Weaponised Political Narratives and Malaysian Youths: The Influence of Online News Media on Political Inclinations

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Abstract

This study explores the weaponisation of political narratives disseminated through online news media and its influence on Malaysian youth. With the increasing use of digital platforms for political content, particularly during elections, it is crucial to understand the contributing factors influencing youth's political inclinations. A qualitative approach was employed, utilising focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. Participants included political actors, journalists, and a diverse sample of Malaysian youth. Data were analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns and themes, including the significant roles of simplified language, multimedia content, and influencer collaborations in making political narratives more engaging and persuasive. The study integrates the theories of agenda-setting, framing, and priming as its conceptual framework, illustrating their interplay in influencing youth perceptions. Results reveal that political narratives framed through visually engaging and emotionally resonant content as shaping their political attitudes political attitudes. Simplified-language multimedia content and influencer collaborations significantly shape political narratives, making them more engaging and influential for youth. The findings contribute to the scholarship of agenda-setting, framing, and priming theories, demonstrating their relevance in the digital age. This research also highlights the critical role of media narratives in shaping the political inclinations of Malaysian youth.

Keywords: *Political narratives; Online news media; Framing; Priming; Agenda-setting; Malaysian youth.*

1.0 Introduction

Social media is a powerful tool for information dissemination, be it true or false [1,2]. Within the political scene, politicians have taken advantage of the affordances of social media, particularly in its mass and speedy dissemination of information. Governments and political actors are aware of the influence mass media has in moulding the minds of their people and have used their propaganda, henceforth referenced as political strategies, constantly via these outlets [3] to achieve their agendas. These strategies, which are implemented through political narratives as termed by Garret [4], are well-organised stories disseminated via different channels like speeches and social media to propagate particular ideologies. These political narratives are not just made for a certain reason but are strategic in their distribution because they affect the political awareness of the people [5]. This research aims to analyse how political strategies implemented via online news platforms influence the political inclination of youth in Malaysia. It identifies online news as news originating from online news portals, regardless of whether it is accessed directly via the portals' websites or indirectly through social media platforms that disseminate their content.

For the purpose of this study, weaponised political narratives refer to strategically constructed political messages disseminated to advance particular political interests and shape audience perceptions. Political inclination refers to the political attitudes, preferences and orientations expressed by participants in relation to political issues and actors.The evolution of political media in Malaysia is deeply intertwined with the nation's democratic journey. Historically, Malaysia's mainstream media were heavily influenced by political parties, with ownership structures tied closely to ruling coalitions, particularly Barisan Nasional (BN), which dominated Malaysian politics for over six decades. This

media landscape ensured that the narratives disseminated through print and broadcast media were largely aligned with the ruling party's agenda [6]. Prior to the digitalisation of the media landscape in Malaysia, the ruling party dominated mainstream narratives through traditional platforms such as print and broadcast media. With digitalisation taking place in the nation, alternative media, including independent newspapers and online platforms, began to challenge the mainstream narrative. Malaysiakini, one of the first online news portals, emerged as a critical voice providing unfiltered coverage of opposition parties and political scandals [7]. Over the years, Malaysiakini, as an online news platform and other digital platforms, including social media, gained preference for providing alternative perspectives on issues brought about by mainstream media. The 2008 general election marked a turning point in Malaysian political media history. Dubbed the "Internet election," this period saw opposition parties leveraging blogs, independent news platforms, and social media to bypass traditional media gatekeepers [8]. This strategy resonated with younger, tech-savvy voters who sought alternative narratives, leading to significant electoral gains for the opposition [9]. Since then, the role of digital media has only intensified, with subsequent elections seeing increased reliance on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp for political messaging and voter selection.

2.0 Problem Statement

Political campaigns involve political parties that are run by political actors. Political actors comprise a multifaceted group of individuals who wield varying degrees of authority and influence within a political system, including elected representatives, media professionals, party strategists, and senior political appointees such as ministers [10]. These actors thus use sophisticated approaches such as micro-targeting and algorithmic repetition to build and spread selected narratives that drive public and political action [11]. The practice includes Facebook's News Feed algorithm during the 2016 American presidential election, in which the filter allowed the circulation of mainly polarising, misleading political content that introduced bias toward voters, which then led to the creation of echo chambers [4]. Likewise, the Chinese government takes advantage of the platform, TikTok, to market state-regulated content with negative sentiments toward the opposition while positive aspects of the existing regime are promoted [12]. Furthermore, the far-right wing actors in the European community have also benefited from the features of YouTube in promoting nationalism and populism to expand their influence and organise their activities [13]. The mass media, especially the news, is considered to be the most appropriate channel for conveying political information. The subject matter involved in news production and distribution processes must be well understood for an effective control of news content [14].Professionally produced videos, appropriate audio, and well-developed visual content may enhance audience engagement and interest in political messages. In their findings, Vedula et al [15] highlighted the fact that people tend to believe exactly what they read and thus, they prefer credible and appealing content. This shows the need for the technical aspect of news with political connotations to enhance the success of the manipulated or biased messages. Moreover, the fact that access to social media content heavily relies on algorithms also introduces an extra problematic layer. As a result, algorithms promote specific content that will attract more of the audience's attention and time, which only deepens the division of opinions and the spread of misleading information and misinformation[16]. This phenomenon not only distorts public discourse but also deepens societal divisions by isolating individuals within ideological bubbles.

