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Political Advertising and Young Voters Information Needs

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POLITICAL ADVERTISING AND YOUNG VOTERS INFORMATION NEEDS

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Abstract. In the election campaigns, young voters will be exposed to a variety of political pieces of information created by political parties to influence either their political efficacy orin formation-seeking. Political advertising has become one of the main political information sources during election campaign. In political advertising, political advertisements are designed to serve multiple purposes, whether to persuade, influence, attack, inform or manipulate the voters' information-seeking. Meanwhile, the role of young voters in political process is a crucial study that needs to be addressed by scholars. Researchers in this field are eager to know how this target group uses political information to meet their information needs and usage. Therefore, in this study, an exploratory study by using Sense Making Methodology (SMM) was conducted to understand how young voters' political situation affects their information needs and usage. The participants of the study consist of nine universities' students from Klang Valley. The findings show that political advertisements do have an impact on their political situation and voting decision. Some important political issues do influence their political situation. In this exploratory study, parents do play a significant role in influencing young voters' political situation. Therefore, this paper will discuss the role of political advertising in voters' information-seeking and voting behaviour.

INTRODUCTION

In any democratic country, the discussion on the involvement and political participation of young voters is always being debated. Meanwhile, like other countries, the numbers of young voters in Malaysia have increased to nearly 1.3 million and this target group will surprisingly be eligible to be the first-time voters in the coming 14th Malaysian General Election. Therefore, this target group has become the main target voters for contesting political parties to attract, influence, persuade, and engage with this target group by influencing their political efficacy and information processing (Azhar, 2015; Jali & Besar, 2011; Muis, Hussin, & Mohamed, 2010; Saahar, 2014; Suhaimee, 2014). Since the 1980s, the research on young voters' involvement in the democratic process has attracted the interest of political communication scholars and there are some arguments involving their interests and participation of Malaysian young voters in the democratic process (Samsudin, 2010). Muralidharan and Sung (2016) mentioned that motivating young voters is a daunting task, and research is crucial to understand the factors that influence their attitudes

and behaviour. Meanwhile, research on young voters' political participation found that this group has relatively low rates of voter participation. They have a much lower confidence in their political knowledge than the general population (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2007); lack of information, knowledge, and intention from candidates (Kaid et al., 2007) and changes in the political culture influence Malaysian young voters to participate in the political process (Jaharudin, 2014); created a new wave and movement among young voters (Hing & Pong, 2014; Vellymalay, 2014); and caused a big impact on 13th General Election and more depending on information from the internet as a source of political information compared with the elder voters (Tedesco, 2007).

In sum, turn out among young voters during elections has become the main concern among scholars. Most research associated with this topic focuses on how young voters make their rational decision that will influence their information seeking, political knowledge, participation, engagement, efficacy and decision (Kaid et al., 2007; Leppaniemi, Karjaluota, Lehto,

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& Goman, 2010; Noordin, Sawal, & Zakaria, 2010; Weiss, 2012). Similarly, most research focuses on voters as determinant factors that will influence the voting process and may reflect election results on certain location.

Most scholars and political analysts believed that the 12th Malaysian General Election has changed the Malaysian political landscape in several perspectives. Thus, it has captured scholars' attention to seek and study the changes in Malaysian political landscape and some leading towards tension among the people of multiracial Malaysia (Nor & Ahmad, 2013). Meanwhile, the performance of Barisan National as the oldest and long incumbent in Malaysian political history has been critically challenged with some domestic political demands. The opposition parties (PKR, DAP, and PAS) had captured Malaysian voters' attention by promoting some critical issues through their series of political campaigns. They had successfully won several parliamentary seats in the 12th (2008) and 13th (2013) General Elections.

Multiple methods and media were used by parties and candidates to reach and engage with the target audience. For example, the Pakatan Rakyat machinery wooed Malaysians to ride on its reform agenda. Its election campaign left Malaysians hooked on the slogan "Ubah" (Change) and "Inikalillah" (Time for Change).These slogans were used creatively to persuade voters and pressure other opponents to increase the political temperatures between PR camp and BN (Noh, 2014). Besides that, this kind of approaches has significantly changed how political parties developed and conducted their campaigns. More creative approaches were introduced to grab the attention and interest of young voters to participate in the democratic process.

