SOCIO-POLITICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MALAYSIAN NET GENERATION WHO USE SOCIAL MEDIA FOR POLITICAL INFORMATION: AN EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS

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Abstract:

Political information appears to be a precious commodity in political process to ensure a healthy, functioning democracy. With the emergence of the Internet, social media has become one of the central premises for political information creation, circulation and consumption. Many have touted social media as effective platforms to garner and mobilize voter support, especially among the wired youth, of whom are the dominant users of social media, and in recent years, even to sway the Malaysian general election results. By employing an online self-administered survey questionnaire with 379 Malaysian respondents aged between 18 and 24 at a local university, this paper aims to provide an exploratory analysis of the socio-political characteristics of the Malaysian Net Generation who rely mainly on social media for political information. Given Malaysians as young as 18 years old are now eligible to cast a vote in the elections, the study comes in timely as it offers insights on who are these Net Geners. The findings, even preliminary in nature, would contribute emerging insights in explaining the implications of social media on youth participation as well as the shifting Malaysian political landscape.

Keywords:

Socio-Political Characteristics, Net Generation, Social Media, Political Information, Youth, Malaysia

Introduction

Social media has been playing important roles since the Malaysian 12th General Election (GE12) in 2008, and its effect continues to traverse both the GE13 and GE14 (Lee, 2017; Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, 2014; Najwa Abdullah & Amalina Anuar, 2018; Sara Chinnasamy, 2018; Tapsell, 2013). In the GE12, the electorate was exposed to alternative political narrative

following the emergence of a couple of online news portals and personal blogs (Tan, 2018). This was then extended by the aggressive use of Facebook by the Opposition in the 2013 GE13, with aims to raise awareness of various issues and to mobilize supporters (Tan, 2018). The same momentum garnered and facilitated by social media continues to drive the 2018 GE14 (Lee, 2017; Najwa Abdullah & Amalina Anuar, 2018; Sara Chinnasamy, 2018), in which Malaysians witnessed a change in the ruling government since independence in 1957.

Social media changes the way people experience politics (Tan, 2018) by not only open up platforms for fellow Malaysians to deliberate political issues, but to also empower the Opposition to get their voices heard beyond the gatekeeping process imposed by the government-controlled traditional mainstream media on dissents; and in recent years, to even sway the election results (Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, 2014). Social media was said to help effectively in garnering voter support, especially from young adults aged between 21 and 40, of whom are the main users of social media in their homes and offices (Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani & Zengeni, 2010; Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, 2014). This claim resonates Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism's latest Digital News Report (2021) which observed individuals aged between 18 and 24 take social media as their main source of news.

Political information appears to be a precious commodity in political process given that it is the substance of a healthy, functioning democracy. Prior (2007) defines political information as "knowledge of specific political facts and concepts as well as knowledge of recent noteworthy political events" (p. 28). Taking into account social media has become one of the central premises for political information creation, circulation and consumption, scholars began to investigate the many possibilities and affordances offered by these platforms in explaining the shifting political landscape and its implications on political process.

Due to limited literature with local context, political information consumption habit and socio-political traits of these young adults who rely heavily on social media for political information are worth our attention. This is particularly crucial in an age of concern over the lack of political interest and motivation to participate, especially among the young-cum-wired generations, whom have taken social media as their main source of news. By contributing exploratory insights on the socio-political characteristics of the Malaysian young adults aged between 18 and 24 who rely mainly on social media for political information, this paper comes at a time of great challenge for political stakeholders to identify and subsequently target potential young voters, in particular, the first-time youth voters.

Literature Review

Social Media and The Malaysian Political Landscape
Despite the Internet has been available in Malaysia since the early 1990s, yet, its penetration remained low for years. For all the while from 1957 until 2004, the ruling Barisan Nasional (National Front, in short BN) enjoyed political stability by retaining at least two-thirds of the parliamentary seats in all elections. The Opposition by then had very little or no access to mainstream media, and on top of that, had been facing threats and working under the strain of various media laws such as the Defamation Act, the Sedition Act, the Official Secrets Act and the Printing Presses and Publication Act (Willnat et al., 2013).

Power shift happened when the government hesitantly upheld an informal policy of not censoring the Internet as part of its efforts to advocate Malaysia as a regional hub of information technology since 1996 (Tan & Zawawi Ibrahim, 2008). Subsequent to the enactment of the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) Bill of Guarantees, the Opposition and civil society movements have benefited from this policy via a new Internet public sphere to circumvent media control and mainstream media blackout (George, 2006; as cited in Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani & Zengeni, 2010). Independent political media and activists took a ride on the Internet to voice anti-government opinions and mobilize the public against causes related to social and economic problems (Willnat et al., 2013). This has thus empowered Malaysian voters to discuss politics at an unprecedented level of interactivity (Willnat et al., 2013).