Meanwhile, paid online news content is defined as sponsored or promoted journalistic material that is strategically designed to influence public perception through financial investment in digital media platforms. Such content can further be situated within given political agendas, employ focused distribution approaches in order to influence public perceptions, support given political views, and increase the prominence of specific political persons or initiatives [17]. Sleek promotion strategies go beyond getting people involved; they influence attitudes and help frame the public agenda for the agenda of certain groups [18]. These promotions thereby encode and disseminate some ideas and epistemologies and make the populace adopt these as the truth, hence exercising soft power or a soft control over societies in democracies [19].

Furthermore, algorithms which are embedded within social media platforms filter what people are offered to view and prioritise content that can generate audience engagement through shares, likes or comments, contributing to the creation of echo chambers [16]. It is mentioned that algorithms increase

echo chambers in society since they act as the silent gatekeeper because they hinder individuals from getting information that could change one's perception of a certain matter [20]. The formation of echo chambers in society is not a good prospect for any nation. Political actors can integrate designed narratives into algorithmically managed informational environments to maintain doctrinal hegemony. This raises serious issues in the context of Malaysia, as youth obtain their news through social media platforms [21].

The total dependent population, as defined by DOSM [22], was 22.2% in 2024 and 22.7% in 2023, which indicates a demographic shift that has contributed to the increased recognition of young voters in the political system of Malaysia. Although the exact numbers of 15 to 30-year-olds have not been pinpointed here, this nevertheless indicates that young voters constitute an increasingly important demographic in the country. These sources offer relevant information to the respondents as their youth political participation levels increase in the EU countries. With digital platforms dominating modern political discourse, it is imperative to examine how social media environments mediate their exposure to political narratives, shaping their perceptions, attitudes, and voting behaviours.

Youth's reliance on social media for news and information exposes them to manipulative practices, potentially influencing their political inclinations in ways that undermine informed decision-making and democratic engagement [23]. Although previous studies have looked at the political messages that are relayed during traditional and social media communication and the extent of youth engagement, few studies have examined the manner in which online news content is structured and presented through multimedia and technical features that may influence the political perceptions of the youth. This highlights the limited understanding of how visuals and content are framed by stories and algorithms, especially in the context of Malaysia. In addition, numerous studies have examined the role of social media algorithms in shaping political discourse, yet there is limited research on their impact on youth exposure to online news and paid political content. Nevertheless, young adults are a vital demographic for news organisations to pay attention to since they are known for highly changeable preferences in many aspects of their lives [21]. Existing literature primarily focuses on algorithmic radicalisation and ideological reinforcement in Western democracies [8], but little is known about how algorithmic biases in content ranking and personalised feeds affect political exposure among Malaysian youth. Previous studies on youth political engagement have largely focused on Western democracies, with less research on the Global South. This research aims to address the gap from a Malaysian perspective. Accordingly, the study contributes empirical insights by examining the technical presentation of political content and paid online news coverage through the perspectives of youth, political actors and media experts within the Malaysian context. It aims to answer the following questions:

(1) How does the technical approach of political content on online news influence the political inclination of youth in Malaysia?

(2) How does paid online news coverage of political content influence the political inclination of youth in Malaysia?

3.0 Literature Review

3.1 The Malaysian Political Landscape

Malaysia is a federal representative democratic constitutional monarchy, with the Yang di-Pertuan Agong as the head of state and a prime minister heading the government [24]. The country follows a parliamentary system of governance with three arms: the legislature (parliament), the judiciary, and the executive [25]. Since independence, Malaysia's political trajectory has been shaped by dominant coalitions such as Barisan Nasional (BN), which maintained an unbroken rule for six decades until 2018 [26]. The emergence of digital media as a cornerstone of political communication has transformed Malaysia's electoral strategies. During the pivotal 2008 elections, opposition parties effectively leveraged online platforms to challenge mainstream media bias, capturing the attention of younger voters who increasingly trusted digital sources over traditional outlets [8]. This shift underscores the growing reliance on social media as a platform for political discourse and the necessity of addressing challenges such as fake news, echo chambers, and paid content.

Paid political content has emerged as a significant factor in influencing voter behaviour. Studies reveal that well-financed campaigns utilising paid content often outperform traditional methods in reaching and persuading youth demographics. By employing emotionally resonant messaging and visual storytelling, political actors can foster deeper connections with young voters, subtly guiding their political inclinations [16, 27]. These developments illustrate the pivotal role of paid media in shaping political narratives, highlighting the need for critical engagement and media literacy among Malaysian youth [8].