In the democratic process, mass media are believed to be one of the main paths for consumers to attain information about the current political going-on. From the news coverage, voters could be influenced in their decision-making to vote for the representatives of the House of Representatives (federal level) and the State Legislative Assembly (state level) (Mun & Li, 2011). Electronic and print media, as sources of communication, play a vital role in disseminating information. Media are important in a modern and democratic society. They provide information and entertainment to the members of society (Idid & Wok, 2007) and keep people informed about political affairs. Meanwhile, the advancement of technology is helping people to get more information. It has directly influenced the way in which we use our sense and experience to make meaning in a specific context. This scenario is important for social science scholars to study the impact of mass media on audience's behavior, mind, and information needs and seeking and its impact on political efficacy and political decision. Perhaps, the most crucial part is how political advertising campaigns can influence young voters'

political situation and information-seeking to determine how these factors will influence their decision-making.

Research Objective

Therefore, the research objective of this paper is:

1. To understand the political situation among young voters and their information seeking behavior.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In Malaysia, the political scenario is different from other countries. Malaysia has different categories of voters based on certain unique and diverse factors that involve demographic and psychographic ones such as ethnicity, gender, religions, cultures, languages, education, values, and norms. Most of the developmental process in Malaysia such as national policies, education, and economy policies created were based on historical and multi-racial perspectives. Consequently, the construction of political messages by political parties in Malaysia has been constructed accordingly with the needs and desires from different backgrounds in Malaysia.

The voter is not a passive audience. Cho (2008) has conducted a research to analyze the effect of political ads on individual communication behavioral patterns. He believed that political ads have a significant role in communication behavior and have a positive role in the democratic process. Cho (2008) believed that campaigns contribute rich information that is delivered to the voters in the form of political advertisements. Voters learn a lot from information that they receive from mass media and stimulate citizens to engage in active communication activities. Contesting parties and candidates will strategically select some salient and beneficial issues to mobilize voters' motivation and pay more attention to the politics, seeking more information effectively and engaging in the political process. However, in his study, he found that there are two categories of the audience, where the first category of the audience, who receive high information, will respond more compared to the second category of the audience, who are relatively low in receiving information and may influence their mobilization and engagement.

Most of the political advertising campaigns are focusing on television advertisement to advertise, promote their candidates and parties (Diagnault, Soroka, & Giasson, 2013; Lee, 2014). Moreover, television advertising is also capable of mobilizing the voters in terms of their political mobilization and participation. It also has been accepted by most political campaign managers, advertising practitioners,and political and communication scholars that television advertising has effects on political campaigns. During campaigns, voters may depend on the television as their main political information source. Previous studies show that television advertising plays a big role as a source

of information and has effects on voters' political knowledge. Yu (2014) conducted a research to study which TV political communication form, TV political campaign news or political TV commercials, is superior in terms of their effects on voters' political knowledge. Therefore, this study takes three variables i.e., political TV advertising, political TV campaign news and voters' political knowledge into account.

The interest in the relationship between campaigns and voting has persisted for over fifty years, but only recently have researchers argued that political advertising has contributed heavily to the disappearance of voters (Clinton & Lapinski, 2004; Kim, 2016). In an attempt to theories, the effects of advertising on voters' behavior, researchers have quantified, categorized, described, or speculatively employed advertisements to explain particular electoral outcomes. In certain circumstances, political advertising has some effect based on the studies done by scholars and how some campaigns have caused more impact than the others still remains unsettled (Robinson, 2010). Previous studies on political advertising search the relationship between political messages delivered by political ads on voters' choice and decision depending on the type of ad and the type of voters (Franz & Ridout, 2007). Some arguments made by several scholars mentioned that the exposure of political ads' content may affect voters' political knowledge, information-seeking, and choice. Meanwhile, the effect of persuasion also has been considered an important variable to study the effect of political ads' exposure on voters' decision.

METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of this study, the Dervin's (2005) SMM was ex-

ecuted as it attempts to build bridges between the two dominant approaches to theories and begins "to be theory of the third kind" (Dervin, 2005, p. 26) - the theory for methodology (Agarwal, 2012). Dervin's (2005) SSM has been designed and applied to study communication situations in ways that free us from being limited to deterministic assumptions about the impact of structures (Reinhard & Dervin, 2012). This methodology has been developed over 35 years of empirical work; what follows is the briefest of overviews (Reinhard & Dervin, 2012). This methodology has been developed over 35 years of empirical work and under it, many studies have been conducted (Reinhard & Dervin, 2012).

