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Political Discussions Among Young Malay Voters on WhatsApp During Malaysia's 14th General Election: A Case Study of IIUM Students

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ABSTRACT

This study was aimed to explore the usage of WhatsApp among young Malaysian voters in discussing political issues in Malaysia. In addition, it was also conducted to investigate the kinds of political and related issues discussed by the members of the created WhatsApp groups. WhatsApp, categorized as Mobile Messaging Applications (MMAs), was regarded in past studies as providing a new avenue for group of individuals to assemble virtually and discuss politics. In the context of this study, WhatsApp was expected to enable any politically savvy individuals to engage in prolong and detailed political discussions, regardless of their location and time. In the context of 14th Malaysian General Election (GE14), held on 9 May 2018, WhatsApp was seen by political observers and media practitioners as an attractive virtual gathering place for some Malaysians to express and share their opinions and observations of politics in Malaysia. This study employed a virtual focus group, with respondents assigned to two different WhatsApp groups, i.e. Group A and Group B. The discussions among the members of the groups were monitored and observed from 23 April 2018 until 10 May 2018. Both groups were exposed to political news i.e. pro-Barisan Nasional (BN) or/and pro-Opposition, reported by several news agencies. The Group A was fed with pro-BN news only, whereas the Group B was fed with pro-BN and pro-Opposition news. This was done to see whether or not the types of news fed influenced the topics or issues discussed by the respondents in the groups. The findings of the study showed that some respondents, in both groups, actively participated in political discussion on the WhatsApp. The interactive and user-friendly features of the application that allowed the respondents to express their opinions and at the same time attached additional information or evidence turned their discussions into evidence-based and detailed exchange of ideas on Malaysian politics. The results also indicated that WhatsApp also provided the ambience of real political discussions, similar to that of face-to-face group communication.

Keywords: *General Election (GE14), political discussions, WhatsApp*

INTRODUCTION

The development and proliferation of new social media, whether social network sites (SNS) or instant messaging apps or short message services, are regarded by many media practitioners, political analysts and scholars as one of the antecedents for a more open and dynamic discussion of political and other related issues in Malaysia (Salman et al., 2018; Raslan, 2018; Abdullah & Anuar, 2018; Willnat et al., 2013). With the invention of more advanced telecommunication gadgets such as smartphones or tablets, the communication process becomes easier and more interactive, with different types of data which can be shared in a real-time context. The social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, provide another interesting platform or avenue for Malaysians especially young Malaysians to express and share their opinions and views on any issues in Malaysia. These social media enable users to communicate across geographical boundaries and time zones. Among the topics that interest young Malaysians on instant messaging apps such as WhatsApp is politics. The young Malaysians became more engaged with the political discussions and they wanted to be the active participants in deciding which political system should be implemented or practiced in Malaysia. This paper is aimed to explore how WhatsApp enhances the process of communicating political issues among young Malay voters during the 14th

General Election. In addition, this study is also carried out to investigate the kinds of political and related issues discussed by the respondents.

WhatsApp and Group Communication

The availability of many choices of social network sites and instant-messaging tools changes the way people communicate and exchanges ideas or information. O'Hara et al., (2014, p. 1) stated that "The development of information and communication technologies continues unabated. An ever-richer array of channels confronts the user – email, SMS [Short Message Service], social networking sites, audio calling, video calling, instant messaging and so on ... it is through these that people engage with each other in ever more diverse and nuanced ways". These technologies or inventions, whether hardware or software change the conventional one-to-one or one-to-many format of mediated communication. Based on a study on group-based communication on WhatsApp conducted by Seufert et al., (2016) at the University of Würzburg, Germany, which was participated by 209 respondents, it was indicated that 85.7% of the respondents preferred to use WhatsApp compared to SMS. As officially stated by WhatsApp (2018) on its website, "More than 1 billion people in over 180 countries use WhatsApp to stay in touch with friends and family, anytime and anywhere. What is free and offers simple, secure, reliable messaging and calling, available on phones all over the world".

The transformation of communication technologies, both hardware and software, changes the nature and content of interactions among individuals on the virtual or cyber world. For instance, WhatsApp can be accessed on many platforms: desktop computers, laptops, tablets or smartphones. The ability to use one single application across platforms encourages users to utilize it in their daily communication. According to Bossetta (2018), the functionality of social media, comprising the hardware, the layout of the graphical user interface (GUI), the broadcast feed, supported media, and cross-platform integration influences user behaviour on virtual space.