3.2 Social Media's Role in Global Politics

The role of social media in shaping political landscapes is not unique to Malaysia. Globally, platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have been instrumental in mobilising social movements, influencing elections, and shaping public discourse. During the Arab Spring uprisings (2010–2012), digital platforms were utilised to organise protests, disseminate real-time information, and bypass state-controlled media [28]. Similarly, in the United States, social media played a crucial role in the 2016 presidential election [1], where targeted political advertisements, algorithm-driven echo chambers, and the spread of misinformation significantly influenced voter perceptions and electoral outcomes spread of and the influenced voter perceptions and behaviour [29]. Beyond democratic states, social media has also been strategically co-opted for state-sponsored propaganda and digital authoritarianism. In the Philippines, coordinated disinformation campaigns through "click armies" and paid trolls have been used to sway public sentiment, control political narratives, and silence dissent [27]. Similarly, in India, WhatsApp have been weaponised to spread fake news and communal hate, with significant consequences for electoral outcomes and social harmony [30]. These instances highlight how social media is not merely a neutral platform but a contested space where political actors actively shape discourse to consolidate power and influence public perception [2].

The algorithmic structure of social media platforms further intensifies their influence on political communication. However, social media, unlike traditional media, relies on an engagement-based system that feeds its users more content that makes them feel some of the most intense emotions, which are positive or negative and outrageous stories [17]. Therefore, users are primed to receive more tightly defined, path-dependent positions congruent with their own political ideology, thus strengthening systematic biases and ideological shifts [19]. It has been argued that social media's capacity to re-transmit content helps worsen political polarisation in various democracies, with election campaigns and political debates influenced more by trends than policies [31]. Similarly, political actors and other organised groups have used social media to shape public opinion. Russia and China have been associated with disinformation campaigns, cyber propaganda, and the use of bots to disseminate messages intended to influence public opinion and political discourse in other countries. These tactics, which have been termed computational propaganda, have made use of bots, deepfakes, and persuasive content circulation to give the impression of natural populism and large support for an election [32]. The increasing use of such tools to disseminate false information during political campaigns has prompted calls for stronger policies, public awareness, and fact-checking strategies to support informed electoral participation.

Malaysia's experience with social media aligns with these global trends but is further shaped by its unique socio-political dynamics, particularly its multi-ethnic electorate, evolving media regulations, and the government's role in digital surveillance and information control. The rise of alternative digital media platforms, state-influenced narratives, and politically aligned influencers has contributed to an increasingly polarised digital landscape, where political discourse is shaped by a mix of grassroots mobilisation and elite-driven manipulation [33]. As this study explores, the weaponisation of political narratives through online platforms in Malaysia reflects both local factors and broader global patterns, underscoring the complex interplay between digital freedoms, media regulation, and political influence in the digital age.

3.3 Social Media and Youth in Malaysia

Social media platforms have become pivotal in shaping modern political communication, serving as both a democratizing force and a mechanism for strategic influence. Globally, these platforms have

disrupted traditional paradigms of political influence, directly affected electoral outcomes and reshaped public opinion [1, 2]. However, their widespread adoption has also facilitated disinformation campaigns, political propaganda, and targeted digital persuasion techniques. Scholars emphasise the manipulation of algorithm-driven content curation, enabling political actors to amplify specific narratives while suppressing dissenting voices, ultimately shaping public discourse in favour of dominant political interests [34]. In Malaysia, social media's growing influence has been both a catalyst for political engagement and a source of political disillusionment among youth. While digital platforms offer greater accessibility to political discourse, they have also contributed to increasing scepticism toward traditional institutions and exposure to misleading political content [36].

Studies indicate that despite the availability of online spaces for civic engagement, Malaysian youth participation in political activities remains inconsistent, mirroring global trends of declining political involvement among younger demographics. This problem is aggravated by the interference of platforms that control their content and their way of shaping the young generation's perception of political processes: narratives and slogans, persuasive messaging, and algorithms [37]. Malaysian youth believe that narratives presented in the news are important towards the shaping society [21]. The use of social media has become a powerful tool for political communication among youth in Malaysia, enabling the dissemination of political narratives. Political players, advertising masters and media groups use personalised content, influencer marketing and relevant information to target the youth. This is especially the case with short-form videos, memes as a tool of political campaigning, and the popularity of narratives based on emotions appealing to the younger generation, which helps to spread political discourse further than traditional methods do [38]. Such approaches make use of echo chambers, so algorithmically it makes sure people stick to their political beliefs, and all goes into the trash bin the opposing view.

In addition, the boundaries between citizen participation and political persuasion may become blurred. Political campaigns may use native advertising, sponsored influencer posts and affiliated web advertising, which can obscure the political intent behind a message [17]. This may make it difficult for some youth users to distinguish genuine engagement from political persuasion, particularly when they have limited awareness of how political content is produced and disseminated.

