Impact of NeWOM on Protest Behaviour Among Tiktok and Instagram Users in Malaysia

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Abstract: *Due to unfavourable electronic word-of-mouth (nWOM), young people' brand consumption is concerningly declining. In recent years, consumers have been significantly cutting back on their use of specific brands and their purchases. A quantitative study examined the impact of negative electronic word-of-mouth (NeWOM) on protest behaviour through social media platforms TikTok and Instagram. Using convenience sampling, 100 respondents participated, and Pearson correlation analysis was employed to assess the relationships. The findings revealed a strong positive correlation between NeWOM and protest behaviour (r = 0.730), highlighting that individuals exposed to negative brand-related content are likely to engage in protest actions such as boycotts, brand avoidance, or online activism. The study also demonstrated the platform-specific influence of NeWOM, with TikTok showing a stronger correlation (r = 0.830) compared to Instagram (r = 0.680). This suggests that TikTok's dynamic and interactive features, such as short-form videos and algorithm-driven content recommendations, amplify the spread and impact of NeWOM more effectively than Instagram. However, Instagram still significantly contributes to shaping protest behaviour through visually engaging posts and Stories that encourage discourse. Overall, the study underscores the role of social media platforms in amplifying NeWOM, driving collective protest behaviours among young adults. These findings suggest brands should carefully monitor and address negative content on platforms like TikTok and Instagram to mitigate potential reputational damage and consumer backlash.*

Keywords: NeWOM, Social Media Platform, Protest Behaviour, Young Adults

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1. Introduction

The word "negative word of mouth" refers to the dissemination of unpleasant comments, criticisms, or viewpoints about a specific product, service, business, or individual. It occurs when people vent to others in their neighbourhood, social group, or online forums about their disappointment, dissatisfaction, or negative experiences. This sort of communication can significantly affect the subject's reputation and perception since it has the power to influence the opinions and decisions of those who are exposed to the negative information. Finding solutions, addressing the root causes of dissatisfaction, and implementing strategies to improve perception and general satisfaction are usually necessary for controlling negative word-of-mouth (Azemi et al., 2020). Negative word of mouth is the dissemination of unfavourable opinions, criticisms, or derogatory statements on a product, service, business, or individual. It occurs when people share bad experiences, disillusionment, or disappointments with others in

their social circle or community, either in person or online (Abbas et al., 2023). Negative word-of-mouth serves as a catalyst for boycotting behaviour, intensifying unfavourable sentiments and maybe motivating individuals to take action by avoiding the product or individual in issue. Social approbation and peer recommendations are often used as a basis for decision-making procedures. In the social media age, negative word-of-mouth can also spread quickly and reach a wide audience, increasing its impact on customer behaviour.When a negative experience is shared on social media platforms like Tiktok or Instagram, it has the power to influence the opinions and actions of numerous individuals. Negative word-of-mouth (WOM) is the term used to characterise the spread of unfavourable opinions, first-hand reports, or remarks about products, services, businesses, or organisations through conventional offline channels or face-to-face contacts (Becker et al., 2024). On the other hand, Hancock et al. (2023) defined negative electronic word-of-mouth (NeWOM) as the spread of adverse opinions, firsthand reports, or criticisms about products, services, businesses, or brands via online forums and digital media.

Acts of protest are actions taken by individuals or groups to express their displeasure of unhappiness or calls for change. It encompasses a wide range of programs designed to promote social, political, economic, or environmental change, challenge conventional wisdom, or increase awareness of a particular issue (Wolberg, 2023). Boycotts and online activity are examples of both non-violent and violent kinds of protest action. Because it allows people to express their discontent and push for change, this is a crucial component of democratic society (McClennen et al., 2023). However, protest conduct can take many various shapes and have a wide range of impacts, depending on the circumstances, the strategies used, and the response from the public and authorities. Social media refers to online groups and platforms that enable users to create, share, and interact with content and each other. Social media platforms provide real-time updates, which enables users to transmit information quickly (Thapliyal et al., 2024). For instance, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok are well-known social media platforms. These platforms have fundamentally altered how people communicate, engage with one another, and share information.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

RO 1: To determine the effects of negative electronic word-of-mouth (NEWM) towards protest behaviour (PB) among young adults in Malaysia.
RQ2: To determine the effects of negative electronic word-of-mouth (NEWM) on Tiktok (TT) among young adults in Malaysia.
RQ3: To determine the effects of negative electronic word-of-mouth (NEWM) on Instagram (INS) among young adults in Malaysia.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Negative Electronic Word-of-Mouth (NeWOM)
Ahmed et al. (2022) define negative word-of-mouth (nWOM) as consumer complaints about purchases or experiences related to specific products or services. Dissatisfied customers share their negative experiences with others, often discouraging them from purchasing or using the product or service. Similarly, De Laine (2023) describes nWOM as interpersonal

communication that criticises companies or products. Research highlights that dissatisfied consumers are more likely to spread negative information compared to satisfied ones, particularly to friends and family. Costa and Azevedo (2022) emphasise the strong link between brand hatred and nWOM, as consumers often use online platforms to share negative experiences and emotions with their social networks, including friends, family, and even strangers, to raise awareness about a brand's misconduct.

