

THE INFLUENCE OF POLITICAL FAKE NEWS ON TIKTOK AND ITS IMPACT ON INTER-ETHNIC RELATIONS IN MALAYSIA

Ahmad Luqman Mohd Shamsul Amri¹, Muhammad Aiman Daniel Mustazar¹, Muhammad Adib Farhan Mohd Hamim¹, Mohamad Hafifi Jamri¹ and Siti Witianti²

¹Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM),
Melaka Branch, 78000 Alor Gajah, Melaka, Malaysia

²Department of Political Science, Universitas Padjadjaran, Indonesia
E-mail: hafifjamri@uitm.edu.my

ABSTRACT. TikTok as a platform has become an ideal environment for political discussions and even plays a role in spreading false information. Malaysia, a country with diverse ethnicities, has experienced the impact of viral political misinformation on societal harmony. Thus, this study aims to enhance our understanding of how political misinformation on TikTok can exacerbate ethnic differences in Malaysia by highlighting its potential social implications. The study adopts the Uses and Gratifications Theory as a foundation for developing a framework. A quantitative survey method was employed, with data collected via Google Forms from 407 respondents. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS software. The findings reveal that the majority of respondents are highly aware and knowledgeable about various aspects of political fake news on TikTok. Specifically, understanding of fake news on TikTok is notably high, with an overall mean score of $M=4.17$, indicating strong comprehension among respondents. Similarly, exposure to political content on TikTok recorded a high average score of $M=3.33$, reflecting frequent interactions with such material. Furthermore, perceptions of political fake news had an overall mean of $M=3.79$, showing that respondents generally acknowledge and recognize the presence of misinformation. Lastly, the perceived impact of political fake news on interethnic relations was significant, with a high average score of $M=3.99$, highlighting concerns about the potential exacerbation of ethnic tensions due to misinformation. These findings underscore the critical need to address the spread of political fake news to mitigate its adverse effects on social cohesion.

Keywords: TikTok; Political Fake News; Interethnic Relations; Social Cohesion

INTRODUCTION

In today's age of technology, social media platforms have emerged as influential tools for spreading information and influencing the public's opinion (Happer & Philo, 2020). TikTok has become a popular platform for creating and consuming content, especially among adolescents and Malaysia, known for its diverse ethnic, offers a compelling setting to analyse the influence of political content distribution on TikTok and its impact on inter-ethnic relationships. Malaysia is a diverse country, comprising various ethnic groups such as Malay, Chinese, Indian, and indigenous communities. The historical presence of diverse ethnic groups in the country has significantly influenced its political landscape, occasionally leading to intergroup disputes (Cheong, 2022). The dissemination of political content on TikTok has the capacity to either worsen or reduce these inter-ethnic tensions, depending on the specific characteristics and viewpoints of the information being disseminated. Hence, the widespread dissemination of misleading political information and fake news, particularly via social media platforms, also possesses the capacity to intensify ethnic conflicts and undermine social unity.

On the other hand, fake news refers to manufactured information that imitates the style of news media but lacks the stringent requirements

and editorial procedures associated with genuine journalism (Lazer et al. 2018). It has become more prevalent with the rise of the internet and social media. These platforms enable the quick and widespread distribution of information, frequently without verification, making them ideal for the propagation of falsehoods. This concern is particularly visible in Malaysia, where there is a significant level of internet access and social media usage (MCMC, 2020). The digital landscape in Malaysia is characterized by a diverse range of social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok, which are frequently used for the dissemination of political content. Thus, the spread of fake news is often driven by various factors, including political agendas, economic incentives, and the desire to manipulate public opinion. Political leaders may use fake news to discredit opponents, influence election outcomes, or galvanize support among specific demographic groups. The economic model of social media platforms, which prioritizes engagement and virality, inadvertently promotes sensationalist and misleading content. This environment creates a breeding ground for fake news, which can be disseminated widely and rapidly, reaching a large audience within a short period (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

The rapid growth of political content is also significantly influenced by the emergence

of influencers and content creators on TikTok. Influencers frequently possess substantial, devoted audiences and have the ability to influence public opinion through their posts. The reach and impact of fake news can be significantly increased when these influencers, whether intentionally or unintentionally, participate in its dissemination (Peter & Muth, 2023). The role of influencers in disseminating misinformation can be a critical factor in comprehending the dynamics of inter-ethnic relations in the Malaysian context, where political discourse is already highly heated. Moreover, the regulatory environment in Malaysia regarding the dissemination of media and information is also complex. Although there are laws designed to prevent the dissemination of false information, enforcement is inconsistent, and the regulations themselves may occasionally be employed to suppress legitimate criticism (Haron et al., 2021). This regulatory confusion can foster an environment in which fake news thrives, as there are frequently few immediate repercussions for disseminating misinformation.

