

The Influence of Sources of Information in Voting Decision Making: A Case Study of Cybercity Apartment Residents, Kota Kinabalu Sabah

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the influence of sources of information on voting decision-making among the residents of Cybercity apartments in Kota Kinabalu. In today's digital age, individuals have access to a plethora of information sources that can potentially shape their perceptions and decision-making processes, particularly in the context of voting decisions. This research seeks to identify the various sources of information on social media (economic performance, political experts, policy experts, community, and religious beliefs) that residents rely on when making decisions about voting decision making.

Through surveys and data analysis, this study uncovered the specific roles that different sources of information play in the voting decisions of *Cybercity* apartment residents. Additionally, this research explores the extent to which residents trust and prioritise certain sources of information on social media and how this ultimately influences their vote. By gaining a better understanding of the impact of sources of information on social media on voting decisions within this unique residential community, this study contributes valuable insights into voter decision-making dynamics in contemporary Society.

INTRODUCTION

In democratic societies, voters have an important right to determine political leaders and government direction by casting their ballots. However, they rely on a variety of sources of information for opinions that lead to voting decisions (Kulachai et al., 2023). These sources of information range from economic performance, experts' views, community or religiosity. These sources of information are available on social media. The source of information through social

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media exposure can affect people's attitudes, knowledge, and perception towards political candidates and issues (Prior, 2007; Iyengar & Kinder, 2010, as cited in Kulachai et al., 2023). The effect of these sources of information on social media should not be underestimated. These sources of information on social media can profoundly affect perceptions, political preferences, and voting decisions. In Malaysia, Malaysian voters have access to many sources of information on social media that can influence their voting decisions and choice of candidates. These sources of information on social media are varied and can dramatically influence opinions about candidates, parties or issues, and can impact how voters decide. The sources of information provided on social media would greatly influence voting decision-making among Malaysians. The sources of information provided to Malaysians through social media are important in informing people about political affairs and have a big impact on voters (Hassan et al., 2021).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The research highlighted that sources of information on social media influenced a staggering 95% of voters during the Malaysia General Election, such as during the 15th General Election (Metro, 2022). Sources of information on social media have also influenced the political views and voting decision-making of Malaysians, especially first-time voters, such as during the Malaysia General Election (GE) 14th in 2018 with their election campaign coverage and facilitating interaction between political candidates and other voters (Hamedan et al., 2019; Tan, 2022). However, most of the literature covered only social media mediums that actually influence election outcomes (Kulacha et al., 2023), yet the social media itself might not be able to impact the voting decision of people directly; instead, the source of information on social media, such as the economic performance of the nation, expert opinions, discussion among people, and religious beliefs. This highlights a gap in current research, as it underscores the need to explore and understand these sources of information more comprehensively. Therefore, this research aims to identify the sources of information on social media that mostly influence the voters' decision-making in the Malaysian election. In light of these findings, this research, conducted in the CyberCity Apartment residential area, aims to identify the sources of information on social media that most significantly influence voters' decisions in Malaysian elections.

THE OBJECTIVE OF THE RESEARCH

The objective of this research is to:

- i. To find out the sources of information on social media the voters refer to for voting decisions in the Malaysian Elections
- ii. To identify the sources of information on social media that mostly influence the voters' voting decisions in the Malaysian election.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media has a powerful impact as a medium/platform for influencing voters on voting decisions by serving as the source of information (Deddy, 2023). A Ghana study revealed a positive relationship between voters' decisions and social media as the source likely to influence voters' voting decisions (Zakarl, 2023). Akilarasan (2024) states that social media influences voters' voting decisions by shaping their political attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours via algorithms, content, and online communities. It amplifies young voters' political engagement by providing instant information, more views and multiple accesses to the political actors. This shows the role of social media in its influence on voting behaviour.

However, some researchers also believe input from experts from different fields that they share from many mediums, including social media, is the source of information that influences voters' decision-making. For instance, some researchers believe voters are heavily influenced by economic experts who strategically release forecasts (Davide et al., 2019). According to Katja and Pelsmaekers (2016), economists like Stiglitz, Krugman, and Piketty significantly influence public opinion and voting decisions, as demonstrated during the Greek referendum. Based on their expertise, their sought-after views and endorsements shape the narrative and impact voters' perception of issues, extending their influence beyond their specialised fields. However, researchers Johnston and Ballard (2014) indicate that the effect of economic expert opinion varies depending on the nature of the economic issues at hand.