The poor reputation of traditional media, which are deemed heavily pro-government due to their direct or indirect ownership by political parties, has been another acute factor to turn the public online (Yong, 2008). To date, traditional sources of political information such as the press, radio and television are losing their place of supremacy they used to be (Casero-Ripollés, 2018). According to Chen et al. (2015), social media serve as information hubs in which users are exposed to abundance of relevant political information, news and user-generated content via active consumption or incidental exposure. This is echoed by Chang and Tham (2016) and the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021 (Newman et al., 2021). The former identified younger generations prefer social media as their source of information, in particular Facebook and WhatsApp; meanwhile according to the latter, younger generations (especially those aged between 18 and 24) and individuals with lower levels of education prefer social media as their main source of news.

Social Media and The Malaysian Youth
As observed by the latest report released by we are social and Hootsuite via DATAREPORTAL, as of January 2021, there were 28 million active social media users in Malaysia, which equals to 86% of the Malaysian total population in the same period (32.57 million) (Kemp, 2021). According to the report, 99.4% of users access social media via mobile phones and they spend three hours daily on social media.

In a survey conducted by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) in 2020 found that young cohorts in their 20's and 30's formed the country's highest number of Internet users (a total of 67.2%), with 46% and 21.2% respectively. Among the various social media platforms, Facebook continues to top the list despite the platform suffers a drop in its users from 97.3% in 2018 to 91.7% in 2020; meanwhile, YouTube, Instagram and Twitter show increment in their user base (MCMC, 2020). Similar findings emerged in the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021 with Facebook tops the Malaysian most used social media and messaging for news list, followed by WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram, Telegram and Twitter (Zaharom Nain, 2021).

As observed by the MCMC report (2020), the five most frequent online activities among the Malaysian Internet users are text messaging, visiting social networking platforms, watching or downloading video/online TV, voice/video calling and information surveillance. As suggested by Farrah Dina Yusop and Melati Sumari (2013), socializing and sharing the latest updates on social media were the most popular online daily activities among the Malaysian young adults aged between 20 and 24, followed by information searching activities, reading, sharing information and online shopping. In a similar vein, Safurah Abd Jalil et al. (2010) observed

that Malaysian youth consume social networking sites (SNSs) mainly to socialize with friends (64%), followed by seeking information (45%).

The Net Generation

Several competing terms claim to pinpoint a generation of young people who are identified as the very first cohort in human development history that have grown up bathing in bits. They witnessed the rise of the computer, the Internet and other digital technologies, and these high-tech inventions have eventually become part of their lives (Tapscott, 2009). Among the three most common terms in circulation are the Net Generation (Tapscott, 1998, 2009), Digital Natives (Prensky, 2001a, 2001b) and Millenials (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). As suggested by Jones et al. (2010) and echoed by Roodt and Peier (2013), in general, the terms are used interchangeably despite each way of describing carries some distinct features of this new generation.

Distinctive Characteristics of the Net Generation

There are a number of distinctive attitudinal and behavioural characteristics or "norms" (as coined by Tapscott, 2009) that distinguish the Net Geners from previous generations. Among the uniqueness are: digitally literate (technology savvy), freedom, customization, scrutiny, integrity, collaboration, entertainment, speed, multitasking, visual and kinaesthetic, social and connected, and global orientation (Kim & Ammeter, 2018; Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005; Prensky, 2001a, 2001b; Tapscott, 2009; Worley, 2011).

Having grown up in a media-rich environment (Kim & Ammeter, 2018) with widespread access to technology, the Net Geners are fluent with technological tools and want to control technology (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005; Worley, 2011). They possess know-how to access and handle the massive amounts of information on the Internet (Kim & Ammeter, 2018; Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005).

Growing up digital empowers this cohort freedom and opportunities to explore the world, learn things, make friends (including dealing with strangers), question the authorities etc. incomparably different than their parents and grandparents (Tapscott, 2009). As such, this generation enjoys the freedom to be their most comfortable self, both in their daily life and at work, and also insist on freedom of choice (Tapscott, 2009).

The Net Geners always look for fun and fantasy, even when they are at work because they believe in enjoying what they do for a living (Prensky, 2001a, 2001b; Tapscott, 2009). They don't draw clear lines between seeking entertainment, learning or working because experience in doing something always says louder than the function of something (Tapscott, 2009). As this cohort grows up with personalized gadgets that allow them not just getting what they want, but determining when and where they want it according to individual needs and desires, they expect customization, albeit they may have no intention to make any changes (Tapscott, 2009).

As they are always being pervaded with abundance of information sources on the Internet, including unreliable information, the Net Geners can be scrutiny in terms of their ability to distinguish fact from fiction with "trust but verify" practice (Kim & Ammeter, 2018; Tapscott, 2009, p. 80). What lies underneath a scrutinizer is the quest for integrity. Net Geners value honesty, considerate, transparent and accountability greatly, and they expect others (including public and private institutions, media, government and politicians) to behave with integrity (Kim & Ammeter, 2018; Tapscott, 2009; Worley, 2011).

To fellow Net Geners, speed is part of their life and thus, they are impatient and always demand for an instant response (Kim & Ammeter, 2018; Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005; Prensky, 2001a, 2001b; Tapscott, 2009; Worley, 2011), so as to gain instant gratification (Prensky, 2001a, 2001b; Tapscott, 2009). As this cohort expects immediacy, they prefer a parallel process and multitasking (Kim & Ammeter, 2018; Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005; Prensky, 2001a, 2001b; Worley, 2011). Besides that, the Net Geners are more attracted to graphics more than text (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005; Prensky, 2001a, 2001b) and their experience-oriented nature triggers them to prefer doing things, but not just thinking or talking about things (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005).

