Undi18: Role of Social Media in Shaping the Political Literacy of Young Sarawakian Voters

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Abstract: *The study examined the role of social media in shaping the political literacy of youth in Sarawak. The specific aspects studied were online political engagement, sources of political news, preferred social media platforms for political information, and factors motivating online political engagement. Questionnaire data from 41 participants aged 18-21 living in Kuching Sarawak were analysed. The results showed high consumption of political news, particularly on TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram. Social media was the main source of political news for 95.1% of participants but television and online newspapers still have a role to play in disseminating political information to young voters. Family, peers, and teachers are hardly political socialisation agents for the youth of today. The participants found news updates as the most useful and interesting political posts on social media, but personal stories and numbers did not appeal to them. Their main reason for accessing political news was to gain new insights but political participation and activism were low on their priority. The findings indicated educational efforts are more effective when delivered through non-intrusive news content rather than overt promotional messages or calls to action.*

Keywords: undi18, young voters, political literacy, social media

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1. Introduction

In Malaysia, in 2019, the Dewan Rakyat passed an amendment to the Youth Societies and Youth Development Act (Amendment) 2019 (Act 668), which empowered individuals as young as 18 years old to become more involved in the political process during the elections. As a result, this amendment has led to an increase of 5.8 million new voters bringing the total number of voters to 21.02 million. Following the implementation, The Ministry of Youth and Sports (KBS) in collaboration with the Ministry of Education is reviewing and reorganising the political literacy programmes to attract the youths' interest (Bernama, 2023). Following this, the Sarawak Youth, Sport and Entrepreneur Development Minister, Datuk Seri Abdul Karim Rahman Hamzah, expressed concern over the fact that many young people in Sarawak were uninterested in politics and might be swayed by false information posted on social media (Ling, 2022).

Generally, Malaysia practises parliamentary democracy with constitutional monarchy, a political system that requires sufficient political participation from its citizens, typically in terms of voting, protesting and petitioning. In Sarawak, knowledge plays a crucial role in fostering political awareness and consciousness among the youth (Tamam, 2020). Political

knowledge influences university students' political participation in Indonesia (Agus et al., 2020). For young voters to effectively perform their roles as citizens and vote wisely, they need to have knowledge and understanding of the political process and political issues. Positive attitudes are also important because it can affect voter turnout and confidence in making the decision to support a particular candidate or party (Lee, 2020).

In the digital era, social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook have emerged as dominant sources of political information, particularly among young voters. These platforms not only facilitate the dissemination of news but also enable users to engage in political discussions, share opinions, and participate in issue-based activism. Prior research highlights the benefits of social media in enhancing political communication such as allowing users to create, exchange, and circulate information rapidly (Kim et al., 2020). Moreover, the accessibility of the internet has embedded social media into the daily lives of young people (Mohamed Nawi et al., 2020). Low and Puyok (2024) found that Undi 18 significantly increased political awareness among Sarawakian youth, but their actual participation and readiness to engage in formal political processes remained limited, indicating a gap between awareness and active civic involvement.

Thus far, how social media use affects the political literacy of young voters is still not well understood due to lack of studies, particularly in diverse and decentralised regions like Sarawak. Understanding the influence of social media on youth political engagement in Sarawak is important for developing targeted strategies to promote informed voting and civic engagement.

This study aims to examine the role of social media in shaping the political literacy of young voters in Sarawak. Specifically, it investigates their patterns of online political engagement, sources of political information, preferred platforms for accessing political content, and the key motivations driving their digital political participation.

