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Agent of Change?

Malaysian Millennials' Social Media Consumption and
Political Knowledge, Participation and Voting in the 2018
General Election

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to examine how Malaysian millennials' use of various social media for news and information seeking influenced their online, offline political and election participation, as well as their knowledge of Malaysian political affairs and election news within a national system that does not have a free press. Data were gathered from a convenience sample of Malaysians aged 21 to 35, one month before the 2018 Malaysian General Election (in which Malaysians overturned six decades of single party rule) via a web survey administered in the three main languages of Malaysia which was distributed via social media (Facebook, Instagram and Twitter) and e-mail. A statistical analysis was undertaken using the statistical software SPSS and four hierarchical regression models were generated to provide a quantitative analysis of the survey findings. The results indicated that frequent use of social media for news and informational purposes was positively but weakly associated with offline political and activist behaviour, with a significantly stronger association to online 'slacktivist' behaviours.

However, the number of social media used did not influence the outcomes in any significant way. Information and news seeking via social media was found to be similarly high across all respondents. This behaviour did not have a significant influence on respondents' knowledge of Malaysian politics, instead, religion played a significant role, in line with the expectations that Malaysian politics were race and religion based. However, political socialisation and efficacy was found to be negatively correlated to online, offline and election participation, indicating increasing levels of political cynicism among Malaysian millennials, which could become a problem for the developing "semi-democracy." In contrast, education and gender were found to be more significantly correlated with offline political engagement. In sum, the results indicate that using social media to look for information and news within the context of a system without a free press like Malaysia can have a small mobilising effect on typically disengaged youth.

1 INTRODUCTION

On 9 May, 2018, Malaysia witnessed an historic moment when its people voted to overturn the ruling coalition Barisan Nasional (BN), which has ruled the country since its independence in 1957. The opposition coalition Pakatan Harapan (PH), led by former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad was voted into power, despite gerrymandering, a mid-week election day and the ruling party blocking its access to the mainstream media. BN has managed to maintain its 60-year-rule in part due to direct and indirect control over the traditional mainstream media in Malaysia, viewing the press as ‘an agent for national development and political stability’ (Baharin *et al.*, 2017: 4; Tamam and Abdullah, 2015: 46). However, earlier policies favourable to Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) development meant that Malaysians were allowed to use the Internet as a mass communication medium without obtaining a government license (George, 2005).

It is against this backdrop of tightly controlled state media and comparatively free Internet media that Malaysian general elections have been held since its introduction to the country. Although elections are generally peaceful and free, they are also considered to be unfair towards the opposition (Tamam *et al.*, 2014: 150). Opposition parties began to adopt online media to spread their political messages and broadcast their rallies in 2008, which led to BN losing its two-thirds majority in parliament for the first time since the country’s independence (Willnat *et al.*, 2013). That year signalled a turning point in the country’s more recent political history.

Incumbent Prime Minister Najib Razak – who in 2013 declared that the election would be Malaysia’s first ‘social media election’ (Lim, 2013) – was struggling to maintain his grip on power in the midst of a massive corruption scandal involving £550 million in state funds (Wright and Clark, 2015). A new ‘fake news’ law aimed at curbing discussion of the corruption scandal applying to both locals and foreigners was hurriedly rushed through parliament in the month before Najib Razak called for the dissolution of parliament (Lahiri, 2018). Following

this move, the election commission denied opposition coalition PH the right to register under the party's logo, blocked its candidates from appearing on mainstream media and issued new guidelines that prevented PH leaders Mahathir Mohamad and Anwar Ibrahim from appearing on campaign posters (Ahmad, 2018). Malaysians remained undeterred, creating the hashtags #UndiRabu (Wednesday Vote, in Bahasa Malaysia), #SPRtipu (or SPRLies, SPR is the Bahasa Malaysia abbreviation for the Election Commission), #CarPoolGE14 and #PulangMengundi (return home and vote) on Twitter and Facebook in response to voter fraud and the mid-week vote. Facebook groups to collect donations for overseas Malaysian students to return home to cast their ballots sprang up across various cities in the world. When it became obvious that postal ballots were not going to be delivered in time for them to be mailed back, Malaysians used Facebook and Twitter to find runners across Asia, Europe, Australia and the Americas to hand deliver their postal votes. More than 1.2 million Malaysians watched Mahathir's final speech on May 8, which was broadcast solely over the internet with Facebook's Live video feature (Free Malaysia Today, 2018).

This research therefore aims to study the mobilizing effects of political information on social media within the traditionally closed media environment of Malaysia, by surveying youth about their voting intention in the 2018 General Election, as well as the effect of this social media use on the political knowledge of youth. This study is unique in that it surveys only the 'millennial' generation in Malaysia and centres on the use of social media for political purposes in Malaysia, since the use of online news media is already widely prevalent among Malaysians, particularly its youth (Baharin *et al.*, 2017; George, 2005; Willnat *et al.*, 2013). At a time when political disengagement among youth is rising (Bessant *et al.*, 2016; Snell, 2010), more mature democratic societies in the West are becoming increasingly polarized, and even Malaysian scholars are warning of the rise in political cynicism among youth due to the increase of questionable news stories on social media (Taibi *et al.*, 2017), the case of the Malaysian election seems to show that there is yet some mobilizing potential of social media in less developed 'semi-democracies' (Case, 1993) like Malaysia.

While other studies have found that social media only has a minor effect on offline political participation unless users have high levels of prior engagement and interest in politics (Bakker and Vreese, 2011; Hargittai, 2007), Boulianne (2017) found that information effects were higher among social media users in political systems without a free press (p.11). This study therefore draws on this finding to test whether millennials in Malaysia, who have the most experience with using online tools for finding information, are more likely to use social media to obtain information on politics and as such be more motivated to vote in the election. The following section continues with an overview of relevant literature on the use of social media and its effect on social movements, political action and participation, outlining the various findings of social media effects studies done both in Malaysia and in other mature democracies. The methods utilized in this study will be detailed in the continuing section, along with the analyses of survey results. This paper concludes by discussing the implications and shortcomings of the study and detailing possible directions for further research.

