

## ANALYZING TIKTOK'S INFLUENCE ON YOUTH POLITICAL ACTIVISM AND SOCIAL PARTICIPATION IN MALAYSIA

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**ABSTRACT.** Despite TikTok's popularity among young users, concerns persist regarding their lack of political awareness and gullibility. This research aims to address this gap by examining TikTok usage patterns among Malaysian youth and analyzing user interactions with political and social content. The research participants consisted of youths aged 18 to 29 years old in Malaysia. Employing a quantitative research design, the study used surveys to gather data and descriptive statistical analysis. The collected data was analyzed using the SPSS software. The study's findings indicate TikTok's potential for political usage and respondents show a moderately high agreement on TikTok as a platform to increase political awareness. Theoretical framework of Agenda-setting Theory guides the analysis of user interactions to uncover mechanisms of influence and information dissemination. By providing insights into how TikTok influences political discourse and shapes youth engagement, this research contributes to understanding social media's role in civic participation.

**Keywords:** TikTok; political awareness; youth; Malaysia.

### INTRODUCTION

2021 marks the year when the voting age in Malaysia lowered from 21 to 18, making about 21.1 million Malaysians eligible to vote in the 15th General Election in November 2022 with 1.4 million of them aged about 18 to 20 (The Star, 2022). This change presents an opportunity for Malaysian youth to shape the future of their country. This change gives youth a formal means of influencing social and political results while acknowledging their maturity, awareness, and involvement in national issues. Even previous Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad said, "Youths in Malaysia are now more politically conscious than they were a few years ago. This step is needed to give them the chance, room, and voice to design the nation's democracy through elections." This decision was also generally well-received, particularly by the young generation themselves. This is proven by research done by Siti Nor Amalina & Joekyrno Joni (2023) where they found that the youth indeed believed that voting is their responsibility as a citizen, therefore solidifying the fact that they can perceive their duty as high-functioning members of the nation.

In recent years, social media platforms have fundamentally transformed how individuals, particularly youth, engage with political content and discussions. TikTok is one of these platforms that has become quite popular, drawing in a wide range of young people with its distinctive mix of algorithm-driven feeds and short-form video content. TikTok's rapid rise in popularity, especially among Generation Z, is notable for its distinct format that prioritizes short, engaging videos. This format,

coupled with a powerful algorithm that personalized content for users, has created a dynamic environment where political content can quickly gain visibility and traction. Research indicates that social media platforms, including TikTok, play a crucial role in how young people access and interact with political information. For instance, studies have shown that platforms like TikTok can amplify political engagement by providing immediate, relatable, and easily digestible content that resonates with younger audiences (Alodat et al., 2023; Marquart et al., 2020).

However, Malaysia's decision to reduce the voting age to 18 prompted a range of responses, including worries from older age groups regarding the youth's possible lack of experience in making political decisions. According to Medium (2021), some older Malaysians worry that younger Malaysians, who are only 18 or 19 years old and have not had much exposure to Malaysian politics or access to reasonably unbiased information, may simply follow their parents' lead and cast their votes accordingly. With the younger generation's constant use of TikTok, its rapid growth has sparked questions about its users' lack of political awareness and blind faith. This study aims to address these concerns by looking at TikTok usage patterns among Malaysian youth and how they interact with political and social content. The existing literature on social media and political engagement implies that platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have a substantial impact on political mobilization and awareness. However, there is little research that proves TikTok's impact in this setting for data based on Malaysian youth. For instance, N. Rani et al. (2017) has found that Malaysian youths are indeed predisposed to use

Facebook as a stage for political expression due to its predisposition, frequent news source, and events criteria, whereas Twitter is noteworthy of being the most prominent social media site for political use when it is event-related (Lorentzen, 2013). Many papers found no correlation between exposure to political news on TikTok and changes in participants' ideology (Dahmen et al, 2022; Karimi & Fox, 2023; Vizcaino-Verdú & Aguaded, 2022). Therefore, to close this gap, this study looks into how the younger generation might use TikTok for political discourse. It also examines the platform's influence on political engagement and discussion and considers whether it could be used as a tool for political mobilization. More importantly, this study tries to find out if young people in Malaysia actually take politics seriously and if they actively seek to stay informed about changes in policy making by using TikTok as their medium of information.