Other than economic, political and policy experts influence voting decisions by providing insights and guidance to align citizens with preferred political parties and candidates (Jose et al., 2024). Ryan (2010) stated that individuals who participate in discussions with political experts often align their voting choices with those of more informed voters, even if they do not have extensive political knowledge. This phenomenon suggests that exposure to expert opinions can enhance understanding and influence decision-making in the voting process.

Policy experts are essential to a well-functioning democracy as they influence voting decisions by providing insights into complex policies, fact-checking claims, and refuting misinformation. They educate the public, fill knowledge gaps, and enhance the quality of public debate, ultimately empowering voters to make informed decisions at the polls. By engaging with policymakers and shaping discussions around critical issues, these experts help ensure that the electorate is equipped with accurate information, which fosters informed voting and contributes to a healthier democratic process (Gibbons, 2021).

According to other researchers, religious experts often hold a position of authority and legitimacy in the eyes of the public. Their opinions can be perceived as credible and trustworthy, which can significantly influence voters' decisions. In addition, voters' degree of religiosity can make them more sensitive to religious content in political campaigns and advertising. This sensitivity can lead to a higher probability of choosing a particular party at the time of voting (Askriet al., 2015).

However, Davide and Coralina (2018) stated in their study that discussions with non-like-minded citizens, including friends and neighbours, can positively influence voter turnout. Evidently, the 2016 Italian constitutional referendum suggests that frequent interactions with individuals with differing opinions can boost political participation. This phenomenon is largely due to the enhanced political learning that occurs within diverse social networks. When individuals engage with a variety of perspectives, they are exposed to different viewpoints and arguments, which can deepen their understanding of complex issues (Davide & Carolina, 2018). According to Pattie and Johnson (2000), an individual is more inclined to change their voting preferences if the people they discuss political issues with, particularly family members, friends or neighbours. This supports that change, especially in voting. This phenomenon shows how having political conversations with people in one's immediate social circle can affect one's decisions. It suggests that these interactions are a valuable source of information for voters.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

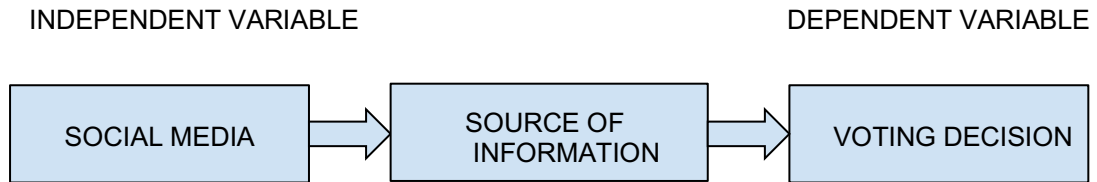


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Based on the literature review, most of the research identifies several sources of information on social media. The sources of information encompass economic experts, political experts, policy experts, community, and religious specialists. Collectively, these sources of information have an effect as the intervening variable, which is the information that is used to make voting choices. Each of these elements offers voters unique points of view and knowledge that influence their voting decisions, illustrating the complex nature of the decision-making process in elections. Economic analysts regard economic experts as a crucial source of information that mirrors the broader economic landscape and policies. Their insights and analyses can play a pivotal role in shaping voter decisions. However, the opinions and insights of experts or professionals in related sectors are included in the experts' assessment and may influence voter impressions. Furthermore, the community is most often a formal entity whose recommendations or endorsements have an impact on informing voters. Finally, religious experts emphasise the influence of spiritual or faith-based factors on voting decisions. Each of these independent variables is shown by arrows that point towards the dependent variable, proving their impact on the voters' information pool when making their voting decision.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Respondent and Research Design

This study employs a cross-sectional research design utilising quantitative methodology. Data is collected through the distribution of questionnaires using *g-form*. The population of this study is residents of the Cybercity Apartments in Kota Kinabalu. This study particularly targets residents who have voting experience, with a sample size of 367 respondents. Cybercity Apartments residents are selected due to diverse socioeconomic background.

Instrumentation

The aim of this study is to identify the sources of information on social media that voters consider when voting and which of these sources of information on social media mostly influence their voting decision-making. In order to gather feedback, a dual-language questionnaire (in English and Malay) was created and consisted of three sections.

Part A collects demographic information, including age, education, occupation, sector of employment, and district. Part B focuses on the sources of information on social media the voters refer to when making their voting choices, allowing respondents to specify their most relied-upon sources of information on social media. Part C identifies the sources of information in social media that significantly influence voters' decision-making during every General election in Malaysia. To analyse the data collected, Parts B and C employ a primary evaluation method that allows

respondents to choose from various answer options, helping to identify trends and the factors shaping voters' decisions.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 29. This research analysed numerical scale data through descriptive methods. The descriptive analysis includes frequencies, means and percentages. Another important term is 'Voting Decision', which pertains to how individuals make choices regarding political candidates, policies, or issues during an election. It involves the evaluation of information obtained from diverse sources to arrive at a decision that aligns with an individual's preferences or beliefs (Laruelle & Valenciano, 2005; Hanmer & Traugott, 2004).