2 YOUTH, POLITICS, AND SOCIAL MEDIA EFFECTS

As youth participation in politics has continued to decline in democratic societies in the West (Bessant *et al.*, 2016), the Internet has begun to seem like a promising arena for engaging youth and wider swathes of society in more democratic and equal ways (Castells, 2007; Morris and Morris, 2013). However, scholarly research has been divided on how much, if any, mobilizing potential social media has on youth.

Three views prevail in the field: the first, and most optimistic, takes the view that there is a significant positive effect on political participation that stems from social media use (de Zúñiga *et al.*, 2014; Jung *et al.*, 2011; Kushin and Yamamoto, 2010; Kwak *et al.*, 2018; Xenos *et al.*, 2014; Yamamoto *et al.*, 2015). This body of research finds that the structure of social media that leads users to see information they may not necessarily have been seeking, the unique combination of user generated content as well as high interactivity that allows political figures and

candidates to directly communicate with their constituents; along with the ease of access to social media creates a setting which can mobilize citizens into offline political participation. de Zúñiga *et al.* (2014) also find that social media use can lead to better informed citizens which in turn leads to political expression and potentially further involvement in politics. In terms of youth participation, Kwak *et al.* (2018) found that for young people, the perceived impact of their online participation is a key factor, and political participation online may constitute a method of satisfying citizenship goals (215). This finding could mean that the mode of political participation may be changing, and that online participation for younger generations can actually improve and contribute to civic discourse. Following in this line of study, Yoo, Kim, & de Zúñiga (2017) extend their research to the online public sphere, finding that political expression online was encouraged by news seeking behaviour. It also led to further self-elaboration on political information and facilitated democratic discussion online, suggesting potential for online social networks to become a more robust field for political debate. Their findings are also supported by Yamamoto *et al.* (2015), who additionally found that mobile application usage had additional independent effects on offline political participation. Their research discovered the apps allowed users to monitor ongoing political events and debates, while also being able to quickly provide information on political rallies such as the date, time and location (894).

The second view remains optimistic, but is more cautious in its approach – social media has slightly significant effects on political participation, but more online than offline; yet there is existing potential for online activity to turn into offline activity (Albrecht, 2006; Baumgartner and Morris, 2010; Boulianne, 2017, 2015; de Zúñiga *et al.*, 2012; Leyva, 2017; Vissers and Stolle, 2014). There is some overlap here with the first body of research. Many of these studies found that social media use does increase political engagement and encourage further political behaviour. Notably, Bode (2017) found support for both the *political interest* hypothesis – which posits that people who are uninterested in politics are not looking at or engaging with political content on social media, it is only those who have an interest who do – as well as the more

optimistic *activation* hypothesis. This theory suggests that even those who are not that interested in politics might engage with political content on social media, such as by 'liking' or commenting on political content, and this kind of 'easy political behaviour' or 'slacktivism' – defined as 'low-risk, low-cost activity on social media, whose purpose is to raise awareness, produce change and grant satisfaction to the person engaged in the activity' (Rotman *et al.*, 2011: 821) – might lead to broader political engagement eventually (7). However, the author of this study suggests further research to uncover the factors that might lead to such broader political activity, as well as when, why and for whom this shift might happen and in what way. Likewise, Leyva's (2017) study on United Kingdom millennials' social media consumption and the effects on election participation found that frequent use of social networks and attention to political content on social networks was associated with higher online slacktivism and had very little significant effect on offline political participation (476). The study also notes that while the demographic targeted for the survey was the group with the most experience using social media, the findings showed that for those without prior childhood or educational political socialisation, sociostructural advantages and/or political interest, most of the political content on social media was of no interest to them. Since social media is easily customisable to individual interest, such content can be ignored and subsequently filtered out by social networks' algorithms (Leyva, 2017). As such, scholars caution against the technological determinism of the first school of thought. Vissers and Stolle (2014) in particular warn that the idea that 'Facebook participation could be entirely apolitical in nature' should not be easily dismissed; but do concede that there is a likelihood that the potential of social media as a mobilizing force has yet to be fully realised.

The third body of research gives support to the reinforcement hypothesis, which posits that online new media and social media only serve the interests of those in dominant and privileged social groups who are already politically active (Nam, 2012; Strandberg, 2013; Van Laer, 2010). The most pessimistic of these studies find that social media use has little to no effect on mobilizing newcomers to the political field, reducing it to a mere tool used and

dominated by those who are already politically inclined and savvy. In fact, this situation leads to disparities and inequalities between those who are politically inclined, interested and active and those who are not active to widen, further marginalizing those from less privileged social groups, particularly the less educated, along with those from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Best and Krueger, 2005; di Gennaro and Dutton, 2006; Min, 2010). Social media also further replicates gender disparities in terms of interest and attention in civic and political engagement, with men being more supportive of political causes on Facebook than women and the gender gap being even wider in Asian and African contexts (Brandtzaeg, 2017). Meanwhile, Van Laer's (2010) study of social media and activist groups found that the Internet was being used mainly by activists and people who had higher levels of interest in politics, and that those who were using the Internet tended to be younger, better educated and had previous protest experience, but does suggest that the Internet's mobilizing potential has gone largely untapped by activist groups.

Despite the proliferation of studies done on social media and political participation, the varying results point to a need for more research on the issue. Yet most of the research can agree on one point, summed up by Bakker and Vreese (2011):

Although findings have sometimes been inconclusive, recent studies acknowledge that Internet use is not a unidimensional concept and thus does not — if at all — affect all groups in society similarly; rather, its effects depend on a complex combination of personal and social characteristics, usage patterns, and the specific content and context of the medium (452).

Therefore, this study aims to narrow the scope of the examination to focus specifically on a singular event within one national context, and to look at the way millennials used and were influenced by social media.

Further, many of the more in-depth studies of social media effects so far have only been conducted in the more mature democracies in the Western world. In her meta-analysis of the research on social media use and participation, Boulianne (2015) suggests that further studies should be cross-national to be able to fully assess whether social media use leads to political participation or if participation leads to more political activity on social media. Howard and Parks (2012), too, called for more country-specific studies to be conducted for comparative analyses to better understand the 'subtle, and often unexpected, ways' that social media, traditional media and political culture might interact (361). As such, this is what this study will aim to do. Taking into consideration the various findings from the aforementioned studies, this research will replicate Leyva's (2017) study on millennials' social media use and participation in the United Kingdom's 2015 elections in the Malaysian context. Some adjustments to the variables and measures were made so as to suit the cultural, political and social environment of Malaysia. To be able to fully assess the extent of the local situation, the following section discusses the unique socio-political background and media environment in Malaysia and examines various studies conducted on Internet media and politics in the country.