2. Method of the study

The descriptive study involved 41 participants aged 18 to 21 living in Sarawak, of which 48.8% were 21-year-olds. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the participants. There were slightly more female participants (58.5%) than male participants (41.5%). The ethnic composition was as follows: Malay (34.01%), Iban (29.03%), Bidayuh (22%), Chinese (9.8%), Orang Ulu (2.4%), and Indian (2.4%). There were slightly more Christians (56.1%) than Muslims (36.6%), and much smaller percentages of Buddhists (4.9%) and Hindus (2.4%). Regarding educational attainment, 31.7% of participants had a Bachelor's degree, 24.4% had STPM/STAM, 22% had Diploma, and 19.0% had SPM. A majority (70.7%) were students, and single (95.1%). Household income predominantly fell within the RM2001–RM4000 range. Participants were from various electoral areas in Sarawak: 19.5% from Serian, 14.6% from Petra Jaya, and 14.6% from Bandar Kuching. The other participants were from Sibu, Kota Samarahan, and other constituencies outside of Kuching.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of respondents (N=41)

Demographic Characteristic		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	24	58.5%
	Male	17	41.5%
Age	21	20	48.8%
	19	9	22%

	18	7	17.1%
	20	5	12.2%
Ethnicity	Malay	14	34.1%
	Iban	12	29.3%
	Bidayuh	9	22%
	Chinese	4	9.8%
	Orang Ulu	1	2.4%
	India	1	2.4%
	Melanau	0	0%
	Kedayan	0	0%
	Others	0	0%
Religion	Christian	23	56.1%
	Islam	15	36.6%
	Buddha	2	4.9%
	Hindu	1	2.4%
	No religion	0	0%
	Others	0	0%
Education level	Bachelor Degree	13	31.7%
	STPM / STAM	10	24.4%
	Diploma	9	22%
	SPM	8	19.5%
	Foundation / Matriculation	1	2.4%
	PMR	0	0%
	Primary school	0	0%
	Not going to school	0	0%
Marital Status	Single	39	95.1%
	Married	2	4.9%
Employment	Student	29	70.7%
	Business	4	9.8%
	Private employees	3	7.3%
	Not working	3	7.3%
	Civil servants	1	2.4%
	Economic gigs (Online business / E-hailing / Freelance)	1	2.4%
	Housewife	0	0%
Household monthly income	RM2001 – RM4000	10	24.4%
	RM1001 – RM2000	9	22%
	Less than RM1000	8	19.5
	No income	7	17.1%
	RM4001 – RM6000	3	7.3%
	RM8001 – RM10000	2	4.9%
	RM6001 – RM8000	1	2.4%
	Above RM10000	1	2.4%
Locality	Serian	8	19.5%
	Petra Jaya	6	14.6%
	Bandar Kuching	6	14.6%
	Sibu	5	12.2%
	Kota Samarahan	4	9.8%
	Puncak Borneo	3	7.3%

Mas Gading	3	7.3%
Sri Aman	3	7.3%
Lubok Antu	2	4.9%
Sarikei	1	2.4%

A questionnaire was formulated in Malay to determine the role of social media in shaping political literacy. The questionnaire employed Batool and Jabeen's (2019) focus on "knowledge-attitude-practice" framework. The social media and political engagement questionnaire comprised online political engagement (10 Likert-scale items), sources of political news, preferred social media platforms for political information, and types of political posts they consider most useful and interesting, and their motivations. Apart from the online political engagement section, the other sections of the questionnaire required participants to place a tick (✓) on the applicable options.

The first researcher sent the Google form link for the online questionnaire to contacts through WhatsApp. She informed participants of the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation, and the fact that they could withdraw at any time without providing a reason. They were also assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of responses as no names and contact details were collected from participants.

For the data analysis, the Excel sheet containing the questionnaire data were downloaded and coded for analysis. Descriptive statistics (frequency, mean, standard deviation, percentage) were computed. Table 2 shows the reliability of the questionnaire assessed using Cronbach's Alpha by the fourth researcher.

The reliability statistics suggested good internal consistency among the items in the scale as $\alpha > .7$. The online political engagement scale had a Cronbach's Alpha of $\alpha = 0.826$. Additionally, the Cronbach's Alpha based on standardized items was slightly higher at $\alpha = 0.831$, which indicates the reliability of the scale when standardizing across items. Eight items (A3 to A10) showed strong internal consistency and were integral to measuring political engagement effectively.

