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Credibility, Online Engagement and Uneven Political Perception: Demographic Differentiation and Support Tendency among Malaysian Voters

Kredibiliti, Penglibatan Atas Talian dan Persepsi Politik Tidak Sekata: Pembezaan Demografi dan Kecenderungan Sokongan di Kalangan Pengundi Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Digital political communication does not affect all voters uniformly. Although platform exposure is often treated as a broad predictor of political attitude formation, voters differ in age, education, occupation, media literacy, political experience and social location. This article examines demographic differentiation in political perception and tests whether political perception predicts support tendency among registered voters in the Larut parliamentary constituency, Perak, Malaysia. Drawing on a cross-sectional survey of 400 voters, the study analyzed differences in political perception by gender, age, education, ethnicity and occupation, and estimated the predictive effect of political perception on support tendency. Results indicate no significant gender difference in political perception ($t = .74$, $p = .459$). However, political perception differed significantly by age ($F = 5.84$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .042$), education ($F = 7.31$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .052$) and occupation ($F = 3.96$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .048$), but not ethnicity ($F = 2.18$, $p = .090$). Political perception also significantly predicted support tendency ($\beta = .654$, $t = 17.23$, $p < .001$), explaining 42.8% of the variance. These results suggest that political perception in a semi-rural Malaysian constituency is socially differentiated, but the differences are more closely associated with generational, educational and occupational factors than ethnic categories. The article contributes to political communication scholarship by proposing a differentiated voter-perception framework that connects credibility, engagement, socio-demographic location and support tendency in a high-connectivity but locally embedded electoral setting.

Keywords: *credibility; tendency; demographic; political communication; voter perception*

ABSTRAK

Komunikasi politik digital tidak mempengaruhi pengundi secara seragam. Walaupun pendedahan sering dianggap sebagai peramal umum kepada pembentukan sikap politik, pengundi sebenarnya berbeza dari segi umur, pendidikan, pekerjaan, literasi media, pengalaman politik dan kedudukan sosial. Artikel ini meneliti pembezaan demografi dalam

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persepsi politik serta menguji sama ada persepsi politik mampu meramal kecenderungan sokongan dalam kalangan pengundi berdaftar di kawasan Parlimen Larut, Perak, Malaysia. Berdasarkan tinjauan keratan rentas terhadap 400 pengundi, kajian ini menganalisis perbezaan persepsi politik mengikut jantina, umur, tahap pendidikan, etnik dan pekerjaan, serta menganggarkan kesan ramalan persepsi politik terhadap kecenderungan sokongan. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan tiada perbezaan jantina yang signifikan dalam persepsi politik ($t = .74, p = .459$). *Walau bagaimanapun, persepsi politik berbeza secara signifikan mengikut umur* ($F = 5.84, p = .001, \eta^2 = .042$), *pendidikan* ($F = 7.31, p < .001, \eta^2 = .052$) *dan pekerjaan* ($F = 3.96, p = .002, \eta^2 = .048$), *tetapi tidak mengikut etnik* ($F = 2.18, p = .090$). *Persepsi politik juga meramal kecenderungan sokongan secara signifikan* ($\beta = .654, t = 17.23, p < .001$), *dengan menyumbang sebanyak 42.8% daripada varians. Dapatan ini menunjukkan bahawa persepsi politik di kawasan pilihan raya semi-luar bandar Malaysia adalah berbeza secara sosial, namun perbezaan tersebut lebih rapat hubungannya dengan faktor generasi, pendidikan dan pekerjaan berbanding kategori etnik. Artikel ini memberi sumbangan kepada bidang sarjana komunikasi politik dengan memajukan kerangka persepsi pengundi terbeza (differentiated voter-perception framework) yang menghubungkan kredibiliti, penglibatan, kedudukan sosio-demografi dan kecenderungan sokongan dalam persekitaran pilihan raya yang mempunyai ketersambungan tinggi tetapi masih berteraskan tempatan.*

Kata Kunci: *kredibiliti; kecenderungan; demografi; komunikasi politik; persepsi pengundi*

INTRODUCTION

Digital political communication has become a central component of electoral life. Yet its effects are rarely homogeneous. Voters differ in their political histories, education, occupation, age, access to trusted networks and capacity to evaluate digital information. These differences influence how political messages are received, interpreted and translated into political judgments. In plural societies, demographic analysis is particularly important because political communication may intersect with identity, generational experience, educational opportunity and community networks. Malaysia offers a significant case for examining the differentiated effects of digital political communication. The expansion of the electorate after Undi18 and automatic voter registration has intensified the need to understand how different voter groups form political perceptions in digital environments. At the same time, political information circulates through both public platforms and private messaging spaces, including WhatsApp, Facebook and TikTok. These platforms produce distinct forms of political exposure: peer-forwarded messages, short-form videos, live-streamed speeches, political memes, online news and community discussion. This article focuses on the Larut parliamentary constituency in Perak, a semi-rural and mixed constituency where digital political communication intersects with local social networks. Rather than asking only whether digital communication affects perception, this article asks which demographic factors differentiate political perception and whether formed political perception translates into support tendency.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Political perception refers to voters' interpretations and evaluations of political actors, parties, policies, issues and institutions. It is shaped by information exposure, prior beliefs, identity, affect, social networks and perceived credibility. Political psychology research emphasizes motivated reasoning, where individuals process political information in ways that protect existing attitudes and group identities (Lodge & Taber, 2013; Taber & Lodge, 2006).

