigation as to why Taiwanese Gen-pro would display such different views on LGBT issues. Among the survey participants, Hong Kong Gen-pro survey participants had a higher acceptance level for leaders who belong to the LGBT group, with 32% of them indicating that this idea is acceptable.

Overall, the results demonstrate that both Gen-pro and Non Gen-pro survey participants appear to be more acceptable of forward-thinking ideas on gender equality and equality of rights for all people. Issues pertaining to LGBT rights are less likely to be acceptable, particularly for a conservative country like Malaysia, where same-sex relations continue to be prohibited.

Figure 27 shows survey participants' self-assessment of their professional mindset. In the survey, survey participants were asked to indicate to what extent the four given traits

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<sup>26</sup> *Malaysia: Government Steps Up Attacks on LGBT People*. (2021, January 25). Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/01/25/malaysia-government-steps-attacks-lgbt-people>

characterizing an individual’s professional behavior describe their professional mindset (see Figure 27). Like how survey participants indicated their proactive behavior positively, the survey results revealed that both Gen-pro and Non Gen-pro survey participants generally regarded the four given traits characterizing one’s professional behavior as describing them “very well.” Likewise, survey participants’ self-assessment of their professional behavior might not truly reflect survey participants’ honest responses as there could be the possibility of response bias where participants gave socially desirable answers (Paulhus, 2002, 2017). This limitation in the current study warrants further investigation, such as by conducting an experiment, to explore the extent to which the awareness among members of Gen-pro of the world they are living in and experiencing would cause them to subscribe to a professional mindset.

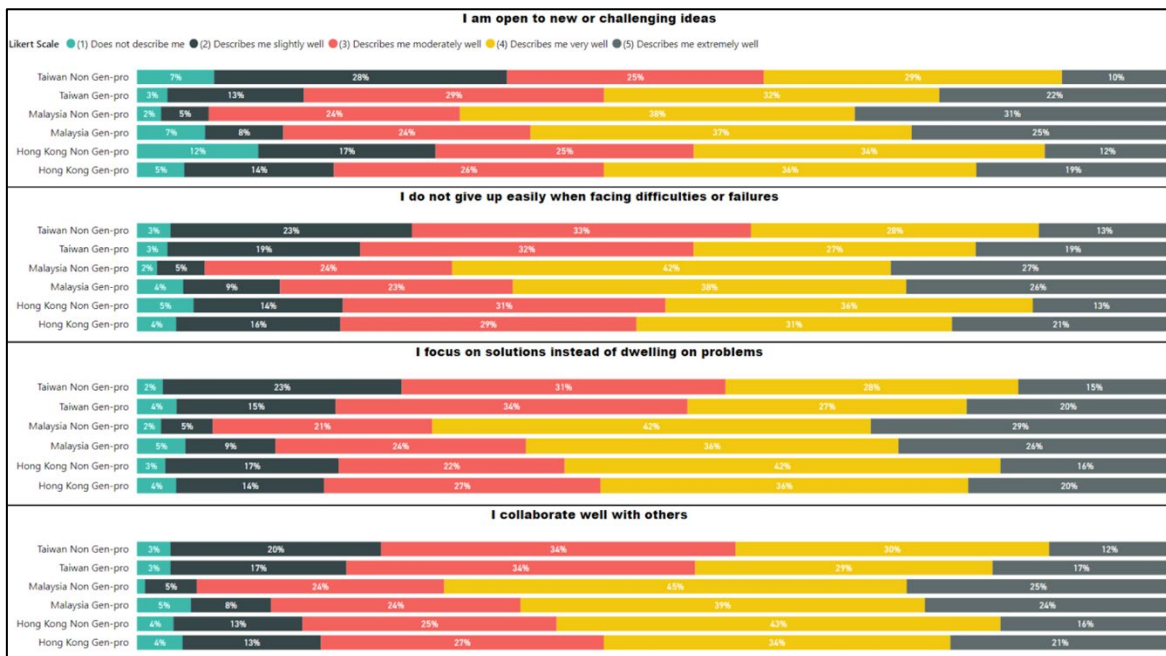


Figure 27: Survey Participants' Self-Assessment of Their Professional Mindset

7.2.4 Political Awareness

To gauge survey participants’ political knowledge or awareness, they were given seven multiple choice questions on contemporary political issues. Figure 28, Figure 29, and Figure 30 show the percentages of Gen-pro and Non Gen-pro survey participants’ responses for the seven questions. Scholars maintained that young people lack knowledge on political matters (Bennet, 2007; Furlong & Cartmel, 2006; Print et al., 2004; Quintelier, 2007). However, the survey results revealed that most Gen-pro survey participants demonstrated sufficient political knowledge or awareness (see Figure 28, Figure 29, and Figure 30).

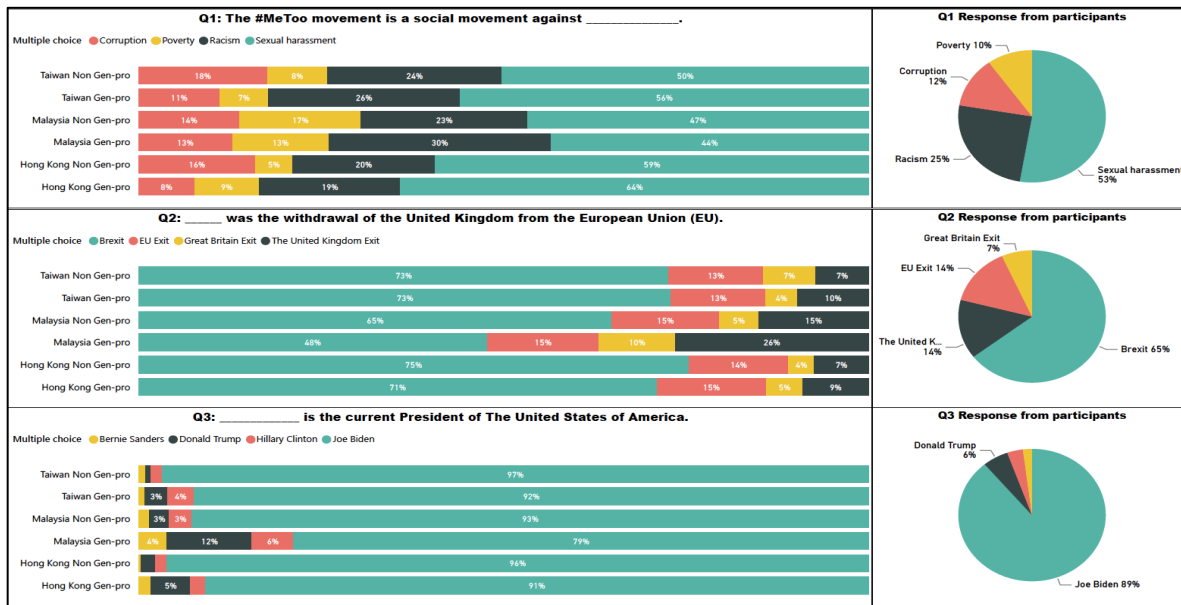


Figure 28: Survey Participants' Level of Political Awareness (Questions 1, 2, and 3)

Among Gen-pro survey participants, those from Taiwan appear to demonstrate more political knowledge or awareness. Out of the seven questions, four questions had the highest percentages of Gen-pro survey participants from Taiwan answering the questions correctly (see Figure 28, Figure 29, and Figure 30). Overall, survey results indicate that members of Gen-pro

demonstrate sufficient contemporary political knowledge or awareness. Presumably, their level of contemporary political knowledge or awareness could be attributable to their frequent use of digital technology to obtain information or news on political or social issues (see Figure 14).

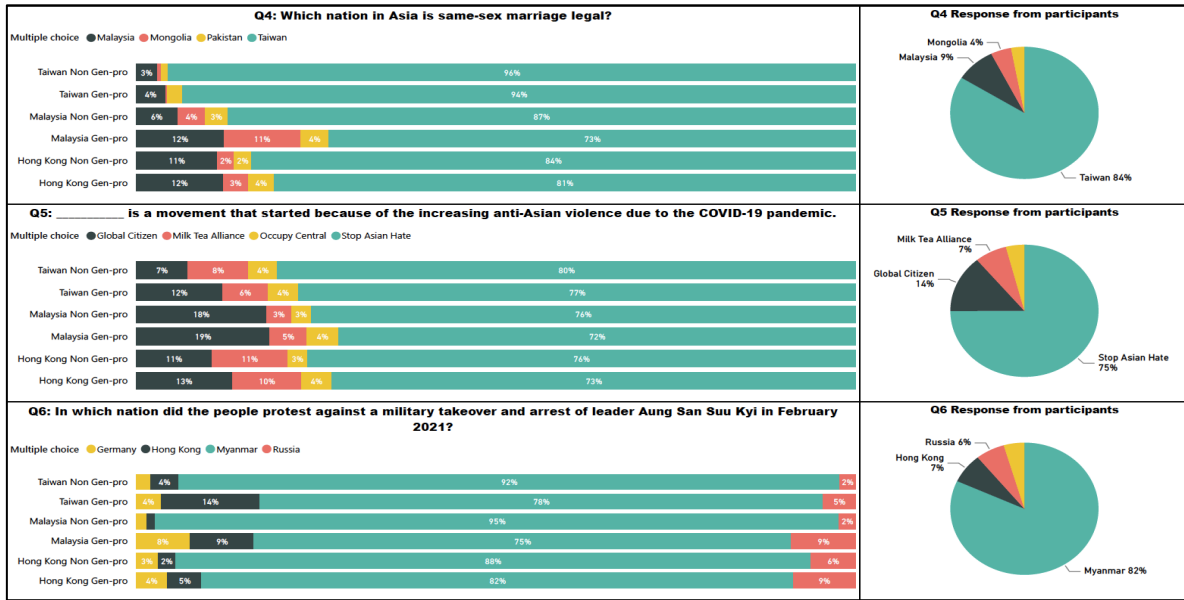


Figure 29: Survey Participants' Level of Political Awareness (Questions 4, 5, and 6)

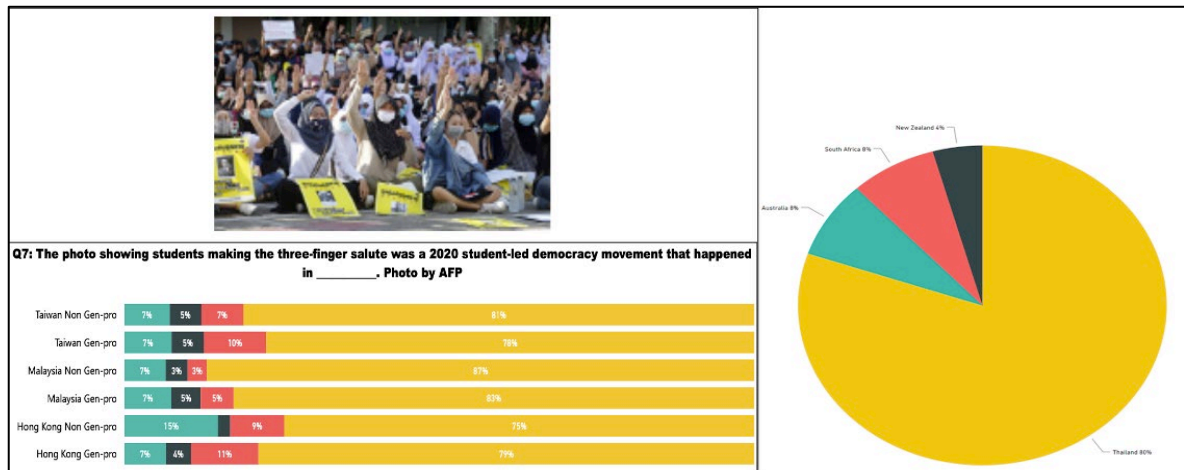


Figure 30: Survey Participants' Level of Political Awareness (Question 7)

## **8 SYNCHRONOUS ONLINE FOCUS GROUP STUDY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **8.1 Focus Group Research Participants' Demographics**

A total of 33 participants were successfully recruited to participate in the synchronous online focus group (OFG) study, with 21 participants from Malaysia and 12 participants from Taiwan. However, there were no participants recruited from Hong Kong. Despite Hong Kong participants expressing interests in the study during the recruitment process, they later withdrew their participation from the synchronous OFG study. Hong Kong participants communicated their concerns and fears that their personal viewpoints or opinions expressed during the synchronous OFG study might implicate themselves, their friends, or their family members. These concerns were reasonable due to the mounting arrests of Hong Kong activists, student protesters, politicians, and journalists by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as part of the CCP's efforts in clamping down on freedom of speech and democratic freedom in Hong Kong.

The demographic characteristics of the participants for the synchronous OFG study are summarized below:

- A total of 21 female participants and 11 male participants participated in the study.
- One participant from Taiwan identified as non-binary.
- Majority of the participants were aged 20-29, with 19 participants from Malaysia and 10 participants from Taiwan belonging to this age group.
- 21 participants earned a bachelor's degree, eight earned a master's degree, two earned a high school diploma, one earned a doctoral degree, and one earned the Malaysian Higher School Certificate (commonly known as STPM) that is a Malaysian pre-university programme.