This behaviour significantly harms the brand's reputation. Brand hatred, therefore, serves as a key driver of nWOM, reflecting opposing behaviours that amplify its impact. Sharma et al. (2022) and Whiting et al. (2019) identify key motivations for negative electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) behaviour, including revenge, altruism, seeking resolution, and expressing dissatisfaction. Other studies highlight several factors influencing the spread of negative eWOM, such as the desire for revenge, assisting other customers, social relationships, opinion congruence, social influence, cognitive dissonance, and social support (Sharma et al., 2022). Additionally, brand hatred has been consistently identified as a significant predictor of negative eWOM in recent research (Joshi & Yadav, 2020; Zhang & Laguna, 2020). The extensive body of literature highlights the need for continued exploration and discussion to better understand negative eWOM. Sharma et al. (2022) stress the importance of developing updated theories and frameworks to enhance comprehension of eWOM behaviour. Consumers frequently reflect on the potential consequences and impacts of participating in eWOM, indicating that it is a purposeful and goal-driven activity.

2.2 Protest Behaviour

The process of linking protest to public opinion begins with identification or appeal. Barrie (2021) and Wouters (2019) note that protest organisations employ persuasive tactical repertoires to influence public opinion and encourage alignment with their viewpoints. A second linking process involves protest bringing specific issues to prominence, or "priming" them. Direct exposure to protests heightens public awareness, increases the perceived importance of issues, and shifts public opinion towards the protest's stance (Barrie, 2021; Branton et al., 2015). Recent studies have connected negative word-of-mouth (NeWOM) to protest behaviour, particularly among Malaysian young adults, where dissatisfaction with unethical brands sparks negative emotions. Existing literature highlights that protest effectiveness depends heavily on media coverage (Barrie, 2021; Andrews & Caren, 2010). However, such coverage is often biased. Protests that employ disruptive tactics, resonate with wider audiences, and are supported by robust organisational infrastructures are more likely to receive media attention (Barrie, 2021; Amenta & Elliott, 2017), as they align with news values and priorities. Social media usage by young adults also plays a significant role in shaping their responses to unethical brands.

Historically, collective action has driven social change (Awad & Wagoner, 2020). Theories exploring protests and revolutions often reference "relative economic deprivation" (Royall, 2020) and the growth of labour movements (Feltrin, 2019; El-Shazli, 2019) as key precursors. However, these conditions only lead to protests when triggered by symbolic events that unite and mobilise groups (Awad & Wagoner, 2020). Symbols provide identity and purpose, sustaining protest movements over time. Additionally, Buheji and Ahmed (2023) argue that consumer participation in boycotts is driven by personal beliefs and values, shaping their perceptions of right and wrong and influencing their behaviours.

2.3 Young Adults

Geographic location significantly influences young adults' emotional experiences and responses to negative events. Urban areas often provide better access to education, employment, and social networks, which can enhance emotional well-being (Sun et al., 2024). However, urban life also presents challenges, such as high living costs and the stresses of a fast-paced lifestyle. Conversely, rural areas offer a quieter, community-oriented lifestyle, but young adults in these settings often face isolation and limited access to services and opportunities (Kaye, 2021). As of early 2024, Datareportal reported that 21.1% of Malaysians resided in rural areas, while 78.9% lived in cities. For instance, a young adult in Kuala Lumpur may benefit from abundant social opportunities and job prospects but also face stress due to the high cost of living. In contrast, rural living provides peace and strong community ties but can lead to feelings of isolation and limited social interactions. Geographic differences also play a critical role in shaping young adults' emotional responses to boycotts. In urban areas, young adults often have greater exposure to diverse viewpoints and information, leading to a more informed understanding of boycott purposes and outcomes, which reduces emotional reactivity (Sen, 2024). Economically, urban residents are less impacted by boycotts due to job diversity and economic resilience, which mitigates negative feelings (Musonda et al., 2023). Additionally, urban social networks provide robust political and social support systems that reduce stress by fostering a sense of collective action and solidarity.