This methodology has been widely applied in the conduct of audience/user research in library and information science, health communication, technology studies, and a variety of other contexts. Further, it has been widely used to interrogate the assumption that permeates not only arts institutions, but virtually all institutes serving the general publicthat certain socio-demographic groups are passive, unimportant, or deficient in some way (Dervin, 1980, 2003; Dervin & Frenette, 2001). Therefore, the study believes that this approach is suitable to study the young voter's political situation and how it affects the information seeking behavior.

To achieve the interview and analysing process, the researcher must find a way to intersect with the informants in this study so they can easily name the world or situation they face in their own terms. For describing the interviewing process, a tool called the Sense-Making Metaphor or triangle was used to explain the movement (cognitive, emotional, physical, and/or spiritual) through time-space. This is pictured in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1
Dervin's Sense-Making Methodology Triangle Metaphor
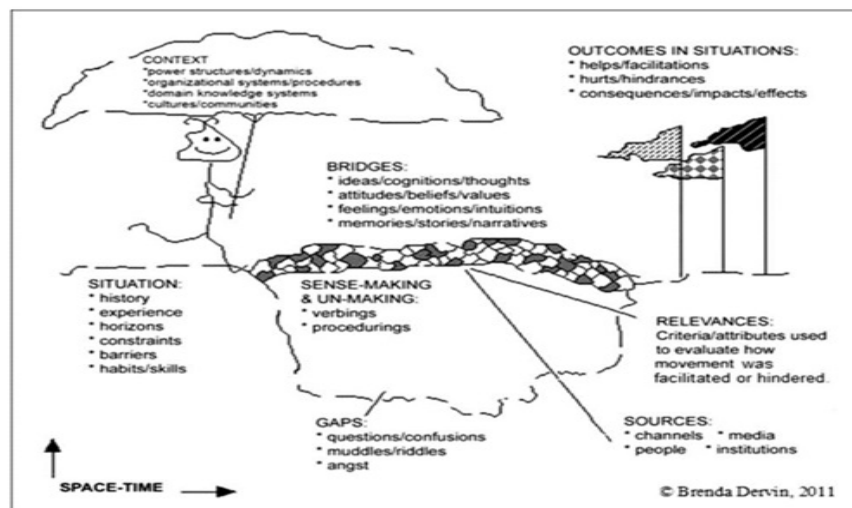
Foreman-wernet and Dervin (2006) cite what they see as three major reasons for the significance of the SMM.

1. Sense-making offers a thorough critique of and an alternative to the widely-prevalent transmission model of communication.
2. Sense-making examines in an ongoing manner philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality, the nature of human beings, and the nature of observing upon which communication theories and practices are built.
3. Sense-making pays explicit attention to the "hows" of communicating that occur at every level of society that helps us not only to understand how we communicate but to intervene, change and improve these practices (Agarwal, 2012).

Dervin's (2005) use of the term 'methodology' itself reflects a broad conceptualization that refers to the relationship between the actual research methods used in any given situation and the substantive theory, or working concepts, that direct those methods as well to the meta theory, or philosophical assumptions, on which the entire research edifice rests. Because Dervin (2005) defines research as communication practice, the practical implications of SSM have been developed to inform not only research but all communication practices (Foreman-wernet & Dervin, 2006).

SMM has been applied to focus group interviewing in a variety of research situations (Dervin, 2015). Participants are asked not to interrupt others with their agreements, disagreements, and reactions. Rather, they are asked to listen deeply to the stories of others. The questions asked were grounded in sense-making theory specifically related to the four dimensions of sense-making and how these might help an individual seek information during a political campaign. Common to all approaches to SMM interviewing is the use of nine questions that are applied to each of the designated micro-moments of time-space that are conceptualized as foci in a particular project (Dervin, 2015).