## 8.2 Findings and Discussion

I have coded participants' responses and collated them into five broad themes. The following section discusses the findings from the interview.

### 8.2.1 *Attitudes towards Digital Technology*

In exploring participants' attitudes towards digital technology, they were asked to share their opinions on three aspects of the impact of digital technology:

- Their access to information,
- Current political and social issues affecting them, and
- Their opportunity to engage in politics

The interviews revealed that all 33 participants reflected positively towards the role of digital technology in increasing their access to information. They responded assertively with “yes” and “definitely” that they relied a lot on digital technology to obtain information and news. Almost 97% of the participants (32 out of 33 participants) echoed similar sentiments that without digital technology, they would not be able to obtain the same amount of information if they had to rely on other means besides digital technology. The participants unanimously agreed that they “need technology to get access to information” (Participant 249, Malaysia), and without technology, they “won't be able to access that much information” (Participant 439, male Taiwan) and that they “cannot survive without Internet” (Participant 936, Malaysia) because “it would be really challenging as people constantly share and use technology as a platform to share all kinds of information” (Participant 575, Taiwan). A total of 13 participants expressed that they rely on the Internet and social media to obtain the “latest news and information” (Participant 988, Malaysia) and without these sources, they “wouldn't know about today's news” (Participant 623,



Malaysia). One participant went further to explain that while she relied on technology, such as social media, to get information, she tried to “verify and cross-check information from different sources” (Participant 866, Malaysia).

Regarding the effects of obtaining information on current political and social issues through digital technology, all 33 participants unanimously agreed that having knowledge of these information have had an impact upon them. Knowledge of these information have affected their “understanding of the world” (Participant 439, male Taiwan) and how they “look at this world” (Participant 936, Malaysia). One participant noted that “knowing these political or social issues from Internet exposed me to the problems surrounding those issues” (Participant 650, Taiwan). 21 out of 33 participants expressed negative comments when asked about the effects of being exposed to current political and social issues through digital technology. The words participants used to describe their feelings and opinions included “frustrated,” “angry,” “upset,” “sad,” “depressing,” and “furious.” Some of the comments included how participants felt “frustrated and hurt by what is happening to the world today” (Participant 936, Malaysia), “disappointed with the political situation of the country” (Participant 533, Malaysia), and “a lot of grief and frustration with what’s going on in the world” (Participant 301, Taiwan). From the interviews, it was common to see frustration reflected on participants’ facial expressions and hear disappointment in their voices. Overall, while all participants agreed that digital technology, such as the Internet and social media platforms, has furnished them with the convenience to access vast amount of information, almost 67% of the participants (22 out of 33 participants) further clarified that they tried to avoid making immediate judgments based on the information they read or received:

*I have the mentality that if I don't know, I won't judge because there are things that happened that we don't know the full story of. My principle is we need to know the full story. Need to know from all sides before passing judgement. If I get this information for example, I try to do research to see from another way, perspectives. Cause if you see from one perspective your thinking would be just that way, you won't see it from another perspective. That is a problem with most people. You don't know the full story but already judging. (Participant 949, Malaysia)*

*If we only use one platform to gather information, we would only hear one perspective but if we get to use different platforms, we get to learn about how others feel. (Participant 278, Taiwan)*

*Sometimes if we are reading the news or posts on Internet they might not be true, so we have to be neutral and use our own thoughts. (Participant 716, Malaysia)*

*I will reflect upon it or rethink about the information and find a way to digest it. (Participant 439, female Taiwan)*

*I do feel a lot of the news, especially political news they are not very fair on their standpoint. I will complete the readings and try to think from their perspectives and see whether I'm correct or in the wrong direction. (Participant 249, Malaysia)*

As to whether digital technology has increased their opportunity to engage in politics, the interviews revealed that majority of the participants (30 out of 33 participants) agreed without hesitation that digital technology has, in some way, helped to increase their opportunity to engage in politics. While all 12 participants from Taiwan agreed that digital technology has increased their opportunity for political engagement, 18 were from Malaysia. These participants expressed that they were able to take advantage of digital technology to engage in politics

through several ways. All 30 participants cited using social media. They commented on how social media has conveniently enabled them to engage in politics more by reading about current information or people's posts, posting stuffs on their Facebook page to raise people's awareness of what is happening in the world, such as news, information, and pictures, and voicing out their opinions on certain political or social issues.

*Definitely! Definitely! Social media, Facebook, technology, they really shrunk our world and political engagement looks very different because then whatever we post or whatever we say definitely has an impact on other people or people who have more direct power. (Participant 301, Taiwan)*

*Whenever I see some political news, I will share on my Facebook. (Participant 274, Malaysia)*

*Posting stuffs on social media, like Facebook, raising awareness, so yes. Getting more information about when and where certain things are happening, like protests or other ways to get involved in politics. (Participant 302, Taiwan)*

*Through social media something can be viral and when someone voices out about something, I believe that people around the world or in the country can see or read about our opinions regarding some social or political issues that are happening to the world today. (Participant 936, Malaysia)*

When participants mentioned social media as one of the digital tools that has helped to increase their opportunity for political engagement, they only cited Facebook but made no mention of other social media platforms, such as Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, or YouTube. Besides using social media, participants also mentioned joining online forums to discuss about political or social issues they cared about, searching for political information on the Internet, and

signing online petitions. The three participants from Malaysia who did not agree that digital technology has increased their opportunity to engage in politics explained that they were not particularly interested in politics, so they did not see how digital technology could have increased their opportunity for political engagement. In other words, they associated the role of digital technology in increasing their opportunity to engage in politics with their interests in politics. While this was the case, it was interesting that one participant further explained that:

*Since I didn't see any news that say using technology is successful because the prime minister or government would think that these issues are sensitive questions to talk, so they will either lock people up or give you a big fine. So, it is hard to voice opinions even with technology. (Participant 797, Malaysia).*

From this participant's comment, we can infer that he linked the role of digital technology in increasing his opportunity to engage in politics with the effectiveness of digital technology as a tool in generating political efficacy. Table 1 summarizes the examples participants gave on the ways that they can use digital technology to engage in politics, thereby increasing their opportunities for political engagement.

*Table 1: Opportunities for Political Engagement Provided by Digital Technology*

Engagement Opportunity Provided by Digital Technology	Participants	
	Malaysia	Taiwan
Using social media (post, share, comment)	18	12
Joining online forums for discussion	14	9
Search for political information on the Internet	18	12
Signing online petitions	10	7

### 8.2.2 Perceptions of Politics

When participants were asked to describe their feelings or thoughts about politics, the interviews revealed that 30 out of 33 participants were inclined to perceive politics less favorably in general. Figure 31 shows the top 10 most used words by participants to describe their feelings or thoughts about politics, with “corruption” topping the list with 21 participants and the words “disappointing,” “unfair,” and “dirty” all tied for the tenth position, each with five participants respectively.

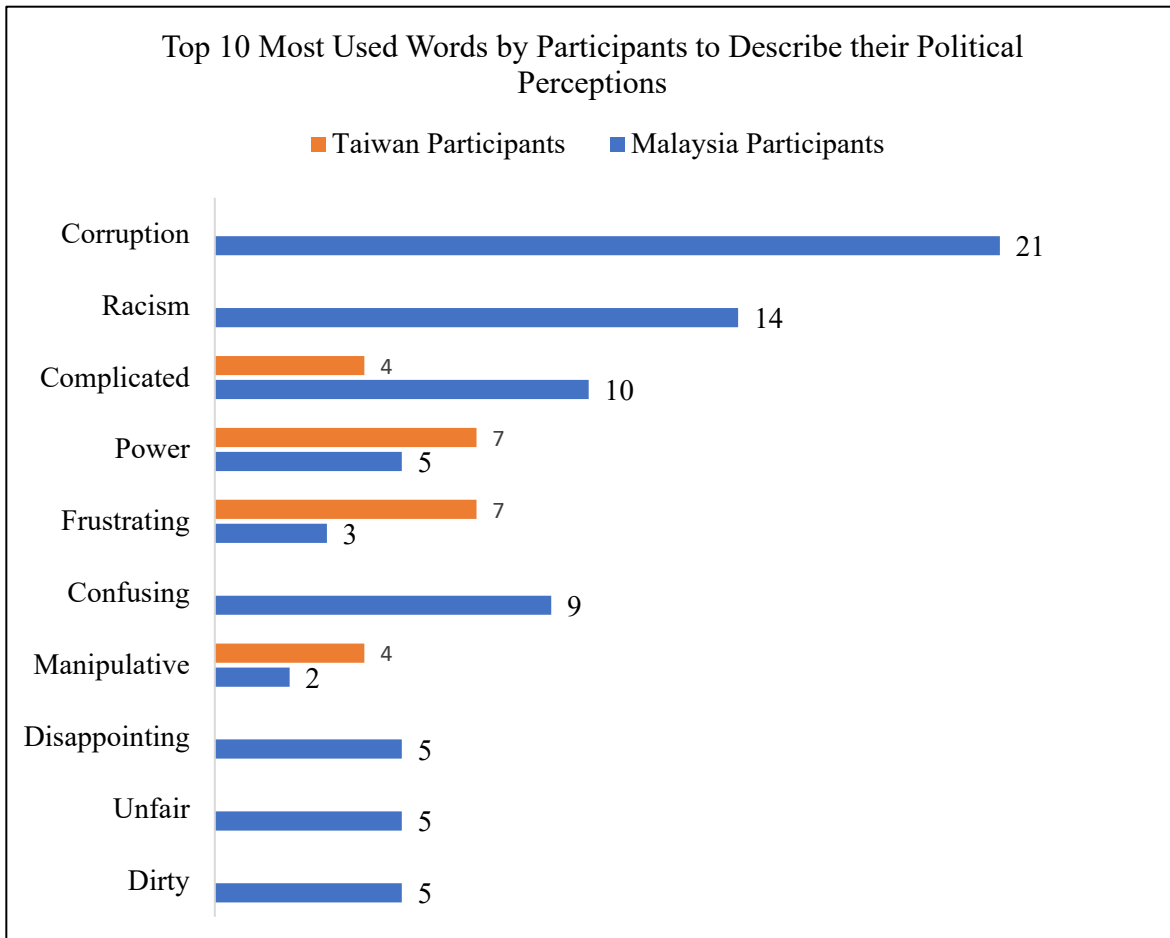


Figure 31: Top 10 Most Used Words by Participants to Describe Their Political Perceptions

Interestingly, while corruption was the most frequently used word by participants to describe their feelings or thoughts about politics, none of the participants were from Taiwan. Out of the 21 participants from Malaysia who used the word corruption to describe their feelings or thoughts about politics, 14 were inclined to associate corruption with racism in Malaysia:

*Corruption definitely. I feel sad because in Malaysia we are a three-race country, with Chinese, Malay, and Indians and these politicians are trying to break us up instead of uniting us. So, you see there are a lot of racism still going on. Saying that we Chinese are earning too much which threaten the place of Malays and Indians. But in the real world we actually do not threaten them. They just want to protect their race. Due to this protection, they always divide us all. (Participant 797, Malaysia)*

*As a Malaysian, in our minds politics is constantly that about corruption and racism. This is frustrating and confusing because the politics in Malaysia is not stable. A lot of corruption cases during Najib's era. (Participant 234, Malaysia)*

*In Malaysia, there's a lot of corruption and racism. In Malaysia there's limitations for people because of race lah...This is unfair lah and also lack of knowledge among political leaders here. (Participant 449, Malaysia)*

*No hope for Malaysia lah as politics here is about corruption and racism. This is very sad. (Participant 815, Malaysia)*

*Malaysian politics is a lot of corruption and racism lah. That's why Malaysian politics is also frustrating and saddening. (Participant 159, Malaysia)*

While it is generally typical to equate issues of racism with unfairness and biases, an association that was also expressed by participants from Malaysia, these participants equally perceived racism as causing political instability in the country. With Millennials and Gen Z

Malaysian participants expressing how frustrated, upset, and sad they were with the political climate in Malaysia, we can gather that these young Malaysians are not politically apathetic but are aware of the political situation of their country and the importance of racial unity and cohesion as the cornerstone of Malaysia's political success and stability. By stating that Malaysian politics is corrupted and plagued with issues of racism without much hesitation or deliberation when participants were asked to describe their feelings or thoughts about politics, demonstrates the severity of racial conflict, discrimination, and disunity that continues to persist within the Malaysian society. Malaysian leaders often pride the Malaysian society as "a unique multiracial, multireligious, multilingual, and multicultural society that has enjoyed rapid development and maintained peace."<sup>27</sup> The government's tourism board brands Malaysia as "Truly Asia" as no other country is "Truly Asia" like Malaysia, with Asia's three major races, Chinese, Indian, and Malay, living harmoniously together. However, the interviews revealed that the perception of racial disunity strongly occupies the minds of these young Malaysian participants, whereby ethnic Malays and Indians deem Malaysians of ethnic Chinese descent as a threat to their social statuses.