3 ONLINE AND SOCIAL MEDIA AND POLITICS IN MALAYSIA

The democratizing potential of the internet and particularly social media has been extensively discussed following the Arab Spring (Brown *et al.*, 2012) and the 2008 Obama presidential campaign (Smith, 2009). Castells (2007) argued that social media offers 'social movements and rebellious individuals' more autonomy as well as the opportunity to 'confront institutions of society in their own terms' (249). Castells (2007) also points out: 'For new social movements, the Internet provides the essential platform for debate, their means of acting on people's mind, and ultimately serves as their most potent political weapon' (250). In the Malaysian context, Castells words seem to have rung true.

Due to the perceived economic value of the Internet, a no-censorship guarantee to encourage foreign investment was put in place by Mahathir in 1996 (Bakker & Vreese, 2011; Hargittai, 2007) – who was re-elected as Prime Minister during the May elections. This allowance meant the government did not have complete control over Internet media, unlike in neighbouring Singapore or the more extreme ‘Great Firewall’ in China, which blocks access to Facebook, Whatsapp and various other ‘Western’ social media and websites. Dissenting ideas began to spread and flourish through blogs and online forums in the early 00s and through social media and alternative online media today (George, 2005; Gong, 2011; Postill, 2014). The arrest of the popular then-Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in 1998 on made-up sodomy charges triggered the *reformasi* (reform) movement, leading protestors to swarm online forums and listservs to voice their dissatisfaction with the ruling party over the Anwar issue and set up more than 50 pro-Anwar websites (Postill, 2014; Smeltzer and Keddy, 2010). *Reformasi* marked the beginning of a more vigorous democratic activism environment in Malaysia that used online tools to their advantage.

In 1999, the online alternative news portal *Malaysiakini* was established, bringing Malaysians even more access to what George (2006) called ‘contentious journalism’, and more Malaysians began turning to alternative news sources as distrust of the mainstream Malaysian press grew, especially among youth (Merdeka Center for Opinion Research, 2008). Despite the government constantly ransacking the *Malaysiakini* offices (The Star Online, 2016, 2003) and existing laws such as the Sedition Act being used to arrest critics like cartoonist Zunar for his tweets (Amnesty International, 2016) – particularly after BN won the 2013 elections by a narrow margin – the Internet and social media has provided opposition parties a platform to disseminate their material as well as a tool with which to engage young voters. Today, the nation of 32.4 million (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2018) has a 79% rate of Internet penetration and 24 million active social media users (We Are Social, 2018). Survey data found that Malaysians reported spending an average of three hours a day on social media, including messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger, with the five most popular social

networks being Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook Messenger (We Are Social, 2018).

Combined with an increasing distrust of the mainstream media among ordinary Malaysians (Gong, 2011; Suffian, 2010), it therefore comes as no surprise that Malaysians increasingly depend on social media to access the news, and politicians and their respective parties capitalized on this fact in the 2018 general elections by creating WhatsApp and Facebook groups to directly spread their campaign message to Malaysians (Abdullah and Anuar, 2018). According to Tamam, Hassan and Azarian (2014: 147) social media, particularly Facebook, emerged as a main source of political information in Malaysia because it is easy to use and allows users to control their privacy settings – an important feature, considering that internet users still face the threat of defamation charges under the Sedition Act, as previously mentioned. Despite the risk, Malaysian citizens and politicians alike increasingly find that online platforms give them the widest reach in terms of making their voice heard in the public sphere – particularly as the right to public assembly has been increasingly limited – as well as unfettered access to uncensored political information (Liow, 2012; Willnat *et al.*, 2013). Opposition parties and political candidates began to adopt social media over a decade ago to disseminate campaign messages and subsequently mobilise the Malaysian public against the ruling coalition (Willnat *et al.*, 2013).

Following that, most studies around social media effects on politics have focused on dissecting the role of online tools in the 2008 Malaysian elections, in which the ruling coalition BN lost their two-thirds majority. Suffian (2010), observed that the opposition had used a combination of text messaging, party websites and supporter-run websites and blogs and the video sharing platform YouTube to circumvent the mainstream press blackout imposed by the ruling party. By comparison, BN's online footprint was minute even with their 'cybertroopers' attempting to counter the opposition's message (Suffian, 2010: 20). Mohd Sani and Zengeni (2010) in their analysis of the 2008 elections argued that social media had moved Malaysian society closer to

Habermas' (1999) public sphere ideal, where citizens could voice their opinions on social issues without fear of retribution. At the same time, they also noted that online media in general broadened the reach of the opposition, allowing them to target youth aged 21 to 40 "in their offices and homes" (Sani and Zengeni, 2010: 7). However, these two studies were purely qualitative and did not manage to quantify the actual impact of online and social media on the elections.

Like Sani and Zengeni, Gong's (2011) quantitative study focused on the production side of the online campaigns in Malaysia. She found that blogs had a significant positive effect on politicians winning elections, with the effects increasing by 4.66% for opposition candidates. However, there was no significant effect on winning for ruling party candidates. The study also noted that subsequent analysis of the role of online and social media should take into consideration audience reaction (Gong, 2011: 324), which is what this study will aim to address.

Willnat, Wong, Tamam and Aw (2013) on the other hand, focused on the audience angle in their study of the impact of online and new media on the 2008 elections. The research found that online media use was positively associated with higher political participation and political efficacy, however, it should be noted that they also found a significantly higher association with offline political participation for political bloggers. This lends support to the reinforcement hypothesis (Nam, 2012). Willnat *et al.* also found that more time spent on the Internet in general was actually associated with less offline participation (Willnat *et al.*, 2013: 574). Overall, their findings showed that the highest correlation was between online media use and online political participation (Willnat *et al.*, 2013: 579).