### Research Questions

1. How much do Malaysian youths know about politics?
2. How are youths engaging with political content on TikTok?
3. What effect does TikTok have on the political awareness of Malaysian youths?

## METHOD

This research employs a quantitative research design and survey method with a questionnaire as the tool for data collection to investigate TikTok's role in facilitating political activism and social engagement among youth. Youth aged 18 to 29 years old was selected for the study. This age group was selected to reflect the age range for youth specified by the Malaysian Youth Policy (Awang, 2023). Including this age group was of particular interest to this study because of the lowered voting age to 18 years old from the previous 21 in 2019, and the highest age range for TikTok users in Malaysia as of June 2023 is 19 to 25 years old (Statista, 2023) making it the perfect sample for our research. The sample was designed to include the male and female participants, youth in the age ranges of 18 to 29 years old, and those belonging to the 3 main ethnic groups in Malaysia (Chinese, Malay, and Indian), along with a smaller number of youth from other ethnic groups. This allowed collection of rich and inclusive information from a diverse group of youth. This research integrates 3 types of sampling procedure which are purposive sampling, convenient sampling, and snowball sampling had been merged as a method to gain data

from youth aged 18 to 29 across Malaysia. Purposive sampling, which is a non-probability sampling technique, selects respondents based on specific characteristics. In this context, 18 to 29 years old were specifically targeted because they are youths (Awang, 2023). In order to recruit youth, the first few referrals were sought from acquaintances, and the participants were briefed about the study's purposes to disseminate to others and initiate snowball recruitment. Taking advantage of University settings, students were also targeted online and physically as they are conveniently located around a specific location making it a convenient sampling. All 402 respondents have consented to their responses to be analyzed in our findings. SPSS software has been used to analyze the results. This minimum sample size was determined through Raosoft Sample Size Calculator software. The survey was produced using Google Forms and distributed via the Internet and social media to youths all across Malaysia. The development of instruments was referred to from past literature reviews articles from Kasirye (2021), Kasirye (2021), and Minhas et al. (2022).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The age distribution of the survey respondents reveals a predominantly young demographic as this research's focus is on youths, with the majority which is 50.8 percent and 41.8 percent falling within the 18 to 20 and 21 to 23 age brackets. Specifically, 50.8 percent (204 respondents) fall within the 18 to 20 age bracket, and 41.8 percent (168 respondents) are within the 21 to 23 age bracket. This suggests that TikTok is particularly popular among young adults, which aligns with existing research indicating that younger age groups are more engaged with social media platforms that offer short, engaging video content (Cervi, 2021). The lower number of respondents in the 24 to 26 making up only 6 percent (24 respondents) and 27 to 29 age groups as 1.5 percent (6 respondents) further underscores TikTok's appeal to a younger audience.

In terms of ethnicity, the survey respondents are overwhelmingly Malay, with 95 percent (382 respondents) identifying as Malay. Other ethnic groups are significantly underrepresented, with only 1.2 percent (5 respondents) Indian/India respondents and 0.7 percent (3 respondents) Chinese/Cina respondents. Additional ethnicities such as Bumiputera Sarawak, Bajau, Punjabi, and others each have just one respondent. This ethnic distribution could reflect the demographic composition of the survey's target population or the broader user base of

TikTok in the region where the survey was conducted. It also highlights the need for more inclusive research methodologies to capture a diverse range of experiences and perspectives.

The education level of respondents indicates a high level of academic achievement, with the majority which is 54 percent (217 respondents) holding a diploma or 40.3 percent (162 respondents) with a bachelor's degree. A smaller number of respondents have completed secondary school which is 4.7 percent (19 respondents), while only 0.7 percent (3 respondents) hold a master's degree and 0.2 percent (1 respondents) have Ph.D. This educational profile suggests that TikTok users in this sample are relatively well-educated, which may influence their content consumption patterns and the types of information they seek on the platform. The prominence of higher education levels among respondents also points to the importance of considering educational background when analyzing social media usage and its impacts. In a study conducted by Charron and Rothstein (2016), it was hypothesized that individuals with higher levels of education are likely to exhibit increased levels of social trust, therefore with the educational background of the respondents, the credibility is much higher.