No participants from Taiwan mentioned racism. The reason could be because the Taiwanese society is not made up of distinct races like Malaysia, with Chinese, Indian, and Malay populations. Taiwan's population is predominantly ethnic Han Chinese (98%) and the remaining 2% are Taiwanese Aborigines.<sup>28</sup> While Malaysians speak different languages and dialects due to the nation's different racial makeup, Mandarin as Taiwan's official language is spoken by almost all Taiwanese. These facts are echoed by one participant who drew comparison

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<sup>27</sup> Santa Maria Chin, E. (2019, October 26). *Dr M: Tolerance crucial for Malaysia to preserve harmony*. yahoo!news. <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/dr-m-tolerance-crucial-malaysia-130347638.html>

<sup>28</sup> World Population Review. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/taiwan-population>

between Malaysia and Taiwan, whereby the political climate in Malaysia is plagued with racism, while in Taiwan it is about different political parties:

*In Taiwan it's blue and green. In Malaysia there's limitations for people because of race lah. So, it's different environment compared to Taiwan who has no race problem. This is unfair lah and also lack of knowledge among political leaders here. (Participant 449, Malaysia)*

Tying with racism as the second most used word by participants to describe their feelings or thoughts about politics, only four out of the 14 participants who used the word “complicated” to describe their perceptions of politics were from Taiwan. They commented that “political agenda makes politics complicated and unjust in many ways” (Participant 115, Taiwan) and because “there isn’t one answer for anything, politics becomes complicated and complex and also it takes time to understand them” (Participant 301, Taiwan). Participants from Malaysia perceived politics as complicated by explaining that political issues have created “a lot of gray area” (Participant 533, Malaysia) and “there is no black and white in politics” (Participant 249, Malaysia). Overall participants from Malaysia and Taiwan perceived politics as complicated because politics itself is not a subject that they could easily understand or comprehend.

In using the word “power” to describe their feelings or thoughts about politics, participants characterized politics “like a world that people with power and privilege have more authority” (Participant 302, Taiwan) and this ‘power gives people with authority to influence or manipulate public’ (Participant 989, Taiwan). Some participants further commented that “power causes double standard and poor government management” (Participant 943, Malaysia) and noted how “people in power have their own agendas even though in a democratic country and play favoritism and this causes unfairness” (Participant 866, Malaysia). In general, participants



seemed to share this attitude towards perceiving politics as power by associating it with privilege, manipulation, and authority.

Participants perceiving politics as “frustrating” seemed to share a sense of recognition that politics is important and affects people’s daily lives:

*In general politics is important and impact our lives I feel and should be encouraging, motivational, and collaboration among different races, but instead I feel it’s confusing and frustrating cause there’s many problems lah. (Participant 159, Malaysia).*

*It’s frustrating I would say. It’s part of our lives yes and it’s quite important. A lot of times, I feel like how much could I actually do, how much could I actually change? So, a lot of times, I have to remind myself it starts with baby steps or small things to raising awareness. So, those small things I know I can engage in politics like having different kinds of conversations with friends and people. (Participant 302, Taiwan).*

*Politics is important and “是生活的一部分”<sup>29</sup> but feel that people like politicians make it extreme. (Participant 650, Taiwan)*

Only nine participants from Malaysia perceived politics as “confusing”, while none were from Taiwan. For these participants, their underlying sense of confusion stemmed from the actions of Malaysian politicians:

*Confusing because the politics in Malaysia is unstable and you see right, our politicians from different parties like to jump from one party to another, just like the recent changes lah the Pakatan Harapan was like gone and then those politicians jumped to Muhyiddin’s Perikatan Party. (Participant 234, Malaysia)*

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<sup>29</sup> Translates to mean “part of our daily lives” in English.

*In my country, the politics is quite confusing I feel about our politicians who do not know what to do. Like the pandemic situation now right, cases are increasing and we are still under lockdown. It is also disappointing those politicians are confusing people with their actions lah and fail to control the pandemic. Also disappointed that the parties or politicians only interested in getting higher positions and competing to get those positions and not doing good for the people. At least they have to think of the citizens first and not themselves.* (Participant 988, Malaysia)

Participants describing politics as “manipulative” explained how politicians “know how to look good to influence people” (Participant 439, female Taiwan), “like to use beautiful words and phrases to describe their actions, plans, and policies” (Participant 278, Taiwan), cleverly “use media to present themselves to get more votes to get elected” (Participant 575, Taiwan), and “can use power to control people’s minds” (Participant 989, Taiwan). Only five participants, all of whom are from Malaysia, perceived politics to be “disappointing” and “unfair” respectively. This finding is rather interesting since no participants from Taiwan perceived politics to be disappointing, while almost 53% of survey participants from Taiwan (569 Taiwanese survey participants out of a total of 1083 Taiwanese survey participants) perceived politics to be disappointing (see Figure 22).

The reason underlying Malaysian participants’ disappointment was inclined towards the actions or behaviors of their politicians. As some of the participants commented, politicians are “always playing games and take this country as their playing ground, which is disappointing” (Participant 623, Malaysia), “greedy and corrupted and go to where benefits are” (Participant 732, Malaysia), and “selfish and useless and don’t really want to help our people” (Participant 485, Malaysia). One participant specifically emphasized his disappointment by questioning as to

why his “country is still led by those old, outdated, ignorant, no wisdom, and no leadership politicians” (Participant 973, Malaysia).

Perceiving politics as unfair, all five participants seemed to share the sentiment that Malaysian politicians are self-serving, whereby they are only “interested in protecting their own benefits” (Participant 159, Malaysia) and “fighting for power” (Participant 449, Malaysia). Three participants went further by using the COVID-19 pandemic situation to illustrate the unfairness they felt:

*It’s really unfair right. The government fails to control the COVID-19 from spreading but when lockdown they allow the Malays to go “masjid”<sup>30</sup> to pray and go “outstation”<sup>31</sup> to visit during “Raya”<sup>32</sup> right, but we Chinese leh can’t go anywhere must “乖乖”<sup>33</sup> stay at home or not we will “kena denda”<sup>34</sup> lah. (Participant 898, Malaysia)*

*Malaysian politics is stupid cause we can watch the parliamentary debate live recently cause of COVID right and we can see how those “YB”<sup>35</sup> treat our people when they talk what they want like uneducated person and so unfair cause they are exploiting the rules for COVID-19 however they want for themselves. (Participant 973, Malaysia)*

*Unfair cause sometimes people in power have own agendas even though in a democratic country and play favoritism and this causes unfairness. It’s the citizens that vote them into power, but they are not serving the citizens they are serving their own*

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<sup>30</sup> The Malay word for mosque.

<sup>31</sup> In Malaysia, the phrase means going out or being out of town but still within the same country.

<sup>32</sup> The shorter version of the Malay word “Hari Raya Aidilfitri”, a festival celebrating the breaking of the fast marking the end of Ramadan, which is celebrated by the Muslim population in Malaysia.

<sup>33</sup> The Chinese word to mean obediently or to follow the rules or law obediently.

<sup>34</sup> In Malaysia, this Malay phrase means to be charged an amount of money as a punishment for breaking or not obeying a rule or law.

<sup>35</sup> The Malaysian acronym of the Malay word “Yang Berhormat” that means The Honorable in English and is a honorary style accorded to members of the federal and state legislatures in Malaysia.

*agendas. We can see this for COVID. So, so unfair cause they are not working for the citizens.* (Participant 866, Malaysia)

The five participants who used the word “dirty” to describe their feelings or thoughts about politics were from Malaysia. Their perceptions of politics as dirty were related to two factors, namely corruption and manipulation. For instance, one participant vented her disappointment that to her, “it feels like daylight robbery the level of corruption and dirty politics that are happening, also how manipulative you can see what the politicians are doing” (Participant 282, Malaysia). Another participant further added that she found politics to be dirty because “politicians like to lie and like to fool us” (Participant 328, Malaysia). Other words from participants included chaos, competition, conflicting, depressing, disaster, greed, hypocrisy, messy, money, outdated, polarized, scary, stupid, terrible, uncertain, and violent. Only three participants out of 30 participants, all of whom were from Taiwan, did not express negative feelings or thoughts about politics. They seemed to share the attitude that politics is part of people’s daily lives:

*I think politics is very important. It will affect our daily life although people might think it’s far from what their daily lives are. At the end of the day, everyone is being bound in this same society, so if we don’t care about politics, we let bad politicians take control and they will make your life miserable. So, we should try to engage in politics or at least try to understand what’s going on. That’s very important.* (Participant 439, male Taiwan)

*Politics is everyone’s business. It’s our daily life. Anything related to people is politics.* (Participant 905, Taiwan)

*Politics is like a platform for people to be there to exchange their ideas and feelings. It is in people's daily lives. (Participant 793, Taiwan)*

Overall, participants from Taiwan seemed to perceive politics less negatively compared to participants from Malaysia. Participants from Taiwan largely perceived politics in three aspects. They perceived politics to be complicated as politics is not a subject that they could easily understand. They viewed politics as related to power and this power gives people authority to influence the public. Thirdly, they understood politics to involve the art of manipulation, whereby political leaders are conscious of their public image and know what to say or what not to say in front of the camera. Participants from Malaysia tended to be more frustrated with the political climate in their country and disappointed with the actions or behaviors of their political leaders. Their feelings or thoughts about politics largely centered around two aspects. The first being the ongoing issues of corruption and racism in Malaysia that Malaysian politicians have failed to resolve or eradicate. Secondly, they were disappointed with the unfair and unjust racial policies in place that continue to favor one race over other racial groups despite the government professing racial harmony in the country.

### **8.2.3 Attitudes towards Political Engagement**

Regarding the theme of participants' attitudes towards political engagement, participants were asked to discuss about their opinions on young people's political engagement today and the types of behaviors or actions they would consider as political engagement (see Figure 32).

### 8.2.3.1 *Opinions on Young People's Political Engagement*

All 33 participants seemed to agree that in general, young people engage more in politics today compared to their parents' and grandparents' generations. They attributed this phenomenon to technology. Specifically, participants noted how technology has made them "more well-informed today" (Participant 973, Malaysia), "more aware about what is happening inside the country and outside" (Participant 274, Malaysia), "more concern about political issues" (Participant 650, Taiwan), and "to have more education compared to previous generation that cause different way of thinking between young and older generation" (Participant 936, Malaysia). As one participant noted "things are different now because of technology" (Participant 943, Malaysia). Some of the insights that participants provided on how technology has allowed young people like them and others to engage more in politics today included:

*Young people engage more due to technology, I think. Information is more transparent than before so young people are having more opportunity to get information that people in the past cannot access to. People get more and more information with technology, and it triggers young people to have more discussion in politics. (Participant 989, Taiwan)*

*Yes, cause we young people can obtain more information through technology, so we all know or understand politics more, like what kinds of rules, the effect, the cause. So, young people now already know so they will understand better about politics. Compared to last time, our parents' generation was through face to face because the information didn't exchange quickly like now. So, now with technology this will cause young people to join politics more and more today cause they now understand the importance of politics and their votes. (Participant 943, Malaysia)*

*More because young people use technology to get on social media every day and they can also get involved in politics nowadays on social media like posting comments, online discussion, way more than older generation. This is definitely a good thing for young people to get involved in politics more as young people have their own opinions and ideas. Young people are smarter and have more new ideas to conduct public agenda way more better than older people. (Participant 905, Taiwan)*

*Definitely! Young people engage more today in comparison with the older generation because of technology advancement. So, information about political stuffs are more readily available or more easily accessible. The result is our generation is more gung-ho about social issues today and social issues are influenced by a lot of policies and laws that the country impose and that's why young people care about these issues and want to have a say, to make a stand and that's why they are more involved in politics. (Participant 866, Malaysia)*

*Definitely more! More young people today engage as it is much easier for them to get info today and the amount of information today is much more. Nowadays we can use Internet or podcast to get any kinds of information due to technology so it's easier for people to get information and notice political things. (Participant 793, Taiwan)*

*Yes, young people nowadays engage more. Young people now engage more in politics because they want to change the way to manage the country. It's a good thing because young people right now have a lot of ideas and technology helps to give them ideas to better solve, to come up with better solutions to manage the country. (Participant 988, Malaysia)*

*Yes, engage more in politics. My friends are always on social media, post a lot about politics, make new ideas with technology, like to encourage people to engage in politics to make Malaysia a better place. (Participant 797, Malaysia)*

*Definitely engage more. Young people share their ideas, also inviting others to join the discussion on social media and online due to technology. People are getting more and more aware about politics. Like the gay marriage vote in Taiwan. (Participant 278, Taiwan)*