FINDINGS

Sources of Information on Social Media Reference for Voting Decision

Table 1. Sources of information on social media reference for voting decision

Item	N	%
1. Sources used as a tool to refer to information		
Facebook	87	23.7
Tiktok	19	5.2
Online News Portal	23	6.3
Other social media	238	64.8
2. Sources of information on social media regularly refer		
Expert's View	237	64.6
Community	75	20.4
Other	55	15.0
3. Trusted sources of information on social media for making voting decisions during the Malaysian Election		
Yes	291	79.3
No	76	20.7
4. Diverse sources of information on social media influence voter understanding of political issues and candidates and ultimately shape the voters' voting decisions		
Yes	328	89.4
No	39	10.6
5. Actively seeking diverse sources of information on social media, including experts with differing political perspectives, helps in making informed voting decisions.		
Yes	234	63.8
No	133	36.2

N = 367
Note: Facebook and Tiktok are one category with Social media

Table 1 outlines the sources of information on social media that Malaysian voters utilise and trust when making voting decisions. Among the respondents, 64.4% indicated they depend on other social media as a medium/platform to access the source of information. Within this category,

Facebook is another widely used platform at 23.7%, followed by TikTok at 5.2%. Online news portals represent 6.3%. As for the sources of information on social media, 64.6% of respondents mentioned their community as a key source of information. Expert opinions are considered by 15.0% of participants, and 20.4% turn to various other sources. Regarding trust, 79.3% of survey participants believe that social media posts assist them in making informed voting choices, while 20.7% do not share this belief, indicating a significant level of trust in social media as a reliable source of news. Furthermore, over 90% feel that different news outlets influence public perceptions of political issues and candidates, which subsequently impacts their voting decisions, while 10.6% disagree. Additionally, 63.8% believe that various information sources on social media shape voters' understanding of political issues and candidates, whereas 36.2% disagree.

Sources of Information on Social Media that Mostly Influence Voters' Voting Decision

Table 2. Sources of information on social media that mostly influence voters' voting decision

Questions	Strongly disagree	disagree	Strongly Agree	Agree	Mean
1. Social media platforms serve as sources of information ranging from economic performance, religious beliefs, and expert analyses to discussions with friends and neighbours.	4	28	81	254	3.12
2. social media platforms serve as the main sources of information for disseminating information that influences voting decisions during an election.	5	50	96	216	3.10
3. Opinions provided by economic experts are one of the important sources of information on social media for me when choosing a candidate during an election.	26	101	78	162	2.80
4. Opinions provided by political experts are one of the important sources of information on social media for me when choosing a candidate during an election.	7	59	77	224	3.01
5. Opinions provided by policy experts are one of the important sources of information on social media for me when choosing a candidate during an election.	30	90	87	160	2.83
6. Opinion provided by religious experts is one of the important sources of information on social media for me to choose a candidate during an election	50	63	78	176	2.77
N = 367					

Table 2 shows a significant number of respondents, with a mean score of 3.12, believe that social media provides diverse information, including topics like economic performance and religious beliefs, with 335 agreeing and only 32 disagreeing. Additionally, social media is seen as a primary influence on voting decisions, scoring a mean of 3.10, where 312 respondents agree and 55 disagree.

Among the various sources of information on social media, opinions from economic experts are considered important by many respondents, achieving a mean score of 2.80. However, this source has mixed reactions, with 240 respondents agreeing and 127 strongly disagreeing. In contrast, political experts' opinions hold a more significant influence, as indicated by a mean score of 3.01. Here, 301 respondents agree with the value of political expert insights, while only 66 disagree, reflecting a strong trust in their assessments.

Policy experts' opinions scored slightly higher at 2.83, showing moderate importance. Lastly, opinions from religious experts received a lower mean score of 2.77, suggesting they are less influential overall; 50 respondents strongly disagreed with their importance, while 78 strongly agreed.

