



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
EDUCATION, PSYCHOLOGY
AND COUNSELLING
(IJEPC)

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SHORT-FORM DEMOCRACY: THE IMPACT OF TIKTOK'S ALGORITHMIC ENVIRONMENT ON THE POLITICAL BEHAVIOR AND VALUES OF MALAYSIAN YOUTH

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Article Info:

Article history:

Received date: 07.05.2026

Revised date: 13.05.2026

Accepted date: 03.06.2026

Published date: 29.06.2026

Abstract:

In today's digital era, TikTok has emerged as a significant and influential platform for youth engagement in political discourse in Malaysia, increasingly serving as an important alternative to traditional mainstream media. This study investigates the mechanisms and motivations underlying youth's political expression through short-form video content, while also examining how the platform's dual role as an algorithmic agent structure shapes and reinforces social and political perspectives. Grounded by Media Dependency Theory (MDT) and framed within Jürgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere, this research employs a mixed-methods approach conducted in two phases. The first phase comprised of in-depth interviews with 20 Malaysian

To cite this document:

Rani, N. S. A., Ab Hadi, S. N. I., Khairuddin, K., & Abd Aziz S. H. (2026). Short-Form Democracy: The Impact of TikTok's Algorithmic Environment on The Political Behavior and Values of Malaysian Youth. *International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counselling*, 11(63), 878-886.

youths who actively engaged with political content representing both government and opposition viewpoints. The second phase consisted of a quantitative survey of 800 respondents, with the collected data analysed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to ensure methodological rigor and validity. Findings then demonstrate a growing distrust among youths towards mainstream newspapers, consequently encouraging greater reliance on TikTok as a trusted, accessible, and timely source of political information. In addition, the platform's interactive features, particularly its comment sections, play an important role as a public forum in mobilizing youths towards political activity by encouraging discussions, facilitating communication between politicians and citizens. Ultimately, this study contributes valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and relevant stakeholders by highlighting the strategic and transformative role of TikTok in shaping contemporary democratic practices and enhancing political participation among young Malaysians.

DOI: 10.35631/IJEPC.1163052

Keyword:

TikTok, Social Media, Media Dependency Theory, Mixed Method, Youth.



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Introduction

Malaysia's open sky policy especially for information and communication technology (ICT) has enabled the emergence of alternative spaces for expression through non-authority zones such as TikTok, blogs, Twitter and Instagram. The abundance of information has led to social media users becoming more engaged in disseminating information and providing feedback on national political issues. At present, social media serves as a platform that enables individuals to express their opinions and discuss political issues, therefore encouraging greater political involvement among the youth.

This interaction is usually a good thing, but it is risky too, as these platforms can be misused for personal or political reasons, introducing algorithmic dependencies that heavily alter public perception (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976; Paschke, 2023). Unsubstantiated information disseminated can shape public opinion and perceptions of political actors, often leading to controversy and negative perceptions of the progressive youth voices demanding societal and governmental reform. The criticism of government officials is often seen in short video and interactive formats on social media, contributing to polarized political discourse.

With the advent of information democracy brought by new media, there has been increased scope for participatory practices, especially among the youth. According to Abdullah et al. (2024), there is a difference between the information consumption pattern of the youth

generation from that of other generations since they get their news and political information from social media, unlike traditional media. Tariq et al. (2022) said, the social media platforms that were previously known for entertainment through videos are increasingly becoming forums where politics takes place and, as a result, engaging youth in politics. It has been highlighted that the use of social media such as TikTok is changing the way the youth generation participates in politics and provides opinions about governance in Malaysia (Noorman et al., 2024). Political involvement among youth on the Internet indirectly shapes the perceptions of people regarding policymakers. There are many diverse uses of the Internet among the youth, which makes this topic interesting in terms of research scope.

Although there is now greater digital engagement with politics among young people, it is apparent that there is still insufficient knowledge regarding how these young people engage with their politics and why they engage with their politics through the social media platform TikTok, one of the most popular platforms in Malaysia. Although there are many past literatures which discuss the relationship between social media usage by young people and their political participation, these previous literatures only tend to focus on the consumption of media in a traditional form or the use of social media in general without going into specifics about political issues. It is true that previous research has emphasized on the influence of social media on politics but more literature combining the two perspectives of social media and politics is needed.

The present study seeks to address these gaps by examining Malaysian youth engagement on TikTok. Specifically, the study aims to:

- Identify the extent of youth's views of the political environment that shapes their readiness to share political opinions on TikTok.
- Explore whether political interests influence attitudes toward using TikTok for political activities, such as interacting with and disseminating political content.
- The study should shed light on the relationship between youth perceptions, political motivations, and social media engagement, which can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of digital political participation in Malaysia.

Literature Review

Social media platforms are one of the most notable features of modern digital communication, with TikTok being one such phenomenon. TikTok allows people to freely voice their views concerning politics via the Internet. Social media has become vital in Malaysia, providing online groups with new opportunities to engage in political debates and participate in political actions on the web. The emergence of Internet democracy has enabled new possibilities in terms of communications; thus, information sharing and discussion of political questions have been made possible.