*Young people engage more because we use Internet everyday so it's easy to watch news and also you can share opinions on Facebook, Instagram. Young people nowadays engage in politics more and more thanks to technology, I think. (Participant 439, male Taiwan)*

*Young people engage more in politics today. Like when they want to express something, they will straight away drop their comments on the social media. So, I see this is how young people getting more and more involved in politics although they are not in the government, but I will say this is part of engagement lah. (Participant 249, Malaysia)*

*Definitely more. It's easier through social media and technology. Without technology or social media, I think we will like moving towards a conservative society with not that many information. At least in Taiwan I feel. (Participant 115, Taiwan)*

Three participants explicitly pointed out how social media has changed the political landscape for young people to engage in politics today:

*Social media is a place for young people and all to voice out their feelings because in Malaysia we Chinese are timid because from the past until today, we Chinese lack of power in politics because all politics are controlled by the Malay and just let them*



*bully us until this generation that we found out that it's not right. So, if we have anything that happen to us, we have no one else who can save us. We can only save ourselves. So, technology like social media now help us to voice out what we feel about Malaysia, so we started to stand out, but we just take the first step. Although it's a small step, it's a very courageous thing to do because we are final taking our first step after 57 years of independence. Our generation is taking steps even baby steps to stand up, speak up, to fight because of advance of technology. So, when we access loads of news and information about government from social media, we know what is actually going on in Malaysia and we started to fight for our rights. (Participant 797, Malaysia)*

*For the older generation like my parents and grandparents will literally tell me don't go on the politics track because their generations have seen a lot of government violence, so they remind us not to go on politics. But for us young people, 20-ish, 30-ish, we don't think like our parents. Social media gives young people more chances to engage in politics. We can post, comment, share, and get news. I'm happy to see a lot of young generation they are very engaged in politics. (Participant 439, male Taiwan)*

*From my friends and people I know, we engage in politics more. We do discuss about politics. Some young Malaysians are affected by the teaching of their parents and grandparents to not to engage in politics in anyway as it will corrupt our minds or some bad effects. But the young people in Malaysia are progressing in a very good way where we are more politically conscious, and we understand which movement we should support and how we can voice our opinions when things happen to let more people know. Technology like Internet and social media let us do it. (Participant 485, Malaysia)*

Although the participants generally agreed that young people engage more in politics today, three expressed reservations about the level of young people's political engagement in their country compared to young people's political engagement in other nations:

*They engage more but maybe less. Maybe outside the country, young people engage more like in US, Europe, Hong Kong. (Participant 898, Malaysia)*

*Malaysian young people engage less but Taiwanese young people will be more. Environment in Malaysia not so good because our parents will say you should not engage in politics cause you will be caught. (Participant 449, Malaysia)*

*In Malaysia, maybe not so much if we compare to elsewhere like other Western countries. (Participant 815, Malaysia)*

Participants appeared to view young people's level of political engagement today with optimism. Their optimism is stemmed from the presence of digital technology, such as the Internet and social media, that has afforded them the opportunity to obtain more political information, increase their understanding of politics, voice their opinions, share news or information about politics, and fight for their beliefs. In short, digital technology has empowered them to engage in politics with ease and convenience compared to their parents' and grandparents' generations.

### *8.2.3.2 Types of Behaviors of Actions Amounting to Political Engagement*

When asked to share their opinions about what types of behaviors or actions they considered as political engagement, all 33 participants mentioned using social media without deliberation. While 39% of the participants (13 out of 33 participants) cited voting as a form of political engagement, 24% (8 out of 33 participants) mentioned joining a political party to

engage in politics. Considering Taiwan being notably acknowledged as a vibrant democratic society with strong citizenship engagement, it was surprising that only two participants mentioned joining a political party to engage in politics. Only 18% of the participants (6 out of 33 participants) viewed being a politician as a means to engage in politics. Figure 32 shows participants' attitudes towards political engagement.

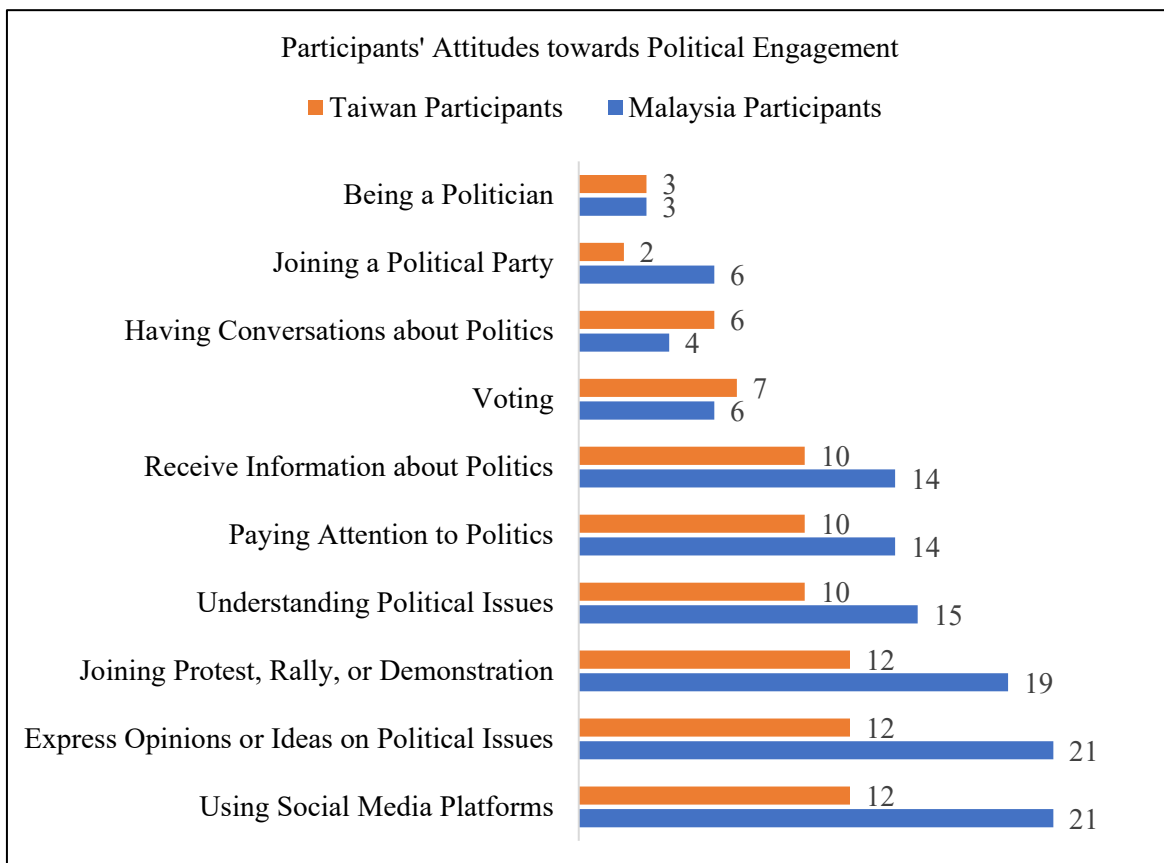


Figure 32: Participants' Attitudes towards Political Engagement

Almost 52% of the participants (17 out of 33 participants) seemed to agree that there are many ways to engage in politics today as political engagement is more than just voting:

*Well, politics is not just about voting! Political engagement for me even when you are giving your opinions about how people should run the government, that is also*

*political engagement cause you are partaking the movement of changing the political way. (Participant 949, Malaysia)*

*I guess it is not just voting or joining like a political party. Engagement can be like where we are concern about political issues that are happening around us and the world. So, we voice out our opinions, we gather to voice out in unity. It need not be like directly involve like be a politician. (Participant 936, Malaysia)*

*Definitely more than voting! It could be like sharing some ideas to let people know, speaking out making people hear your voices, sharing ideas to let people think in different ways through online, social media. There're many ways today to engage in politics. (Participant 989, Taiwan)*

*We can engage in politics in different ways, not just voting. Now, we can use online platforms like write good essays about politics and share it on online platform like Quora, social media, and or even watch like political talk shows to engage in politics. (Participant 249, Malaysia)*

All 33 participants shared the view that using social media to post, share ideas, or voice out one's opinions amounted to political engagement. Social media was the first example they mentioned and without deliberation. These participants who cited using social media to engage in politics equally regarded expressing opinions or ideas on political issues, specifically on social media platforms, as a form of political engagement. Several participants gave examples how social media could be helpful to them and others in engaging in politics:

*When you advocate for something, you can join a civil group or openly write about something on social media to express your views and leverage your social media to achieve your goals. (Participant 543, Taiwan)*

*Politicians get to know the needs of the “rakyat”<sup>36</sup> and it has to be through a channel that is being widely used by the people, like social media. For example, we know the parties engage with us through social media with information update or information sharing. We also express our views lah on social media. (Participant 159, Malaysia)*

*Nowadays, we can raise awareness like posting on social media and express our ideas on politics on social media like FB. (Participant 302, Taiwan)*

*Like for example, the previous “PM”<sup>37</sup> Najib is doing very well in sharing his profile on social media and using it in engaging the public. Using social media, we can let people stay engaged in the current moment news or info. It is very easy to engage currently. With social media, we can like sharing posts or like them or express our opinions. Those are part of engagement as well. (Participant 973, Malaysia)*

*For now, social media platforms let people join and discuss freely and express our political views. There are several degrees of political engagement. The minimum maybe is for people to know what is happening in society and around them and we can do this on social media. Then, they can figure what the problem or issue is or what cause the conflict and then think about the action they may take and decide whether to take the action, which will be the last step. (Participant 793, Taiwan)*

*On social media you express your political views or opinions that can help in political activities like the “Bersih protest”<sup>38</sup> where people can know more. (Participant 234, Malaysia)*

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<sup>36</sup> “Rakyat” is the Malay word for “the people or citizens of a country”.

<sup>37</sup> PM is the abbreviation for Prime Minister.

<sup>38</sup> The “Bersih protest” is a civil society movement in Malaysia that calls for a thorough reform of Malaysia’s electoral process. It was first launched in 2006, with the 2007 Bersih rally first held on 10 November 2007. “Bersih” means “clean” in Malay.

*The majority they will use social media and drop their comments, make their videos, express their views, and talk about politics. This is how they engage. I see this as part of the engagement in politics.* (Participant 249, Taiwan)

Almost 94% of the participants (31 out of 33 participants) brought up joining a protest, rally, or demonstration to engage in politics. Despite an overwhelming majority of participants cited joining a protest, rally, or demonstration as a form of political engagement without much hesitation, participants from Malaysia had mixed feelings regarding its efficacy, citing that “protests are not effective in Malaysia” (Participant 623, Malaysia) because protests are “difficult as there will be many police who will obstruct protesters” (Participant 815, Malaysia) and might “end up not having any big changes for the issue or problem” (Participant 328, Malaysia). In comparison to participants from Malaysia, participants from Taiwan were more optimistic about joining a protest and regarded joining a protest as a political behavior that is “quite normal and part of a healthy society” (Participant 793, Taiwan) as it is a “good channel to ask the government to face the issues people are trying to address” (Participant 575, Taiwan). Despite viewing the act of joining a protest positively, Taiwanese participants expressed concerns over the risk and danger that joining a political protest will pose:

*Protest is a good example for political engagement, but we also put ourself in a very dangerous situation that affect our own life. But we need to take if we want to change something.* (Participant 989, Taiwan)

*I think protest is a good way overall. There's also safety issues when we join.*  
(Participant 302, Taiwan)

*Student protests they pay a high price. They get injured by the police, the government. My parents don't forbid me to join but don't encourage me to join either because they think it's dangerous. (Participant 439, female Taiwan)*

Almost 76% of the participants shared the view that understanding political issues amounted to political engagement. To these participants, knowing about “the story or background about political issues” (Participant 650, Taiwan) allow them to know why, how, or the reasons those political issues happened in the first place. Some of the participants who provided more insights into their opinions further regarded understanding political issues as the first step to engaging in politics:

*First level of engagement is to understand politics, doesn't matter whether it's country level, city level or any level. So, we have to try to understand more of what are the things going on around you, understand how the different policies will affect the people, environment. Then, the next step is to try to be more proactive after knowing things like give support to politicians or people who can better society or giving some advice or express our views. All these are good ways. The ultimate step is to step in and become the one who wants to make changes. (Participant 439, male Taiwan)*

*Understand politics firstly. Then engaging in conversations or calling representatives or email them. Being involved in volunteering or advocacy works that you care about, so those kind of small things also count as engaging. (Participant 302, Taiwan)*

*To understand the news of politics first, I think. Next, we discuss the political topics with our friends, so that is also a kind of engagement. (Participant 449, Malaysia)*

*Personally, what I usually do is like I will read some news or see “political variety shows”<sup>39</sup> and I see this as part of the way how I try to understand politics and get engaged into the political things first, you know, as first step lah. (Participant 249, Malaysia)*

Almost 73% of the participants (24 out of 33 participants) cited paying attention to and receiving information about politics amounted to political engagement respectively. These participants were inclined to associate these two acts of political engagement with digital technology, such as using the Internet, using social media platforms, or listening to podcast:

*For me, I pay attention to politics to getting the right information. I use social media, podcast of people willing to share news or politicians themselves. I can join online group with people who are interested in political engagement. Online discussion boards like Reddit for people to go and discuss political things. Politicians in Taiwan host online streaming or they have Instagram accounts, or they have podcast you can listen to. (Participant 793, Taiwan)*

*For me personally, it’s being aware and pay attention to policies that are being made in the parliament, in the country. I receive info about politics on Internet, my phone, and keep up with news and that to me is what political engagement means.*

*(Participant 866, Malaysia)*

*Focus or pay attention to political news or policies. I use technology like Internet, social media, my phone. (Participant 439, male Taiwan)*

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<sup>39</sup> Participant explained that “political variety shows” means political talk shows that discuss about local and international political issues accessible on local television channels.



