

FACEBOOK AND POLITICAL CYNICISM: UNDERGRADUATES' PERCEPTION

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to examine the perception of undergraduates about political cynicism based on the information that they consumed from Facebook. It is common for people to share various types of information on Facebook, which include news, commentary, videos and photographs of politicians and political parties. Such information may form perception among undergraduates about politics and politicians as a whole. Using quantitative approach, a total of 105 questionnaires were distributed to undergraduates across different faculties in UNIMAS. Out of 12 questions about trust adapted from Elderman Trust Barometer, undergraduates had chosen to be neutral in their answers. This indicates that undergraduates are undecided when it comes to their perception about political issues and politicians in the country.

Keywords: Political Cynicism; Trust; Undergraduate; Facebook.

1. INTRODUCTION

Having trust on the ruling government is one of the prerequisites of a country's political legitimacy and stability. There are reasons why citizens do not trust their government. Capella and Jamieson (1997) stated the reason why government and political system cannot be trusted is because the misuse of power for illegitimate private gain by politicians and government officers. This in turn, could spark cynical reaction from citizen towards the government. A number of researchers suggest that negative political campaign tactics and biased media portrayals add fuel to the flame of cynicism among citizens (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Hart, 1994).

In the age of the Internet, social media provides platforms to young adults to engage in political activities. One of the political activities is where citizens interact with others or participate in online communities (Kushin, 2010). This active behaviour of political engagement via social media support the democratisation of knowledge where young adults are involved in activities such as posting and sharing political commentaries on social media. In the case of dissatisfaction or disagreement on political issues, politicians or political parties, social media users have choices either to post sensible expression or to ridicule them. The latter, which young adults are engaging

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in and are making fun of these entities has become part of political culture of online participation. These users share their opinions and express their emotions regarding certain political issues freely.

Another contributing factor for active participation in social media among present undergraduates is the requirement for them to have access to social media for teaching and learning purposes. This requirement has the spillover effects where they (undergraduates) also use social media to stay in touch with friends, keeping up to date with news, sharing their thoughts or opinions with the public and distribute photographs and videos. During these activities, they may be exposed either intentionally or unintentionally to political information. Therefore, it is important to conduct a study on undergraduates from institutions of higher learning, as they are diverse in term of ethnicity, religious and political stance. A survey by Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) (2014) indicated that younger generation aged from 20-24 years old are the highest user of social media in Malaysia followed by those aged 25-29 years old. Therefore, this study is relevant in examining the undergraduates' perception on political issues as they are exposed to political information on social media and might be participating in sharing the news or giving their comments and opinion on the issues.

This paper is aims to examine the consumption of political information among undergraduates. Specifically, the objectives of the paper are two-fold. Firstly, it is to study undergraduates' perception towards political cynicism and secondly to investigate their reaction towards political information.

2. POLITICAL CYNICISM

Scholars referred the concept of political cynicism as a negative perception by the public or voters towards politics, politicians, and the government as a whole. However, different scholars have different interpretation and definition on political cynicism. According to Miller (1974), political cynicism "refers to the degree of negative affect toward the government and is a statement of the belief that the government is not functioning and producing outputs in accord with individual expectations" (p.952). When people's expectation on the government is not met, it can help to spark a negative perception among the people towards the government institution. In addition, Bandura (1986) defined political cynicism as the lack of confidence in the political system only.

While other scholars tend to relate political cynicism on the government alone, Strama (1998) claimed that political cynicism reveals a feeling of distrust by the publics in three different entities namely politics, politicians, and governmental institutions. It is equivalent to what Schyns and Nuus (2007) defined political cynicism as "an individual's attitude, consisting of an opinion of the ineffectiveness and dishonesty of politicians, political institutions and/or the political system as a whole." Cynics have the feeling that governments do not care what people really think. Citizens are cynical when they believe the government to be irresponsible, when they have lost confidence in politics and politicians (Blais, Gidengil, Nadeau & Nevitte, 2002, p. 108). It is obvious that the concept of political cynicism mostly refers to negative perception towards politicians, political institution and political system as a whole. In the case of young voters, many scholars have agreed that they are generally more receptive to negative and strategic framing in the news, regardless of the prevalence of such news, than older voters (Elenbaas & de Vreese, 2008).

The political information exchange between users and those who are involved in politics has a significant impact on Malaysia's political landscape in many ways. Exposure to electoral discussion on social media may develop cynic behavior. A survey by Jamaluddin and Lefevere (2014) showed that exposure to electoral discussion on social media increase political cynicism rather than decrease them. In Jamaluddin and Lefevere's study, respondent was exposed to political discussion on social media with different partisan slant. The result showed that, exposure to electoral discussion on social media increase political cynicism rather than decrease them. In addition, Jamaluddin and Lefevere (2014) also found out that heavy social media users were more likely to be cynical.