In rural areas, limited access to information sources often results in biased perceptions of boycotts, leading to stronger negative emotions, as young adults may feel their way of life is under threat (Seyfi et al., 2023). Economic vulnerability amplifies these feelings, particularly when boycotts target businesses crucial to local economies, causing increased resentment and anxiety (Wang et al., 2024). Furthermore, strong community ties in rural areas can create cohesive but highly emotional responses, especially if the boycott is seen as an external threat to their values and way of life (Ramos et al., 2024). In conclusion, urban and rural contexts shape young adults' emotional reactions to boycotts differently. While urban residents tend to form more informed and less intense negative responses, rural communities experience heightened negative emotions due to economic fragility and limited access to diverse information.

2.4 Social Media Platforms

Social media platforms have the capacity to connect a large network of individuals, facilitating social movements in reaching a critical mass (Wahid et al., 2023). Moreover, social media offers various channels for peer approval, interpersonal feedback, and reinforcement of group norms, which are crucial for the development of both personal and collective identities—key factors driving young adults' participation in protests and boycotts. Therefore, understanding how privacy risks limit consumers' involvement in social media brand communities is essential for several reasons (Wang et al., 2020). Addressing privacy concerns helps to build trust and credibility, which in turn enhances engagement and loyalty. It is also vital to meet legal and ethical standards, thereby protecting the brand's reputation (Olaniyi, 2023). Furthermore, disregarding privacy boundaries can lead to negative reactions, while maintaining transparency enables consumers to make informed decisions about their participation. By prioritising privacy, brands can foster long-term relationships with consumers, creating a safer and more welcoming online community that benefits both the brand and its members.

Social media is a key tool for young adults in communication and socialising, with various social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok being popular platforms for promoting brands and products (Haenlein et al., 2020). These platform pages offer consumers

an easy way to interact with brands, support their purchasing decisions, and enhance their shopping experiences (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Grover et al., 2022; Jin et al., 2022). For instance, consumers are encouraged to seek product information to assess products more thoroughly and make informed purchasing decisions (Cheng et al., 2021). Through product reviews, consumers also share their buying experiences, and they assist by responding to questions from other consumers about products (Yang, 2021).

In a recent study, Similarweb (2023) analysed nearly 43 million posts from the top 20,000 companies on Facebook pages. The findings showed a 24% increase in the number of posts each quarter, with an additional 20,000 posts uploaded daily to the most popular brand pages. User-generated content like this helps businesses gain valuable insights into consumers and manage their brands, which in turn boosts competitiveness and commercial performance (Lin & Wang, 2023). With billions of active users worldwide, Facebook provides organisations with a vast audience. Its advanced targeting features allow businesses to target specific demographics, interests, and behaviours, ensuring that advertisements reach the most relevant users.

2.5 Theory of Planned Behaviour
The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) has been widely used to predict various human behaviours. TPB highlights the role of intention as a determinant of actions. Research frameworks are often developed based on this theory, with components derived from prior studies such as those by Bangun and Handra (2021). A person's attitude is considered the primary behavioural variable. Attitude refers to a positive or negative thought pattern that influences a specific behaviour, known as behavioural beliefs. When individuals hold positive views about a behaviour, they are more likely to engage in it. Attitudes are shaped by perceptions of the consequences of adopting certain behavioural beliefs, which are further validated and weighted through risk assessments or outcome evaluations. These attitudes are believed to directly influence behaviour and are closely tied to perceived behavioural control and subjective norms. Perceived behavioural control is thought to predict consumer behaviour either directly or indirectly. In essence, TPB demonstrates how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control collectively determine an individual's intention, ultimately shaping their actions. This theory serves as a valuable framework for understanding and predicting consumer behaviour by emphasising the importance of evaluating attitudes and perceptions in behavioural decision-making processes.

3. Methodology

This research adopted a quantitative approach to explore the relationship between independent variables (NeWOM) and mediator variables (protest behaviour) to better understand the dynamics of information dissemination. The research design provides a detailed understanding of the relationships among the variables involved (Fancera, 2023). A cross-sectional survey method was employed, which is particularly effective for gathering information on current events. Data was collected using self-administered questionnaires (SAQs), featuring closed-ended questions that respondents could complete independently without researcher involvement (Razak et al., 2023; Pearson, 2010). SAQs were distributed extensively via Google Forms, social media platforms, and email.