3. Results

3.1 Online political engagement
Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations for participants' online political engagement. The results showed high consumption of political news (M=4.27) but lower levels of active political participation on social media platforms. The youth communicated and discussed political issues with others on social media to some extent (M = 2.73). It cannot be concluded, however, that social media is a space for political dialogue for young voters. They hardly posted, forwarded, or shared political content with others (M=2.22). They also hardly joined politically oriented social media groups (M = 2.10). While they may read political news, they were not active in dissemination of political news.

Table 2: Mean and standard deviation for participants' online political engagement (N=41)

	Statement	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	I have read online political news on social media	4.27	1.07
2	I have communicating and discussing about politics with others over the social media	2.73	1.38

584

3	I have become a "Fan" of a political figures, politicians, or political parties on social media	2.39	1.26
4	I have engaging with politicians on social media (e.g.: like, comment, share their posts)	2.32	1.40
5	I have encouraging other people to act on a political issue that is important to you using social media	2.32	1.27
6	I have posted, forwarded, and inserted political content on social media for others to read	2.22	1.15
7	I have joined any group on social media that concerns politics	2.10	1.26
8	I have signed an e-petition to fight for my rights	2.05	1.32
9	I have participated in online donating to the political crowdfunding campaigns	1.61	0.89
10	I have worked with others (e.g., cyber troopers) to boycott politicians or political parties	1.51	0.84

Note: Likert scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 3 neutral and 5 (strongly agree)

The participants generally did not become followers or "fans" of political figures or parties online (M = 2.39). They did not show support for politicians through liking, commenting, or sharing posts (M = 2.32). They also hardly encouraged others to take action on political matters via social media (M=2.32). These results pointed to a general reluctance to engage in organised online political communities.

The results on direct forms of political participation showed very low engagement levels. The participants aged 18-21 generally did not sign e-petitions (M = 2.05), donate to political crowdfunding campaigns (M = 1.61) and collaborate with others (e.g., cyber troopers) to boycott political entities (M = 1.51). They did not get involved in digital political advocacy
As a whole, the participants were only interested to read political news but distanced themselves from political activism, whether it is publicly supporting political figures or parties or discussing political issues on social media platforms. The implication of this finding is that targeted initiatives are needed to foster a more politically active youth population, eventually firming democratic participation.

3.2 Sources of political news
The study also examined the primary channels through which young voters in Sarawak access political information. Table 3 shows frequency and percentages for participants' sources of political news. The results indicated that social media was the most prominent source of political content for 95.1% of participants. Digital platforms play a crucial role in shaping political awareness among youth because this is the main source of political news for the youth.

Table 3: Frequency and percentages for participants' sources of political news (N=41)

Political information sources	Frequency	Percentage
Social media	39	95.1
Television	30	73.2
Online newspaper	27	65.9
Family	24	58.5
Radio	13	31.7
Peers	12	29.3
Print newspaper	10	24.4
Teacher	8	19.5
Neighbour	2	4.9
Employer	2	4.9

Traditional media sources such as television (73.2%) and online newspapers (65.9%) were still important sources, showing that broadcast and digital journalism still has a role to play in disseminating political news to the youth. However, the youth relied less on people for political news, including family members (58.5%), peers (29.3%) and teachers (19.5%). Neighbours (4.9%) and employers (4.9%) were even less likely sources of political news for youth. Family, friends, and teachers were political socialisation agents in the past, but this is no longer true for the youth of today.

Other conventional forms of media, such as radio (31.7%) and print newspapers (24.4%) were considered as sources of political news for less than one-third of the participants, compared to 65.9% who read online newspapers. This indicates a clear shift from traditional print media to digital news consumption. For young voters, online platforms provide convenience and immediacy that print cannot match. These findings reflected a broader shift toward digital channels as key sources of political news among young voters. The main source of political news for young voters is social media, which can provide real-time updates on political matters.

3.3 Preferred social media platforms for political information

Table 4 shows the frequency and percentage for the participants' preferred social media platforms for political information. Participants were asked to choose the three most accessed political information sources.