The majority of respondents which is 86.6 percent (348 respondents) are students, which significantly impacts their engagement patterns on TikTok. Students, compared to full-time employees, often have more flexible schedules, allowing them to spend more time on social media platforms. Syam & Meldawati (2022) suggests in their findings that university students enjoy using TikTok, with entertainment videos being their most popular content, and it does not directly impact their communication skills. Furthermore, this demographic detail is crucial as it suggests that a large segment of TikTok's user base may have the time and inclination to engage deeply with the platform. Additionally, the survey reveals a mix of suburban and urban residents which is 66.7 percent (268 respondents) and 19.7 percent (79 respondents). This division is important because it reflects different access levels to internet infrastructure and social trends. Urban users might have better internet access and be more exposed to the latest trends, influencing their TikTok engagement.

Interestingly, all or 96.3 percent of respondents (387 respondents) reported using a smartphone to access TikTok. This uniformity underscores TikTok's mobile-centric design and its alignment with user habits. The convenience and accessibility provided by smartphones make them the preferred device for consuming TikTok content, highlighting

the platform's optimization for mobile use. This consistency in device usage ensures that TikTok remains accessible to a broad audience, regardless of their demographic background as with the growing popularity of mobile devices, applications have been made to cater the estimated 4.88 billion people who own a smartphone worldwide (Backlinko, 2024).

The survey data indicates that most users, 74.1 percent (298 respondents), primarily engage with entertainment content on TikTok. This preference for light-hearted and engaging content is typical of the platform's main use case. Entertainment content's dominance aligns with TikTok's reputation as a hub for fun and engaging videos that capture users' attention. Some respondents, 6.7 percent (27 respondents), also mentioned following trends as a primary content type, suggesting that staying current with popular topics is another significant draw. This emphasis on entertainment and trends showcases TikTok's role in providing a leisure activity that keeps users coming back. Political interest or advocacy for TikTok proves to be low, which implies that TikTok is primarily used for entertainment, yet at the same time, politics can also co-exist depending on the algorithm. Abidin (2021) agrees with this idea as he believes TikTok has allowed young people to become politically active yet it is not intended for entertainment. He believes this result would differ individually because algorithms are influenced by the attention norms and preferences set by platforms, as well as the cultural beliefs and tastes of the audience.

A notable finding is the amount of time users spend on TikTok daily. 41.8 percent respondents (168 respondents) reported spending between one to three hours on the platform each day. 45 percent of respondents (181 respondents) also very much so frequently access TikTok five times and above in a day. This high engagement time indicates that TikTok plays a significant role in users' daily entertainment and social media consumption. The platform's ability to captivate users for extended periods highlights its effectiveness in maintaining user interest through a continuous stream of engaging content. Wu (2023) relates this high engagement time with dopaminergic activities and strong social needs met by its addictive functions, underlying TikTok's effectiveness in capturing and retaining user interest.

Despite the primary focus on entertainment, users also engage with political content to varying degrees. The time spent on political news ranges from less than an hour to up to three hours daily. This variation suggests that while political content is not the main attraction, it still holds considerable interest for a portion of the user base. The presence

of political content on TikTok provides an avenue for users to stay informed about current events, albeit to a lesser extent than entertainment content. Huang (2022) reports in *The New York Times* that for the younger generation, TikTok is the new search engine. Therefore, if these youths are interested in political information, they would also use TikTok to find information about it only when they need it.

The majority of respondents indicate that on average, respondents tend to agree to some extent ( $M=3.75$ ) with the statement of using TikTok to strengthen the bond between themselves and their friends. This suggests that TikTok is perceived as a tool for enhancing connections with friends. These respondents believe that TikTok is a great way to communicate with friends through amusing short videos, which is not unexpected as TikTok itself was viewed mainly for entertainment. It also enforces Geisel-Zamora (2023)'s research in which the author found TikTok enhances both online and offline communication by giving friends additional talking points rooted in their shared experience of using the app. Youths especially, who value being socially conversant, find that TikTok provides common ground for deeper connections. As one of her respondents noted, friendships often rely on shared interests and humor, which TikTok helps facilitate by offering a centralized platform for accessing similar content. This shared experience fosters relatable conversations and strengthens social bonds without fundamentally changing the nature of friendships. Instead, it adds a new dimension where friends can communicate through shared digital content.