In the Malaysian context, Azman et al., (2013, p. 13) conducted a nationwide survey, which involved 2124 respondents recruited from various ethnic groups (i.e. Malay, Chinese, Indian, and *Bumiputera* of Sabah and Sarawak), on digital maturity among users of Information Communication Technology and the results showed that 70 percent of the respondents downloaded mobile communication apps, such as WhatsApp and Skype, which were considered useful for managing their life routines. They also added that most of the respondents in the study utilised the features offered by the digital technologies in many aspects of daily routines and activities. Based on his personal observation during his field trips, Raslan (2018) posted on his Twitter, "I've been to rural Kedah three times over the past six months. Everybody – the *imam*, the rice farmer, the *mak cik* manning the *warung* – tells me they get their information through instant messaging. ... WhatsApp is even more dominant in urban areas". In other words, the penetration of this instant messaging application is beyond the big cities in Malaysia as it gains popularity among those living in rural areas.

Due to its highly user-friendly features, WhatsApp provides a more interesting and interactive communication platform for many users, with a minimal cost. Unlike the other existing social network sites or instant messaging applications, WhatsApp enables as many as 256 individuals to be in a group, with unlimited group affiliation or membership (WhatsApp, 2018). This feature transforms the virtual group discussion or conversation to be a many-to-many format of communication, rather one-to-one or one-to-many which is one of the common features for other social network sites or instant messaging tool (Caetano et al., 2018; Sánchez-Moya & Cruz-Moya, 2015). Technically, according to O'Hara et al. (2014, p. 4), "WhatsApp presents IM chats as a series of threaded messages on a wall, using spatial position and colour to differentiate sender and receiver messages ... These chats can be performed either between 2 individuals ... or as a group". Thus, more ideas from many users can be shared and responded on WhatsApp. Caetano et al. (2018) stated that WhatsApp, "has a class of public groups that allow members to share invites on public platforms, thus bringing more people to participate of different discussion groups". In other words, unlike the other applications within MMAs or instant messaging (IM) categories, WhatsApp provides the privacy needed by users but at the same allows users to communicate publicly within specific groups, based on invites. WhatsApp, as described by Sánchez-

Moya and Cruz-Moya (2015), offers a variety of interactive features for exchanging information such as emoticons, photos, videos and web links. The distinct and unique features of WhatsApp attracted more than 1.3 billion users globally and it becomes more popular for news sharing or dissemination (Caetano et al., 2018)

Social Media and Virtual Political Discussion

Many studies have been conducted to analyse how individuals or voters used social media to discuss political issues and share political information (Salman et al., 2018; Oyeboode & Adegaju, 2017; Kaur & Verma, 2016; Kligler-Vilenchik, 2016; Zainon, Hashim & Ismail, 2015; Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project, 2012). In their study on e-political participation among students of Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Shah Alam campus, Zainon et al., (2015, p. 4) found that there was "a high level of online political participation" among the sampled students. In addition, the results of the study also indicated that rather than directly participating in discussions, the students preferred to be readers, followers and observers. Based on their study, Zainon et al., (2015) concluded that Malaysian youths used social networking platforms for political engagement. Another study on political participation in social media that involved 993 respondents from states in Peninsular Malaysia which was conducted by Salman et al., (2018, p. 158) also came out with similar findings, where the sampled respondents "expressed an average agreement on political participation through social media" and regarded social media as one of the important tools for gaining political supports. The study mentioned that the respondents used social media as an avenue for discussing politics with family members and friend (Salman et al., 2018). Kligler-Vilenchik (2016), who content analysed political talk on WhatsApp among Israeli citizens, interviewed as well as observed the participants, found that the instant messaging application was used as a tool for managing and resolving conflicts among the heterogenous respondents. Thus, the purpose of using WhatsApp varies from individuals to individuals, even in the context of political communication.