Tamam, Hassan and Azarian's (2014) more recent study on university students' social media use similarly found that online media use was significantly associated with online political participation but less so with offline political action. However, while online and social media use did increase students' awareness of political issues, the researchers also found that

students practiced a certain amount of self-censorship when discussing politics online, fearing retribution due to the University and University Colleges Act (UUCA), a now repealed Malaysian law that prohibits academics and university students from taking part in politics; as well as the fact that they were more likely to use social media for education and leisure than for news (Tamam *et al.*, 2014: 163). The two studies show that there remains a gap between online political participation that social media may not necessarily be able to bridge. They also show the complex intertwining of social, cultural and political forces that influence social media use for political purposes. Tamam *et al.* (2014) take these factors into consideration, and warn against overstating the role that social media could play in mobilization.

Similarly in his overview of the role of new media in the 2008 Malaysian elections, Liow (2012) warned against over valorisation of its role in the political landscape and noted that while new media could be used to generate support for democratic action, it could likewise be used to spread anti-pluralist and illiberal messages. He also noted that while the use of new media 'generated enough of a momentum to carry the opposition coalition to a series of remarkable performances in 2008, they do not appear to have been able to sustain this momentum' (Liow, 2012: 312).

A brief overview of the research done on new media and social media and its impact on Malaysian politics is enough to emphasise the fact that even in the context of a 'semi-democracy' (Case, 1993) like Malaysia where freedom of information and press is almost non-existent, scholars remain divided in their findings. This reflects the wider corpus of literature and research that so far has been unable to definitively prove that social media and new media has an impact on political participation. As such, this paper will add to the already existing corpus of literature and while there are various limitations to this study, it may still be able to contribute some observations from a different time, political and social context which may prove useful in future endeavours to study new media effects.

It should also be noted that the majority of the research done on Malaysian politics and online media seems to have zeroed in mostly on blogs and alternative online news sources, rather than more interactive social networks like Twitter and Facebook. However, more and more people have begun to access the news via social media instead of directly visiting the news sites. This study therefore, centres on the role of social media in the 2018 elections, assuming the use of social media as an aggregate platform not just for direct interaction between political candidates and their constituents, but also for peer to peer dissemination of news and information on the elections.

Previous studies surveyed all age groups or were targeted at university students, but because Malaysia's legal voting age is 21, studies that look at university students might actually include large swathes of the younger non-voters. Young adults have a large part to play in democracy, and it is detrimental to the health of a nation if they no longer take interest in politics. Previous research has already sounded alarm bells in this area – Malaysian youth are increasingly disinterested and cynical of politics and are beginning to disengage from the field (Taibi *et al.*, 2017). Tamam *et al.*'s (2014) findings are similar, with only university students who were politically interested and active using social media for political purposes. This study therefore aims to focus on young adults aged 21 to 35 who are able to register to vote, more tech savvy and more likely to be heavy users of social media. As such, this study aims to answer the following questions:

RQ1: How does social media news consumption influence online, offline and voting intention among millennials in the Malaysian context?

RQ2: Does social media use for news and information gathering influence political and election related knowledge among Malaysia's young voters?

In sum, this research will aim to examine whether political activity and information seeking on social media in a society without a free press can transcend the online sphere into real-world political action in the form of participation in elections, or whether such online political activity is merely slacktivism, not quite pushing the boundary between online and offline. The following section will give an overview of the research design and methodology employed in the study, as well as reflect on some of the limitations faced during the course of this research.

4 METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

An online survey was designed using Qualtrics software (version April – August 2018) to examine the use of social media and political participation among Malaysian youth aged 21 to 35. The survey was administered in three languages, English, Simplified Chinese and Bahasa Malaysia, all written and translated by this researcher. 73.6% of respondents took the survey in English and the remaining 26.4% took the survey in Simplified Chinese. While web surveys are limited by the fact that it will only reach participants that have access to the Internet (Couper, 2008: 2), this was considered to be a small issue since the focus of the study was Internet-based social media use (Bakker and Vreese, 2011). Although generally ‘youth’ includes those from age 17, this study excludes those below the age of 21 as this survey was aimed at examining social media effects on election participation, and the legal voting age in Malaysia is 21. Furthermore, Malaysians aged between 21 to 39 make up 41% of the registered voters in the country (Chow, 2018), making it important to study how newer voters find information and how their methods influence election participation. The survey had an average completion time of 8 minutes. As the target age group was higher than most surveys of youth, social networks such as Facebook Messenger, Instagram, WhatsApp, as well as emails were used to recruit a convenience sample of participants from Malaysia. The survey link was distributed first to friends of the researcher, who then helped to share the link with other friends. This means that the survey was distributed among a small but relatively diverse

group of people. However, convenience sampling is unable to avoid external validity problems (Sedgwick, 2013), yet in this case, it allowed for quick collection of responses due to the short period of about 20 days available between the dissolution of parliament and the actual election day on May 9, when the survey was distributed.

Ethical approval for this study was submitted to the supervising professor and subsequently attained before the survey was distributed. The first page of the survey notified respondents of the purpose of the research and that responses would be kept anonymous and used only for the purposes of this dissertation. Although friends of the researcher contributed responses to the study, no method of identification was required in the survey. Additionally, respondents could choose to take the survey at any time, ensuring that full anonymity was preserved. Respondents were also allowed to drop out of the survey at any time. In total, 277 responses were recorded; 86 participants dropped out and 9 of the completed responses were from participants outside the target age group. This left a total of 182 valid responses. However, the ethnic makeup of the participants was 83.5% Chinese, only 11% Malay and 4% Indian, meaning this sample of participants is not representative of the ethnic makeup of Malaysia, which is 67.4% Malay, 24.6% Chinese and 7.3% Indian (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2018). This result may have been an outcome of this student's own peer network, despite conscious efforts to ensure the survey reached as diverse a group of people as possible. As such, this survey cannot be considered to be representative of the entire population. However, it should still provide a preliminary look into the social media consumption habits and political activities of a small sample of Malaysians.