Additionally, the emergence of social media influencers as political intermediaries has reshaped how young Malaysians engage with political narratives. Unlike traditional political figures, influencers possess significant cultural capital and trust among youth audiences, making them highly effective in shaping political attitudes and behaviours. Political parties increasingly collaborate with digital influencers to disseminate ideological narratives subtly, embedding political messages within lifestyle content, entertainment media, and viral trends [39]. This subtle form of political persuasion, often disguised as neutral discourse, fosters a deeper emotional connection between young voters and political entities, creating a new dynamic of digital political influence.

As social media platforms continue to define Malaysia's political engagement landscape, concerns surrounding youth vulnerability to misinformation, algorithmic biases, and covert political manipulation remain pressing. With most young Malaysians relying on social media as their primary source of political news, the absence of critical media literacy skills and fact-checking mechanisms makes them highly susceptible to disinformation, false narratives, and emotionally charged propaganda [40]. Ultimately, while social media platforms have expanded opportunities for youth political participation, they have also become powerful instruments of influence, where strategic content dissemination, ideological framing, and algorithmic reinforcement shape political behaviours. This study seeks to examine how political narratives in Malaysia are framed and disseminated via online platforms, particularly in relation to youth engagement and their susceptibility to digital persuasion techniques.

3.4 Agenda Setting, Framing, and the Priming Theory

The triadic framework of agenda-setting, framing, and priming theories provides a nuanced understanding of how media narratives influence political discourse and public opinion. Taken together, these theories coalesce into the notion of media as having the ability to sensitise on issues, determine their interpretations and inform decision-making through reinforcement as a result of exposure. According to the agenda-setting theory, the media has a significant function of determining what

subjects are worthy of attention by the people [41]. In the present study, agenda-setting is considered in relation to the prominence and visibility of political content rather than the salience of a specific political issue. Framing expands on this notion and analyses the way in which the information is presented, and the packaging which comes with the perception of a story with a bias or ideology included [42]. Picking up from these notions, priming theory expands the understanding of how continuous exposure to certain messages influences the cognitive and affective state, thus predisposing the public to respond in certain ways [19].

This paper synthesises these related theories to examine paid political content and its perceived influence on the political inclinations of Malaysian youth. One way in which priming can be directly linked to current theories of framing is by focusing on certain cues in order to gain control of the content of people's thoughts or their receptiveness to message information. Altogether, these factors lead to the creation of a priming effect in which repeated exposure makes certain political cues more accessible in individuals' evaluations. In the Malaysian context, this interplay is best seen in terms of politically influenced and strategically planned blogger campaigns with the use of appeals and the use of digitally targeted content aimed at young voters. For example, in the Malaysian 14th General Election, *#UndiRabu* and *#PulangMengundi* were created to energise youth to vote, besides subverting state-controlled discourses and politically instrumentalist approaches with grassroots-led online activism [38]. In the same way, during the 2022 General Election (GE15), political parties used TikTok and reels to share selective and sensational material, which then introduced a partisan model to first-time voters [39]. This is an example of agenda setting through biased framing. It is argued that a biased news frame leads to negative representation formation [43, 44]. With the rise of social media as a primary source of news for young voters, the interplay of agenda-setting, framing, and priming has become more critical in understanding how narratives are constructed and consumed. By examining these theories within the Malaysian context, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how political narratives influence youth behaviour, offering valuable insights for policymakers, media practitioners, and educators [45].

4.0 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach employing focus group discussions and in-depth interviews to obtain in-depth perspectives and experiences relevant to the study objectives. The study was conducted in Malaysia, with data collection carried out between February and March 2023. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that participants possessed relevant insights into the study's objectives. The sample comprised Malaysian youth between the ages of 18 and 24, political actors, and media experts. A total of 42 participants were included, which consists of 24 youth divided into three focus groups; nine political actors; and nine media experts. The research follows the recommendation by Creswell et al. [46] to include 8 participants in each focus group. The adequacy of the sample was considered in relation to the study objectives, the purposive selection of participants and the diversity of perspectives provided by the three participant groups [50]. The three distinct focus groups enabled triangulation, representing diverse urban and rural youth experiences and varying levels of political engagement and media consumption. The World Health Organization's [35] definition of youth guided participant selection. Selection was based on high engagement with social media as a primary source of political information and their eligibility to vote. Selection of these youth also reflected diverse urban and rural backgrounds, varying educational levels, and differing political affiliations.

In addition to youth participants, political actors were included for in-depth interviews to provide insights into the strategic deployment of social media for political messaging. This group consisted of campaign strategists, press secretaries, and digital content creators who play a direct role in crafting and disseminating online political narratives. Their perspectives were instrumental in uncovering the mechanisms of targeted persuasion, algorithmic amplification, and influencer-led political engagement within Malaysia's digital ecosystem. Furthermore, media experts, including journalists, editors, and consultants specialising in political reporting and digital media strategies, were interviewed to provide a critical analysis of how political narratives are framed and distributed across digital platforms. Their insights helped contextualise the role of traditional versus digital media in shaping public discourse, the ethical considerations of political reporting, and the impact of media structures on political engagement.