*Engaging ah...means conscious about politics, like pay attention to be aware and get info on Internet, political movements around his country and also to join or side with a movement to express their views or frustrations. (Participant 485, Malaysia)*

*Receiving information on Internet is also a sort of engagement. (Participant 115, Taiwan)*

The interviews revealed one interesting finding regarding having conversations about politics as a form of political engagement. While very few participants (10 out of 33 participants) cited having conversations about politics as a means to engage in politics, nine out of the 10 participants mentioned “having a conversation” (Participant 201, Taiwan) or “discuss political topics” (Participant 449, Malaysia) with friends or “discuss freely” (Participant 793, Taiwan) on social media platforms or online groups. While participants who mentioned having conversations about politics as a form of political engagement did not elaborate further on their answers, choosing to have political conversations with friends or even strangers on the Internet instead of with their family members could be attributable to two existing conditions, especially in Malaysia where most ethnic Chinese parents almost never discuss politics with their children and have a tendency of asking their children to refrain from engaging in politics. These conditions were revealed by one participant later in the interview while discussing on the topic of young people’s choice of political engagement:

*In our Malaysia, it’s totally different. First of all, it’s our parents’ problems. Our parents force us to stay at home and not to fight for our rights. It’s brainwashed since older generation that if you go out to fight for your rights, you will get mock, injured. So, we don’t talk politics at home. (Participant 797, Malaysia)*

Only one participant mentioned having conversations about politics with family members. This participant gave somewhat detailed accounts of her experience having political dialogues with her family while growing up, which was neither positive nor encouraging:

*This question brought me back to my childhood. I remembered we used to spend a lot of time sitting in front of the TV when we elect the president for 4 years and other representatives every 2 years. So, we are constantly engaged in this dialogue of who to vote for, what they are saying online, and my parents also tune in to a lot of political debates on TV. So, it's a family dialogue we always have. But my family kind of lean very obviously towards a certain party, so as a child I don't have a say who to vote for. They will tell me when you go to vote remember to vote for who and who. It's like already set out the rule my family will lay down. (Participant 575, Taiwan).*

The interviews largely revealed that the attitudes of participants from Malaysia and Taiwan towards political engagement were more inclined to regard political behaviors or activities that have a psychological element as amounting to political engagement. The only exception being physically joining a protest, rally, or demonstration to engage in politics. Such non-physical behaviors or activities included expressing opinions or ideas on political issues, understanding politics, paying attention to politics, and receiving information about political news or issues. Specifically, they associated most of these political behaviors or activities to using digital technology to engage in politics, such as the Internet and social media platforms. This potentially informs us that Malaysian and Taiwanese Millennials' and Gen Zers' attitudes towards political engagement today are moving away from traditionally recognized forms of political engagement, such as voting, being members of political parties, or running for political office, and are increasingly leaning towards using different types of digital technology to engage

in politics. In short, the current trend is that the psychological and virtual are gradually replacing the physical.

#### ***8.2.4 Attitudes towards Young People's Method of Political Engagement***

To explore participants attitudes towards their generation's method of political engagement today, participants were shown images of webpages (Stop Asian Hate and MeToo Movement) and posts on social media platforms Facebook and Instagram and were asked to discuss about them. All participants appeared to view favorably on young people's choice of using digital technology, such as social media platforms and the Internet, to engage in politics over traditional forms of political engagement, such as voting or joining a political party. Most of the participants commented on how their generation's tech and social media savviness have allowed them to fully utilize the Internet and social media platforms to "connect with people globally" (Participant 949, Malaysia) to "create noise" (Participant 815, Malaysia), "widely spread the information" (Participant 575, Taiwan), and "raise awareness" (Participant 115, Taiwan) for a political cause or issue. They also viewed digital technology as a "modern trend" (Participant 905, Taiwan) making it possible to "combine a lot of people and everyone's strength in one go to achieve the biggest result for the political cause" (Participant 274, Malaysia).

Additionally, participants also attributed to the convenience, low cost, simplicity, and speed of using the Internet and social media platforms as among the reasons young people are increasingly turning to digital technology for political engagement. As previously noted, participants mentioned how they found politics to be complicated and confusing. Considering this factor alone, it could be expected for participants to be more inclined to use the Internet and

social media to engage in politics, especially in obtaining more information to better understand politics or in seeking support or help for a cause. As these participants aptly summarized it:

*You know, we young people today are very engaged and well-connected to the Internet, social media, and young people know technology, they know it well, how to leverage it, and make our voices be seen and heard. These digital forms of engagement are much more easier to use and commit...most of the time, when young people form such tight-knit community online...when you write an online blog you have readers, and information flow and flow really fast, so young people and everyone are committing to the cause and sharing these stuffs using technology have become a way of showing our identity, showing our political preferences and ideas. I think, taking actions online have this ripple effect of creating awareness and gather support. (Participant 543, Taiwan)*

*Around us, more and more young people like to use digital technology like social media to voice out their opinions because they can find people who have same channel with them, and they can have sharing sections and they are looking for people who can make changes with them. That is why they go for social media. (Participant 328, Malaysia)*

In articulating how young people are committed to a particular cause by using digital technology to voice out their views, these participants were also recognizing their generation's proactiveness in seeking ways to engage politically and resilience in making the change they hope for. This demonstrates the proactive behavior of members of Gen-pro in taking the initiative to engage in political matters instead of passively adapting to current conditions or waiting for change to happen by itself.

Participants equally acknowledged how young people today are creative and innovative in coming up with different ways to engage politically or socially, particularly by capitalizing on the various tools that digital technology has afforded them. In referring to the creations of webpages, such as Stop Asian Hate and Me Too Movement, one participant articulated how such webpages make it easy for people to engage by offering them a variety of options to pick and choose from:

*I really think it's smart and innovative how these webpages give people choices on how to engage. Like telling people how we can start with small things first like use the hashtag, with a post, use an image, and then it goes to taking other actions, like donation, volunteering, joining movement. I also like the language choice they chose...like how they tell us we can all stand together to support these people... it is definitely changing how people are taking in that political information and choosing to engage in more creative ways. (Participant 575, Taiwan)*

Several participants further commented on how social media platforms, such as YouTube, Twitter, and TikTok, allow young users to “get people’s attention” (Participant 905, Taiwan):

*Like Twitter trending pages, that's where you get people to actually find out about what's happening, with interesting hashtag. For me a person who knows or use social media quite a lot, this platform like Twitter is very resourceful especially when it comes to where you need to share, you give links on Twitter or Instagram and then you share with everyone. This is a very great way to spread awareness to other people and actually put everything in one place for people to give help, send help. (Participant 949, Malaysia)*

*Young people use hashtag, tweets, memes, emojis and share videos or images on YouTube and TikTok to bring out the message clearly. With videos, memes, emojis, images of your cause or events would greatly engage or impact someone's mindset about these events so they can remember it more vividly instead of just words and words on news. I think it's creative. (Participant 159, Malaysia)*

*Twitter is a very powerful platform. Like when I try to know more about political news, I use Twitter. Pictures speak a thousand words, like the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong. We can also create videos and share on YouTube with dance, catchy tunes. They all attract attention faster. (Participant 282, Malaysia)*

Based on the participants' comments above, it could be inferred that the maturation of digital technology has afforded everyone, particularly today's young people, with the opportunity to utilize various digital media tools to engage in whichever way and however they so freely choose to, including developing young people's digital media creativity and skills. Using creative or progressive ways to voice for the changes they seek, such as creating videos, memes, or hashtags, demonstrate how members of Gen-pro, subscribing to a professional mindset, are constantly innovating and reinventing new ways to engage socially and politically to reach a wider audience in spreading their cause and message. This equally attests to their proactive behavior in taking advantage of social media and using their digital skillsets to initiate changes rather than passively waiting for change to happen.

To further clarify how impactful social media can be in gathering a wider audience or garnering attention, one participant even referred to how fans of Korean pop band, BTS, made use of digital technology by creating a BTS fan webpage to organize events and update information about their favorite K-pop's activities, news, and whereabouts:

*It's a clever way using social media because a lot of young people are social media savvy. For example, BTS K-pop fan group, if you see them, they have such an organized way of spreading news like a BTS comeback. If you actually go into their webpage, it is like they are ONE big community organizing things. It's what a community should look like even if you are different people from different countries. People engaging in this form of global engagement working well together. It creates a bond that is not just in one place but all over the place people all over the world are bonding over the same thing. That's the beauty and benefits of using social media or technology as a form of political engagement because you are able to connect not just with people around you but also with people who are far than you. You create a virtual, online community to search for people that have gone through a certain problem that you are going through to ask help, advice, or even to find support. It's clever, you know, and organized.*

(Participant 949, Malaysia)

This interesting reference above that the participant made regarding BTS K-pop fans creating a BTS fan webpage to provide information about their idol to other fans and the acknowledgement of how this is a clever and well-organized way demonstrate the ability of Gen-pro to subscribe to a professional mindset when they seek to accomplish a task or goal. As such, today's young people are increasingly demonstrating qualities that show they could work well with others, be organized, and be opened to try new ideas to achieve the things they set out to accomplish; qualities that exemplify professionalism.

While participants were largely enthusiastic and optimistic in using digital technology for political engagement, they equally expressed concerns in using this form of engagement in political matters. Some of these concerns included the dangers of fake news, information

manipulation, online scams, misleading online images, and the efficacy of these digital endeavors in bringing about the changes they hope to achieve, especially whether the “governments will pay attention or will feel the pressure” (Participants 623 and 533, Malaysia):

*Sharing of videos or images can actually bring out the message very clear and reach more people, but sometimes these videos or pictures might be very misleading. So, sharing videos or images like the Stop Asian Hate might be spreading more hates among those who hate Asian already. I don't share them unless I make sure the news is accurate.* (Participant 159, Malaysia)

*I'm not sure how effective it is but at least these posts, hashtags, things like that does let politicians hear the voice of people but until now I don't see much action taken by politicians to stop this racism because whoever is extreme or racist, they are still acting like they are right.* (Participant 973, Malaysia)

*Digital space would give people to be more brave to express their opinions definitely. So, through cyberspace, they tend to speak boldly, they are not afraid to express their true feelings. Twitter is a good thing but when we use Taiwanese national flag, Chinese people always attack us. But cause it's virtually it is safer to engage in politics. But there's also a lot of false information as well as we have no way to identify it it's real news or fake news.* (Participant 905, Taiwan)

*About videos or images on social media, they can invite all kinds of interpretation. We can even misinterpret people when they are saying or expressing themselves in written forms. So, for videos and images, they can also invite different interpretations at times. It's going to make things a little bit more complicated because people can approach a certain image or video in many ways.* (Participant 575, Taiwan)



*Twitter is a powerful platform...Pictures speak a thousand words like the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong. You see pictures of the citizens and young people getting attacked by the authorities it just moves your heart so much. So, they are powerful but can also be tools that people use to manipulate others. (Participant 282, Malaysia)*

Despite expressing concerns in using digital technology, like the Internet and social media platforms, for political engagement, some participants expressed an awareness of how social media platforms work and how they themselves would go about handling the possibility of misleading information or inefficacy of these digital political actions:

*Platforms like Twitter people can update as and when they go, whatever is happening and many different people can update their points of views, all in real-time. So, the danger is that you need to know what is fake news and what is not. So, when many people are reporting for example in the context of a protest like 10 people are in location A, and if 8 people report one thing and 2 people report something else then you can maybe guess the 8 people are probably giving real news. Compare the information so then you are more aware, and you get a balanced view and not like super bias kind of information or anything and don't just hearing what news portal want to tell you only. (Participant 866, Malaysia)*

*The images or pictures can strengthen the feelings and arouse people's emotions when they see these kinds of pictures or read the articles or posts. For me, I will feel more strongly but also tell myself it might not be true, it might be fake. So, I will rethink or reflect before taking action. Find out more on it. (Participant 439, female Taiwan)*

*Images are very influential but what is important is that when I see those kind of things or pictures, I will be suspicious and careful because you never know the people*