The sample of respondents was relatively unique in terms of gender, with 60% of the participants being female and only 39% being male; 1 of the respondents declined to provide their gender. By contrast, the male to female ratio in Malaysia is roughly 107 men for every 100 women (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2018). This means that this study is uniquely positioned to study the effects, if any, of the intersection of gender and social media

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consumption on political participation in Malaysia. Respondents were also relatively varied in terms of religion (12.6% Muslim, 17.6% Christian, 44% Buddhist, 12.6% Taoist, 1.6% Hindu and 11.5% other or agnostic/atheist), which was included due to the importance of religion within the politics of the country. Moreover, as the sample of respondents was not focused within a university setting, level of education was also surveyed, with the majority of respondents (68.1%) reporting at least a four-year degree, 2.7% high school graduates, 9.9% completed two-year college, 16.5% had a Master's degree and 2.7% had a PhD. Respondents self-reported annual family income was also collected as a measure of social economic status (SES). 36.3% of respondents correspond to the low SES income group (MYR40,000 or less), 14.3% lower middle SES (MYR40,000 – MYR60,000), 13.7% upper middle SES (MYR60,000 – MYR 80,000) and 35.7% high SES (MYR80,000 or more).

5 RESEARCH DESIGN AND ANALYSIS STRATEGY

The following section explains the research design and the operationalisation of the survey data that was collected.

5.1 Dependent Variables

The questionnaire for this study mainly replicated Leyva's (2017) survey, however some changes were made to account for the different national context. This study measured three separate outcomes, participation in the 2018 Malaysian General Election, online and offline political participation and political and election related knowledge. Respondents were asked if they intended to vote in the 14th general election and responses were coded $1=yes$ and $0=no$ to form the dependent binary variable *Intend to Vote in the 2018 Malaysian Election*.

To create the online and offline political participation variables, respondents were asked to select if they had participated in any of 12 political activities in the last 12 months. Activities under online participation included (1) Spread information about a political party on social

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media, (2) 'Liked' or shared a political image or story on social media, (3) Signed an online petition about a social or political cause, (4) Spread information about a political event or demonstration on social media, (5) Used social media to spread awareness of a political or social cause or issue, and (6) Purchased a product to support a political or social cause. The responses were coded 1=yes and 0=no, then summed ($M = 1.87$, $SD = 1.74$, $\alpha = .74$) to create the additive dependent variable for *Online Political Participation* with a score of 0 (no participation) to 6 (high participation).

The additive dependent variable for *Offline Political Participation* was measured through the following traditional formal and activist activities: (1) Campaigned for a politician or political party by passing out pamphlets or door to door canvassing, (2) Helped organize a political event (3) Attended an event hosted by an environmental, human rights, and/or other activist groups, (4) Telephoned or written a letter to local politicians or government officials, (5) Attended a political demonstration, and (6) Joined a political party. The responses were likewise summed ($M = 0.56$, $SD = 1.06$, $\alpha = .69$). However, the above measures have limitations in that it does not account for frequency of engagement in the activity (Dylko, 2010), meaning a respondent who was highly active in one activity but did not take part in any other activities would still be considered a low-scorer. Despite this, the indexed measures generated acceptable internal consistency and can be considered a good starting point to indicate patterns in participation (Leyva, 2017: 467). The frequencies of engagement in online and offline political practices are shown in Table 1 below.

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Table 1 Frequency of Political Practices and Social Media News Use

Online Slacktivist Practices (engaged in during the last 12 months)	
Spread information about a political party on social media	31.9%
"Liked" or shared a political image or story on social media	53.8%
Signed an online petition about a social or political cause	25.3%
Spread information about a political event or demonstration on social media	27.5%
Used social media to spread awareness of a political or social cause or issue	43.4%
Purchased a product to support a political or social cause	5.5%
Offline Political Practices (engaged in during the last 12 months)	
Campaigned for a politician/political party by passing out pamphlets/ canvassing	6%
Helped organize a political event	5.5%
Attended an event hosted by environmental, human rights, and/or other groups	26.9%
Telephoned or written a letter to local politicians or government officials	4.4%
Attended a political demonstration	11.%
Joined a political party	2.2%

Source: Malaysian Millennials Social Media Consumption Patterns and Political Engagement Survey, administered April 10 – May 8, 2018

Finally, political and election knowledge was measured through three multiple choice questions and one true/false question covering knowledge on political party composition, political manifestos and election laws.: (1) Which of the following political parties is part of the opposition coalition Pakatan Harapan (PH)? (76.4% correct) (2) Which of the following political parties is part of the ruling coalition Barisan Nasional (BN)? (84.6% correct) (3) Which of the following are demands made by the Bersih Coalition for free and fair elections? (87.9% correct) (4) Is the following statement true or false? Barisan Nasional and Pakatan Harapan have both proposed to remove the Goods and Services Tax (89% correct). The answers were dummy coded, 1 for correct answers and 0 otherwise, then summed to create the additive variable for *Knowledge of Malaysian Politics* ($M = 3.38$, $SD = .91$) ranging from 0 (no knowledge) to 4 (high knowledge). Despite generating a low level of internal consistency ($\alpha = .49$), this variable measures a combination of general factual long-term political knowledge with knowledge of current political issues, which can allow the electorate to better assess their interests and this knowledge and also allows for a more conservative measure of political knowledge as it is likely to be also affected by socialisation and education rather than just media effects (Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Fraile, 2011). However, it should also be acknowledged that the small sample size and number of questions might have lowered the reliability, and more questions should be added for future studies.

5.2 Independent Variables

Respondents were asked to select social media they owned accounts for and used daily from a list of nine of the most widely used social media in Malaysia. The nine social media were selected for this survey based on the Internet Users Survey 2016 (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2016), and each of these can be accessed via computers and smartphones and can be used to create, distribute and consume online media content including pictures, text, and video. Social media, particularly Facebook, Twitter, WeChat and WhatsApp also allow users to access, find and share news articles from varying news sites that

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may or may not be accessible from Malaysia. The selected items were coded 1 and 0 for those that respondents did not use, then summed to form the additive variable *Number of Regularly Used Social Media* ranging from 0 to 9 types of social media used ($M = 4.95$, $SD = 1.78$).

Next, respondents were asked two follow up questions regarding their use of social media for news and information purposes: (1) How likely are you to click on an external link to a political news article (62.6% were likely to do so); and (2) How likely are you to use social media to look for news about the Malaysian general election (67% were likely to do so). Responses were collected on a 4-point Likert scale then coded 1 for yes (extremely likely and likely) and 0 otherwise (unlikely and extremely unlikely) then summed to create the additive variable *Social Media for News and Information Use* ($M = 1.30$, $SD = 0.88$, $\alpha = .89$).