Consequently, Malaysia's distinctive socio-political environment renders it an intriguing case study for investigating the influence of fake news on inter-ethnic relations. The country's cultural richness and socio-political challenges have been historically influenced by its ethnic diversity. Malaysia's governance has been characterised by ethnic-based political parties and policies, which frequently serve as a breeding ground for ethnic tensions (Shukri, 2017). In this context, the rapid dissemination of fake news through platforms such as TikTok has the potential to exacerbate existing tensions or generate new ones. For instance, communities may develop an elevated level of disapproval and hostility regarding disinformation that targets particular ethnic groups or portrays them in a negative way (Grambo, 2019). Furthermore, the algorithms employed by TikTok, and comparable platforms frequently promote echo chambers, in which users are predominantly exposed to content that is consistent with their preexisting beliefs and biases (Samuels, 2012). This phenomenon can result in the entrenchment of stereotypes and the polarisation of opinions, which can further strain inter-ethnic relations. The impact of echo chambers can be particularly pronounced in Malaysia, where ethnic identity is closely attached to political and social identity (Temby, 2020).

A multidisciplinary approach is necessary to comprehend the influence of political fake news on inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia. This approach should integrate insights from political science, sociology, communication studies, and information

technology. It is imperative to examine not only the content and dissemination of fake news, but also the social and psychological mechanisms that predispose individuals to believing and disseminating such information (Bryanov & Vziatysheva, 2021). Considering the Malaysian context, where cultural nuances and diverse ethnic backgrounds can impact people's political views. Therefore, it is important to thoroughly examine the factors that influence social cohesion and political ideology in the spread of fake news. This will enable the development of specific interventions that take into account and address these unique sociocultural dynamics. The objective of the research is to fill the gaps in current research about the spread of political fake news and its impact on Malaysian society. This study seeks to offer significant insights for media practitioners, policymakers, and the general public.

METHOD

This study uses a quantitative approach, the research method used is explanatory. Primary data collection techniques with survey techniques conducted online. The platforms used to distribute questionnaires include WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. According to Ridzuan et al., (2018), researchers can more easily reach and collect responses by using all of these platforms, especially the general public. The sampling technique uses Purposive sampling, which is a non-probability sampling strategy, in this case meaning that not all individuals have the same opportunity to do so (McCombes, 2021). The sample criteria selected include those based on the employment sector, such as in the public and commercial sectors, self-employed, education, full-time housewives, retirees, and the unemployed (Ridzuan et al., 2018). According to the Raosoft Sample Size Calculator, 385 respondents are needed for a 95% confidence level in this study. However, the researcher managed to get 407 respondents for this study. The questionnaire consisted of 30 question items. The rating scale ranges from 1 to 5, with the options strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), neutral (3), agree (4), and strongly agree (5). The validity and reliability of the questions make it easier for respondents to understand and answer. To analyze the data, using Statistical Package of Social Science (SPSS) software version 23.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Section

The demographic information of the 407 respondents indicates that the survey was predominantly completed by male participants,

which represents 56.3% of the gender demographic. Furthermore, most of responses are between the ages of 18 and 24, which amounts to 59.2% of the total age. Meanwhile, 49.9% of respondents are from the Central Region, which includes Selangor, Kuala Lumpur, and Putrajaya. In addition, 79.6% of responders are from metropolitan regions. Finally, 46.2% of respondents had a bachelor's degree out of the total.

Respondents' Behaviour and Interactions with Political Content on TikTok

The collected data shows the respondent's interactions towards political content on TikTok. Based on the findings, most of the respondents who responded to the questionnaire (93.6%) reported using TikTok. Furthermore, (79.1%) of respondents use TikTok daily. Additionally, most of the respondents (59.2%) did follow any political accounts on TikTok. Finally, (50.1%) of the respondents experienced share political content on TikTok.