*who started or spreading this information, like what's the context around it or maybe they just take our clips in between but didn't give you a full picture of the story. This will very easily affect the public's emotions...so, we need to do more research first to check the truth of the news or pictures when see these images. (Participant 439, male Taiwan)*

*Using these kind of social media platforms make people easily connected together, more accessible, more convenient, don't have to meet in person. Can use these Twitter platforms to talk to each other or announce something. But, at the same time every single platform has an algorithm to determine whether a specific post is shown. You cannot control as that is controlled by the platform. You receive information chosen by the platform chosen for you by the algorithm. (Participant 793, Taiwan)*

Some participants continued to demonstrate an encouraging attitude towards the efficacy of these digital political endeavors by expressing an understanding of how sometimes these engagements take time and are not actions that could change the political status quo overnight or immediately:

*Probably effective with images, pictures, videos, cause Twitter is one of the first platforms you will receive any information and it really is effective in spreading inspiration. But information is like present everywhere so at times you are not sure if this is scam or real. So, it runs that risk but other than that I think it is effective cause you can reach a lot of people and raising awareness is always the first step. Of course, no political engagement is going to change whatever's in place like right away. It normally takes like a long time and multiple efforts. So, I think it is effective however impossible or insignificant these individual events can seem. (Participant 115, Taiwan)*

*Like this year, I signed up a lot of online petitions like to support the Myanmar protest for example. Although it's good I also wonder if there's any physical help to Myanmar. Like a few months ago, people around the world are paying attention to what happened to Myanmar but today there's not much attention about Myanmar. But I am thinking about Germany, the Berlin Wall, that it doesn't happen in one day or like the Soviet Union. It took a lot of time so we should prepare ourselves for the future and be patient if you can't change anything right now. (Participant 439, female Taiwan)*

The interviews revealed that participants largely demonstrated a positive attitude towards using digital technology for political engagement. Participants regarded creating webpages, videos, memes, or hashtags as creative, innovative, and clever ways for young people to engage in politics today. Among the reasons that participants gave on choosing digital technology for political engagement included the ease and affordability of using digital tools, such as the Internet and social media platforms, and the potential of social media platforms to reach a wider audience and raise global awareness at a faster speed. Participants were further encouraged to turn to social media platforms to engage in politics as these platforms furnish them with the opportunity to build solidarity and seek support from others wanting to make changes together.

These potentially demonstrate the proactive behavior among members of Gen-pro in taking the initiative to seek different and innovative ways for political engagement. By showing support for issues beyond the borders of their own nation, young people are expressing concern for the collective instead of regarding some of today's pressing issues as isolated instances impacting a few parties. This potentially attests to young people's forward-thinking attitude (progressive attitude). Having an awareness of the possibility of misleading information or fake news circulating online, a basic knowledge of how these social media platforms operate, and an

understanding of how political changes do not happen overnight demonstrate young people's rationality and maturity. These qualities inform us that young people are not ignorant or insensible towards their environment or global matters but rather exemplify their professional mindset. In short, the interviews revealed that participants recognized the impact that digital technology has had upon their lives and their opportunity for political engagement today. As three participants fittingly summarized young people's attitudes towards using digital technology for political engagement:

*Digital technology is the new era to participate together. It will engage more and more young people worldwide. All around the world we can see the posts or comments or hashtags from everyone. It's the new way to spread the message to let people know their message or ideas, what they want to say. (Participant 449, Malaysia)*

*Young generation grew up inside the Internet and inside all these social media, so this is part of their lives, and part of the language they use. So, this is the way they are most comfortable. Doesn't matter if it's politics or commercial or anything, they understand they need to go on the digital world today. (Participant 439, male Taiwan)*

*It's our everyday life now. We use technology for almost everything now so it's only natural that we use that to engage in politics. Digital technology is the way forward now and the future. It will and it should because it's more efficient to organize data and information and use it. (Participant 282, Malaysia)*

### **8.2.5 Challenges to Engaging in Politics**

With regards to the challenges associated with engaging in politics, the participants mentioned several challenges. These challenges were grouped and coded under three broad

themes as “institution- or organization-related challenges,” “personal-related challenges,” and “society-related challenges” (see Figure 33).

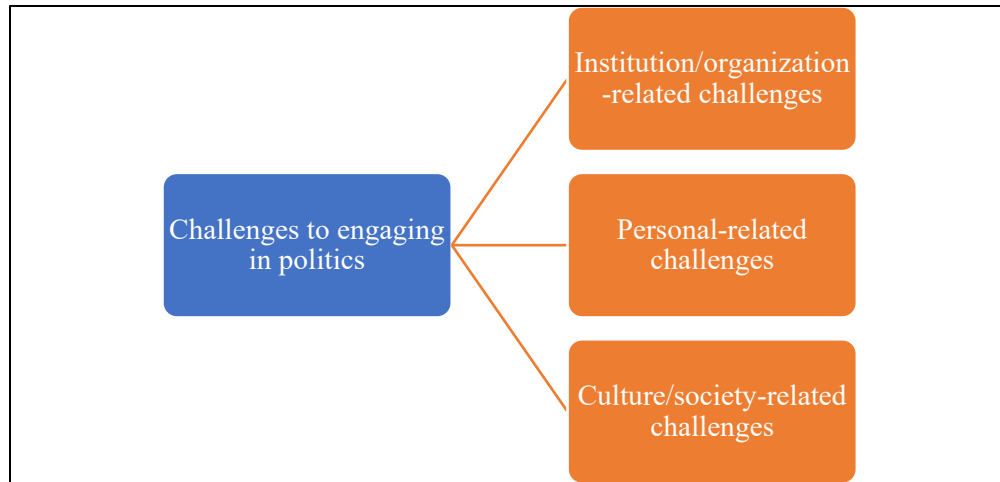


Figure 33: Participants' Perceptions of Challenges to Engaging in Politics

#### 8.2.5.1 Institution or organization-related Challenges

Institution or organization-related challenges were the most frequently mentioned challenges by participants from Malaysia ( $n=12$ ) and least by participants from Taiwan ( $n=3$ ) (See Table 2).

Table 2: Participants' Perceptions of Challenges to Engaging in Politics by Place of Origin

Challenges	Participants	
	Malaysia ( $n=21$ )	Taiwan ( $n=12$ )
<b>Institution/organization-related challenges</b>	11	3
<b>Personal-related challenges</b>	8	4
<b>Society-related challenges</b>	2	5

Seven out of 11 participants from Malaysia perceived the challenges as stemming from the political system of Malaysia. They largely attributed the challenges to three factors inherent

in the system, namely a system that persistently tolerates corruption, segregates society based on race, and lacks government transparency. Comments included:

*Although our country is a democratic country but still there are some restrictions. No freedom to speak in Malaysia. If we speak too much the police or government will come to our house to catch us. We cannot freely talk or have freedom to speak. We cannot critique the government too much. Also, because we are “华人”<sup>40</sup> so we are bystander instead of proactively changing the government or country since this country and government prioritizes Malays, “马来人为主”<sup>41</sup>. (Participant 274, Malaysia)*

*The biggest challenges I would say race problems and corruption. The government forbid some people to engage in politics. From the start we want to fight corruption and when most Chinese show up then some people will say this Chinese people want to fight for their benefits, which will cause disadvantage to your race. So, how to engage like that? (Participant 797, Malaysia)*

*Cause of the bureaucratic structure. So, if you have a strong background your voice will be counted but if you have no background or a nobody, even though your suggestions is very wise nobody will take it or listen to you. Strong background means you need to be related to money or power. It is like Najib cause his dad was Razak so when he joined as YB, people already know his background so he will have more chances to go up but if you join from the bottom or are a nobody, people won't take you seriously cause you don't have background, you are nobody. This has been going on for many, many years so it has become a culture in this country. Malaysian citizens are without*

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<sup>40</sup> Chinese words translate to mean ethnic Chinese in English.

<sup>41</sup> Chinese words translate to mean Malay-dominated.

*power. So, no background means difficult to join politics. Our system favors Malays not Chinese. We also have corruption. (Participant 943, Malaysia)*

*A lot of people at first when they joined for good intention but end up might be affected by the system. Our system I see there are a lot of dark things inside. Corruption activities. Dirty things. Shady business in the government makes it difficult to engage if you have good intentions. (Participant 328, Malaysia)*

*One of the big problems in Malaysia is corruption. This would be a challenge for me and also for young people to join or engage in politics. If you cannot fight them, they might corrupt your beliefs and you are forced to join them. (Participant 485, Malaysia)*

As a result of these perceived challenges that have consistently frustrated their opportunities for political engagement, one participant further added that young people eventually decided to turn to using social media platforms to engage in politics:

*You know, it's not easy for you to get engagement in the government, so young people can only make their engagement in politics through online platforms like Facebook and express what they really think. We don't have enough opportunities given by government or law. Some government jobs reserve for some race only lah. (Participant 249, Malaysia)*

The remaining three Malaysian participants referred to the lack of government transparency or appropriate guidance to engage in politics. In short, participants attributed this challenge to the lack of political information and education:

*In Malaysia, I would say the challenge is lack of information. For example, when I was in Singapore, I saw their politicians getting to know the grassroots. You can get to know whoever is servicing your area. But in Malaysia, it's very lack of appearance from*

*those politicians until election is coming. So, within the three to four years there's no election we don't know what are the activities or campaigns going on or what the politicians or government are doing. This lack of political information has been going on many years. This makes it difficult to engage cause we don't know what is going on.*

(Participant 973, Malaysia)

*For me, the challenge is I don't know what to do. It's like nobody tell you what to do, no resources, and no proper guidance in terms of what to do or how we can engage in politics.* (Participant 949, Malaysia)

*Cause from small, we were not educated that we can engage in politics and that politics can bring any benefits to you. As Chinese, we were taught to study hard and find a good job upon graduation, live your life peacefully. Don't involve in politics. No education on how to engage in politics and what to do, so they block our way to engage politically.* (Participant 533, Malaysia)

The three participants from Taiwan who perceived institution- or organization-related challenges as a challenge to engaging in politics were generally less critical of Taiwan's political system compared to participants from Malaysia. While they did not comment much, interestingly two of them did not attribute the challenge to themselves but to that of marginalized groups or ethnic minorities in Taiwan and other places:

*One problem I see is that marginalized groups in Taiwan don't really get as much spotlight in the system. If there could be more emphasis on issues that involved marginalized young people in Taiwan, also for indigenous groups and new immigrants everywhere to be included in the system.* (Participant 301, Taiwan)



*I guess it is with minority groups and they not having a status in Taiwan and also most societies. So, that could be a challenge for them to engage cause they don't have enough say in the system. (Participant 302, Taiwan)*

The remaining one participant commented that because the system has allowed politicians from different political parties in Taiwan to “use all kinds of dirty ways or different tactics to attack each other” (Participant 439, male Taiwan), he would think twice before joining a political party or running for office. He further stated that because of this ongoing political observation in Taiwan, he and a lot of young people in Taiwan would rather choose to engage in politics through other means, specifically using social media.