By integrating these three distinct participant groups, this study ensures a triangulated perspective that captures the complex dynamics of social media's influence on youth political inclinations in Malaysia.

The focus group discussions and in-depth interviews explored participants' perspectives in relation to the study objectives and research questions. The discussions focused on the technical presentation of political content, including language, visuals, multimedia elements and content delivery, as well as perceptions of paid online political content. Paid online political content was distinguished from ordinary online news based on its sponsored or promoted nature. The data were manually analysed using thematic analysis. The researchers reviewed the participants' responses to identify recurring patterns and initial codes, which were subsequently grouped into broader themes relevant to the research questions. The identified themes were reviewed and refined to ensure their relevance to the study objectives and were then reported in the findings. The inclusion of youth, political actors and media experts enabled the triangulation of different perspectives and supported the credibility of the findings. The next section discusses the findings of the research.

5.0 Results

This section presents the study's findings to answer the first research question: How does the technical approach of political content on online news influence the political inclination of youth in Malaysia? The findings incorporate different perspectives, with youth describing their perceptions and experiences, political actors discussing strategic considerations, and media experts providing insights into media and content practices. Findings suggest two factors that shape the political inclination of youth in Malaysia. They are content presented in a less formal approach and interesting content delivery.

5.1 Less Formal Content

The study found that Malaysian youth were more interested in political content presented informally on social media. This theme refers specifically to the informal and accessible style of political content, including the use of simple language and a less formal tone. Informants indicated and creatively presented content involving visuals, pictures, and background music. According to some informants:

> … *"Visuals and pictures are easy to understand, content in social media."* … (Informant Y1, 4 February 2023).

Visual and audio elements made the content more appealing, capturing the youth's attention. According to some informants:

> … *"Visual news helps me understand the topic more effectively because of the technique, clear and accurate delivery and content."* … (Informant Y4, 4 February 2023).

> … *"Younger audiences are drawn to the informal, fun style of visual media platforms (particularly online video), which they describe as more personal and diverse than television."* … (Informant Y5, 4 February 2023).

> … "*Political news has interesting visuals, and background music can make me watch a video with more enthusiasm. It doesn't matter whether news related to oneself or not."* (Informant Y6, 14 February 2023).

This aligns with Bimber [47], who noted politicians' use of music to attract voters. Media experts corroborated the importance of straightforward, less formal content to entice youth, using "catchy visuals," "fast-cut" editing, accessible language, and viral content. In this context, a *catchy visual* refers to striking or appealing imagery used by politicians in media to instantly capture young voters' attention and enhance message retention. According to some informants:

> *... "Catchy visuals are current and up-to-date visuals that attract young people. The way of editing 'fast-cut' will be made according to the trending song of the young people. In addition, to attract this group, we use easy-to-understand language and adapt current viral content." ...* (Informant P1, 8 February 2023).

> *... "One of the easiest ways to ensure learners retain information in their long-term memory is to combine concepts with meaningful images and increase the chances of learners remembering the material" …* (Informant P2, 11 February 2023).

The intersection of medium and message transforms the way the youth engage with, understand, and respond to the contemporary political landscape in Malaysia.

5.2 Interesting Content Delivery

In contrast, this theme focuses on the creative and engaging techniques used to deliver political content, such as visuals, music and editing. Interesting content delivery emerged as a key component in shaping youth political inclination via online platforms. It is characterised by creative, engaging, and visually attractive elements that captivate and retain youth attention. Informants consistently emphasised that political content becomes more compelling when presented in a creative and relatable manner.

> For instance, Informant Y9 (11 February 2023) noted, *"Short and concise content with attractive and simple graphics such as charts or drawings will be more accepted."*

> Similarly, Informant P3 (6 March 2023) stated, *"Political news that has interesting visuals and background music can make me watch a video with more enthusiasm. It doesn't matter whether it is news related to oneself or not."*

Youth respondents were particularly drawn to content that used background music, striking visuals, and fast-paced editing, evoking emotional responses and keeping them engaged throughout.

> As Informant Y10 (4 February 2023) shared, *"I prefer to watch news that uses a delivery technique that gives a heart-pounding sensation."*

This aligns with Bimber [47], who highlighted how politicians use music strategically to attract audiences. Media professionals echoed this sentiment.

> Informant M2, a TV producer (9 February 2023), explained, *"We use simple language, short videos, creative editing and engage with young social media TikTok influencers."*

These influencers deliver political narratives in ways that reflect current digital trends, combining entertainment with information. Their content is often described as "interesting" due to its vibrant visuals, humour, relatability, and alignment with youth values.

> *Other media experts reinforced the importance of "catchy visuals" and "fast-cut" editing that mirrors trending online aesthetics (Informant Syafiq, 7 March 2023).*

These components are crucial in making political content go viral, particularly when framed with emotional storytelling or satire.