Respondents' Understanding of Fake News on TikTok

The item with a mean of ($M=4.41$) has the highest mean among the items in the part that evaluates understanding of fake news on TikTok, which states that the most respondents believe that fake news in TikTok is a manipulative tool to convince mass audiences. Trninic (2021), asserted in his research that fake news has evolved into a variety of forms and approaches in response to the increase in social media usage. Additionally, he asserted that fake news is not restricted to the dissemination of fictional news on social media wall feeds, but it can also be detected in a variety of ways. He also classifies deception, satire, clickbait, conspiracy theories, and photo manipulation as examples of fake news (Trninic, 2021). This statement is also supported by previous research conducted by Pennycook et al. (2018), who stated that fake news has evolved in a variety of ways over the last few decades, including fake headlines posted by bot and troll account and false trivia posted through social media accounts. Based on the assertions by Trninic (2021) and Pennycook et al. (2018), it can be inferred that the respondents' findings suggest that fake news, which is prevalent on social media platforms like TikTok, is employed as a tool for manipulation to influence and persuade large audiences. The lowest mean for understanding fake news on TikTok ($M=3.83$) indicates that the some of the respondents does not recognise between fake and real news on TikTok. This finding can be supported by a study conducted by Lan (2024), which claims that people who live in echo chambers and filter bubbles

are less exposed to a wide range of news sources and viewpoints on social media, making it difficult for them to assess the accuracy of the information they encounter. As a result, the overall mean score for comprehending fake news on TikTok is ($M=4.17$), which is considered to be a relatively high average. With this information in mind, it is reasonable to conclude that the respondents understand the concept of fake news on TikTok. This conclusion is supported by research indicating that individuals who are frequently exposed to a variety of content on social media platforms, such as TikTok, tend to develop a greater awareness and comprehension of fake news and its implications (Madrid, 2023). Furthermore, educational initiatives and media literacy programmes have been demonstrated to improve the capacity of social media users to identify and critically assess false information (Al Zou'bi, 2022).

Respondents' Exposure of Political Content

The item with a mean of ($M=3.51$) has the highest value among all items in the area that measures the exposure of political content. The statement that political content shows up frequently in their TikTok feed was agreed upon by most respondents, showing that their content is influenced by their preferences and visuals. This can be supported by Kumar (2022), which he stated that TikTok differs from other social media platforms in that its central feed is not built around the people users follow but a system that determines what types of content viewers want to see and engage with. Most young people today use social media platforms for entertainment and to get information about their interests. Therefore, since social media is primarily used by young people, they often become the target of political content within platforms, including advertisements from politicians and issue groups. This statement can be backed by (Sodani et al., 2021). Another similar statement made by Wilnart (2013) which he stated that Malaysian politicians, predominantly Opposition members, been utilised the power of Internet and social media to attract young Malaysian voters since 2008, especially during Malaysia 12th General Elections (GE12). However, the lowest mean for the exposure of political content is ($M=3.22$) which indicates that not all respondents does feel comfortable engaging in any discussions about politics on TikTok. This data aligns with the hypothesis in the article made by Platt (2024). He states in his article that most Americans use social media to access political information and news, but most of the content they encounter in their feeds is conducted in hostile, uncivil manner, and

offensive language (Platt, 2024). By stating that, users of TikTok may not feel as comfortable as they should when participating in political discussions due to the matter has stated by Platt, (2024). Thus, the overall mean for exposure of political content is ($M=3.33$) which is relatively high. Based on this information, it is reasonable to assume that the respondents are more likely to have a significant amount of political content exposure on TikTok. In support of this claim, as referenced by (Macafee, 2013), these opportunities are most likely to be pursued by youthful individuals. This is because political engagement via social media continues to be an important way for individuals, especially young ones, to engage in the political sphere. Therefore, the examining the details of this phenomenon in this research are essential.

Respondents' Perception of Political Fake News

Based on the data shown in this section, the highest mean for the perception of political fake news is ($M=4.26$). This indicates that respondents believe that political fake news on TikTok poses a threat to Malaysian democracy and social stability. An article written by Jalli (2023) provides evidence of hate speech and false narratives in the Malay language content targeting non-Malays, as well as Chinese-language content that focuses on Malays and Islam in Malaysia. On November 11, 2022, a TikTok user with the handle @125cc_madi uploaded a video that acquired more than 16,000 views. The video portrayed DAP supporters expressing their criticism towards the Muslim PAS by referring to them as "stupid Muslim ulama." Other than that, in a video, another TikTok user (@muhdasyari6) said that DAP, a largely Chinese political party, is racist and aims to abolish the unique privileges of Malays (Jalli, 2023). This type of misinformation and hate speech can significantly jeopardise national security and harmony. Nevertheless, the lowest mean value in the data, which is ($M=3.30$), indicates that not all participants hold the belief that political content on TikTok is generally more accurate and credible than traditional media. The rationale for this data is supported by a paper authored by Al-Quran (2022), which asserts that traditional media remains an important source of information for individuals seeking the trustworthiness and dependability of news disseminated on social media. The author further asserts that any material distributed through traditional media undergoes a rigorous process of verification across various levels. Furthermore, the information is exclusively generated by authorised journalists or reporters. Subsequently, the average perception of political fake news is ($M=3.79$), which

is a considerably high mean score, as indicated by the information in the table. The data indicates that a substantial number of respondents are informed about this matter and have their own perspectives on the extent of political misinformation on TikTok. This is supported by a claim made by Apuke & Omar (2020), who propose that individuals who possess the necessary skills and awareness of fake news may approach questionable or imprecise content with a greater degree of scepticism, thereby diminishing the impact of fake news on society because of their own perspective and awareness.