Communication research similarly shows that framing, repeated exposure and source credibility influence how voters interpret political messages (Entman, 1993; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Demographic differentiation is central to political communication because different social groups may encounter and interpret information differently. Age can influence platform preference, political socialization and responsiveness to digital persuasion. Younger voters may rely more heavily on short-form video platforms and peer discussion, while older voters may rely more on WhatsApp, Facebook or established news sources. Education can shape information evaluation, source verification and the ability to distinguish between political claims, satire, propaganda and evidence-based reporting. Occupation may influence political perception through economic interest, workplace networks, class position and exposure to local policy concerns.

Ethnicity is often treated as a salient political category in Malaysia. However, digital political communication may not always produce significant ethnic differences in perception at the constituency level, especially when shared local issues such as cost of living, development, candidate integrity and community welfare cut across ethnic lines. This makes it important to test ethnicity empirically rather than assuming its effect. Support tendency is treated in this article as a downstream political orientation rather than as actual voting behavior. Political perception may influence support tendency because voters who evaluate a party, candidate or issue positively are more likely to express favorable political inclination. At the same time, support tendency can be shaped by the credibility of information, local issue relevance and peer-mediated political discussion. Therefore, this study conceptualizes political perception as a bridge between digital information processing and support tendency.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a quantitative cross-sectional design based on survey data from 400 registered voters in the Larut parliamentary constituency. The sampling frame consisted of voters aged 18 years and above. The final usable sample exceeded the minimum sample requirement for the constituency population and represented voters across gender, age, ethnicity, education, occupation and state constituency areas. The instrument measured political perception and support tendency using five-point Likert-type items. Political perception included evaluations of political issues, parties, candidates, policy information, credibility and political interpretation. Support tendency referred to the respondent's inclination to evaluate, support or lean toward a candidate, party or policy direction based on political information received. The instrument achieved good reliability, with Cronbach's alpha of .89 for political perception and .86 for support tendency. The broader instrument also showed acceptable construct validity through exploratory factor analysis, with KMO = .914 and total variance explained of 68.42%. The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, descriptive statistics were used to summarize the demographic profile. Second, independent-samples t-test and one-way ANOVA were used to determine differences in political perception based on demographic groups. Third, simple linear regression tested whether political perception predicted support tendency. Effect sizes were interpreted using eta squared for ANOVA results and R^2 for regression. A consent form was used to obtain respondents' agreement to participate in the survey. Given the sensitivity of political opinions, the findings are presented as aggregate statistics, without identifying individual respondents. This reporting approach supports the protection of respondents' privacy and confidentiality. Informed consent and the protection of participants' privacy and confidentiality are central considerations in social science research ethics (Israel & Hay, 2006).

RESULTS

The sample was balanced by gender, with 201 male voters (50.25%) and 199 female voters (49.75%). In terms of age, 137 respondents were aged 21-30 years (34.25%), 101 were aged 31-40 years (25.25%), 78 were aged 41-50 years (19.50%) and 84 were aged 51 years and above (21.00%). The majority of respondents were Malay (81.50%), followed by Chinese (10.25%), Indian (5.50%) and other ethnic groups (2.75%). Education levels were diverse: SPM and below (30.25%), STPM/diploma (23.00%), bachelor's degree (34.50%) and postgraduate degree (12.25%). Occupational categories included private sector (28.00%), public sector (20.75%), self-employed or entrepreneurs (18.50%), farmers or rural workers (16.00%), students (8.50%) and unemployed or retired respondents (8.25%).

TABLE 1. Samples demographics distribution

Category	Group	n	%
Gender	Male	201	50.25
	Female	199	49.75
Age	21-30 years	137	34.25
	31-40 years	101	25.25
	41-50 years	78	19.50
	51 years and above	84	21.00
Ethnicity	Malay	326	81.50
	Chinese	41	10.25
	Indian	22	5.50
	Others	11	2.75
Education	SPM and below	121	30.25
	STPM/Diploma	92	23.00
	Bachelor's degree	138	34.50
	Master/PhD	49	12.25

The independent samples test showed that political perception did not differ significantly by gender. Male respondents recorded a mean of 3.80 (SD = 0.57), while female respondents recorded a mean of 3.76 (SD = 0.59), t = .74, p = .459.

TABLE 2. Political perception on gender

Gender	n	Mean	SD	t	p	Decision
Male	201	3.80	0.57	0.74	0.459	Not significant
Female	199	3.76	0.59			

ANOVA results indicated significant differences in political perception based on age, education and occupation. Age was significant, $F(3, 396) = 5.84$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .042$. Education was also significant, $F(3, 396) = 7.31$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .052$. Occupation showed significant differences, $F(5, 394) = 3.96$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .048$. In contrast, ethnicity was not significant, $F(3, 396) = 2.18$, $p = .090$, $\eta^2 = .016$.