Table 4: Preferred social media platforms for political information (N=41)

Social Media platforms	Frequency	Percentage
TikTok	30	73.2
Facebook	29	70.7
Instagram	28	68.3
X (Twitter)	14	34.1
YouTube	11	26.8

The results revealed a clear preference for TikTok, with 73.2% of participants indicating it as a key platform for political content. Facebook (70.7%) and Instagram (68.3%) were almost as popular but lost to TikTok. These three social media platforms are visually-driven and contain algorithm-driven content delivery. These platforms prioritise short videos, images, and interactive content, making political messages more engaging and easier to digest for younger audiences. In addition, their algorithms tailor content based on user behaviour. The youth receive political news feeds that fit their interests even without active searching. This passive exposure, combined with high levels of peer interaction (likes, shares, comments), encourages political engagement.

In contrast, platforms traditionally associated with more text-based or long-form political discourse such as X (formerly Twitter) were used by fewer respondents (34.1%). YouTube was the least preferred (26.8%) as a source of political information, probably because its long-form content is too time-consuming compared to the short, fast-paced videos found on TikTok or Instagram. Additionally, political content on YouTube often requires active searching, whereas other platforms deliver it through algorithmic feeds. Moreover, YouTube is also perceived as more formal and less interactive, lacking the viral, social dynamics of other apps. Youth typically associate YouTube with entertainment or tutorials rather than political engagement, making it a less appealing platform for casual political exposure.

586

3.4 Most useful and interesting political posts on social media

Table 5 shows the most useful and interesting political posts on social media for participants. They were asked to choose three posts. The results indicated that news updates were the most valued form of content, selected by 80.5% of participants, reflecting a strong preference for timely and factual political information.

Table 5: Frequency of the most useful and interesting political posts on social media (N=41)

Political posts	Frequency	Percentage
News updates	33	80.5
Infographic	17	41.5
Opinion and commentary	15	36.6
Memes and jokes	15	36.6
Live events: Political rallies, speeches, and press conference	15	36.6
Personal stories: People sharing own experiences and view on politics (Podcast)	12	29.0
Polls and surveys	8	19.5
Behind The Scene: Politicians' daily lives and work	7	17.1
Campaign: Promoting political candidates	6	14.6
Quizzes and games about politics	4	9.8
Call to Action	2	4.9

Other commonly appreciated formats included infographics (41.5%), opinion pieces and commentary (36.6%), memes and jokes (36.6%), and live political events such as rallies, speeches, and press conferences (36.6%). These numbers suggest that youth are drawn to a mix of informative and engaging content that combines substance with accessibility or entertainment.

In comparison, personal experiences were not as interesting as visually engaging political content. Personal stories and podcasts appealed to 29.0% of participants. Behind-the-scenes glimpses of politicians' lives appealed to 17.1% of participants.

The youth generally found the rational appeal uninteresting. Even less preferred were polls and surveys (19.5%), and campaign promotions (14.6%). Polls may be viewed as data collection tools rather than informative content, reducing their appeal to casual social media users. Campaign promotions, on the other hand, tend to resemble advertisements rather than authentic communication.

Another part of the results confirmed that youth do not like promotional or directive messaging. The least engaging content types were quizzes and games about politics (9.8%) and calls to action, such as urging participation in political causes (4.9%). The results suggest that the youth prefer passive involvement rather than active involvement.

3.5 Factors motivating political engagement on social media

Table 6 shows the results on factors motivating political engagement on social media. Participants were asked to choose the top three factors. The most common reason was the desire to learn from others and gain new insights (87.8%). This suggested that youth primarily view social media as a platform for political learning and exposure to diverse perspectives. This result is consistent with the results on online political engagement (Table 2), whereby they get political news updates from social media.