Traditional media consumption, particularly newspaper and television news, has been found to have significant effect on political knowledge and offline political participation (Bakker and Vreese, 2011: 460; Baumgartner and Morris, 2010: 33). Therefore, the survey also asked respondents how often (daily, two to three times a week, once a week, or never) they consumed news from three traditional media sources: newspapers, radio and television. The responses were summed and averaged to create the variable *Traditional Media News Consumption* ($M = 2.91$, $SD = .84$, $\alpha = .64$). News consumption on the Internet outside of social media was measured as a separate variable. The survey question was structured similarly to the ones for traditional media and responses were coded 1 = daily use, 2 = two to three times a week, 3 = once a week and 4 = never (73.6% daily, 17% two to three times a week, 7.7% once a week, 1.6% never) to create the variable for *Internet Media News Consumption* ($M = 1.37$, $SD = .70$).

5.3 Control Variables

Demographic variables were included to control for the effects of gender, education and socioeconomic status on political participation and voting. Responses were coded 1 = *male*, 2 =

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female; 1 = *low SES*, 2 = *low middle SES*, and so on, and 1 = *less than high school*, 2 = *high school*, 3 = *two year college*, 4 = *Bachelor's Degree*, 5 = *Master's Degree* and 6 = *Ph.D.* Due to its British colonial past, Malaysian politics are divided along ethnic and religious lines rather than in terms of left-right ideological lines, a remnant of the British 'divide and rule' tactic (Baharin *et al.*, 2017; Welsh, 2013; Xia *et al.*, 2018). As such religion was coded 1 = *Islam*, 2 = *Christianity*, 3 = *Buddhist*, 4 = *Taoist*, 5 = *Hindu*. However, since 83.5% of respondents identified as ethnically Chinese, ethnicity was excluded from the analysis. Age was also excluded since all of the respondents were between 21 and 35.

Additionally, respondents were asked a series of questions to measure political socialisation and efficacy. The influence of parents, peers and education on children has been shown to have a significant effect on political knowledge and participation in political activities and elections (see Leyva, 2017; Neundorf & Smets, 2017). Similarly, political efficacy, which measures how feelings that individual political action can impact the wider political landscape (Campbell *et al.*, 1971), has also been proven to be a large psychological influence on political participation (Cohen *et al.*, 2001; Jung *et al.*, 2011). Participants were asked to what extent they agreed with the following statements: (1) I had relatives or close friends that discussed politics and social issues with me when I was growing up; (2) My parents discussed politics and social issues with me when I was growing up; (3) My family or close friends encouraged me to participate in elections and/or political demonstrations; (4) My secondary school history, social issues or economics teachers encouraged us to debate and discuss topics; (5) I am better informed about politics and government than most people (6) Politicians in general care about what people like me think; and (7) My vote in the general election will make a difference. The responses were coded on a 4-point scale from 1 = *strongly agree* to 4 = *strongly disagree*, then summed and averaged to create the variable for *Political Socialisation and Efficacy* ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 0.51$). The scale generated acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = .64$).

5.4 Analysis Strategy

Four hierarchical regression models (three ordinary least squares and one binary logistic) were constructed to analyse the research questions. The four models predicted (1) online political participation, (2) offline political participation (3) knowledge of Malaysian politics and (4) intended to vote in the 2018 Malaysian elections. The first block included all the control variables, traditional media news use and internet media news use variables were included in the second block. The social media variables were entered into a third and final block. This procedure was used to counterbalance specification error and generate more accurate coefficient estimates (see e.g. Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010; Leyva, 2017). This method also specifies the different types of media usage to better isolate the effects on political participation and knowledge (see e.g. Bakker & Vreese, 2011; Leyva, 2017). The results of the analysis are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Political Participation, Election Participation and Political Knowledge by Social Media Consumption Variables

	Online Participatio n	Offline Participatio n	Knowledg e of Politics	Voting of in 2018 Election
First Block				
Control Variables				
Gender	-.087 (.25)	-.139 (.15)	-.013 (.14)	-.085 (.07)
Socioeconomic Status	-.111 (.10)	-.125 (.06)	.042 (.05)	-.033 (.03)
Education	.165* (.18)	.198*** (.11)	.018 (.10)	.118* (.05)
Religion	.073 (.09)	-.020 (.05)	.177* (.05)	.003 (.03)

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					-0.162*
Political Socialisation and Efficacy	-0.336 ** (.24)	-0.258** (.15)	.042 (.05)		(.07)
R ² (adjusted)	.128**	.106**	.006		.043*
Second block					
Control Variables					
Gender	-0.087 (.25)	-0.138 (.15)	-0.013 (.14)		-0.084 (.07)
Socioeconomic Status	-0.111 (.10)	-0.122 (.06)	.044 (.05)		-0.031 (.03)
Education	.150* (.18)	.188*** (.11)	.017 (.10)		.124* (.05)
Religion	.066 (.09)	-0.019 (.05)	.181* (.05)		.006 (.03)
					-0.158*
Political Socialisation and Efficacy	-0.334** (.25)	-0.250** (.15)	.025 (.14)		(.07)
Independent Variables - Other media					
Traditional Media News Use	.071 (.15)	-0.019 (.09)	-0.040 (.08)		-0.053 (.04)
Internet Media News Use	-0.121 (.18)	-0.051 (.11)	.010 (.10)		.060 (.09)
R ² (adjusted)	.139**	.099**	-0.004		.049*
Third and Final Block					
Control Variables					
Gender	-0.098 (.24)	-0.145* (.15)	-0.023 (.14)		-0.098 (.07)
Socioeconomic Status	-0.115 (.10)	-0.128 (.06)	.030 (.05)		-0.034 (.03)

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Education	.144* (.18)	.179* (.11)	-.005 (.10)	.115* (.05)
			.197***	
Religion	.084 (.09)	-.007 (.06)	(.05)	.014 (.03)
		-.235***		
Political Socialisation and Efficacy	-.305** (.25)	(.06)	.042 (.14)	-.126 (.07)
Independent Variables - Other media				
Traditional Media News Use	.096 (.15)	-.006 (.09)	-.025 (.08)	-.036 (.04)
Internet Media News Use	-.084 (.18)	-.028 (.11)	.044 (.10)	.092 (.05)
Independent Variables - Social media				
Number of Regularly Used Social Media	.046 (.15)	.003 (.04)	-.042 (.04)	.010 (.02)
			.204***	.133**
Social Media for News and Info Use	.182* (.14)	.127 (.09)	(.08)	(.04)
R ² change	.032*	.015	.040*	.056***
Total R ² (adjusted)	.162**	.104**	.026	.098**
N	182	182	182	182

Note: Estimates for the first three columns are standardised coefficients. Unstandardized coefficients are used in the last column. All columns have standard errors in parenthesis.