The Net Geners value relationship greatly as they gravitate toward activities that encourage social interactions (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005; Worley, 2011). They are socially and emotionally open to sharing with strangers on the Net (Kim & Ammeter, 2018; Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). They function best when they are networked (Prensky, 2001a), and they have seized on the potential of networked media to be always connected (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). For instance, they are more likely to work together online in chat groups, use share files for various formal and informal activities and enjoy playing multiuser video games (Tapscott, 2009). They are confident of themselves in offering useful insights and feel good for being part of a knowledgeable and exclusive group (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005; Tapscott, 2009). Via various forms of collaboration, they tend to influence each other, of which Tapscott termed it as "N-Fluence networks" (2009, p. 89). Given the great ability to be always connected, they are more global-oriented compared to previous generations (Kim & Ammeter, 2018). They display openness to diversity, differences and sharing, and are more comfortable to meet strangers online (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005; Worley, 2011).

Table 1: Summary of the Characteristics of the Net Generation from Extant Literature

Scholarship	Distinctive Characteristics
Kim & Ammeter (2018)	Technology savvy, refinability, sense of entitlement, social, scrutiny, global orientation, multitasking, free expression, immediate, regulation
Oblinger & Oblinger (2005)	Digitally literate, connected, immediate, multitasking, experiential, social, teams, structure, visual and kinaesthetic, things that matter
Prensky (2001a, 2001b)	Twitch-speed, multitasking, graphic-first, random-access, active, connected, fun, fantasy, quick-payoff
Tapscott (2009)	Freedom, customization, scrutiny, integrity, collaboration, entertainment, speed, innovation
Worley (2011)	Technologically advanced, sheltered/protected, sense of entitlement, diverse, extremely social, close to parents, education oriented, self-confident, multitasking, impatient, materialistic, self-centred

Research Methodology

An online self-administered survey questionnaire was conducted in December 2018 at the Universiti Malaya (UM), Malaysia, as part of a larger study on politically participative Net Generation Malaysians. Links to the online survey questionnaires in three languages (Malay, English and Chinese) via Google form were attached to an email invitation sent to all UM students via an official email application system provided to the UM community. Screener questions were set to ensure respondents are (i) Malaysian students aged between 18 and 24

(during the survey period); and (ii) they use social media specifically for political news and information. This returned 379 valid respondents.

Measures

Respondents' demographic characteristics include gender, age, ethnicity and party affiliation (neutral or non-neutral).

Political information consumption habit refers to attention respondents pay to news and information about current events, public issues or politics daily. The measure was adopted and adapted from Hao et al. (2014). Respondents were asked, on a six-point scale (1 = I don't use it; 2 = less than 15 minutes a day; 3 = 16 – 30 minutes a day; 4 = 31 – 45 minutes a day; 5 = 46 – 60 minutes a day; 6 = more than one hour a day), how much time they spend on each of the following media platforms to obtain information about current events, public issues or politics on a typical day: print newspaper or e-newspaper; television; radio; news websites or portals; Facebook; and other social media.

Political knowledge refers to the possession or mastery of information about one's political environment (Plaesu et al., 2011). Two dimensions of political knowledge, namely *factual knowledge* and *structural knowledge* were examined. Factual knowledge is defined as "being able to correctly identify bits of information" (Eveland & Hively, 2009; Neuman, 1981; as cited in Beam et al., 2016, p. 216). Structural knowledge is conceived as "being able to see the connections that exist between related concepts" (Eveland et al., 2004; Neuman, 1981; as cited in Beam et al., 2016, p. 216). This study tested respondents' factual knowledge with lower-level questions that measured the bits and pieces of facts on political and regional affairs with measure adopted and adapted from Wen et al. (2013) and Stephen et al. (2014). Given that structural knowledge received lesser attention from the current scholarship (Beam et al., 2016), a Malaysian scale of structural knowledge questions were formulated based on the factual knowledge questions to test the respondents' ability to see connections between the bits and pieces of political facts, political concepts, national and regional incidents, events or decisions. All questions are open-ended. The researcher coded whether or not a respondent answered a given question correctly (1 = correct answer; 0 = incorrect answer or 'don't know').

Political efficacy was examined from two dimensions, with nine items made up of *internal political efficacy* and *external political efficacy* which were adopted and adapted from extant scholarship (e.g., Barrett & Zani, 2015; Hao et al., 2014; Miller et al., 1980, as cited in Kim, 2015; Willnat et al., 2013; Yang & DeHart, 2016; Zhang et al., 2013). Internal political efficacy involves one's subjective evaluation of own political knowledge competence and the self-conviction that the actions taken will impact the political environment (Jung et al., 2011; Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010; Reichert, 2016). External political efficacy emerges when one believes "the government authorities and institutions are responsive to citizen demands" (Niemi et al., 1991; as cited in Kenski & Stroud, 2006, p. 175). For each item, respondents were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). There are three items in external political efficacy were reversed coded due to the nature of reversed sentence structure (1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree).