In the context of Malaysia, with the increasing number of smartphones sold in Malaysia, equipped and installed with the latest social network sites and instant-messaging tools or mobile messaging applications, the discussion and sharing of political information and ideas become easier and faster. According to Caetano et al. (2018), "Due to its impressive penetration in many countries, WhatsApp turned out to be an important platform for political propaganda and election campaigns" and in some countries such as the UK and Australia, WhatsApp was used by political candidates to influence voters. In Malaysia, it is estimated that the number of WhatsApp users has already reached millions. Comparing the number of Malaysian population, which was 32.2 million in 2017, with the number of WhatsApp users in the same year, Yunus and Yusof (2018) reported that, "Statista, an international statistics portal, found that 68 percent of Malaysians were active on WhatsApp in the same quarter, meaning there are a staggering 21.9 million users". Thus, the impact of WhatsApp on Malaysians' access to information as well as the ability to further disseminate any information or news, including political information, cannot be underestimated.

According to Kaur and Verma (2015, p. 31), "Political campaigns in today's era are not limited to rallies, speeches to deal with crowds and masses rather social media is an emerging tool to share information, influence and engage people for political participation". Even though freedom of expression is very much guaranteed by Article 10 of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, the sense of insecurity and vulnerability can be observed among Malaysians due to cases of arrests and imprisonments resulting from critical political expressions. With the assumption that their identities are hidden on the Internet or cyber world, the new generations are more comfortable with expressing their thoughts and ideas using social media, which includes WhatsApp. In the context of Malaysia, based on their study on voters' usage of social media for political engagement, Salman et al. (2018, p. 158) stated that the participants "expressed an average agreement on political participation through social media." Despite all the advantages offered by WhatsApp in term of public expression of political ideas or sentiments, did Malaysians discuss real political issues in Malaysia (actively) or they simply shared information from the conventional or new mass media with other WhatsApp users? Another concern of the paper is to what extent WhatsApp provided a platform of open discussions of political matters and

what were the dominant topics or issues discussed by the users on the so-called uncensored social media? These concerns are the main issues analysed and discussed in the paper.

METHODS

Based on the existing literature on social media and politics or general election in Malaysia, there is a lack of understanding on how WhatsApp enables political participation among Malay youth or students of higher learning institutions. This study was also exploratory since limited empirical studies found on how WhatsApp used as a virtual gathering place for political communication and engagement among Malaysian youngsters or university students or to what extent the instant messaging application encourage or reinvigorate online political participation among young Malaysians. The study is needed to contribute to the corpus of research literature especially in the Malaysian context. This study employed a qualitative method for data collection and basic descriptive analysis for analyzing the data. This section explains the methods employed for this study i.e. virtual focus group and basic descriptive statistical analysis for reporting the result. Since the main unit of analysis in this study is the participants, it is vital to approach the data qualitatively to enable the identification of political issues discussed by each of them and whether or not their discussions reflect the news that were shared with them.

Participants

Participants were selected using convenience and snowball sampling procedures. These two types of sampling procedures are categorised as non-probability sampling techniques in which the respondents were selected due to their availability and their familiarity or understanding of the studied concepts (Wimmer & Dominick, 2014; Baxter & Babbie, 2004). Besides, another possible reason for recruiting a certain group of people as respondents was the researcher's ability to access the prospective respondents. For instance, in the context of snowball sampling, the respondents were selected based on the suggestion made by the key informants with the assumption that they have or possess the right knowledge or understanding of the studied concepts. In this regard, the main criterion for selecting the participants was the political involvement or knowledge of the participants. They were regarded as having an understanding of political issues in Malaysia.

Invitation letter and information sheet were distributed to the potential participants prior to recruitment. The confidentiality of the students participating in this research was ensured and for this reason, pseudonyms were used to report the findings. Participants for the experiment were recruited using a WhatsApp group link based on these main criteria; interest in the political scenario, eligible voters, current IIUM students, and voluntary participation. Since IIUM is mostly dominated by Malay students, the sample lacks participants from other ethnic groups particularly Chinese and Indian.

Generalisation is not the main intended purpose of this study, therefore, a non-random sample of appropriate size is acceptable. The main intent of the virtual focus group is to provide insights and to understand rather than infer, hence, lesser number of sample is sufficient. At the beginning of the experiment, Group A and Group B were consisted of 25 and 26 participants respectively, with a total of 49 undergraduates and two postgraduate students. There were 15 male and 10 female participants in the Group A and 21 male and five female members in Group B (See Table 1).