Furthermore, willingness to continue using TikTok as part of daily communication with friends regarding social and political interactions suggests a moderate willingness ( $M=3.19$ ) among Malaysian youth to use TikTok for these purposes. This does not imply that they are completely ignoring political discussions or prioritizing entertainment alone, but it is just used for what it is intended for which is connectivity as Wright (2020) wrote, TikTok serves as a social interface particularly within strong-tie relationships, playing a significant role in reaffirming existing relationship dynamics and shaping communication patterns among its users. It does not matter whether the content is about entertainment, politics, or even sports as long as it is shareable or a topic of common ground between friends. This moderate willingness correlates with the findings above: a mean score of 3.75 for the statement about using TikTok to strengthen bonds with friends, indicating a stronger agreement. To further strengthen this, TikTok themselves has recently introduced

streaks to further enhance the platform's role in strengthening bonds and fostering communication. Streaks are a feature borrowed from platforms like Snapchat, designed to encourage continuous engagement and interaction between users. The streaks feature on TikTok operates by maintaining a direct message conversation with someone for at least three consecutive days. Once achieved, a streak badge appears in the chat, showcasing the number of consecutive days of the streak. This gamification element not only incentivizes users to stay active on the platform but also reinforces the sense of connection and continuity within their relationships. This suggests that TikTok is perceived as a tool for enhancing connections with friends through shared experiences and communication, not quite yet for political purposes (Navlakha, 2024).

As mentioned in the previous section, the lack of usage of TikTok as a political drive doesn't necessarily equate to political ignorance. This is proven by the fact that the item with the highest mean score ( $M=3.83$ ) for the section proves that the youth moderately agrees it's important to stay informed of political issues. Ironically enough, this is also thanks to the widened use of social media to promote important causes in the sociopolitical climate. Young people are beginning to understand that it is their civic responsibility to be knowledgeable and involved citizens. Education and social media campaigns that highlight the value of having political knowledge are common ways to reaffirm this sense of duty. According to studies, well-informed young people are more likely to vote, volunteer, and engage in other civic activities (Ellen Middaugh et. al, 2023). It makes sense for the younger generation to have an inclination to be concerned of political discussions especially regarding issues and policies that could affect their future. This is also aligned with a report written by Elan C. Hope (2022) where she states that young people are aware of how political decisions directly affect social justice issues, job prospects, and educational policies. They can promote changes that will benefit their future by remaining informed. The study also emphasizes how youth were mobilized by events such as the 2020 protests against racial injustice, demonstrating their awareness of and reaction to issues related to politics that impact them.

The perception that TikTok produces a lot of misinformation that leads to division among different users suggests a moderate level of agreement ( $M=3.58$ ) among respondents regarding the platform's role in spreading misinformation and causing divisions. It is known that political misinformation has become more prevalent due to

digitalization (Li, 2022). This interpretation implies that while some users acknowledge the presence of misinformation on TikTok and its potential impact on creating divisions among users, there may be varying degrees of concern or awareness among respondents. It highlights the importance of addressing misinformation on the platform to foster a more positive and cohesive online community. However, this concern proves to be a good thing as youth are aware of the existence of misinformation which will allow them to fact check before believing in any news. Sodani & Mendenhall (2021) also vouches for the importance of being informed about political discourses, stating that TikTok provides youth with the information they need to cast a well-informed ballot. Despite society's worry about youths being gullible followers of political leaders, Bringula et al., (2021)'s study determined that students exhibit high levels of access to information and frequent usage of social media platforms. They perceive a prevalence of fake news within these platforms. Additionally, they place significant importance on political awareness and devote time to staying updated on national issues. Despite their exposure to fake news articles shared on social media, more than half admit to being deceived by such content at least once. Furthermore, they demonstrate a reduced tendency towards confirmation bias and lower levels of trust towards those who share news. When verifying the authenticity of fake news, students rely on technology, such as Google search, or seek human judgments from sources like family and friends due to their accessibility. This highlights the importance of continued efforts to promote media literacy and critical thinking skills among young users, ensuring a more informed and resilient society in the digital age.