Measure for *political interest* was constructed based on Barrett and Zani's (2015) study. Respondents were asked to specify their level of political interest based on three specific statements on a ten-point Likert scale (1 = not at all to 10 = to a great extent).

Findings

The 379 respondents who rely mainly on social media platforms as their primary source of political news and information were made up of 287 females (75.7%) and 92 males (24.3%) (age mean = 21). Among them, 230 (60.7%) are Malays, followed by 111 Chinese (29.3%), 24 Indians (6.3%), and 14 are from other ethnicity groups (3.7%). According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2018), the estimated population of Malaysia in 2018 was 32.4 million with Bumiputera 69.1%, Chinese 23%, Indian 6.9% and Others 1%. Thus respondents surveyed in the current study would likely reflect the Malaysian population composition. Majority of the respondents (68.3%) are neutral in politics.

According to the survey findings in Figure 1, 180 (male = 50; female = 130) or 47.5% respondents rely on Facebook as their main source of political information, while the remaining 199 or 52.5% (male = 42; female = 157) reported that they rely mainly on other social media platforms for political information. Among these platforms, Twitter has the most user (27.7%), followed by Instagram (14.0%), WhatsApp (4.5%), YouTube (4.5%), blog (0.5%), Reddit (0.5%), 9GAG (0.3%), LinkedIn (0.3%) and Telegram (0.3%).
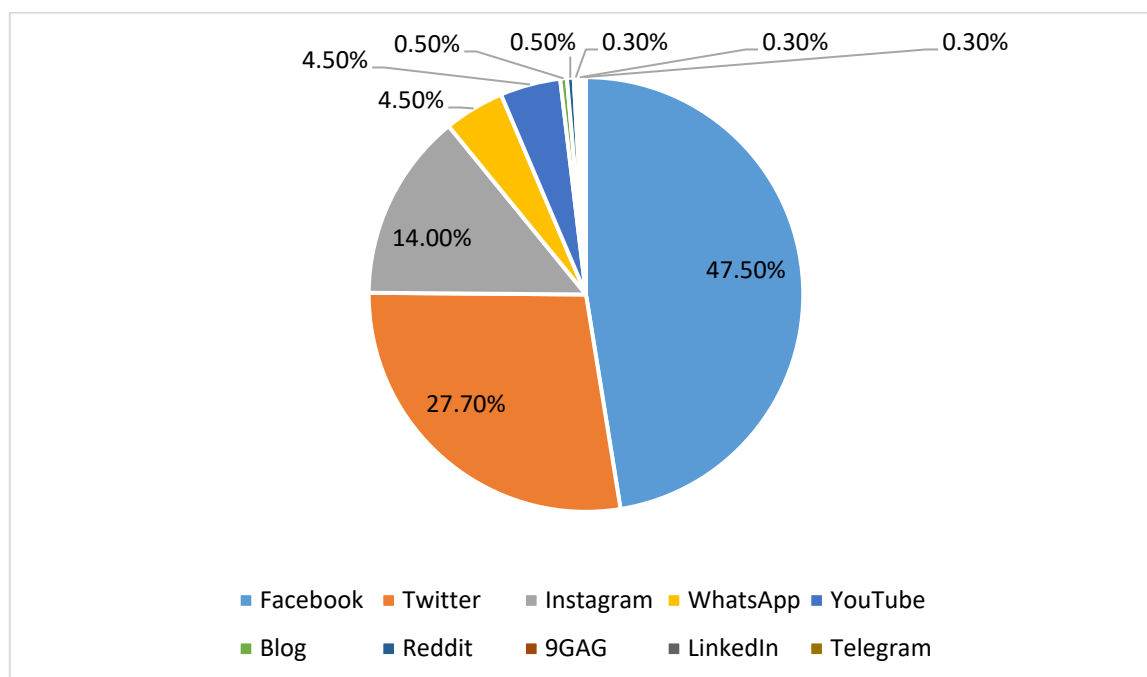
Figure 1: Distribution of Various Social Media Platforms Used by the Respondents for Political Information