Some scholars have looked more precisely at the impact of cynicism among young people. In a study of young voters, Blais et al. (2002) found that those who were cynical were less likely to be interested in politics. In the same study, cynicism, although not directly linked to participation, had an indirect effect, with political interest serving as an intermediary variable. While cynicism is likely to have an effect on political interest, we cannot exclude the possibility that political interest would, in turn, influence cynicism. This could be the reason why politically interested youths have lower levels of cynicism, as noted by Dermody and Hamner Lloyd (2004).

However, this effect might be less clear if political interest increased cynicism in some cases. Those who are more interested might become better informed. If the information a young person receives is more negative than positive, cynicism might increase.

3. METHOD OF STUDY

This study employs a quantitative research design using survey method. Samples were taken from undergraduate students of seven (7) faculties in Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. Through convenient sampling, self-administered questionnaires were distributed to 15 students of each faculty. A total of 105 students answered the survey. The sample consisted of 41.9% male (n=44) and 58.1% female (n=61) respondents, with ages ranging from 20 to 25. Respondents came from a variety of racial backgrounds, in which 50.5 % (n=53) were Sabah and Sarawak Bumiputera, 37.1% (n=39) were Malay, 10.5% (n=11) were Chinese, 1% (n=1) were Indian. Based on locations, 38.1% (n=40) were from East Malaysia, 34.3% (n=36) were from Sarawak, and 27.6% (n=29) were from Sabah. Among the respondents, 36.2% (n=38) reported that they were interested in politics, 59% (n=62) paid attention to political news, 31.4% (n=33) actively sought information about politics. In terms of supporting political parties, 14.3% (n=15) supported the ruling party (BN), while 13.3 % (n=13) supported the opposition parties. The remaining of 72.4% (n=76) were undecided.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In presenting the preliminary results, the researchers will explain the pattern of Facebook usage among the undergraduates in their daily lives to see the relationship between their usage and perception about political issues. Majority (98%) of them have Facebook accounts with more than six years (56%) of experience. Out of 105 undergraduates, 34.3% of them spend less than one hour on Facebook a day while 25.7% spend one to two hours visiting their Facebook account. In addition, another 18.1% of the respondents spend about two to three hours on Facebook daily and the remaining 21.9% spend more than three hours on Facebook every day. However, it is important

to note that even though the time spent on Facebook varies among respondents, the frequency of logging in to the account is almost similar, as most respondents tend to check on the latest notifications and messages every now and then. This concurred with Joinson's (2008) study about gratification of using Facebook among young people. At the same time, this also suggests that undergraduates are dependent on technology (social media) in order to get the latest information or to be connected with their friends.

The period of using Facebook and the amount of time spent on it had also contributed to the undergraduates choice of medium when looking for information about politics. This is shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Preferred Medium to Seek Information about Politics

Media	Frequency	Percent
Social Media	80	76.2
News Portal/Newspaper	58	55.2
Television	52	49.5
Blog	24	22.9
Radio	16	15.2

Notes: n=105

From the above table, majority of the undergraduates (76.2%) will turn to social media (in this case, Facebook) as the preferred medium for seeking information about politics. This explains how Facebook is used as a platform to share information among undergraduates. The nature of Facebook which is faster than any other forms of social media has enabled the dissemination of political information to them. They might not be the ones who are looking for the information, but the information is disseminated and shared to them by their Facebook friends through their Facebook's wall. These preliminary findings are concurrent with a study by Hashim, Mahpuz, Khan, and Daud (2012) on the use of social media among the young urban middle class in Malaysia which showed that there is a potential change in the nation political landscape.

One of the most interesting points in the preliminary findings of this study is on how undergraduates displayed "play safe" attitude in the way they answered some of the questions regarding political engagement. Interestingly, when they were asked on their interest in politics, 63.8% gave a "No" answer while 59% indicated that they do pay attention to political news. On top of this, 68.9% also disclosed that they do not seek political information, but was fed by the notification and information shared by other users on their Facebook's wall. This situation also creates a paradox where on one hand, they showed disinterest in politics while on the other hand, and they admitted on paying attention to political news. Mixed answers given by the respondents showed the lack of maturity when it comes to their views about politics and political issues. Over time, this "play safe" attitude can affect voting behavior among young people in the future. Another possible reason for such result may be because students are presently more interested to actively seek information about entertainment news than political news. For example, study by Freeman (2013) found out that Malaysian young adults follow entertainment news closely, which is consistent with the Uses and Gratification Theory where people actively look for information to satisfy their needs and desires.