*p ≤ .05 **p ≤ .001 ***p ≤ .01

6 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

6.1 Results

The first model shows that respondents who had higher levels of education ($\beta = .144, p < .05$) that used social media to look for news and information on Malaysian politics ($\beta = .182, p < .05$) were more likely to be politically active online, and individuals with lower levels of political socialisation and efficacy ($\beta = -.305, p < .05$) were actually more likely to participate in 'slacktivist' practices. Adding the traditional media and internet media variables in the second block actually yielded a result with no statistical significance in terms of its correlation to online political participation which is to be expected. Additionally, the number of social media used did not actually show any statistically significant correlation to online political participation, possibly because Malaysian millennials already spend so much of their time online (We Are Social, 2018). However, the change in total variance between the first block with the control variables, which accounted for 15.2% of the variance ($R^2 = .152, F = 6.309, p < .05$) and the final block that included the social media variables ($R^2 = .204, F = 4.895, p < .05$) was only 5.2%, indicating that this effect is minimal at best. The results suggest that information effects of social media use in systems without a free press (Boulianne, 2017) is only marginally associated with an increase in online political activity.

Results from the second model with the inclusion of the social media variables in the third block show that men with a higher level of education are more likely than women to take part in offline political activities ($\beta = -.145, p < .05$). However, the addition of traditional media, internet media and the social media news variables in the third block did not show any statistically significant correlation with offline political activities. In contrast, the second model shows that a higher education level ($\beta = .179, p < .05$) and lower level of political socialisation ($\beta = -.235, p < .05$) is significantly associated with a higher likelihood of offline political participation. The overall model however, does indicate a marginal significant association

with increased offline political participation ($R^2 = .149$, $F = 3.333$, $p < .05$) even after the addition of social media variables in the third block.

The third model predicting knowledge of politics in Malaysia shows that religion ($\beta = .197$, $p < .05$) has a significant effect through all three blocks, and the third block with the addition of social media for news use ($\beta = .204$, $p < .05$) shows significant association with knowledge on Malaysian political issues. However, the overall model is not statistically significant, possibly indicating weaknesses with the survey questions as previously discussed or that relying on social media as a news and information source is not very reliable or accurate as a whole. The religion factor will be further discussed in the next section.

Finally, the overall results of the fourth model suggest that there is a positive and significant association ($R^2 = .143$, $F = 3.181$, $p < .05$) between social media news and information use ($\beta = .246$, $p < .05$) and intention to vote in the 2018 Malaysian general elections, showing significant improvement from the first block to the third block ($R^2 = .069$, $F = 2.618$, $p < .05$). Education level ($\beta = .169$, $p < .05$) also showed significant association with respondents' intention to vote in the elections. Results from the fourth model indicate that social media offers significant mobilizing effects during elections, but not for general offline political activity, supporting previous studies as outlined in the literature review above.

6.2 Discussion

Overall, the results from the regression models suggest that social media use and particularly consumption of news and information via social media is positively but weakly associated with offline political participation. It is more strongly associated with online political participation and participation in elections, but not significantly associated with any increase in knowledge of Malaysian politics. These findings are in line with the second school of thought on social media's mobilising potential – it exists, but is currently still minimal at best, especially in terms of bridging the gap between online and offline (Baumgartner and Morris,

2010; Boulianne, 2017, 2015; de Zúñiga *et al.*, 2012; Leyva, 2017; Vissers and Stolle, 2014), with results bearing the most similarity to Tamam *et al.*'s (2014) study on Malaysian university students' social media consumption and political participation and Willnat *et al.*'s (2013) analysis of the 2008 Malaysian general elections. Another notable finding from the analysis is that the inclusion of traditional media and internet media did not produce any significant association with any of the dependent variables. This could be due to Malaysians' increasing distrust in the local media (Gong, 2011; Merdeka Center for Opinion Research, 2008; Suffian, 2010), reflected in the number of respondents who never consume news through traditional sources (radio 41.8%, newspapers 43.4%, television 40.7%). In contrast however, 73.6% of respondents read the news through internet media sources, indicating that more studies should be done to analyse the relationship between internet news consumption, particularly in terms of what types of news are consumed which was not included in this analysis, and political knowledge and participation.

In addition, the results indicate that the political socialisation and efficacy variable was actually negatively associated with online and offline political participation and voting intention, providing some support for Taibi *et al.*'s (2017) finding that Malaysian youth are increasingly cynical and disengaged about politics, even though they were likely to have access to political information on Facebook. This is also consistent with the findings from this study that show the negative association between political socialisation and voting intention no longer has any significant effect once the social media news and information use variable is added to the model. This finding is encouraging in that it suggests that social media can push individuals to go beyond slacktivism and take part in real world political events, particularly during elections or political protests, contributing to the overall health of Malaysian civic society. This result also diverges from the reinforcement hypothesis which states that individuals with prior political socialisation and experience would be more likely to use social media for political purposes. However, it should be noted that individual demographic factors do still have a significant association with political participation, in

particular in terms of offline participation. While social media may not necessarily be exacerbating gender and educational differences (Brandtzaeg, 2017), these factors should still be taken into consideration especially in this context where more than half of the respondents (68.1%) indicated at least a four year degree and only 39% of the participants were male. Education also had significant positive associations with online political participation and election participation, indicating that individuals with higher levels of education were more likely to be active and more likely to vote. Following from this finding, future studies should aim to survey larger samples of the Malaysian population, to better assess the relationship between education – especially considering the differences in the various types of schooling systems in the country, from state run public schools to privately run international schools.