DISCUSSION

Sources of information on Social Media voters refer to voting decisions in Malaysia's Election

This research aimed to identify the key sources of information on social media that significantly influence voters' decisions during elections. The findings reveal that voters rely on various sources of information on social media. i.e. Online News Portals, Expert Opinions, and Community insights. Notably, 64.0% (Table 1) of respondents utilise social media to obtain election-related information, highlighting a critical trend in the contemporary electoral landscape, particularly in Malaysia. Social networking platforms are increasingly pivotal in shaping voter preferences and decisions. Supporting this observation, prior research by Hassim et al. (2020) underscores the influential power of social media, emphasising its substantial impact on Malaysian voting behaviour. This suggests that social media not only serves as a primary source of information but also acts as a motivator for engaging with political content. In addition to social media, 64.6% (Table 1) of respondents expressed a strong appreciation for expert opinions, indicating a clear desire for informed perspectives. This distribution illustrates that Malaysian voters adopt a multifaceted approach to information gathering, effectively blending both digital and traditional sources. This highlights a shift in information dissemination and consumption in the digital age, where Malaysian voters increasingly rely on sources of information on social media, experts' views and insights for election-related information. This trend reflects a global phenomenon, indicating that digital platforms significantly shape political discourse and influence electoral outcomes. In conclusion, the diverse sources of information on social media reveal a complex landscape of trust and reliance that guides voter decision-making in today's electoral environment.

Sources of Information on social media that mostly Influence the voters' voting decision in the Malaysian Election

In this research, social media, with a mean score of 3.12 (Table 2), serves as a platform for sources of information ranging from economic performance, religious beliefs, and expert analyses to discussions with friends and neighbours. Social media, with a mean score of 3.10 (Table 2), serve as the main sources of information for disseminating information that influences voting decisions during an election.

The source of information on social media that mostly referred to voting decision-making (Table 2) placed the opinion of political experts first with mean score of 3.01, followed by the

opinion of policy experts with a mean of 2.83 seconds, then third, the opinion of economic experts with mean score 2.80 and fourth is the opinion of religious experts with the mean score of 2.77.

The finding states that the opinion of political experts is mostly referred to. This is supported by Miguel (2023), who stated that engaging in political discussions with like-minded individuals can lead to shifts in voting choices, primarily facilitated by exchanging new information. Such interactions highlight the pivotal role that community discussions play in informing voter perspectives and decisions.

The finding also aligns with Rita et al. (2023), as it emphasises the value of social media as a dynamic platform for political discourse. The interactivity of these sites enables users to engage in discussions, fostering an environment where ideas can be exchanged and opinions can be swayed. Similarly, research by Stieglitz and Xuan (2012) illustrates how user-generated content and conversations on social media can effectively persuade individuals to modify their voting behaviours.

Social media is indeed an arena that constantly changes, and people can obtain a variety of opinions and engage in discussions on candidates or politics in real-time. That change shows that respondents have switched from the passive consumption of media content identified in traditional media to an active contribution mode on the new media (Lamis et al., 2023). The potential to read, comment and discuss political content on social media can provide the voters with the necessary information and create a community with its own point of view on elections.

Contrary to existing literature that posits social media as the primary driver of voting behaviour, this research's findings suggest that the content shared on these platforms truly influences voter decisions rather than the medium itself. This distinction offers a fresh perspective in light of Waiphot and Kulachai's (2023) assertion that the medium of communication impacts electoral outcomes. The research underscores the importance of content and context within social media interactions as critical factors in shaping electoral choices. Overall, this discussion underscores the interplay between community interactions and social media in influencing voter decisions. It highlights a nuanced understanding of the sources of information that inform voters, illustrating how both traditional and digital platforms contribute to the political engagement landscape in contemporary elections. This research also fills the gap of current research on which sources were heavily relied on by the voters during the voting.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the sources of information on social media influencing voting decisions among residents of Cyber City Apartments in Kota Kinabalu during the Malaysian Election. The primary objective was to identify which sources of information on social media that voters rely on and which significantly impact their decisions. The findings revealed that voters predominantly refer to social media as a platform to access expert opinions and community discussions. Social media is emerging as the most influential source of information. The political implications of these findings are substantial, as understanding trusted information sources allows political parties, policymakers, and election agencies to effectively allocate resources, craft targeted messages, and enhance voter engagement in the political process. However, the study also faced several limitations, including a biased sample population, linguistic imbalances in the questionnaire, the omission of certain questions, and a lack of prior research on the specific demographic subset examined. These flaws highlight the need for further research to refine methodologies and gain deeper insights into voter behaviour in this context.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits or commercial or financial conflicts and declare the absence of conflicting interests with the funders.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Siti Fatimah Mapelendo and Sakurah Jonytim carried out the research and wrote the article. Zuraidah binti Zaaba supervised the research, revised, formatted and approved the research and the article submission. Haijon Gunggut assisted in reviewing the research focus, reviewing and revising the questionnaire and reviewing any amendments to the article.

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