In order to examine the perception of undergraduates on political cynicism, they were-also asked on their political affiliation or preferences of political parties. It was found that 72.4% of the respondents were undecided on which political party they wanted to support. The majority of them were neither supporter of Barisan Nasional or opposition party. Interestingly, a small number of them (14.3%) claimed that they are supporters of Barisan Nasional, while 13.3% choose to support opposition party. One of the possible reasons on why the students may be afraid to choose which political party they belong to is may be because of their awareness on the prevailing Universities and University Colleges Act (AUKU 1971) which prevent students from joining any political party when they are still studying.

The concept of political cynicism is more than just a dislike or distrust of politicians. It can include lack of trust towards the government. Previous study by Edelman Trust Barometer found that the level of political cynicism among Malaysian is increasing. In this study, 12 sets of questions were asked to gauge the respondents' perception of political cynicism.

Table 2: Political Cynicism in General

		Frequency	Percent (%)
1. Politicians are out of touch with the real world.	Agree	23	21.9
	Neither	50	47.6
	Disagree	32	30.5
2. Politicians are in touch with the real world and care about people interests.	Agree	43	40.9
	Neither	43	41.0
	Disagree	19	18.1
3. Trust Malaysian government.	Agree	20	19.1
	Neither	42	40.0
	Disagree	43	40.9
4. Do not trust Malaysian government.	Agree	41	39
	Neither	41	39.0
	Disagree	23	21.9
5. Interested in people's votes and not their opinions.	Agree	54	51.4
	Neither	34	32.4
	Disagree	17	16.2
6. Interested in people opinion	Agree	18	17.1
	Neither	51	48.6
	Disagree	36	34.3
7. Satisfied with the way government works in the country.	Agree	14	13.3
	Neither	39	37.1
	Disagree	52	49.5
8. Not satisfied with the way government work in the country.	Agree	47	44.7
	Neither	42	40.0
	Disagree	16	15.3
9. Politician main concern is to be elected as representative.	Agree	54	51.4
	Neither	39	37.1
	Disagree	12	11.4
10. Politician main concern is to solve the city's problem.	Agree	20	19
	Neither	56	53.3
	Disagree	29	27.6

Table 2: Political Cynicism in General (cont.)

		Frequency	Percent (%)
11. Lying about their manifesto.	Agree	37	35.2
	Neither	56	53.3
	Disagree	12	11.4
12. Telling the truth about their goal.	Agree	15	14.3
	Neither	56	53.3
	Disagree	34	32.4

From Table 2 above, the respondents have shown a consistent “play safe” approach in answering these 12 questions. These can be concluded from their “Neither” answers for questions 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 10, 11 and 12. Most of the questions are straight forward asking for their opinions regarding various statements on political cynicism using a 3-likert scale answers. From their responses, it can be construed that the undergraduates do not demonstrate political maturity to give their opinion on the statements. On the other hand, when respondents were asked about negative statement, they answered “Agree” to show their agreement to the statement as stated in questions 5, 8 and 9. Nevertheless, question 7 that asked them whether they are satisfied with the way government works in the country, their answer was “Disagree.” This indicates the immaturity of undergraduates to analyze political issues even though they do access to and are exposed to political information on the Facebook.

5. CONCLUSION

This article is aimed to contribute better understanding on how social media, in this case Facebook, may shape the perception among undergraduates on political issues in our country. The use of Facebook is also examined to investigate if the information consumed and shared in this platform may help to increase political cynicism among undergraduates.

A study by Valenzuela, Arriagada and Scherman (2012) on Facebook use and protest behaviour among youth aged 18-29 years old in Chile demonstrated that having a Facebook account and using it frequently were positively and significantly related to participation in protests. This strongly suggests that Facebook has a significant influence for political change in developing democracies. This also concur with findings from Shah, Rojas, and Cho (2009) where informational and social interactive uses of media can lead to participatory behaviors and at the same time entertainment uses can drive people away from collective action. In other study by Asur and Huberman (2010), social media has been used to forecast future outcomes of identifying box office movies based on the responses from Twitter. This indicates how powerful social media is and its impact on society. At the rate of how information is consumed and shared among young people on social media, similar situation could happen in our society and eventually change the political landscape in our country.

Young generation are always regarded as the future leaders of this country. Their interest and involvement in the political arena should be cultivated so that they will be prepared to lead the country when the time comes. However, the existence of communication technology including social media may pose a challenge to groom these future leaders as they are being bombarded with information in which the authenticity of the sources may be questionable. As a result, it may also increases the distrust and dislike of younger people towards politicians and the government.

The lackadaisical attitude among young people on political issues may also contribute to voting behaviour that can be detrimental to the political stability in the country. The political information that they access from the social media somehow influences the way their perceived politicians and government as a whole. This will increase the level of political cynicism among younger generation which might not be healthy to the political landscape in this country.

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