Referring to the ethnicity distribution of the top five social media platforms as shown in Figure 2, majority of those who take Facebook as their primary source of political information are Chinese (52.2%), followed by Malays (37.2%), Indians (8.3%) and Others (2.2%). Meanwhile, majority of those who rely heavily on Twitter for political information are Malays (91.4%), followed by Others (3.8%), Indians (2.9%) and Chinese (1.9%). As for Instagram, most of its users are Malays (79.2%), followed by Chinese and Others (7.5% each) and Indians (5.7%). Most of the WhatsApp users are Malays (64.7%), followed by Chinese (17.6%), Indians (11.8%) and Others (5.9%). Meanwhile, most of the YouTube users are Malays (58.8%), followed by Chinese (41.2%).
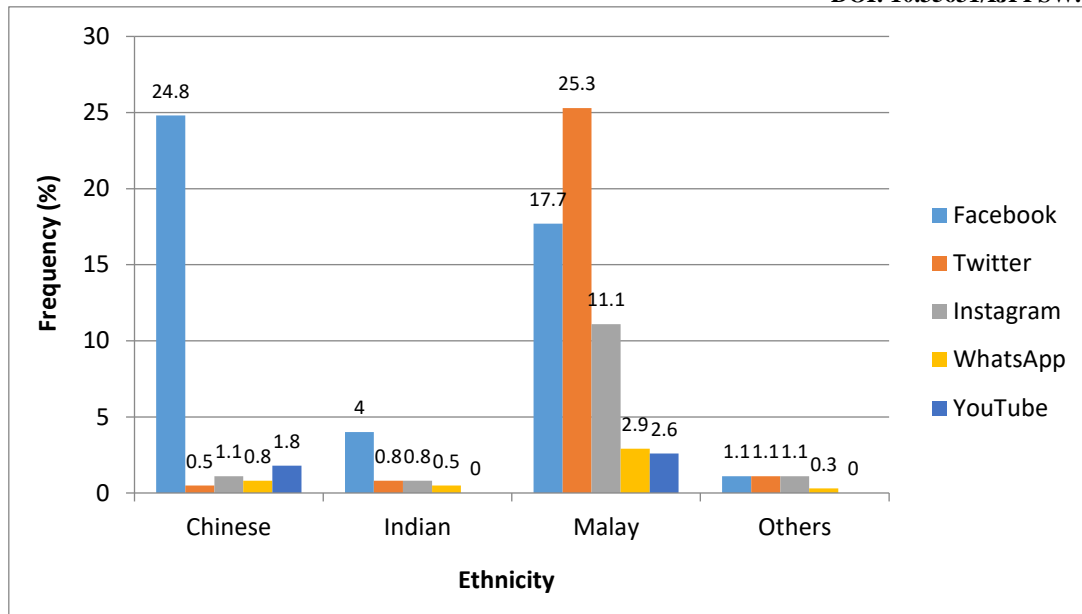
Figure 2: Respondent Ethnicity Distribution of Various Social Media Platforms

As shown in Table 2 and Table 3, younger social media users prefer non-Facebook social media platforms as their major channel for political information, while the elders prefer Facebook. Among these non-Facebook social media platforms, most of the respondents use Twitter (27.7%), followed by Instagram (14.0%), WhatsApp (4.5%) and YouTube (4.5%).

Table 2: Respondent Age by Political Information Consumption Channel

Political Information Consumption Channel	Mean	Standard Deviation (SD)
Facebook	21.706	1.588
Other Social Media Platforms	20.724	1.699

Table 3: Respondent Age by the Five Most Popular Social Media Platforms in the Study

Year of Birth	Age	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	WhatsApp	YouTube
2000	18	0	1	2	0	0
1999	19	11	28	18	5	3
1998	20	42	29	13	4	4
1997	21	32	18	7	5	2
1996	22	35	6	5	1	6
1995	23	24	4	6	2	1
1994	24	36	19	2	0	1

As shown in Table 4, majority of the respondents reported that they no longer using or indeed spend very little time on traditional media platforms such as newspapers, television and radio for political information. Among those who spend more than 15 minutes a day on these traditional media platforms are 21.0% for newspaper, 24.5% for television, and 17.4% for radio. 40.1% of the respondents reported that they spend more than 15 minutes a day on news websites or portals for political information.

Table 4: Political Information Consumption Habit of the Respondents

Media Platform	I don't use it	Less than 15 minutes a day	16 – 30 minutes a day	31 – 45 minutes a day	46 – 60 minutes a day	More than one hour a day
Print Newspaper/ E-Newspaper	174 (45.9%)	125 (33.0%)	49 (12.9%)	18 (4.7%)	3 (0.8%)	10 (2.6%)
Television	185 (48.8%)	101 (26.6%)	57 (15.0%)	13 (3.4%)	12 (3.2%)	11 (2.9%)
Radio	213 (56.2%)	100 (26.4%)	41 (10.8%)	14 (3.7%)	8 (2.1%)	3 (0.8%)
News Websites/ Portals	88 (23.2%)	139 (36.7%)	91 (24.0%)	30 (7.9%)	15 (4.0%)	16 (4.2%)
Facebook	79 (20.8%)	67 (17.7%)	65 (17.2%)	49 (12.9%)	38 (10.0%)	81 (21.4%)
Other Social Media Platforms	35 (9.2%)	54 (14.2%)	69 (18.2%)	59 (15.6%)	46 (12.1%)	116 (30.6%)

Results of the current study observe a majority of the respondents possess better factual political knowledge than structural political knowledge. As shown in Table 5, for factual political questions, all respondents answered FK1 correctly. Most of the respondents couldn't provide a correct answer for FK3. For structural political questions, majority of the respondents answered SK1 correctly. However, many were not able to provide correct answers for the remaining two questions (SK2 & SK3).