Findings from this section suggest that news featuring less formal content and interesting or engaging content delivery are influential factors shaping the political party inclinations of Malaysian youth. The next section addresses the second research question by examining the role of paid online political news coverage. Five contributing factors are identified and discussed. The following themes

address distinct aspects of paid online political content, including source credibility, perceived trustworthiness, repeated exposure, formal news delivery and content presentation.

5.3 News Source and Image

Informants trust news sources from the official media and the primary alternative media. Although youth rely on social media and internet sites to keep them updated about current events, they are least likely to trust social media platforms to give reliable information when compared to other organisations. In any case, the desired image of the news organisation is that it provides real news and reputable reports. According to the informant's observations, people are sensitive to the source of any news.

A political expert interviewed believes in the importance of working collaboratively with various media outlets to ensure the news posts target the right audience with relevant content. According to one informant:

> *"Engagement with media organisations is important to attract them to publish. On top of that, we must ensure our facts, data, and narratives have news value"* … Informant P5, 2 March 2023)

Further reinforcing this perspective, a media expert shared a distinction between paid and unpaid news, emphasising the higher level of trust attributed to professionally curated content:

> *"…I distinguish the two more to pay because of the accuracy and ease of understanding compared to regular news; regular news is more for one side of the party and is in favour of one side."…* (Informant X, 11 February 2023)

> *"…Usually paid political content will be presented in ways appealing to youth. It is a branding exercise of sorts, manipulating issues pertaining to youth and presenting them in ways most attractive to them."* … (Informant M7, 5 February 2023)

These insights highlight how the image and credibility of a news source are perceived as important in youth political engagement. Trust in the medium is not only essential for the dissemination of political content but also for shaping the political perceptions and inclinations of younger audiences.

5.4 Perceived Trustworthiness of Paid Media

Some informants perceived paid political content on online news as more trustworthy and influential than unpaid content.

> *… "I distinguish the two more to pay because of the accuracy and ease of understanding compared to regular news; regular news is more for one side of the party and is in favour of one side." …* (Informant M3, 9 February 2023).

> *… "Paid things are clearer because we get info or information that is clear and more accurate than unpaid news." …* (Informant M4, 4 February 2023).

> *… "Paid news is clearer because we get information and views with more accuracy."* … (Informant P6, 8 February 2023).

> *… "Usually paid political content will be presented in ways appealing to youth. It is a branding exercise of sorts, manipulating issues pertaining to youth and presenting them in ways most attractive to them." …* (Informant M5, 5 February 2023).

These results point towards an increasing youth demographic that equates paid media's professionalism and content quality with trustworthiness. This signifies an essential opportunity for stakeholders in political communication to craft impactful content that not only reaches but also resonates with the younger electorate in shaping their political opinions and participation.

5.5 Consistent and Repeated Content

Participants reported that consistent and repeated exposure to political content through online news platforms heightened its perceived importance and influence among them.

> *... "If the news is reported repeatedly, I see it as important. As a viewer or reader, I am easily influenced by repeated news." ... (Informant P7, 3 February 2023).*

> *"When the news was broadcast repeatedly, it made things that the young people did not want to know open their eyes and discuss this matter with friends"...(Informant P8, 3 February 2023).*

Repeated content was more likely believed, even if initially perceived as fake news. This finding aligns with previous studies that argue repeated exposure leads to increased believability. According to Pennycook, Cannon, and Rand (2018), prior exposure increases the perceived accuracy of fake news.

> *..."Repeated exposure to political news on social media makes me believe the news at first. News that I thought was fake but, if repeated, made me believe it."...*(Informant Y12, 4 February 2023).

> *... "It depends on which media and target audience the narratives have been disseminated to. The most effective is when the narratives are disseminated repeatedly and consistently." ...* (Informant P9, 4 February 2023).

Findings from this section suggest that political experts acknowledged the effectiveness of consistent, repeated narratives disseminated through youth-preferred media.

5.6 Formal News Delivery

The findings convey that formal news channels, including meticulously researched articles and social media accounts with a reputation for reliability, are perceived to hold higher levels of accuracy and have greater influence. This trust and influence are underscored by the testimonies of individuals with preference for reputable sources when consuming news.

> *... "I get news on social media through articles on influential and trusted social media accounts because the news released is more accurate." ....* (Informant Y13, 11 February 2023).

Additionally, respondents noted that paid or professionally produced content tends to convey clearer and more accurate information, further reinforcing the perceived reliability of formal news sources:

> *"...Paid news is clearer because we get information and views with more accurate. The news is not paid, the information is more for us not to get accurate information."* (M10, 7 March 2023)

One respondent elaborated on the preference for concise, factual news content that avoids unnecessary embellishments, suggesting that such characteristics contribute to the credibility of formal news:

> *"…I prefer news that is true, non-dragging, non-biased and Euro scientific, content that includes black and white written evidence that is displayed is more interesting for me to study and see the news more deeply…"* (Y10, 4 February 2023)

Moreover, media experts pointed out the significance of structure and clarity in formal news writing, especially the impact of the headline and introductory paragraph in establishing trust and attracting attention:

> *"…The beginning of your message is most important. It should grab your reader's attention and make them want to read on... It must be at least 25 words and contain: Who, what, where, when, why, how."* (Y11, 14 February 2023)F

Collectively, these quotes highlight a clear preference among youth and media professionals for formal, structured, and well-researched news as a more trusted source of political information.