Data analysis employed multivariate statistical methods to assess the impact of negative electronic word-of-mouth (NeWOM) and protest behaviour. Mishra and Alok (2022) highlight that the research process involves a structured sequence of activities to ensure proper execution

and outcomes. Analytical methods included descriptive analysis, correlation, regression, and SPSS software. Data analysis played a crucial role in refining decisions, validating findings, and drawing conclusions based on factual evidence. A sample size of 100 respondents was determined to represent the target population. Convenience sampling and non-probability sampling methods were utilised to ensure accessibility and practicality in obtaining the sample. Research design, as an organised framework, guided the collection, measurement, and analysis of data, ensuring methodological soundness, validity, and reliability of the findings (Fancera, 2023). This structured approach ensured that the research effectively addressed the research problem and questions, with data readily interpreted and developed using analytical software.

Table 1: Instrument Development (Questionnaire)

Variable	Items Code	Items	References
Section A Demographic	A1	Gender	Pai, 2023
	A2	Age	
	A3	Social media platform	
	A4	State	
	A5	Universities	
	A6	Education level	
	A7	Locality	
Section B Social Media Usage	B1	Read comments and news on social media every day.	Priskila, 2021
	B2	Interact actively with social media users.	
	B3	Like to read and view content on social media about preferred brands.	
	B4	Social media users often provide negative comments on certain brands	
	B5	Information can easily spread on social media	
	B6	Gossip can easily spread on social media.	
	B7	News can easily spread on social media	
	B8	Use social media to share new ideas.	Gupta, 2018
	B9	Use social media for reading news.	
	B10	Use social media for relayed information.	
	B11	Use social media for entertainment.	
	B12	Use social media as a primary source of information.	Sharma et al., 2022
	B13	Use social media to get advice or recommendations	
	B14	Use social media to learn new things.	
Section C NeWOM	C1	Young adults speak about boycotted brand on social media much more frequently than about any other brand.	Sharma et al., 2022
	C2	Young adults mostly spoke negative things about boycotted brand on social media.	
	C3	Young adults spoken unflatteringly of the boycotted brand on social media.	
	C4	Young adults tried to make sure that as many people as possible learn about their negative experiences with the boycotted brand.	
	C5	Young adults posted very negative ratings frequently about the boycotted brand on popular consumer review platforms.	
	C6	Brand or organisation would usually receive negative comments from Internet users.	Andrei, 2016
	C7	Young adults will 'SHARE' negative talk about the brand or organisation.	
	C8	Young adults would 'LIKE' negative comments about brands or organisation.	

	C9	Negative ratings were found to have a stronger negative effect on trust in sellers than positive ratings.	Ba and Pavlou, 2002
	C10	Negative online reviews were perceived as more persuasive than positive reviews.	Zhang, Craciun and Shin, 2010
Section D Protest Behaviour	D1	Young adults plan to boycott boycotted brand.	Sameeni et al., 2024
	D2	Young adults will boycott boycotted brand.	
	D3	Young adults will boycott unethical brand.	
	D4	Young adults would feel better about self if boycott the unethical brand.	
	D5	Young adults would feel guilty if buy the boycotted brand	
	D6	Young adults actively involved in sharing information to others.	
	D7	Do not like to share uncertain information.	
	D8	Social media users often provide negative comments on certain brands.	

4. Finding

This research involved a total of 100 respondents for data collection, utilising a questionnaire comprising 46 questions. This phase is a critical component of the research process, ensuring the success of the main study. Through careful planning, execution, and analysis, researchers identify and address potential issues, refine their research design, and improve the overall quality and reliability of their findings (Usher, 2023; Ying, 2023). Furthermore, a small-scale exploratory investigation was conducted prior to the primary study or large-scale research. The primary objective of this preliminary study was to evaluate the feasibility of the full-scale research in terms of timeline, cost, risk, and potential adverse outcomes (Ying, 2023). The demographic profile summarises as below.

Table 2: Summary of Demographic Profile

Demographic Group	Item	Frequency	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	33	33
	Female	67	67
Age	18-19	13	13
	20-21	77	77
	22-23	5	6.7
	24-26	5	6.7
Social media platform	Instagram	37	37
	Facebook	3	3
	Tiktok	60	60
Public Universities	Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM)	100	100
Education Level	SPM	3	3
	Diploma	35	35
	Degree	62	62
Locality	Rural area	35	35
	Urban area	65	65

The dataset provides demographic and behavioural insights into respondents, with a focus on gender, age, social media platforms, education and locality. Females comprise the majority (67%) of the group, with males making up 33%. Most respondents (77%) are aged 20–21, while smaller groups are aged 18–19 (13%) and 22–26 (13.4%). Social media usage is

dominated by TikTok (60%), followed by Instagram (37%), with Facebook being the least used platform (3%). All respondents are affiliated with Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM), indicating a uniform academic environment.