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics for Items Related to Factual and Structural Political Knowledge (N = 379)

No	Item	Correct Answer	Percentage (%)
FK1	Name the current Prime Minister of Malaysia.	379	100
FK2	Which political coalition holds the majority in the Malaysian House of Representatives (Dewan Rakyat)?	285	75.2
FK3	Name the largest opposition party in Malaysia.	94	24.8
FK4	What is the maximum time period between each general election in Malaysia?	314	82.8
FK5	Among the 11 countries listed, which country is not a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)?	291	76.8
SK1	What is the main controversy surrounding Najib Razak?	365	96.3
SK2	In Malaysia, who is allowed to vote in a general election?	47	12.4
SK3	Myanmar's membership was once been called to be stripped off from ASEAN. What is the main reason for this call?	5	1.3

FK: Factual Political Knowledge; SK: Structural Political Knowledge

As shown in Table 6, Chinese respondents were able to provide more correct answers compared to respondents of other ethnicity background.

Table 6: Descriptive Statistics for Factual and Structural Political Knowledge of the Respondents by Ethnicity

Ethnicity	Factual Political Knowledge		Structural Political Knowledge	
	Total Wrong Answer in %	Total Correct Answer in %	Total Wrong Answer in %	Total Correct Answer in %
Chinese	30.63	69.37	61.56	38.44
Indian	37.50	62.50	63.89	36.11
Malay	37.18	62.82	64.20	35.80
Others	32.14	67.86	61.90	38.10

The overall mean of political efficacy is 3.165 (SD = 0.631), which indicates that respondents' level of political efficacy is slightly higher than the median of the scale (3). The overall mean of all five indicators of internal political efficacy is 2.9 (SD = 0.719); meanwhile the overall mean of all four indicators of external political efficacy is 3.429 (SD = 0.782). That said, respondents possess higher level of external political efficacy than internal political efficacy.

Among the five indicators of internal political efficacy, as shown in Table 7, indicator with the highest mean is "I am aware of the important political campaign issues in the election" (M = 3.40; SD = 0.924); while the lowest is "I have sufficient knowledge to participate in politics" (M = 2.52; SD = 0.927). As for external political efficacy, indicator with the highest mean is a reversed coded statement: "In this country, a few individuals have a lot of political power, while the rest of the people have very little power" (M = 3.55; SD = 0.917); while "Most of our leaders are dedicated to serve our country" scored the lowest mean (M = 3.02; SD = 0.978).

Table 7: Descriptive Statistics for Items Related to Internal and External Political Efficacy (N = 379)

No	Item	Mean	Standard Deviation
IPE1	I know more about politics than most people of my age	2.68	0.912
IPE2	I have sufficient knowledge to participate in politics	2.52	0.927
IPE3	I have good understanding of the political and electoral processes	3.08	0.953
IPE4	I am aware of the important political campaign issues in the election	3.40	0.924
IPE5	I know the backgrounds of the representatives in my constituency	2.82	0.976
EPE1	Most of our leaders are dedicated to serve our country	3.02	0.978
EPE2	The very powerful leaders in government care very little about the peoples' opinion	3.22	0.966
EPE3	In this country, a few individuals have a lot of political power, while the rest of the people have very little power	3.55	0.917
EPE4	Political parties are only interested in gaining votes but not about voters' opinions	3.52	0.995

IPE: Internal Political Efficacy; EPE: External Political Efficacy

Indian respondents possess the highest level of political efficacy (M = 3.321, SD = 0.642), followed by Malays (M = 3.236, SD = 0.597), Others (M = 3.019, SD = 0.629) and Chinese (M = 3.001, SD = 0.669) (Table 8).

Table 8: Internal and External Political Efficacy of the Respondents by Ethnicity

	Internal Political Efficacy				External Political Efficacy			
	Chinese	**Indian**	**Malay**	**Others**	**Chinese**	**Indian**	**Malay**	**Others**
Mean	2.732	3.058	2.976	2.729	3.270	3.583	3.497	3.310
Standard Deviation	0.757	0.699	0.701	0.500	0.828	0.788	0.737	0.974

Results in Table 9 reveal that male respondents possess higher level of political efficacy (M = 3.384, SD = 0.644) compared to female respondents (M = 3.094, SD = 0.611).

Table 9: Internal and External Political Efficacy of the Respondents by Gender

	Internal Political Efficacy		External Political Efficacy	
	Female	**Male**	**Female**	**Male**
Mean	2.833	3.109	3.355	3.659
Standard Deviation	0.723	0.670	0.750	0.837

Findings of the current study also found that despite levels of political efficacy among the respondents are very similar across different ages, but respondents aged 18 years (the youngest) possess the lowest level of political efficacy (Table 10).

Table 10: Political Efficacy of the Respondents by Age

	Year of Birth (Age)						
	2000 (18)	**1999 (19)**	**1998 (20)**	**1997 (21)**	**1996 (22)**	**1995 (23)**	**1994 (24)**
Mean	2.533	3.127	3.100	3.254	3.161	3.250	3.190
Standard Deviation	0.348	0.635	0.635	0.569	0.690	0.732	0.557

The overall mean of political interest is 5.446 (SD = 2.478), which indicates that respondents generally possess a moderate level of political interest (median score = 5.5). As shown in Table 11, majority of the respondents showed more interest in election news than socio-political issues and politics.