5.7 Content Presentation

Findings further indicate that the way the content is presented plays an important role in better understanding of the news. According to some informants:

> *… "I prefer news that is true, non-dragging and non-biased. Content that includes black and white written evidence displayed is more interesting for me to study and see the news more deeply…"* (Informant Y14, 4 February 2023).

> *… "A good news style conveys information effectively. It is easy to attract the reader. Word to word, sentence to sentence, paragraph to paragraph, one section of the work to the next. A bad style is boring and often confusing."…* (Informant P3, 14 March 2023).

> *… "The beginning of your message is most important. It should grab your reader's attention and make them want to read. It should be sharp, crisp and follow normal sentence structure and grammatical rules. It must be at least 25 words and contain: Who, what, where, when, why, how. …* (Informant M6, 14 February 2023).

Crafting such compelling narrative entry points is crucial in an era where capturing the fleeting attention span of readers can determine the overall impact and dissemination of political news.

In addition, media experts highlighted the importance of a youth-friendly writing style for attractiveness, comprehension, and engagement. According to informants:

> *… "The way of writing for young people is simpler and more compact. Unlike the middle class and above, this group is not interested in the arrangement of political sentences that are too heavy and extreme. They prefer simple conversational sentences because it is suitable for their age and understanding." …* (Informant P4, 5 February 2023).

Content delivery through social media, especially for serious topics such as those related to politics, faces the challenge that youth are not very keen on issues, as indicated by one political expert. The respondent emphasised the need to use infographics and videos for the messages, besides allocating ample duration for newsworthy topics:

> *… "You need simple messages such as infographics, short videos, parody songs - as youth are not keen on listening to long speeches and long articles" …* (Informant P1, 7 February 2023).

Presentation and the adaptability of language are integral to ensuring that the content not only garners attention but also maintains engagement.

These are five factors that influence the political inclination of youth in Malaysia. The next section will discuss the findings.

6.0 Discussion

The findings of this study reveal seven key themes that collectively explain how political narratives are constructed, consumed, and interpreted by Malaysian youth through social media. The discussion interprets the findings on content delivery, paid political content, source credibility and repetitive exposure in relation to broader issues raised by participants and relevant literature, including algorithmic influence and emotional appeal.

A central theme in this study is the preference of Malaysian youth for multimedia-driven political content over traditional text-heavy formats. All the informants preferred short videos, memes, infographics, and generally content that was rich in visuals. This change can be explained by the alteration in the way consumers approach content, a phenomenon influenced by the fact that the young generation is the digital generation. According to Vedula et al. [15] stated that visual cues enhance memory recall and increase visibility of information during teaching. This tendency to disseminate easy-to-understand and flashy content is in harmony with framing theory held that the way informative messages are packaged determines the way they are perceived [42]. The participants were unanimous that content presented with visuals, in-stream music and text familiar to the target group is more likely to be consumed, retained, and shared. In this context, framing provides a useful perspective for interpreting how language, visuals and other content cues may shape participants' perceptions.

Another core finding involves the role of algorithmic content curation in shaping political views. Youth interviewed observed that the feed they get from their social media platforms is mainly comprised of engagement-based content. This results in polarisation, in which people are only exposed to information that supports their views and avoid opinions that differ from them. These findings are consistent with those of Leong [8], who observed that although the algorithmic systems in Malaysia may differ in their radicalisation processes compared to the flaws seen in Western societies, they nonetheless lead to the echo chamber effect due to the nature of the algorithms in use. This can be rooted in the Priming theory that puts emphasis on the exposure to repeatedly charged political stimuli and the influence it exerts on attitudes due to the establishment of corresponding ideological biases [19]. Participants and relevant literature suggest that algorithmic systems may prioritise high-engagement content, potentially contributing to narrowed information exposure and political polarisation.

The study also revealed a notable trust in paid political content, which respondents described as more structured, professional, and fact-based compared to user-generated political content. This trust in paid political content contrasts with other parts of the world where paid political content is commonly regarded as dubious due to propaganda [29]. Meanwhile, Malaysian youth are more predisposed to accept professionally made and sponsored content as reliable and authoritative. While trust in professional content may derive from high production quality and consistent messaging strategies seen as credible by youth, the information presented may be biased since it is funded by political parties with their own political agenda, which not many of these youth are aware of. For instance, The Edge [49] reported that several media groups in Malaysia have close ties to political parties through ownership structures controlled by corporate entities or politically interested individuals. The perceived credibility of paid content thus becomes a double-edged sword, offering clarity and appeal while also raising the risk of covert political manipulation.