According to previous research, social media becomes essential in creating manifestos and providing communication between politicians and common citizens (Mat Husain et al., 2024). In the case of online space, these requirements are fulfilled through cognitive development, the use of language and engagement through short-form videos on algorithmic platforms like TikTok. Therefore, cyberspace has turned out to be an important environment for voicing opinions concerning government officials.

The use of new media by youths has been explained primarily by the role played by new technologies in providing information democracy. Information democracy enables unrestricted distribution of ideas, leading to higher levels of engagement and political activity. The emergence of platforms like TikTok has significantly promoted youths' political involvement, making political information instantly available and appealing to them (Mohd Nor et al., 2025). At the same time, there is evidence that social media usage and political participation among youths are inseparably linked, thus becoming an inherent part of the latter (Mat Husain et al., 2024).

Previous studies using surveys show that there is a moderate level of youths' agreement with the statement of increased political awareness thanks to the presence of TikTok (Mohd Nor et al., 2025). However, very little has been said about the way diverse audience perceptions, possible exposure to different political views, and interactions in an algorithmic digital space can affect youth posting practices. In other words, it is unclear what types of political content are shared and why youths make certain decisions regarding the posting of specific materials.

As a result, modern application of Media Dependency Theory further supports the research, indicating that individuals rely structurally on specific media formats to fulfill critical cognitive and orientation goals (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). For instance, using digital media platforms, young people may benefit from relying on TikTok for not only getting information but also discussing and sharing their political opinions with others. Integrating the concepts of media dependency theory and political participation will enable scholars to find answers regarding the motivations and behaviors of youth.

At the same time, social media applications, including TikTok, have the potential to be empowering and constraining. They offer fast dissemination of information, help foster engagement with different viewpoints, and serve as vehicles for civic mobilization. On the other hand, social media applications expose users to fake news and politically polarized communities, among other aspects. This exposure alters internal cognitive schemas and shapes political efficacy within algorithmic spaces (Mat Husain et al., 2024; Ognyanova & Ball-Rokeach, 2015). Therefore, studying youth activities on such platforms as TikTok becomes even more challenging because they not only have opportunities but also experience challenges and barriers that make them feel the necessity to think twice when participating in politics online. It is critical to explore how young people manage their social media accounts in order to express themselves in a way that would ensure their credibility in political discourse.

In terms of limitations in the current literature, the following findings stand out. On the one hand, even though there are some pieces of evidence that young people become more active on social media, they mostly investigate youth offline participation or their activities in general while being active in social media applications. Hence, there is insufficient knowledge concerning the extent to which youth use TikTok for political purposes in Malaysia as well as perceive risks of doing this. Moreover, few researchers have applied qualitative and quantitative methods simultaneously while studying youth online political engagement and motivational factors behind content creation. Finally, it is unclear whether youth consider the diversity of political opinions and whether it influences their activities.

Methodology

In the current study, a mixed-methods methodology is employed whereby both qualitative and quantitative approaches are utilized. This research methodology involved data collection through in-depth interviews and surveys, which made it possible to conduct an extensive investigation into the research problem in the unique environment provided by TikTok.

The qualitative part of this research, namely the process of conducting in-depth interviews, aimed at obtaining rich insights regarding the perceptions of young people towards the existing political environment and political issues discussed by using short-form videos on TikTok. Qualitative research also helps to situate and validate the results of the subsequent quantitative survey. The findings confirm that the nature of TikTok itself is the most influential factor in citizens' decisions to use it as a political medium. This indicates that platform architecture shapes individual communication choices at a micro-psychological level (Valkenburg et al., 2016).

The decision to use surveys in the quantitative research was justified by the fact that there exists a large population of youth, active users of social media sites in Malaysia, which will serve as units of analysis in the current study. As Hirose and Creswell (2023) suggest, the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches to studying social phenomena can help expand the scope of research and explore particular contexts more deeply. This statement is aligned with the opinion of Sekaran and Bougie (2020), stating that combining approaches from different methodologies increases credibility, validity, and reliability of research findings.

Discussion

Qualitative Analysis

Analysis of interviews with Malaysian youth who are active TikTok users revealed six main themes indicating that TikTok is indeed utilized in Malaysian political activities to stay updated on the latest political information. Furthermore, the use of TikTok is actively creating social networks among users and audiences focusing on political issues. Political information and discussions on TikTok have been and are shaping the narrative of national political discourse. These findings also demonstrate that TikTok serves as a source of political information and a communication medium between politicians and their supporters. This reinforces the assumption that one of the main reasons users utilize the TikTok platform in Malaysia is the effectiveness and impact of the social media app's interactive and algorithmic features.