Table 11: Descriptive Statistics for Items Related to Political Interest (N = 379)

No	Item	Mean	Standard Deviation
PI1	I discuss socio-political issues with friends and acquaintances	5.127	2.470
PI2	I am interested in politics	5.077	2.477
PI3	I am interested in election news	6.135	2.488

PI: Political Interest

As shown in Table 12, Chinese was reported to have the highest level of political interest (M = 5.760, SD = 2.215), followed by Indians (M = 5.403, SD = 2.960), Malays (M = 5.346, SD = 2.528) and Others (M = 4.667, SD = 2.629). Meanwhile, males (M = 5.978, SD = 2.416) possess higher political interest than females (M = 5.275, SD = 2.477). Besides that, respondents at younger age possess lower level of political interest (Table 13).

Table 12: Political Interest of the Respondents by Ethnicity and Gender

	Ethnicity				Gender	
	Chinese	**Indian**	**Malay**	**Others**	**Female**	**Male**
Mean	5.760	5.403	5.346	4.667	5.275	5.978
Standard Deviation	2.215	2.960	2.528	2.629	2.477	2.416

Table 13: Political Interest of the Respondents by Age

	Year of Birth (Age)						
	2000 (18)	**1999 (19)**	**1998 (20)**	**1997 (21)**	**1996 (22)**	**1995 (23)**	**1994 (24)**
Mean	4.667	4.547	5.050	5.333	6.019	6.308	6.170
Standard Deviation	2.768	2.521	2.575	2.384	2.507	2.246	2.014

Discussion

In general, the ratio between female and male respondents who rely heavily on social media platforms for political news and information is identical to each other. Majority of the respondents, regardless of their ethnicity and age are no longer consuming or indeed spending very little time on traditional mass media platforms such as newspapers, television and radio for political information. This may be attributable to the changing media habits of the Net Geners. Another possible justification could be due to the Malaysian's distrust in the traditional media (Merdeka Center for Opinion Research, 2008), given the local traditional mainstream media are perceived to have close ties with the ruling parties, which has thus turned people online to seek for more 'balanced' news concerning the country's developmental issues (Chang & Tham, 2016).

Among the various social media platforms, Facebook is still the most popular platform for political information surveillance among the Net Geners, followed by Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp and YouTube. Despite younger users are turning away from Facebook, this finding resonates well with Chang and Tham's (2016), MCMC's (2020) and Zaharom Nain's (2021) analyses as discussed in earlier section.

When asked to identify their political affiliation, majority of the Net Geners claimed that they are politically neutral. As youth are always said to be politically apathetic, one may interpret the observation in the current study as the respondents are indeed neutral politically, or they may 'choose to be neutral because of no interest in politics'. This dynamic gap deserved more investigation in future studies.

In terms of political knowledge, respondents generally possess better factual knowledge than structural knowledge. This is indeed an indication that the Net Geners who participated in the current study know better the bits and pieces of political facts but possess a more inferior ability

to see connections between these bits and pieces of political realities, political concepts, national and regional incidents, events or decisions. Such findings correspond to Low's (2019) conclusion that news and information consumption behaviour on social media is not connected with any increase in knowledge of Malaysian politics. Earlier on, Dimitrova et al. (2014) too, concluded that social media has little impact on political knowledge. Likewise, Hao et al.'s (2014) study also showed evidence that reading news on social media doesn't necessarily make the respondents more politically knowledgeable. Bowyer and Kahne (2015) argued that prior political knowledge is indeed an important determinant of how much people will absorb available political information given that exposure alone doesn't lead to reception.

Tapscott (2009) opined that the constant conventional critics on the youth in politics were wrong. According to him, young people stay out of politics because they do not trust elected officials who are deemed selfish and institutions of government that are still practicing bureaucratic governance processes that are deemed "old-school". In contrast, the Net Geners believe in themselves to bring changes in many aspects, including their country, with expectations to collaborate with politicians, but no more approving the conventional "we vote, you rule" politics model as their parents do (Tapscott, 2009). However, the Malaysian Net Geners surveyed in the present study possess a greater external political efficacy than internal political efficacy, which contradicts Tapscott's observations on the Net Geners. The findings imply that the Malaysian Net Geners have more trust in the government and the authorities to address their demand and problems compared to trust in themselves with power to bring changes to the polity. This discrepancy could be due to cultural differences between developed western democracies and developing Asian democracies.

Also to note that, to learn as to why respondents generally possess greater external political efficacy than internal political efficacy, the period of conducting the survey might have some influences on the results. The study was conducted seven months after the Malaysia's GE14, in which Malaysians witnessed a change in the government via their votes. One would regard the historical change of the Malaysian government as complex interactions between 'hope for change' and 'change for hope'. The winning of the Opposition coalition (Alliance for Hope/Pakatan Harapan, in short PH) is an indication that people have trust in the newly elected administration (in power from May 2018 – February 2020) to bring forth positive change to the country and the people's lives.

Respondents expressed a moderate level of political interest with majority of them expressed higher interest in election news. Again, this could be due to the survey period, which was seven months after the GE14. The historic change of Malaysian government since independence six decades ago has since triggered many to develop an interest in following election news.