587

Table 6: Frequency and percentage of factors motivating political engagement on social media (N=41)

Factor	Frequency	Percentage
To learn from others and gain new insights	36	87.8
To share my opinions and perspectives	22	53.7
To advocate for causes or political views	18	43.9
To engage with friends and follower who share similar interests	12	29.3
To challenge misinformation or false narratives	9	22.0

Over half of the participants (53.7%) reported being motivated by the opportunity to share their own opinions and perspectives, reflecting the value placed on self-expression and active participation in political discourse. Additionally, advocacy for causes or political views motivated 43.9% of participants, indicating a notable interest in issue-based engagement. These results contradict the earlier set of results on online political engagement (Table 2), whereby a majority of the participants reported that they hardly communicate and discuss politics with others over the social media. They also refrained from active participation such as following politicians. With the earlier set of results in mind, it is expected that less than 30% of participants wish to challenge misinformation on social media (22.2%) or engage with like-minded peers (29.3%).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The study on the role of social media in shaping the political literacy of youth showed high consumption of political news updates on TikTok, Facebook and Instagram to gain insights, but less inclination towards active political participation on social media platforms. Television and online newspapers have some function in political socialisation, but youth do not look to family, peers and teachers for political information. Personal stories and numbers do not appeal to the youth.

The study indicates that social media plays a central role in shaping political literacy among Sarawakian youth. The present findings show that despite Sarawakian young voters' interest in consuming political news, this interest does not translate to active political participation on social media platforms such as communicating and discussing politics with others, joining groups, signing e-petitions, donating, and boycotting. The findings on lack of political activism should not be surprising because Kasmani (2023) also found that the first-time Malay voters aged 18-20 have low online political participation and engagement in political activities due to lack of political knowledge and confidence to discuss political issues. Whether the young voters are Sarawakian or Malay, young voters are largely passive consumers of political content. This disengagement could be caused by various factors, including feelings of alienation, fear of criticism or a perception that their contributions would not make a significant impact. Youth in East Coast of West Malaysia fear government punishment for expressing political opinions online (Muhamad et al., 2021). This apprehension persists even with constitutional changes aimed at enhancing youth political participation, suggesting that legal reforms alone may not suffice to alter entrenched perceptions of risk and censorship.

Next, the present study also shows that Sarawakian young voters are not interested in engaging with politicians on social media platforms through actions like liking, commenting, or sharing their posts. In this respect, the Sarawakian young voters do not display slacktivism or clicktivism, a term used by Karpf (2010) to describe the shallow involvement in politics through clicking "like" or "share" to show support for an interest political candidates or parties in Facebook, signing online petitions, and changing profile picture to show support for a cause.

Social media is important for raising youth awareness and literacy in political matters (Chin, 2022; Zulkifli et al., 2022). However, the present study shows that while social media can facilitate access to information, it lacks the ability in promoting active participation among young voter. Mansor (2023) is aware of the limitations of social media, reflected in the statement that social media activity does not accurately reflect the true political support of young voters.

Finally, the present study has revealed that educational efforts are more effective when delivered through non-intrusive news content and political messages may fail when they sound too promotional messages or aggressive. This finding ought to be taken into consideration when promoting political literacy among young voters such as when hosting live-streamed events with popular influencers to reach younger audiences. Humanizing political figures and making them more approachable may also increase youth engagement. Such approaches not only increase the visibility of political campaigns but also cultivate a deeper sense of connection between candidates and the electorate, which is vital for sustained youth engagement.

The present study did not investigate young voters' perceptions of their susceptibility to misinformation and fake political news on social media. Relying too much on pop culture, YouTube, or TikTok may distort our understanding of the world, according to Qyira Yusri, Co-Founder and Education Director of #Undi18 (Reza, 2023). The misinformation may cause confusion and reduce desire to engage actively in politics. Therefore, future studies should investigate to what extent the young voters are grappling with disinformation, misinformation, and mal-information (Undi18, 2020). Investigating these dimensions will provide a deeper understanding of how misinformation impacts youth political literacy, enabling the development of targeted interventions to enhance critical media literacy and informed political participation among young voters.

Acknowledgement

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