Analysis of the interviews with TikTok users also indicates that information, as well as the expression of opinions and reactions received from both audiences and politicians, have transformed the political landscape in Malaysia. TikTok platform provides timely political updates that are not often readily accessible through traditional mainstream media. It is also found that the platform functions as a real-time source of political information, acting as an additional channel for political communication to take part. Furthermore, the findings also show that TikTok plays a crucial role in forming political discourse in Malaysia, which corresponds with Frankel's (1974) view of democracy as a public sphere where issues can be openly debated without being constrained by state-driven agendas. The informants revealed the opportunities provided by TikTok to present missions related to political issues more openly, despite initially facing restrictions from the authorities. The acceptance of TikTok as a political

platform in Malaysia has grown regardless of gazetted restrictions. Frankel (1974) argued that public sphere discussions regarding politics require input from citizens voicing local problems and responding to issues raised by politicians. Political content on TikTok Malaysia can be considered a significant medium of discussion and a forum for political visions, which were previously very limited.

In addition, information on TikTok has fostered social networks among viewers and political activists. For example, collaborative networks and online communities on TikTok have organized initiatives like live political discussions and seminars to increase citizens' understanding of politics. Furthermore, the TikTok platform has emerged to help mobilize political activities. New online political spaces in Malaysia have initiated interactive engagements and the collective construction of political identity. The results from the youth interviews yield findings concluding that political participation on TikTok can enhance societal integration and civic engagement among the younger generation.

Quantitative Analysis

Initial findings from Phase 1 of the qualitative study revealed a serious level of distrust toward mainstream newspapers. Consequently, the quantitative study findings demonstrate a significant relationship among citizens who choose TikTok as an alternative medium for political information. Furthermore, the analysis indicates that engaging with content related to online news articles is a critical practice utilized by TikTok users. The findings confirm that the nature of TikTok itself is the most influential factor in citizens' decisions to use it as a political medium, driven by its high impact in terms of information availability, relevance, timeliness, and ease of sharing.

The findings indicate that youth accept TikTok as a primary source to obtain political information. Furthermore, respondents explained that they do trust the content found on the said platform. In their view, TikTok can be utilized to encourage political activities while at the same time increasing their own political participation. They further maintain that the use of TikTok actively drives youth engagement in politics, alongside encouraging wider political activities among the general public. The analysis also illustrates that respondents strongly believe TikTok serves as an effective communication channel between politicians and their supporters. This position aligns with Habermas (2006), who argues that the public sphere of political discourse is sustained through citizens' ability to voice out their opinions and respond to issues raised by political actors. He further added that social interaction is a key mechanism for bridging society within such discourse. When traditional networks degrade, short-form interactions step in to reconstruct those civic habits entirely online (Zhuravskaya et al., 2020).

The analysis reveals that TikTok has successfully drawn youth who are not affiliated with political parties to engage with political information. More importantly, it is evident that even non-partisan youth demonstrate a strong interest in political content, signalling a strong desire to better understand and learn Malaysian political issues. This therefore strengthens the argument that TikTok provides an effective and accessible space for political information-seeking.

The analytical results show that respondents hold a broadly positive stance toward political information found on TikTok. They mentioned that it is an informative and engaging platform, now widely recognised as a primary source for political news. Respondents further insist on

the reliability of political content presented on the app. At the same they affirm their trust in TikTok as a dependable channel for obtaining the latest political updates. Finally, the analysis highlights that this platform is heavily and frequently accessed on a daily basis by the younger generation.

Conclusion

The results of the analysis demonstrate that TikTok remains highly relevant as a source of political information, effectively capturing public attention toward political matters by enhancing awareness and understanding of the current political climate. These findings further suggest that content on TikTok is widely trusted by viewers, largely due to an underlying distrust of information disseminated through mainstream newspapers. Frankel (1974) argues that discussions conducted via social media will empower citizens to function as a form of public jury, therefore shaping their opinion on political issues that are not easily expressed within mainstream media spaces. Regarding this, respondents believe that TikTok serves as an effective medium for obtaining political information, as the content it operates with serves as a credible alternative media source.

Furthermore, analysis reveals that viewers frequently rely on TikTok to gain information on recent political issues, with an abundance of videos often discussing and referencing news that are originally reported by traditional newspapers. In addition, the study also highlights the interactive comment section on TikTok that has become a highly favored feature among its younger users. This interactive space acts as a vital platform for individuals to read, reply, and debate political issues, thereby facilitating direct communication between citizens and politicians who also present actively on TikTok.

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- Acknowledgements:** The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Melaka Kampus Alor Gajah for providing the necessary resources and support throughout the course of this research. The authors would also like to express their sincere gratitude to colleagues and peers who contributed valuable insights and constructive feedback, which greatly enhanced the quality of this paper.
- Funding Statement:** No Funding
- Conflict of Interest Statement:** The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. All authors have contributed to this work and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission to the International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counselling (IJEPC)
- Ethics Statement:** This study conducted indepth interviews and survey from willing human participants. The authors confirm that the research was conducted in accordance with accepted academic integrity and ethical publishing standards.
- Author Contribution Statement:** Each authors contributed significantly to the development of this manuscript. Nur Shazana Abdul Rani was responsible for the conceptualization, methodology, and overall supervision of the study. Siti Nur Izyandiyana Ab Hadi handled data collection, analysis, and interpretation of results. Siti Hajar Abd Aziz contributed to the literature review, drafting, and critical revision of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript prior to submission.
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