Table 1 Information of Participants by Gender

Gender	Group A	Group B
Male	15	21
Female	10	5
Total	25	26

Five members left the former group in the first three days of the study as compared to only four members who left in the latter group in the first week of the study. To reach the determined number of the participant, i.e. 25, the coders tried to recruit new members, however, only one member was recruited in the Group A and no new member was added in the other group. It was also recorded that

there were five active members in the Group A while the Group B recorded six active participants. The rest only participated a few times. The participants' age ranged from 22 years old to 36 years old. The participants were also recruited from different Kulliyah as shown in Table 2. The experiment started from the day of candidates' nomination, 28 April 2018, until 10 May 2018 the day after the GE14.

Table 2 Information of Participants by Kulliyah

Kulliyah	Group A	Group B
Ahmad Ibrahim Kulliyah of Law	0	2
Kulliyah of Economics & Management Sciences	2	3
Kulliyah of Engineering	2	4
Kulliyah of Information & Communication Technology	2	1
Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge & Human Sciences	16	16
Kulliyah of Sciences	3	0
Total	25	26

Design

As stated earlier, this study employed qualitative content analysis to examine virtual focus group discussions among the Malay university students. Methodologically, the utilization of the virtual focus group, as in the context of academic research in Malaysia, was not a common approach for collecting data. Qualitative content analysis was chosen because the method is convenient and flexible to gather many kinds of data. As Weber (1990) stated, content analysis is flexible as it can be tailored to suit a researcher's interest, the problem under study as well as the theoretical foundation of the research. Content analysis further assists the systematic gathering of written text to be categorised using short codes. The process, as explained by Bauer (2000) is a "systematic classification and counting of text units [that will] distil a large amount of material into a short description of some of its features" (pp. 132-133). The goal of the process is to "provide knowledge and understanding" (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992, p. 314) on the studied phenomenon. The study opted for directed content analysis as detailed out by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) where categories of codes were based on existing research. The method is appropriate as the researchers have identified several key concepts as the initial categories in the coding book.

In electoral studies, content analysis is commonly used by researchers (Idid, 2017). For example, Ghazali, Mohamed, Nasir, and Manan (2019) content analysed selected Facebook and Instagram accounts of political candidates in an attempt to understand how these platforms were used to assist them during election campaign. Likewise, Towner and Munoz (2017) compared the posts and issues shared by Bernie Sanders and Hilary Clinton in 2016 American presidential primary using the same method. Another study that focused on the use of Instagram by Austrian President in 2016 presidential election campaign has also relied on content analysis. Based on these examples, content analysis helped in organising codes in the data collected which were later presented as meaningful categories to contribute in understanding questions under investigations.

Procedure

The method of investigation for this paper was the virtual focus group using WhatsApp. The participants of this study were recruited from among IIUM students because the study was interested to look at the young voters' political knowledge and interest during the GE 14. IIUM consisted of students from different states and represented the young voters' population. Since the researchers were IIUM lecturers, it was achievable to recruit many students through a short period. The selection of students as participants for a research was not uncommon. This is observed from past studies that reported meaningful relationship between participation in political activities and the usage of online media among students (e.g. Mahmud and Amin, 2017; Schmiemann 2015; Gibson and McAllister, 2012). Besides, students are also considered as millennials and the usage of social media such as WhatsApp is popular among them (Ahmad, Alvi and Ittefaq, 2019). Notably, the similar participants' recruitment

approach was done by Abidin and Mohamed (2018) and that recruiting students is acceptable provided they fulfil the criteria needed (i.e., having political knowledge and inclination) to answer the questions of this study.

Data Collection

To carry out the experiment, WhatsApp was chosen to serve as a platform for discussions. According to a survey conducted by Digital News Report (2018), WhatsApp was ranked second after Facebook for top social media and messaging in Malaysia. Based on a study conducted by Amanullah and Ali (2012), WhatsApp was found to be one of the most favoured mobile messaging applications among IIUM students. Since little research found in exploring this kind of issue using WhatsApp, this study could become a reference for future research on different populations.