In the context of TikTok enabling youths to reach out to a diversity of voters, the results suggest a slightly stronger level of agreement ( $M=3.38$ ) among respondents regarding the statement. The slightly stronger level of agreement indicates that while TikTok may not be traditionally associated with political discourse, its reach and influence extend beyond entertainment to encompass broader societal issues. This highlights the platform's unique position in enabling youths to connect with a diverse range of voters, potentially amplifying their voices and fostering political awareness among a younger demographic. With the exposure of different political opinions from diverse voters these respondents are bound to come across political polarization which McBeth et. al. (2021) believe the exposure or teaching of political polarization to youths helps them reflect on their own political

biases. This shows that TikTok has the ability to serve as a platform for political information and diverse viewpoints, even if it is not the primary medium for political engagement for many users. In the research of Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, (2021) and Zeng & Abidin (2021) where they believe that TikTok serves as a vibrant space for youth activism and political engagement aligns with the results of this findings as to even reach out to diverse voters itself activism and political engagement.

A noticeable level of agreement ( $M=3.34$ ) is received from the respondents towards TikTok in increasing political awareness. Interestingly enough, a research by Ling (2023) that was conducted in the midst of 15th General Election (GE15) showed that 82 percent of respondents agreed to using the information that they received from political videos through TikTok to decide their voting behavior during GE15 which aligns with our findings. This suggests that TikTok does enhance political and social awareness, and there is a significant impact on voting behavior attributed to political content on the platform. Certainly, the timing of Ling's (2023) research during the 15th General Election (GE15) is noteworthy. Conducting the study amidst a major political event like an election provides a unique opportunity to gauge the immediate influence and relevance of TikTok in shaping voter behavior. It captures the real-time impact of political content on the platform during a crucial decision-making period for voters. This context adds depth and urgency to the findings, highlighting TikTok's potential as a timely and influential source of political information and engagement. Our findings are aligned with Minhas, Khan, and Haq (2022)'s study which also concluded that political awareness was precisely evident in the citizens with the advent of social media. This is the positive approach developed by social media among voters and a positive change is expected in the politics of this area. Agenda setting theory also states that media agenda-setting positively influences public agenda-setting, with media highlighting important topics and shaping public opinion. In this context, TikTok, which is used by most youths in Malaysia (Factory, 2023), has been cleverly used as a platform to disseminate information about politics. According to our findings, most of the respondents use TikTok for entertainment, but many also gain political knowledge which proves the presence of the agenda setting theory.

## CONCLUSION

This study explored how Malaysian youth use TikTok for social media engagement and political

activism. The results indicate a more nuanced relationship between political awareness and TikTok, even though entertainment remains to be its primary content type. Some respondents agreed that TikTok promotes political and social awareness, defying concerns about adolescent apathy. Users are exposed to a variety of opinions by the platform's algorithm, which could contribute to creating more informed citizens. This aligns with Agenda-Setting Theory, suggesting that TikTok's content-curation algorithms can influence the issues young people consider important. The study also emphasizes TikTok's potential for political mobilization, evidenced by its use in the 15th General Election.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge limitations. The research focused primarily on user perceptions and self-reported behavior. Further investigation into the credibility and accuracy of political information found on TikTok is required. Additionally, Malaysia's cultural and legal context may have a different impact on user behavior than in other regions. Further research on content moderation practices and the influence of political individuals on the platform would provide valuable insights.

Despite these limitations, the research highlights TikTok's potential as a platform for political communication and youth engagement. This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on social media's role in political participation. By understanding how Malaysian youth utilize Tiktok for political purposes, policymakers can adjust and refine existing policies to leverage the platform's unique features and content format. This, in turn, can empower educators and policymakers to develop more effective strategies to promote civic participation and political awareness among young Malaysians.

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