In terms of education, the majority hold a degree (62%), with diploma holders making up 35%, and a small minority (3%) having SPM qualifications. Locality data reveals that 65% of respondents reside in urban areas, while 35% come from rural areas. This dataset highlights the prominence of TikTok as the preferred platform, particularly among young adults studying at UiTM. It also reflects a higher proportion of urban respondents and those pursuing higher education qualifications. Such data could be instrumental in exploring trends in social media engagement, education, and behavioural patterns among university students, particularly in relation to protest behaviours and electronic word-of-mouth dynamics.

RO 1: To determine the effects of negative electronic word-of-mouth (NEWM) towards protest behaviour (PB) among young adults in Malaysia.

Table 3: Summary of Pearson Correlation (NEWM-PB)

Hypothesis	Relationship	Pearson Correlation (ρ)	Correlation Interpretation
H1	NEWM-PB	0.730	Strong

This table summarises the Pearson correlation results for Hypothesis 1 (H1). It indicates a strong positive correlation ($\rho = 0.730$) between NEWOM (New Electronic Word-of-Mouth) and PB (Protest Behaviour), suggesting that as engagement with NEWOM increases, protest behaviour is likely to increase as well.

RQ2: To determine the effects of negative electronic word-of-mouth (NEWM) on Tiktok (TT) among young adults in Malaysia.

Table 4: Summary of Pearson Correlation (NEWM-TT)

Hypothesis	Relationship	Pearson Correlation (ρ)	Correlation Interpretation
H2	NEWM-TT	0.830	Strong

This table summarises the Pearson correlation results for Hypothesis 2 (H2). It indicates a strong positive correlation ($\rho = 0.830$) between NEWOM (New Electronic Word-of-Mouth) and TT (Tiktok) suggesting that higher engagement with NEWOM is strongly linked to increased trust. The relationship between NEWOM (New Electronic Word-of-Mouth) and TikTok demonstrates a strong positive correlation, highlighting the platform's influential role in shaping user behaviour. TikTok, as a highly engaging social media platform, facilitates the rapid spread of opinions, reviews, and recommendations through short-form video content. Users interacting with NEWOM on TikTok are more likely to develop trust, consider switching preferences, or even engage in protest behaviours due to the platform's ability to amplify content virally. This strong connection suggests that TikTok serves as a critical medium for NEWOM, leveraging its dynamic features to influence perceptions and decisions among its audience, particularly younger demographics.

RQ3: To determine the effects of negative electronic word-of-mouth (NEWM) on Instagram (INS) among young adults in Malaysia.

Table 5: Summary of Pearson Correlation (NEWM-INS)

Hypothesis	Relationship	Pearson Correlation (ρ)	Correlation Interpretation
H3	NEWM-INS	0.680	Strong

The relationship between NEWOM (New Electronic Word-of-Mouth) and Instagram reveals a strong positive correlation, with a Pearson correlation coefficient (ρ) of 0.680. This indicates that as engagement with NEWOM increases, the intention to switch platforms or behaviours via Instagram also rises. Instagram, as a popular social media platform, acts as a significant channel for NEWOM, facilitating the rapid dissemination of information and opinions. This suggests that users heavily influenced by electronic word-of-mouth on Instagram are more likely to adopt new behaviours or make changes, such as switching preferences or brands. The strong correlation underscores the platform's role in driving intention to switch, reflecting its power in shaping user decisions and behaviours.

5. Conclusion

The relationship between NeWOM (New Electronic Word-of-Mouth) and protest behaviour is notably strong, as increased engagement with NeWOM often leads to heightened awareness and mobilisation around issues, potentially fostering protest behaviour. Social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok play a significant role in this dynamic. Both platforms are highly effective in spreading NeWOM due to their visual, engaging, and viral content features. On Instagram, users are influenced by the personal and visually-driven nature of the platform, sharing opinions, reviews, and calls to action that can encourage protest behaviour. TikTok, on the other hand, amplifies NeWOM through its short-form, viral videos, which are particularly impactful in shaping younger users' attitudes and behaviours. Both platforms allow for rapid information dissemination and social interaction, making them powerful tools in influencing protest behaviour. As young adults engage with NeWOM on these platforms, they are more likely to be exposed to calls for action, thereby strengthening the relationship between social media engagement and protest behaviour. Ultimately, both Instagram and TikTok serve as critical catalysts for spreading awareness, galvanising support, and encouraging protest actions.

Acknowledgement

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