Two WhatsApp groups were created on 23 April 2018 named Group A and Group B. Different types of news were shared in both groups. The Group A was exposed to news slanting toward BN while news from various slants was fed in the Group B. The former group was created with the purpose to differentiate how participants would respond in a situation where limited information was shared to them as compared to the latter where a variety of opinions could be heard. Two research assistants were hired to moderate, monitor, and code data in the groups. One of the principal researchers was added into the group but remained silent throughout the experiment to avoid discomfort or uneasiness among the respondents.

The researchers decided to feed news in both groups using three slots; morning slot from 9.00 am until 11.00 am, afternoon slot from 3.00 pm until 6.00 pm, and night slot from 9.00 pm to 11.00 pm. However, very low responses were recorded from the morning slot. Due to this, the researchers decided to reduce the number of slots to two, morning between 10.00 am until 1.00 pm and night between 8.00 pm until 11.00 pm. To speed up the process of news sharing, only online news was used for this experiment. The English and Malay news shared in both groups was taken from different online sources. Table 3 shows the sources of news for both groups. It can be seen that the total number of news fed was not equal in both groups because the coders shared extra news in two slots.

Table 3 News Sources for the Experiment

Group A		Group B	
Berita Harian	8	MalaysiaKini	6
Utusan	5	Astro Awani	5
The Star	4	Malay Mail	5
New Straits Times	3	Berita Harian	5
MalaysiaKini	3	Sinar Harian	4
Metro	1	The Star	2
Malay Mail	1	Utusan	1
		Harian Metro	1

Data Analyses

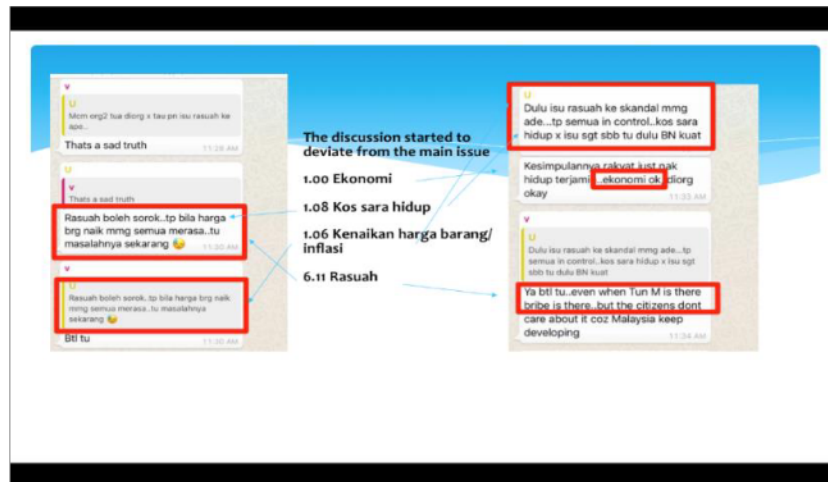
This research used qualitative content analysis. A standard coding sheet was used to ensure that data were interpreted as accurate as possible for both coders (refer to Appendix 1). Therefore, the researchers agreed that the unit of analysis for this study is the participant. All participants' words were retrieved and coded using a code sheet and their sheets were recognised through pseudonyms. Therefore, participants' words were coded based on meanings and more than one categories and sub-categories were generated in most cases. Other coding items include the title of the articles shared, the news slant, the participant slant, the source of news, the time slot when news was shared, and the main category discussed by the respondents.

Two coders were employed and trained on how to code the data using coding sheets. Before coding the data, a pilot test was conducted to check an inter-coder reliability using Cohen's kappa formula. Achieving agreement between coders is important as it serves "as an indicator of the quality

of the categories [units] of the instrument and the raters' [coders] ability to apply them. High agreement between the ratings indicates consensus in the diagnosis [of the coded data] (Warrens, 2015, p. 1)". In interpreting Cohen's Kappa, Landis and Koch (1977) provided the most commonly used guidelines as follows: values ≤ 0 as indicating no agreement and 0.01–0.20 as none to slight, 0.21–0.40 as fair, 0.41–0.60 as moderate, 0.61–0.80 as substantial, and 0.81–1.00 as almost perfect agreement (McHugh, 2012). From the pilot test conducted the inter-coder reliability was reported at 0.74 which is substantial.