#### *8.2.5.2 Personal-related Challenges*

With regards to personal-related challenges, participants from Malaysia and Taiwan largely focused on two aspects, namely their cultural background and emotions. Out of the eight participants from Malaysia, five mentioned how their personal emotions, primarily centered around one emotional factor – fear – have presented a challenge for them to engage in politics. Three participants expressed fear of being arrested by law enforcement if they engaged in politics. While one developed this fear of being arrested if she engaged in any political protests or demonstrations, as she has witnessed her “friends being caught and put in jail during the Bersih campaign” (Participant 815, Malaysia), the other two participants expressed fear of being arrested if they voiced out political opinions on social media that did not favor the ruling party (Participants 898 and 66, Malaysia). For the remaining two participants, it was interesting how one commented that her fear of public speaking presented a challenge for her to engage in politics as she perceived her fear and lack of public speaking skills would end up hurting those

she intended to help (Participant 623, Malaysia). The other participant stated that her disappointment with the political climate of the country has demotivated her from any hope of engaging to change the current political situation, and due to this reason, she feared that she would gradually have “less interest to participate in political events” (Participant 716, Malaysia). The other three participants commented on how their cultural background as ethnic Chinese presented a challenge for them to engage in politics. Their concerns included:

*Pressure of parents. As Chinese we grew up and taught by family not to join politics. Our culture is to study good, find good job, and settle down. (Participant 449, Malaysia)*

*My parents might not agree with me engaging. The challenge is parents. They usually tell us politics is for “them”<sup>42</sup> not us Chinese. Don’t be involve and get in trouble. (Participant 936, Malaysia)*

*Family issues. Different opinions in family might prevent you from joining politics that you like. The moment I join politics, I felt that maybe my family have different perspectives towards me. They always tell us don’t go into politics. Just study well, go to good school, graduate, and get a stable job. (Participant 159, Malaysia)*

For participants from Taiwan, two cited personal emotions as a challenge to engaging in politics, while the other two mentioned cultural background. Similar to Participant 716 from Malaysia, the two participants from Taiwan who cited personal emotions as a challenge associated their emotions with fear of losing interest to engage in politics as a result of their disappointment towards politics in Taiwan. One of the participants further remarked that she sometimes asked herself “how to keep the spirit or motivation going to engage in these political issues or problems” (Participant 650, Taiwan). The two participants whose challenge stemmed

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<sup>42</sup> The word “them” refers to the ethnic Malay population in Malaysia.

from cultural background cited difficulties having open and honest communication with their families and making them understand their political views or preferences:

*My family only votes for one party all their lives. They rarely question what those candidates are saying or what they are doing. So, the challenge for me would be to first stand up to my family and say I have a different opinion that I actually think the other party also represent the people's ideas and they are also proposing things that could really move Taiwan forward. But that would be emotionally challenging for me and for my family to go through that dialogue. (Participant 575, Taiwan)*

*My parents. They are just not ready for me to advocate for something they don't fully understand or something that's very distance from them. (Participant 543, Taiwan)*

### 8.2.5.3 Society-related Challenges

With regards to society-related challenges, participants from Malaysia ( $n=2$ ) cited the consequences of being “boycotted by co-workers” (Participant 234, Malaysia) and “attacked by many online users” (Participant 249, Malaysia) for posting or sharing their personal political opinions on social media platforms and online forums or discussions that did not align with or support the majority. Both equally expressed concerns that posting their personal political views on social media could also affect their careers, work, and family. Out of the three challenges, society-related challenges were the most frequently mentioned challenges by participants from Taiwan ( $n=5$ ). Out of the five participants, three shared similar sentiments with participants from Malaysia regarding the consequences of posting or sharing their personal political opinions or preferences on social media platforms. One expressed concern of the negative impact upon her work or career:

*It is a challenge and I felt scared as my boss or manager will try to discriminate me for promotion because I supported a different party when I post or say things on social media. They will feel you are not my people. You can feel their attitudes towards you. I feel that this is very unfair. Private life is private and whoever I support has nothing to do with my professionalism. They didn't separate my private life from work.*

(Participant 905, Taiwan)

The remaining two participants explained how their personal political views or preferences would cause others to shun away from further discussing political matters with them or to label them as a supporter of a certain political party without seeking further clarification:

*If I talk to someone like online and someone gives me a label at the early stage because of my views, that may prevent the person from spending more time to discuss political things with me. People will divide you and other people into groups, so I am not or you are not in the same group with them because you have different views. Example, if I say on social media, I support independence people would label me as a supporter of DPP. But it doesn't mean that if I support independence, I support DPP, but people will link my pro-independence stance with DPP. They link my political stand with a certain political party even if that's not true and they don't ask me for any explanation. They just think I am like that.* (Participant 793, Taiwan)

*Being neutral and rational are hard nowadays. It's a challenge because if you want to share something honestly, you might be criticized by other people, and they will avoid talking to you about those issues on politics.* (Participant 439, female Taiwan)

Two participants specifically pointed out the issue with polarization that is happening in Taiwan in recent years:

*Because Taiwan is a democratic country, we are relatively easier to engage in politics than some other countries. But I feel that people are divided into two extreme groups these years and it is a challenge to engage in political issues. One group cannot understand what the other group thinks, so they basically think other groups are all wrong. Due to machine learning, social media try to feed you what you want to see so we gradually separate the whole group into two extreme groups, left-wing, right-wing. The intensity becomes more extreme. It will be hard to communicate because what you think or what he or she thinks will be wrong to you. This is a challenge now. (Participant 989, Taiwan)*

*The challenge is polarizing effect of different views among people now, of not being able to speak out honestly for fear of being criticized or judged differently by others, even online. (Participant 278, Taiwan)*

Overall, majority of the participants from Malaysia ( $n=11$ ) regarded institution- or organization-related challenges as a challenge to engaging in politics. They largely attributed the challenges to three factors that are inherent in Malaysia's political system. According to the participants, the country's political system is a system that persistently tolerates corruption. They perceived the practice of nepotism as the biggest issue with corruption in Malaysia; a practice that has frustrated their opportunity for any meaningful political engagement. Secondly, they observed how the system continues to segregate the Malaysian society based on race. Consequently, there has been unequal public policies and laws that tend to privilege one dominant race's opportunity for political engagement over all other racial groups. Thirdly, participants noted that the lack of government transparency frustrates any opportunities for them to have essential knowledge of the government's activities or actions.

Only three out of 12 participants from Taiwan cited institution- or organization-related challenges as a challenge for them to engage in politics. Compared to Malaysian participants, participants from Taiwan were generally less critical of Taiwan's political system. One of the reasons provided for this particular challenge was related to how Taiwan's political system still does not adequately represent the interests of minority or marginalized groups. The other participant commented on Taiwan's system that has allowed politicians from different political parties to apply tactics to attack each other. This participant perceived this state of Taiwan's political climate as a challenge for the participant to join a political party or run for office, but not to engage in politics through other means, such as using social media.

Participants from Malaysia and Taiwan who cited personal-related challenges largely focused on two aspects, namely their cultural background and emotions. For participants from Taiwan, the emotional challenge resulted from having the fear of losing interest or motivation to continue engaging in politics due to their disappointment with their nation's political climate. Besides having similar fear factor as participants from Taiwan, Malaysian participants also cited the fear of being arrested by law enforcement for expressing their political views publicly and the fear of public speaking. With regards to cultural background, participants from Malaysia and Taiwan mentioned facing challenges from their families. For Malaysian participants, the challenge was associated with race – being ethnic Chinese living in a country that is Malay-dominated. For participants from Taiwan, the challenge was not being able to have open and honest political discussion with their families. Finally, for society-related challenges, the challenges stemmed from being boycotted by others for expressing different political views publicly to being discriminated against at work by colleagues or employer due to having different political preferences to the political polarization situation in the nation.

The synchronous OFG study further revealed that despite participants acknowledging the freedom of political expression that social media platforms have afforded them, many still expressed fear and concerns of being stigmatized, attacked, or boycotted by others for expressing political views or preferences different from the majority. Additionally, feeling frustrated for not being able to further engage others in political discussions or dialogues due to having different political views demonstrated that participants do not merely wish to post or share their political views or preferences thoughtlessly on social media platforms, but seek to have discussions with others. Therefore, participants perceived having healthy and intellectual political discussions with others as a significant form of political engagement. Having concerns of how their political views would impact their work, career, life, or family, showed that participants do not carelessly or recklessly express their political views without thinking about the consequences, but are mindful when expressing them.

## 9 ROADMAP FOR A GEN-PRO-CENTERED CITIZENSHIP ENGAGEMENT

### 9.1 Chapter Introduction

Young people's increasing civic and political engagement today, especially considering that they are not a monolith but a group of individuals who are globally interconnected and incredibly diverse in many aspects, requires more youth-centric research agendas that carefully explore young people's diverse perspectives about the contemporary world they are experiencing and living in. More importantly, it is crucial to gain a better understanding of how this globally conscious group of young people *truly* think about politics, citizenship, and their generation's use of digital technology for meaningful civic and political engagement. Additionally, a research program that is youth-centric, where young people have the opportunity to voice their thoughts, feelings, and concerns, would furnish scholars, policymakers, and political leaders with rich insights into young people's perspectives on politics and the issues that confront them in today's ever-changing world, how young people see their opportunities for meaningful civic and political engagement, and how they perceive the use of digital technology in transforming the ways and expanding the prospects for their future political engagement or socialization, particularly as young people continue to find their place, identity, and voice in adult-dominated societies.

While the study was not able to recruit participants from Hong Kong for the synchronous online focus group interview due to the current political climate taking place in Hong Kong, nonetheless, the in-depth focus group discussions with participants from Malaysia and Taiwan revealed critical insights into how the Millennials and Gen Z from these places perceived politics, political engagement, and the impact of digital technology on their perceptions of politics and opportunities for political engagement, specifically the Internet and social media platforms. The findings raise potential recommendations for policymakers and political leaders



in these nations, and hopefully for policymakers in other nations within the East Asian and Southeast Asian regions, to better engage and include today's tech-savvy young people in political dialogues. Based on the findings from the synchronous OFG study, this chapter recommends a two-point roadmap for policymakers and political leaders on how to achieve a Gen-pro-centered citizenship engagement.

## **9.2 Potential Policy Recommendations**

In view of the findings from the synchronous online focus group (OFG), this study proposes two potential policy recommendations to better include young people in political conversations, thereby increasing young people's opportunities for political engagement. The policy recommendations are grounded in the responses and suggestions provided by Malaysian and Taiwanese participants during the synchronous OFG study when they were asked to discuss their opinions on how politicians should better include or engage young people in the political process of their respective nations.

### ***9.2.1 Formal Open Digital Space for Gen-pro: Youth Engagement Space (YES)***

The synchronous OFG discussions revealed that social media platforms have already had a significant impact on young people in Malaysia and Taiwan. Throughout the focus group sessions, participants have consistently articulated how growing up "inside" today's digital ecosystem, particularly around the Internet and digital online platforms, has become an integral and inseparable part of their lives. They equally acknowledged that more and more young people have turned to using digital technology for political engagement as young people have found it easy, simple, and convenient in using digital online tools, such as the Internet and social media

platforms, to engage in politics. Considering the impact that these digital platforms have on these tech-savvy young people's everyday life, it is foreseeable that young people will continue to capitalize on the various tools that digital technology affords them to do practically anything and everything. Following this premise and based on the findings from the focus group discussions, specifically considering existing challenges that participants identified, there is an essential need for a legitimate digital space for young people to engage in politics, particularly an open and safe digital space. As two participants suggested:

*Having more online opportunities, like online parliament definitely, social engagement online, answer questions openly on political things, working with local NGOs dealing with youth especially those in rural areas. Those would be really helpful!*  
(Participant 282, Malaysia)

*I want to tell them, the political leaders to create a kind of online platform where young people can talk to each other honestly and freely.* (Participant 439, Taiwan)

For the first policy recommendation, this study proposes that the government sets up a digital online platform that provides opportunities for young people to engage in politics. This proposed digital platform, Youth Engagement Space (YES), will serve as an official platform drawing upon the efforts of an independently established government body, young people, and non-profit organizations focusing on youth engagement, all parties working collaboratively to increase young people's opportunities for meaningful political engagement by:

- 1) Organizing regular forums and conferences to have open political discussions,
- 2) Holding annual youth engagement summit,
- 3) Working on implementing better youth engagement policies, initiatives, or plans, and

- 4) Providing network opportunities, professional trainings or workshops, and financial support for youth advocacy works

Besides the proposed three key functions of the YES platform, this platform would also provide young people with the opportunity to connect and engage with each other. Young people across the nation can connect with each other to:

- 1) Discuss about political or social issues (domestic and international),
- 2) Share stories, resources, knowledge, or experience in activism,
- 3) Engage in mutual learning on civic and/or political advocacy works,
- 4) Build networks towards advocating for shared issues of concern,
- 5) Learn about and/or be involved in events on civic and/or political issues, and
- 6) Organize activities or events for civic and/or political causes

Apart from young people's increasing use of digital technology for almost anything and everything in their day-to-day life, including for political engagement, another reason for creating a YES platform is that there is a poor understanding of young people's attitudes and behaviors due to the lack of communication between political leaders and young people. As several participants remarked on this unfortunate reality:

*They need to talk to us. By brainstorming and engaging together, I believe that's how young people can contribute ideas and let politicians or whoever the leaders are in the country to consider how the young people think and consider whatever they are suggesting. It may or may not work for those ideas, but it is quite important to get ideas from young people because they are new, daring. So, I think it would be crucial to engage with university or college students. It would be great for young people and the leaders to engage each other, to know more about each other. (Participant 973, Malaysia)*

*Working on communication skills, listening skills would be important cause I feel a lot of times, the gap there is the communication. Young people might not feel heard by politicians, they might not want to vote for them or engage in politics. Just having that open and honest and transparent communication can be the first step to try to come to a consensus of what is the best way to do things. (Participant 302, Taiwan)*

*A lot of the political candidates or who are already in office, they are so disengaged from young people, what young people are thinking, what young people are doing in their daily lives, what kind of challenges they are facing in their daily lives. So, they really have to invite more young people to be talking, critically thinking about what this country really needs, especially just understanding the challenges they are facing personally or in a community. Especially in Taiwan, we don't really have a lot of that kind of candidates who really invite young people to be engaged in the decision-making. (Participant 575, Taiwan)*

When governments put efforts in having open communication and political dialogues with young people, including collaborating with young people and non-profit organizations in working towards building better initiatives, policies, or plans to increase young people's opportunities for political engagement, these initiatives could potentially lead to better understanding of politics among young people and integration of young people into the political system. As two participants aptly articulated:

*Have political leaders include young people in the political decision-making process. Instead of asking us what do you want but still not giving us what we want, why not include us in the discussion of why do we want that or why do we seek a solution for a certain problem. Include us in those discussions so you would see how we think instead of*