Differences in Gender
Extant scholarship generally suggests that men are more politically active than their female counterparts. For instance, having studied the gender gap in political participation based on the young Asian context, of whom aged between 20 and 28, and possess similar educational backgrounds, Wen et al. (2013) found that female respondents were less likely than the male respondents to participate in both online and offline political activities, less knowledgeable and less efficacious politically than male respondents. In their study to investigate the impact of social media on political efficacy and vote intention in the University of Gujrat, Tufail et al. (2015) found that males possess a higher level of political efficacy than females. Examining the relationship between news consumption via various types of media and political/civic

engagement of university students in Singapore, Hao et al. (2014) found that male respondents demonstrated higher levels of participation and knowledge than females. Findings of the past literature are indeed reflected in the current study. Analyses of the current study suggest that gender gaps in political participation persist across democracies. Males were found to possess a higher level of political efficacy and political interest than females.

Differences in Age

Even though Facebook was found to be the most popular source of political information among the Net Geners surveyed, analyses of the results suggest that Facebook is more popular among the elder age respondents. Respondents aged below 20 instead prefer other social media platforms, in particular, Twitter and Instagram. This finding supports latest research findings suggesting that young people are now taking Facebook breaks and quitting Facebook (Perrin, 2018).

Respondents born in the year 2000 were found to possess the lowest level of political efficacy (both internal and external). Besides that, younger age respondents, in particular those born in the years 1999 and 2000, were found to exhibit a lower level of political interest. These findings are sending a message that younger respondents, in particular those born in 2000 are less politically active. Again, this deserved more scrutiny in future studies.

Anyhow, analyses of the current study draw our attention back to the prevalent stereotype on the younger cohorts that they are generally politically apathetic may be true to a certain extent, at least in the context of the current study. The Malaysian lawmakers approved a legal amendment to lower the voting age to 18 (previously was 21) on July 16, 2019. The change also included provisions for voters to become registered voters on electoral rolls automatically, as well as lower the age of election candidate to 18 years old. Due to younger respondents were found to be more politically apathetic compared to their elder counterparts, what is worrying now and worth our attention is their maturity and readiness to participate in politics, in particular, to cast a vote at 18 years old.

Differences in Ethnicity

Chinese and Indian respondents prefer obtaining political information from Facebook, while Malays prefer Twitter, followed by Instagram, WhatsApp and YouTube. This finding corresponds to an earlier study by Chang and Tham (2016). According to them, Facebook is a prominent communication and entertainment tool, as well as source of information by the majority of the Chinese focus group informants.

Chinese possess a higher level of political knowledge than the rest. Besides that, Chinese are among the rest to maintain the highest level of political interest, followed by Indians, Malays and Others. However, being more politically knowledgeable and have more interest in politics may not guarantee a higher level of political efficacy among the Chinese respondents. On the contrary, findings of the current study instead discover that Chinese possess the lowest level of political efficacy. Meanwhile, Indian is the most politically efficacious race, followed by Malay and Others.

Limitations and Recommendations

First, the sampling method employed in the study was not robust enough to generalize the findings. The study relied on Malaysian students with specific age range at a local university as the target population. Despite UM's local student population is made up of individuals from

different states in Malaysia, with diverse ethnic background, which would potentially infer the Malaysian community in general, yet, this study makes no claim of representativeness to all the Malaysian Net Geners on the prevalence of social media use or any other descriptive factors. Future studies may consider to enlarge the scope of study by taking into account participants of different demographic background instead of university students, as well as taking into context the differing political landscapes between the Peninsular and East Malaysia, where the former is much more developed than the latter in terms of developments and wealth.

The study achieved its purpose to identify socio-political characteristics of the Malaysian Net Geners who merely consume political information on social media platforms. This study relied solely on quantitative survey measures and thus are unlikely to capture the nuances of social media behaviour as well as political attitudes and behaviour of the respondents. Future studies may want to consult a wide variety of methodological approaches (e.g., interviews) to explore factors or forces behind these dynamic gaps. This may include taking into account of other civic factors such as civic, ethnic and religious consciousness, especially in the context of a multiracial, multireligious and multicultural nation like Malaysia.

Conclusion

Having realized that the Net Geners who are growing up bathing in bits will be potential leaders, consumers as well as users who possess great power in shaping the country's social, economic and political landscape, the paper is important in relation to its contribution of a preliminary understanding of the socio-political characteristics of the Malaysian networked generation who rely heavily on social media for political information. This paper comes at a time of great challenge for political stakeholders to identify and subsequently target potential young voters, in particular the first-time youth voters. In addition, these exploratory findings would provide significant insights into a given situation and facilitate more precise research problem and hypothesis development in future research endeavours.

Young adults have a large part to play in a democracy, and it is detrimental to a nation if they no longer take an interest in politics. The 'one size fits all' approach may no longer work well to date, be it in youth research, political communication or electoral campaigning. As such, continuous efforts in the inception of new insights and to impose greater selectivity and consistency in measuring the Net Geners' personality traits as well as their political participation is substantial for the planning and execution of significant studies, which include electoral campaigning, messaging and relevant political activities for an emerging class of new generation voters.

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