Following the pilot test, the contents of virtual group discussions were coded by the same coders. After transferring the contents of WhatsApp discussion to a word document, 66 pages and 92 pages of transcription from Group A and Group B was compiled. It is vital to note the difficulty of determining the unit of analysis since participants have different ways of responding to the WhatsApp discussion. Some participants preferred to write word by word, while a few others wrote in long sentences before sending to the group. Some favoured texting a lengthy message at one time in a single dialogue box, whereas some preferred to post several short messages although there was only one theme (for example, Photo 1). However, the issue was able to be resolved since the study employed directed content analysis which had detailed out existing key concepts as the initial categories and codes to keep the analysis process directed.

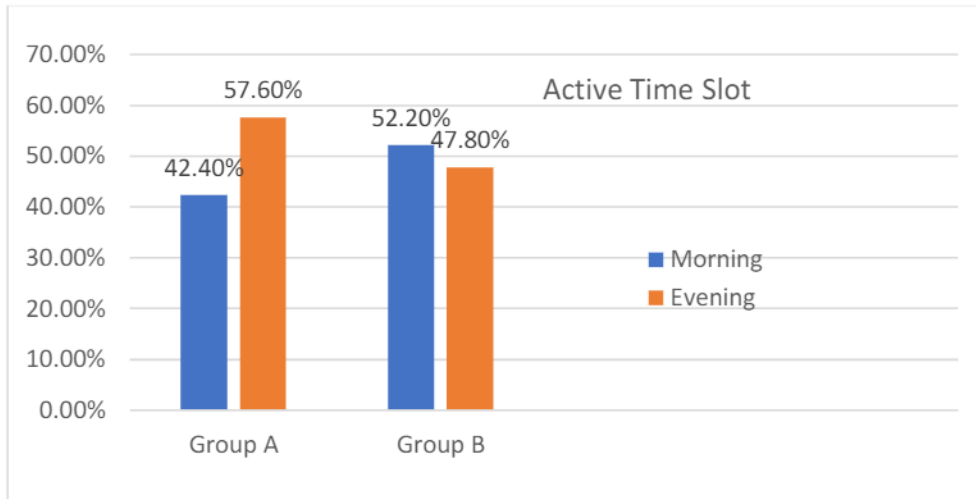
Photo 1 WhatsApp Screenshots



FINDINGS

The analysis of the data revealed that both groups were active at different time slots. In the Group A, discussions were high during the night slot with 57.6 percent, while participants were slightly more active in the morning slot in the Group B with 52.2 percent (See Figure 1).

Figure 1 Time Slot

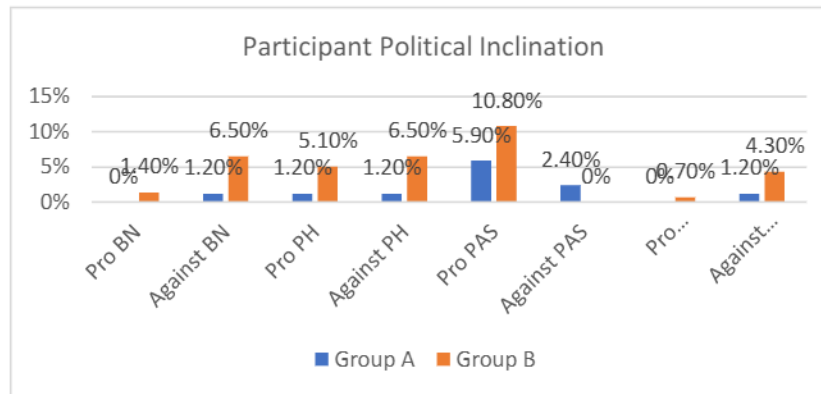


In general, the issues discussed by participants were partially contrasted with the issues shared by coders. There were four top issues discussed in the Group A; Election (30 percent), Leadership (12 percent), Media (9 percent), and Economy (2 percent), whereas the four main issues shared in the group were Election, Leadership, Manifesto, and Changes in Administration. While in the Group B, the four main issues shared were Manifesto/Election campaign, Others (Malaysian constitution, young voters, strategy to win the general election), Tun Mahathir, and Strength of Party. However, the discussion was mostly dominated by other issues such as the Malaysian Constitution, unofficial results of the general election, and Gerakan Melayu Sedar (GPS). The other three categories discussed were Manifesto/Election campaign (8 percent), Election (6.8 percent), and Candidates' Credibility (5.8 percent).