Closely tied to this is the theme of emotional appeal and personalisation in political messaging. The youth respondents' engagements keyed into content that empowered and informed them more in terms of socio-economic rights, education policies, employment opportunities and cost of living. Strategies that relate to the audiences' experiences emotionally would be more convincing. This falls in line with framing theory, with the proposition that the narratives that are constructed in aspects of culture and relevance evoke audiences' actions [42]. Furthermore, Moy et al. [19] argue, in relation to priming theory, that emotionally engaging information not only captures attention but also influences long-term political attitudes. Findings from this study suggest that personalised messages influence Malaysian

youth' apathy and political participation through emotional appeals. However, while emotional resonance can enhance engagement, it also runs the risk of oversimplifying complex political issues, reducing them to emotionally charged talking points that may obscure deeper policy analysis.

Another major theme is the critical importance youth place on source credibility. The study shows that youth are not a passive audience on social media; they interactively compare the information found on social media with major newspaper articles. Findings from this article align with a study on Malaysian youth's news consumption, which suggested that they are critical news consumers who understand news and see its functions [21]. This shows a certain level of media literacy and critical attitude among youth themselves, who realise that information warfare is an existing problem. It makes it possible to suggest that the reception of formal news outlets and identified social media accounts is a deliberate way to avoid contact with unreliable information.

Repetitive exposure emerged as another influential factor in shaping youth political beliefs. Respondents established that material that they first deem as biased, when viewed frequently on their social media feed, gradually gains value. This is a condition called the Illusory Truth Effect, which is a condition where repeatedly exposed information leads to an increased likelihood of believability [20]. This pattern may be interpreted through priming theory, whereby repeated exposure may make certain political cues more accessible in participants' evaluations [19]. These accounts suggest that participants perceived repeated exposure as potentially influencing their evaluation of political information.

These findings strengthen the need for comprehensive media literacy among youth, especially first-time voters. The influence of social media algorithms further necessitates a shift in policy and platform design. Platforms should be more transparent in their daily operations and engage with the regulators and fact-checking organisations. If such interventions are not made, then engagement-based algorithms will keep serving users within the bubbles of ideological conformity and keep the youth abreast of the political polarisation in society. The risk here is not merely misinformation but the erosion of democratic discourse, where youth are confined to echo chambers that reaffirm rather than challenge their beliefs.

Finally, political campaigns must evolve in tandem with these shifts in media consumption. Traditional authoritative types of information dissemination and rhetorical approaches are now hard to capture the youth' attention. Instead, they must rely on data and analytics, relevant influencers, and a tone of voice that corresponds to the younger generation's fears and beliefs.

7.0 Limitations

This study should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the qualitative design and purposive sampling approach were intended to generate in-depth insights rather than statistically generalisable findings. Second, the sample comprised 42 participants, including youth, political actors, and media experts; therefore, the findings reflect the perspectives and experiences of these participants. Third, the study focused on Malaysian youth aged 18 to 24 and on their experiences of political content in digital media environments. Consequently, the findings may not represent the experiences of all Malaysian youth or other demographic groups. These limitations provide important directions for future research using larger samples, comparative designs, and complementary quantitative approaches.

8.0 Conclusion

This study offers an exploration of Malaysian youth' perceptions and experiences of how online news media, particularly through social media platforms, may influence and shape their political inclinations. The findings demonstrate that political narratives are no longer shaped solely by ideological content but are significantly driven by form, delivery, and algorithmic visibility. In addressing the first research question, the findings suggest that youth were drawn to political content that was emotionally engaging, visually dynamic and easy to understand. Findings from this study highlight the integration of agenda-setting, framing, and priming theories as an integrated whole. Political actors, media strategists, and influencers collaborate to shape narratives that prioritise specific issues (agenda-setting), present them in emotionally appealing ways (framing), and rely on repetition and familiarity to reinforce political attitudes over time (priming).

In addressing the second research question, the findings also highlight the perceived importance of source credibility, paid political content and repeated exposure in participants' engagement with political information. The study also revealed a complex relationship between political (subtle) influence and audience trust in the news media wherein, for Malaysian youth, some participants perceived greater trust in paid political content that is professionally produced and visually polished. It raises ethical concerns regarding potential manipulation of young voters through seemingly credible sources. Given the qualitative design, these findings reflect participants' perceptions and experiences and are not intended to establish direct causal effects or statistical generalisations.

9.0 Recommendations For Future Research

Comparative cross-national studies can be conducted in order to inform how youth interact with digital political content in different cultural, political and regulatory contexts. Such studies would widen understanding of how other countries strategise digital political communication.

Research into the long-term effects of algorithmically curated content on youth voting behaviour and ideological development is needed in the future. Such research will be able to understand how prolonged exposure to a personalised political message affects voting preferences, partisanship, and democratic involvement in order to determine how technology's role in shaping youth political engagement changes.

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