Respondent's Assessment on its Impact upon Inter-Ethnic Relations

Based on the collected data, it has been shown that the greatest mean for the impacts on inter-ethnic relations section is ($M=4.30$). This suggests that most of the respondents agree that political fake news on TikTok can exacerbate racial tensions in Malaysia. This finding is supported by a previous study conducted by Grambo (2019). According to Grambo (2019), she stated in her study that fake news that falsely and negatively portrays a particular ethnic, racial, or religious group has the power to impute a "terrible criminality, creating hostility gesture towards minorities indirectly motivated irresponsible vile person who committed provocative act against innocent minorities.". In order strengthen Grambo's (2019) statements, a study conducted by Jalli (2022) discovered that the emerging hashtags #13Mei, #13Mei1969, and #BangsaMelayu, which were employed by Malay ultra-nationalists to disseminate anti-Chinese narratives, were also present in the hate speech content. This was due to the prevalence of political fake news regarding ethnicity on TikTok during the General Election 15 (GE15). This is the primary example of how political fake news can result in heightened ethnic tensions in Malaysia. However, the lowest mean for the impacts on inter-ethnic relations is ($M=3.76$) which states respondents have witnessed heated online discussions about politics turn negative due to fake news shared on TikTok. This item has the lowest mean in the data, and it can be supported by a statement in the journal by Sveningsson (2014), which she stated in her study that when a political actors use social media to reconnect with young people, they follow traditional communication patterns known as broadcast one-way communication and brochure-ware. If interaction is permitted, communication is usually restricted and monitored by moderators (Sveningsson, 2014). The overall mean for impacts on inter-ethnic relations is ($M=3.99$) which is considered a relatively high mean

score. According to the data collected, it is reasonable to assume that political fake news on TikTok has impacts on inter-ethnic relations. This can be supported by (Suhaini et al., 2022) which states that social media is seen as one of the communication media, educational aspects, economic aspects and political aspects regarding to ensure peace and harmony of society that can be affected through political matters on social media.

Examples of the impact of fake news in other countries during the 9/11 attacks, false narratives and misleading information propagated by media and public figures against Muslims, particularly by individuals such as Donald Trump (during his election campaign on 2016 US President campaign) and other politicians, led to a significant rise in Islamophobia-related incidents and violations against Muslims. These false claims have fostered deep-seated enmity and mistrust towards Muslims, especially in Western countries.

CONCLUSION

The research findings illuminate the troubling prevalence of political fake news on TikTok and its potential ramifications for inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia. This study reveals that the dissemination of political fake news on TikTok can significantly contribute to the polarisation and division among various ethnic groups within Malaysia.

People would live in a state of perpetual suspicion, undermining the coexistence and mutual respect that are essential for a peaceful, multi-ethnic society.

This research points to the urgent need for policymakers and social media platforms to address the dissemination of political fake news on TikTok and develop effective strategies to mitigate its negative impact on inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia. One of the key findings of the research is the role of algorithms in propagating fake news. TikTok's algorithm, designed to maximize user engagement, often prioritizes sensational and emotionally charged content. This can include political fake news that targets specific ethnic groups, either by vilifying them or by promoting divisive narratives.

The impact of political fake news on inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia is not just theoretical but has real-world consequences. The research highlights several incidents where fake news on TikTok has led to heightened ethnic tensions.

Therefore, it is imperative that policymakers and social media platforms work together to resolve this matter. This could include the implementation of more strict content moderation policies, the

promotion of digital literacy programmes to assist users in identifying fake news, and the development of technologies that can detect and flag misinformation. It is also the responsibility of social media platforms such as TikTok to prevent the inadvertent promotion of divisive content through their algorithms.

As conclusion, the research on political fake news on TikTok and its impact on inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia highlights a complex and pressing issue. The spread of misinformation poses significant risks to social cohesion and requires a comprehensive and multifaceted response. By addressing the root causes of fake news dissemination and promoting responsible social media use, it is possible to mitigate the negative impacts and build a more inclusive and harmonious society.

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