The participants' political inclination was also coded in every slot. Using binary 0 to indicate no or unobvious political inclination and 1 for showing political inclination, the data showed that participants in the Group B were prone to disclose their political preference. The data indicated that 10.8 percent and 5.1 percent of participants favoured PAS and PH respectively, while 6.5 percent against BN and PH. While participants in the Group A were more reserved in disclosing their political inclination. Around 5.9 percent showed that they favoured PAS and 2.4 percent against the party. While only 1.2 percent showed that they favoured PH (See Figure 2).

Throughout the experiment, participants from both groups use the multimedia function in the WhatsApp such as sharing photos, video, and audio. Since WhatsApp is rich in different types of communication functions, respondents can express their views using various means. One important challenge of this research is the difficulty to get full participation from all participants as WhatsApp supports asynchronous communication (Seufert et al., 2016). This refers to the situation where receivers may choose to read and reply or ignore the message sent to them. Thus probing is less effective in a virtual focus group. However, it can be drawn that the respondents are likely to respond to issues that are interesting to them.

Figure 2 Participants' Political Inclination



DISCUSSION

From the results, it can be proposed that discussions in both groups mostly were deviated from the main issues. From the researcher's observation, participants will only respond to the issues under the discussion if not many people involved. However, the discussion started to deviate to different issues if participated by more than four members. For instance, one article from *The Star* titled "UMNO Boots Daim and Rafidah out" was shared in the Group A in a morning slot on 6 May 2018. The main issue highlighted in the news was politic – fractions due to different political beliefs. Seven participants involved in the discussion. The discussion was initially on track with responses given by three participants. Later the discussion deviated to bribery and economic issues such as cost of living and high prices/inflation, followed by religious issues, manifesto, leadership, and few more others. This is something predicted since those issues are related to one another.

Another example from the Group B also showed a similar situation. An article entitled "*Jangan Diroboh Rumah, Ganti Mana yang Rosak*" (Don't demolish a house, fix the broken parts) was shared in the morning slot on the 7 May 2018. Six participants responded to the news report that narrated BN transformation plan and projection. The experiment revealed that different kinds of issues were discussed ranging from an Islamic country, misuse of power, problematic, immoral, and inhuman leadership to many others.

The study further sampled the same news shared in both groups in the morning slot to establish a comparative analysis. The news was taken from *Harian Metro*, entitled "*Golongan Muda Jangan Salah Pilih – Najib*" (Young people should not make the wrong choice – Najib). The news that carried issues of the election, administrative changes, development, and non-Muslim leadership was shared on 8 May 2018. Eight and six participants involved in the Group A and Group B discussion respectively. It was observed, the discussion in the Group A generally revolved around the main issues shared on GE14 although their discussion went off the topic sometimes. This was however not the case in the Group B, after responding to the main topic, the participants discussed the variety of issues ranging from media, *hudud*, misuse of power by leaders, indecisive voters, research's credibility, water supply problem, slender to religious issues. The analysis further revealed, participants tended to stick to the same issues if not more than three people were involved. However, when more than four people participated, their discussion would be more likely to deviate from the main issues. The highest number of participants in both groups for this particular news was seven and they were highly responsive to each other's opinions.

The findings unveiled that participants could not involve in all slots as they had to play a role as students. Some participants were not willing to involve in the discussion since they felt uncomfortable to discuss issues that were seen as too pro-BN especially the Group A participants. Some members felt that other participants shared the wrong information that they couldn't agree. They also indicated that their strong attachment to certain parties had hindered them from giving comments.

Although “WhatsApp provides text producers a non-threatening atmosphere to easily air their voices and emotion” (Oyebode and Adegaju, 2017, p. 46), participants from the Group A have shown otherwise. Whereas, participants in the Group B were more open to discuss issues even though they disagreed with other members’ comments. It can be drawn from this situation that, the multiplicity of news in the Group B has encouraged everyone to participate. However, the one-sided news in the Group A has facilitated the containment of views among members.