*you older generations thinking of us like we are just kids. We young people feel like that. So, if you include us in the discussion, you will hear our reasons. (Participant 949, Malaysia)*

*Young people are interested in showing up and support causes because all of this information can be found online, on social media, and social media is such a big role during all these recent protests. When it comes to actual decision-making, I think there should be a more systematic way to include young people, like encourage students to intern or volunteer with government organizations or civil groups. (Participant 543, Taiwan)*

Rather than pushing young people aside, ignoring their voices, refusing to take them seriously, or shutting them out from the political decision-making process because of their inexperience or age, a formal platform that is non-hierarchical, organized, and seeks to integrate young people's contributions towards the nation's political climate would greatly increase young people's political engagement and foster their trust and faith in the government and political system over time. As two participants commented on how young people are hardly taken seriously due to their inexperience and age:

*They almost don't listen to the youngsters. They feel that youngsters have lesser experience than them. They will think that well we are elderly, we are older than you, so we are better than you. They don't want to listen and refuse to accept the suggestions that young people give. This is what I see. Politicians don't listen to us young people's decisions or suggestions. They will think that we are aggressive. (Participant 328, Malaysia)*

*Our government, they don't usually listen to us, and they will evade our suggestions. They think we have no experience. The government and elderly are not progressive and don't understand our opinions. (Participant 485, Malaysia)*

This could potentially lead to building a better and healthier democracy when young people could see that they can discuss legislations and public policy issues with the government and not that their voices are being left out or that political engagement opportunities are reserved exclusively for the privileged few. As one participant noted regarding her perception on young people's opportunity for political engagement:

*The government can create like webpage or organize activities for young people to join but I feel that Malaysian politicians will not organize such activities but instead only allow their family and friends to join politics. Here it's nepotism. (Participant 815, Malaysia)*

For Millennials and Gen Z who are Gen-pro (a generation of people ready for opportunities), when they aspire to make changes, they do not wait for others to initiate the change or until they are old enough to take action. Instead, they demonstrate a proactive attitude by taking the initiative to act, taking matters into their own hands. They adopt a professional mindset when they organize online discussions or forums to have political dialogues, use social networking sites (SNS) to organize rallies or protests, use creative tweets to raise awareness on current political or social issues, and create webpages to advance knowledge for their cause and provide informative materials for interested parties on how to engage.

One such good example is the Parlimen Digital (Digital Parliament) that Malaysian youth initiated by using Microsoft Teams. This first ever parliament digital in the world has enabled Millennials and Gen Z across Malaysia, including rural communities and indigenous people, to

have an opportunity to engage in dialogue on nation-building. It is imperative that political leaders understand that the future and progress of a nation and society depend on the ability of young people to contribute to the system and lead. To do that, young people need opportunities to engage in politics. A proposed official digital platform, such as YES, that could help foster productive interactions and collaboration between the government, young people, and non-profit organizations in building initiatives that would increase young people's opportunities for political engagement, could potentially result in young people contributing positively to the system and building their political leadership. In the long run, it could lead to greater social trust, effective institutional capacity, and eventually a healthy civil society that not only engages in active citizenship, but also trust government policies and measures.

### ***9.2.2 Gen-pro-centered Citizenship Engagement Program (GPCEP)***

As discussed in Chapter 8, participants cited that they perceived politics to be complicated during the synchronous OFG study. Generally, this inherent perception stemmed from how participants considered politics to be a subject that they could not easily understand, as there is almost never one definitive answer to politics because there are so many grey areas when it comes to politics. Additionally, participants also commented on how they were often confused with the actions of or decisions by their political leaders and political parties. Particularly, when participants were asked to share their thoughts on how politicians or political leaders could better include or engage young people in the political decision-making process, several participants raised education as a key factor:

*It has to do with education. A lot of the political candidates or who are already in office, they are so disengaged from young people, what young people are thinking, what*

*young people are doing in their daily lives, what kind of challenges they are facing in their daily lives. So, they really have to invite more young people to be talking, critically thinking about what this country really needs, especially just understanding the challenges they are facing personally or in a community. Especially in Taiwan, we don't really have a lot of that kind of candidates who really invite young people to be engaged in the decision-making. (Participant 575, Taiwan)*

*I will tell them they should focus more on educating us or on topics itself rather than focus on elections because young people know the games they are playing now and as old people die young people getting older, so we have more voting future, so they should care about us more. (Participant 793, Taiwan)*

*The easiest one would be like education and to have like dialogue sessions with students at university level. I think that would be a good place to start the youth from where they are developing and going to be driver of economy once they are out there. (Participant 282, Malaysia)*

*Start at college and university level education by engaging students as in some way you get to experience at an early stage how corporate works, how government works, how society works. (Participant 973, Malaysia)*

Based on these suggestions raised by participants and how some participants perceived politics to be complicated and confusing, there is a crucial need for young people to have fundamental knowledge about politics and how the government functions. Initiating a citizenship engagement program that places youth's future political well-being at the center could be a positive step forward in helping the younger generation expand their knowledge of politics, gain a better understanding of how the government works, and providing them with opportunities for



real-world civic and political engagements. In other words, this program would provide the necessary and fundamental political knowledge, skills, and engagement trainings to today's generation of young people ready for opportunities (Gen-pro).

A Gen-pro-centered program on citizenship engagement would focus on developing young people's understanding of politics, political engagement, and the government, giving them an opportunity to start building their political or activism journey at an early stage. This proposed program would be integrated as one of the core curriculums for high school students in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades. This program will have three key components that high school students will participate in:

- 1) An introductory course to politics – introducing students to the different forms of government, electoral systems, and political theories, political participation, civic engagement, and public policy,
- 2) Gen-pro Talks (GP Talks) – organizing regular forums for students to have open discussions and dialogues on political or social issues with officials or leaders from local communities, activists, and representatives from non-profit organizations, and
- 3) Gen-pro Action Training (G-PAT) – schools partnering with local non-profit organizations to provide students with trainings on advocacy works, internship or volunteering opportunities, and civic and political engagement experiences.

This proposed program could help shape high school students to become well-informed citizens, equipped with the knowledge of politics and the workings of government, including the trainings and experience in advocacy works and engagement, preparing them when they enter college or the workforce. This could potentially help alleviate some of the common criticisms directed towards today's young people, such as young people lack the necessary knowledge,

skills, or real-world experience to work on resolving political or social issues or that young people are too politically apathetic.

## 10 CONCLUSION

Across the globe, we are seeing young people at the forefront of changes. They are no longer passive recipients of the past or passive actors waiting for changes to happen. Instead, these members of Gen-pro (a *Generation of People Ready for Opportunities*), represent a subset of Millennials and Gen Z who are proactively engaging in some of today's most pressing political and social issues. Specifically, we are witnessing a wave of Gen-pro-led initiatives on political and social matters taking East Asia and Southeast Asia by storm. More and more Millennials and Gen Z in these regions are seen vocally expressing their views on issues related to gender identity, sexual harassment, government accountability and transparency, racial justice, democratic freedom, political equality, women's rights, LGBTQ rights, and greater free speech. More importantly, these members of Gen-pro are increasingly exhibiting attitudes and behaviors that are a significant departure from the venerated Asian Values concept that adheres to social order, respect for elders and authority, discipline, and consensus in politics over confrontation. These instances warrant more youth-centric research agenda that seeks a deeper understanding of East Asian and Southeast Asian young people's political attitudes, behaviors, and engagement.

Findings from the online survey have indicated that Millennials and Gen Z from Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Taiwan (Gen-pro) are inclined to have negative perceptions of politics in general. The online survey results also show that the older generation survey participants (Non Gen-pro) tend to perceive politics negatively. These survey participants generally perceive politics to be corrupted, disappointing, unequal, and unjust. Overall, the online survey results show that the political attitudes of young people and the older generation do not differ much. Results from the online survey equally show that there is not much difference between the attitudes of young people and the older generation towards digital engagement, as both groups

appear to recognize using digital technology, such as the Internet and social media platforms, to engage in politics. As such, young people and the older generation appear to share similar perceptions of political engagement.

Participants from Malaysia and Taiwan participating in the synchronous online focus group (OFG) study equally perceive politics negatively. Malaysian participants tend to perceive politics more negatively compared to participants from Taiwan. While Taiwanese participants largely perceive politics to be complicated, manipulative, and related to power, Malaysian participants are extremely frustrated with the ongoing issues of corruption and racism in Malaysia that their political leaders have failed to resolve or eradicate. Regarding using digital technology for political engagement, participants from Malaysia and Taiwan expressed positive attitudes towards using the Internet and social media platforms as ways to engage in politics. They also acknowledged the impact of digital technology on young people's opportunity for political engagement, with most of the participants agreeing that digital technology has allowed them and their generation to engage more in politics today and recognizing how young people today are creative and innovative in coming up with different ways to engage politically or socially, specifically by capitalizing on the various tools that digital technology has afforded them. Additionally, findings from the synchronous OFG study revealed that the participants are also inclined to regard political behaviors or activities that have a psychological element as amounting to political engagement. They include such behaviors or activities as having an understanding of politics, paying attention to political issues, and receiving information about politics.

While results from the online survey show that Gen-pro survey participants appear not to face any challenges for their political engagement, participants in the synchronous OFG study

raised several challenges. They range from institution- or organization-related challenges to personal-related challenges to society-related challenges. Majority of the participants from Malaysia regarded institution- or organization-related challenges as a challenge to engaging in politics, attributing these challenges to three key factors. The first factor being that the Malaysian political system is riddled with corruption largely due to nepotism. Secondly, unequal public policies and laws tend to privilege one dominant race's opportunity for political engagement over all other racial groups. The third factor relates to a system that lacks government transparency. For Taiwanese participants, most of them mentioned society-related challenges to their political engagement. These challenges stem from fears and concerns of the negative consequences on their work or career when they post or share their personal political opinions or preferences on social media platforms.

Digital technology, specifically social media platforms and the Internet, has played a key role in constructing East Asian and Southeast Asian Millennials' and Gen Zers' perceptions of politics and in furnishing them with opportunities for political engagement, both in the digital and physical spaces. Despite having negative perceptions of politics and facing challenges for political engagement, these members of Gen-pro are not politically apathetic. Instead, they take advantage of the various digital tools afforded by digital technology to help them in their political engagement. They apply their digital skillsets and creative skills to come up with innovative and new engagement methods to make the changes they aspire and to demonstrate the power of their voice. They design webpages, organize online forums and discussions, create tweets, produce songs, and make videos. Their attitudes towards political engagement show a strong preference in using social media platforms to engage in politics instead of taking the conventional route of political engagement, such as voting or being a member of a political

party. When asked to discuss about how they hope to have more opportunities for political engagement and what should political leaders do to better include them in the political decision-making process, most of the synchronous OFG study participants mentioned two key aspects. The first being that there should be more open dialogues and better communication between them and their political leaders. Secondly, they hope to have a safe and open space, specifically a digital space, that would support their political engagement and allow young people to freely discuss about political issues.

Considering the findings from the synchronous OFG study, this study proposes two policy recommendations to increase young people's opportunities for meaningful political engagement. These recommendations are grounded in the responses and suggestions provided by Malaysian and Taiwanese participants during the synchronous OFG study when they were asked to discuss their opinions on how politicians should better include or engage young people in the political process of their respective nations. The first policy recommendation is the creation of a legitimate, open, and safe digital space for young people to engage in politics. This recommendation stems from the impact that digital technology has on these tech-savvy young people's everyday life and their increasing use of digital technology for citizenship engagement. This proposed digital platform, Youth Engagement Space (YES), will serve as an official platform drawing upon the efforts of an independently established government body, young people, and non-profit organizations focusing on youth engagement, working collaboratively to organize programs and activities to increase young people's opportunities for meaningful political engagement. The second policy recommendation is to initiate a citizenship engagement program that provides the necessary and fundamental political knowledge, skills, and engagement trainings to today's generation of young people ready for opportunities. This Gen-

pro-centered program on citizenship engagement would focus on developing young people's understanding of politics, political engagement, and the government, giving them the opportunity to start building their political or activism journey at an early stage.

More and more young people around the world are proactively taking the initiative to make the changes they aspire and to shape the future they hope to have. They are increasingly progressive and forward-thinking. They demonstrate professionalism when using their digital skillsets to engage in political matters. Even though they are hardly taken seriously by political leaders and are often being ignored by the older generation, this generation of people ready for opportunities continues to make waves of political and social changes. Members of Gen-pro will continue to be at the forefront of political and societal advancements. Political leaders need to recognize that they are instrumental to the future and progress of our society. Let us not push them to the sidelines or relegate them to a backseat role. Let us acknowledge them as agents of change and legitimate political and social actors, having the capacity to catalyze positive and important changes. Let us work towards building a Gen-pro-centered citizenship engagement environment that supports their political and civic engagement journeys. We hear you, Gen-pro!

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