TABLE 3. Political perception based on age, education and occupation

Demographic factor	df	F	p	η^2	Decision
Age	3, 396	5.84	.001	.042	Significant
Education level	3, 396	7.31	< .001	.052	Significant
Ethnicity	3, 396	2.18	.090	.016	Not significant

Demographic factor	df	F	p	η^2	Decision
Occupation	5, 394	3.96	.002	.048	Significant

Regression analysis showed that political perception significantly predicted support tendency. The model was significant, $R = .654$, $R^2 = .428$, adjusted $R^2 = .426$, $F = 296.90$, $p < .001$. Political perception had a strong positive standardized effect on support tendency ($B = .71$, SE $B = .04$, $\beta = .654$, $t = 17.23$, $p < .001$). This indicates that political perception explained 42.8% of the variance in support tendency among Larut voters.

TABLE 4. Political perception with support tendency

Model	B	SE B	β	t	p
Constant	1.02	0.15	-	6.80	< .001
Political perception	0.71	0.04	.654	17.23	< .001
R	**R^2**	**Adjusted R^2**	**F**		**p**
.654	.428	.426	296.90		< .001

The findings show that political perception among voters in Larut is differentiated, but not along every demographic line. The absence of a significant gender difference suggests that male and female voters in this constituency may be exposed to broadly similar digital political information environments or may interpret key political issues in relatively comparable ways. This is important because gender is often assumed to shape political perception, yet the evidence in this study indicates that gender-based segmentation may not be the most meaningful lens for understanding voter perception in Larut. Age differences were significant. This finding is theoretically plausible because age groups differ in political socialization, platform preference and media experience. Younger voters may be more exposed to short-form video, influencer-style political content and peer discussion, whereas older voters may rely more on Facebook, WhatsApp or conventional news. Different age cohorts also entered political life under different national political conditions, which may shape how they evaluate parties, leaders and political information. Education produced the strongest demographic effect among the ANOVA factors. Education likely influences political perception through cognitive skills, information literacy, confidence in evaluating claims and ability to compare competing sources. Higher educational exposure may also increase sensitivity to policy issues, institutional performance and evidence-based communication. This finding should be framed not as a simple educational hierarchy but as evidence that digital political perception is mediated by information-evaluation capacity. Occupation also significantly differentiated political perception. This suggests that economic position, workplace networks and occupational interests influence how voters interpret political messages. Public-sector workers, private-sector workers, entrepreneurs, rural workers, students and retirees may prioritize different issues, such as public service delivery, cost of living, employment opportunities, rural development or welfare support. Digital content that resonates with occupational concerns may therefore shape political perception more strongly. Ethnicity did not produce a significant difference in political perception. This is a particularly important finding in the Malaysian context, where ethnicity is often treated as a major explanatory category in political analysis. The result does not mean ethnicity is irrelevant to Malaysian politics. Rather, it suggests that in the Larut sample, political perception may be more strongly differentiated by age, education and occupation than by ethnicity. Shared local issues, economic pressures and candidate integrity may cut across ethnic categories in this constituency. The regression result linking political perception to support tendency is also central. Political perception explained 42.8% of the variance in support tendency, indicating that voters' evaluations of political issues, candidates, parties and information credibility are strongly connected to political inclination. This supports a

sequential interpretation: digital information environments help shape perception, and perception then becomes a meaningful predictor of support tendency.

ETHNIC STUDIES IMPLICATION

This article can contribute to ethnic studies scholarship related to politics in three ways. First, it challenges overly generalized assumptions about digital political effects by showing that demographic differentiation matters. Second, it contributes a non-metropolitan Global South case, addressing the urban and Western bias in much digital politics literature. Third, it proposes that political perception operates as a bridge between digital communication and support tendency, especially when credibility and engagement shape how voters interpret political content. The findings have implications for political campaign practice, civic education and digital regulation. Campaigns should avoid assuming that a single digital strategy reaches all voters equally. Younger voters, highly educated voters, rural occupational groups and older voters may require different forms of explanation, issue framing and platform use. However, such segmentation should be ethical, transparent and grounded in policy relevance rather than manipulation. For civic education, the importance of education and credibility suggests that media literacy should focus on source evaluation, fact-checking, recognition of emotional framing and understanding of platform algorithms. In semi-rural constituencies, media literacy interventions should be delivered through community organizations, local leaders, schools, higher education institutions and accessible digital formats. Policy efforts should also recognize that misinformation and political framing circulate through closed messaging spaces, not only public social media.

CONCLUSION

This article shows that political perception among Larut voters is differentiated by age, education and occupation, but not significantly by gender or ethnicity. It also demonstrates that political perception strongly predicts support tendency. These findings suggest that digital political communication should be understood through a differentiated voter-perception framework. In semi-rural Malaysia, political perception is shaped not only by what voters see online, but also by who they are, what networks they trust, what issues matter locally and how credible they perceive political information to be.

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