As reported previously, probing has become one important challenge in this study. Although all news was shared on time, it was difficult to get everyone to participate in the discussion at the same time. Besides the nature of WhatsApp that supports asynchronous communication, participants’ distance also contributed to this. In the face-to-face focus group, participants would be encouraged to express their views, a rule that is difficult to implement in this study. Despite this issue, it can be drawn that, truthful views could be recorded since their participation were more voluntary. Using WhatsApp, everyone could read and reread during their free time and respond to messages later since everything is stored in the application, unlike the face-to-face focus group that only allow real-time responses. As reported by Church and De Oliveira (2013), WhatsApp resembled the open face-to-face conversation that makes it more real and natural.

CONCLUSION

This research has, so far, offered that discussions could be initiated virtually prior to the 2018 General Election in Malaysia. It is worth noting that, this paper can establish a comparison between the views of participants being exposed to different sides of opinions with those who were fed with one side of a story. The researchers expect that the findings provided in this paper contribute to shed light on the way WhatsApp works to enrich interpersonal communication, especially political expression. The researchers believe that the methodology is appropriate to several circumstances and also to other instant messaging platforms.

Alternative newspapers, as well as alternative online media by non-governmental organisations, opposition political parties, and activists, are all contributing to the diversity of view. Groshek and Ying (2011) identified that the purpose of alternative media includes the promotion of struggle, mobilisation, and transformation against the dominant political power in society. Alternative media also includes other newer form of culture which has gained popularity and audience (Groshek & Ying, 2011) such as weblogs, Facebook, YouTube, and other sorts of online shared communication tools which are mostly based on user-generated content (UGC) to exchange views and express opinions. The impact of alternative media on the young audience has been influential to increase their political interest and participation in the March 2008 General Election (Ramanathan, 2009; Kaufman 2008). The present study explored a similar trend. By bringing in students as participants, it could be learned that young voters are better aware of the current political situations. As students were exposed to the alternative information, it could be suggested that most of them were intellectually able to exercise independent thinking when it comes to which deciding which political party performs and which misuses power. Rather than blindly accepting information, they showed a certain level of interest and curiosity and being analytical in the topic under discussion. Although it was admitted by a small number of participants that they could not participate in the discussion because of lacking in political information, the majority of them were more knowledgeable and engaged politically, with one person admitted to have involved actively in the GE 14 campaign.

From the findings of the study, both groups were highly involved in the sense that they either openly disputed issues discussed. In some situations, they remained silent as a form of disapproval. They rarely engaged in emotional confrontation as they were aware of the norms of a focus group study. It should be noted that the way participants responded was, however, dependent on their inclinations. Some preferred not showing any disagreement with the intention of avoiding hurting the other participants. While some believed that they should be heard and everyone should be able to express their opinion to ensure that this study would serve as a platform to convey their once suppressed voices. While conducting a virtual focus group enabled the researchers to assemble respondents virtually without having to worry about being with the respondents physically or having to communicate with

them face-to-face, the notion of control is very much absent. The instant messaging application such as WhatsApp provides the opportunity to gather as many 256 people in one group but it does not guarantee one would be able to control the kinds of communication that take place and the flow of information in the group. It is a common understanding that mediated communication can be ended easily if an individual feels that there is no benefit for her or him to continue with the interaction.

The frequent exchange of messages, and at times lengthy messages, among respondents, whether in the Group A or Group B, seems to indicate that they are free to express any ideas or opinion they wanted. While one may observe that there were exchanges of direct and critical political sentiments, understandings or even disagreements on WhatsApp, there is also a possibility that the exchanged messages might be of similar tone or having similar meanings. In other words, instead of having genuine political talks or healthy political engagement, the individuals only echo the understandings or meanings expressed by the other individuals. They only reaffirm and strengthen the dominant existing political ideology and sentiments or they are politically hegemonised by more powerful political sentiments as discussed by Ghazali (2019). Based on the findings, it is safe to conclude that more studies using virtual focus group, especially on WhatsApp, need to be conducted to ensure the validity of the findings and the reliability of the instrument. Despite the fact the study was exploratory and experimental, the findings of the study indicated that the use of online focus group on WhatsApp could yield interesting data on the promising potentials of WhatsApp as a platform for public expression of political issues. Also, with the assumption that one's identity is hidden and there is a higher degree of confidentiality and anonymity, unlike the conventional face-to-face focus group, conducting online focus group could reflect the reality of public discussions on WhatsApp.

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