Another significant factor in the analysis was in terms of the positive association between religion and knowledge of Malaysian politics. As mentioned in the data analysis, religion and ethnicity were included in the survey to control for political ideology due to the fact that Malaysian politics are very much influenced by these two factors. Postill (2014: 94) noted in his study of 2011 protests in Malaysia that in order to fully understand social protests here, the ‘unfinished business of national belonging for the country’s ethnic minorities’ needs also to be taken into consideration. Barisan Nasional, the previous ruling coalition, is made up of three ethnic based political parties and the current ruling coalition is also largely similar. These two factors are so pervasive it affects everything from economics, healthcare and education, and ethnic based policies combined with religious teachings have been used by the ruling elite for decades to keep the electorate in line (Welsh, 2013). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that religion had a significant association to political knowledge. However, because the ethnic makeup of the respondents to this study was largely (83.5%) Chinese, ethnicity was excluded from the final analysis. Future studies should aim to survey respondents according to the ratio of different ethnicities in the Malaysian population to be able to accurately represent the population as well as test the effects of social media news use when ethnicity is included as a variable.

The second research question in this analysis was designed to examine the informational effects of using social media for news consumption and as an information source on elections, and what effect that might have on political knowledge in the context of the 2018 Malaysian general elections. Boulianne (2017: 11) hypothesized that informational effects would be higher in systems without a free press and suggested more studies be conducted to study information effects within election context. However, she posited that the effects of socially mediated information would be limited because the amount of competing information could potentially cause confusion. The results from this study appear to provide support for this theory, finding that there is no significant effect from socially mediated news and information on political knowledge of the 2018 elections. Another likely reason for this might be Tamam *et al.*'s (2014) finding that most Malaysian youth tend to use social media and the Internet in general for entertainment and educational purposes, rather than for political purposes, lending support for the uses and gratification theory where individuals use social media only for the purposes that they are interested in. Since users are able to personalise their social media feeds to only show content that they want to see, it becomes easy for them to ignore political content that does happen to appear on their screens. Malaysia's government also tended to crackdown on dissenters online, which may discourage typically disaffected youth from engaging in political dialogue on social media for fear of becoming a target of the government's campaigns against its critics. Therefore, typically disengaged people would tend to remain disengaged and lowering the information effects of social media use even in the context of a country without a free press.

Following this line, this study does not carry out a comparison analysis of those who are typically politically active both online and offline, those who are active only online and those who are not active at all. The sample size in this study was too small and the number of respondents who reported engaging in offline activities too low to be able to infer any significant difference between the various groups. As such, future studies should look to compare between the different groups to be able to better isolate the effects of social media

consumption particularly on typically slacktivist and disengaged groups and draw a more in-depth picture of whether social media can truly mobilise people into real world political action.

The most significant effect was between the informational use of social media and voting intention, providing some validation for the many studies that have reported that the opposition parties' use of social media was a significant factor in their slow fight against BN, the former ruling coalition. Since the election has come and gone, more studies can be conducted to examine the differences between individuals that did not vote and those that did to further determine how big a role social media had in mobilising Malaysian youth to the polls. Additionally, Leyva (2017) noted that conducting studies during a period of national political campaigning might amplify social media consumption effects as well as influence attitudes of respondents. Therefore, similarly in this case, further longitudinal studies need to be conducted to better capture the full range of youth experience in both slacktivist and offline political activities and determine how much – if any – of their political activities take place online.

7 CONCLUSION

Malaysia has been inching towards a change in regime ever since the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. This essay has highlighted the ways that the now ousted ruling coalition held onto the reins of power through controlling the media and political debate. With the advent of the Internet, Malaysians were given new access to information as well as platforms through which to access and disseminate information that would otherwise have been unavailable to them. Many studies have noted the multitude of ways that Malaysians both locally and abroad have contributed to a burgeoning civic society. This study contributes to the growing corpus of literature through a social media specific survey and finds that informational effects of social media do have an effect on online political participation as well as election participation, but

less so on offline political activity. However, it is also important to note the context in which the 2018 election took place, and to situate it in the timeline of Malaysian civil action.

The 2008 election came on the heels of two mass protests, one the Bersih rally, which called for clean and fair elections; and the Hindraf protests, staged by a coalition of 30 Hindu NGOs that were calling for equal treatment of the nation's Hindu minority. These two protests widely used social media as a tool to distribute information on the protests and later, damning evidence of police brutality during the rallies, which, according to Liow (2012), provided the momentum for the 2008 general election. In contrast, the 2018 elections took place as the momentum for the Bersih social movement had died down, despite the NGO coalition that organised the rallies remaining highly vocal in its criticism of BN and the election commission. Meanwhile, the top concern of Malaysians at the time was the stagnation of incomes and economic inequality, followed by corruption within the government (Merdeka Center for Opinion Research, 2018). While this survey touched on economic issues when testing for political knowledge in the question regarding the Goods and Services Tax, further studies on the role of social media in the 2018 election should also control for views on the hot button issues mentioned above.

This study is also limited in its sampling strategy, which has resulted in a bias towards more Chinese participants than Malay or Indian respondents, and as this is not reflective of the wider demographic makeup of Malaysia, this study is by no means completely generalizable to the wider population. However, it does survey a section of the Malaysian population that is likely the most tech savvy who have relatively good knowledge of the local political situation, and, as such its findings cannot entirely be dismissed as its findings are largely similar to those from previous studies not just in Malaysia but also from other regions in the world. Further, as technology continues to develop and improve and the way we access the internet and social media continues to change with the new features that are constantly being introduced to the various social media platforms, comparison studies between the past three

Malaysian elections could be carried out to better assess whether or not the changes in technology have changed how people participate in politics, and, by extension, to study whether the nature of political participation itself is migrating onto the virtual world. Another important factor is the differing political landscapes of East Malaysia, where development has been much slower, and Peninsular Malaysia, where most of the wealth and development has been concentrated. Future studies should take this gap into consideration to be able to better contribute to the wider literature and situate the Malaysian context within a more global framework. This study also demonstrated that utilising a more varied and detailed measure of online and social media digital consumption can provide a better understanding of youth political activity in a world where there is increasing distrust of mainstream media products. Finally, despite its limitations, this study has shown the potential of social media to mobilise citizens within a national context where freedom of press and speech is incredibly limited to vote in elections and to provide them with the means to participate in an online public sphere; however, the potential to transcend online boundaries is as yet untapped.

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