RESULTS

A pilot focus group discussion of one hour and 40 minutes and consisting of nine participants ($N = 9$) was conducted with undergraduate students from two local universities, UITM and Universiti Malaya. The average age of the participants was 23 with a range of 20-25 years old. Six participants were female and three males; two Chinese females and one Chinese male, two Indian females, two Malay female and male. This is obviously a convenience sampling. The session was recorded and later transcribed. The questions asked were grounded in sense making theory, specifically related to the four elements i.e., voters' situation, information needs, information usage, and voting behaviour. The questions asked in the focus group discussion have been validated by two experts. Each item was asked and carefully validated to meet the research objectives. The unit of analysis in this study was the question asked by the respondent-not the respondent-reflecting the sense-making approach Dervin (1980, 1992). Data analysis aimed at identifying situations that young voters experienced vis-a-vis environmental responsibility. Dervin (1980, 1992) situation-movement-state metaphoric categories were used for a deductively driven analysis and the warrant of data itself was used to inductively derive a set of categories. The information-seeking and use behaviors of respondents were operationalized in the following three ways (Madden, 1999):

Political Situation and Information Seeking

Based on the focus group discussion, the informants in this study were asked about their political situation focusing on their political knowledge and experience. They were asked what led them to understand this political situation and how it affects their understanding of the political issues. The discussion shows that most of them were heavily influenced by their family situation. The role of their parents and family situation was found to be the main influence in their political situation. As an example, the Malaysian government has introduced Bantuan Rakyat 1 Malaysia (BR1M) to help Malaysian households. This type of economic aid has influenced them in understanding the political situation. Some of them agreed that their parents played a strong role in influencing their political knowledge. The political issues that happened close to them made understand more about the political situation. Their political situation also correlated with their past experience and related with their family situation and parents' political experience. They seek more information from their parents and some of them are following their parents' political orientation or inclination when making a political decision. This finding can be similar to previous findings conducted by the earlier researchers. Parents have a significant role in influencing and shaping young voters' political situation due to certain reasons such as political knowledge, political participation, and experience. Other than parents, social media plays an important role as the main source of political information among students. They are likely to choose the internet as their main political information source to learn and understand the political issues that happened. Some of the informants also believed that information that they received from political advertisements such as from billboard may influence their understanding on certain political issues and it does help them to reduce their uncertainty on certain issues. Female Chinese aged 20: My family took the BR1M and BR1M is like another income for my family... it can help to solve my house problems. Because of my father, he is a supporter of.....

Female Chinese aged 20: Usually my mother does not say much.... she will vote based on the area.

Female Malay aged 21: For me to know about political issues, the first source is from media and because young people always refer to social media such as Facebook regardless either it is newspaper, television or Facebook or from the Internet. The Internet is the first source to get information and as a student, we don't have time to buy newspaper and therefore we can seek political information from the internet.

I do agree that some of the political advertising such as billboard has strongly influenced me and we also know from the social media. All those things are going to help me to understand the situation.

From the discussion, economic issues also play an important part in their political situation. Economic issue was found to have a close relationship with them. This issue does affect their daily life. Therefore, a strong issue like economic issue seems to has significant value in young voters' political situation. They agreed that they have been affected by some economic issues such as the hike in oil prices, the implementation of Government Service Tax (GST) and 1MDB issues.

From the discussion, all these issues seem to have a strong influence on their information seeking behavior. As an active audience, they will seek for further information to guide and help them to make a rational decision based on the issues that happened. All the information that they received will influence their attitude and perception towards the political parties and the members of the parties.

Besides economic issue, the study also found that during an election campaign, as young voters, they also seek information about the candidates. The criteria of candidates such as their experience, knowledge, credibility, confidence and accountability are the information that they need during election campaigns. It will help them to make a political evaluation on the candidate that will carry their hopes. A strong candidate that has certain quality criteria may influence their political decision in making the right vote.

Male Chinese aged 20: Economic issue;we want better economic performance.

Malay Female Aged 22: For me, it does affect my life as student. We need to buy many things but not all afford to buy the GST increases. Perhaps many people will say it a good thing but not all agree with that.

Malay Male Aged 23: Based on my opinion, our current political situation is quite unstable, there are so many issues such as 1MDB, GST recently,

As young voters, we want to say that we seek information with no unreasoned move. We did do some research and questions to some third parties to get the true information. So from there,

we are going to analyze the issues and a bit much will influence our decision to vote for next coming election.

Political Advertising and Political Situation

Based on the discussion with participants, they agreed that political advertising has an influence on their political situation. Some of the political advertising contents in different forms and shapes such as print and electronic advertisements dohelp them to increase their political knowledge and understanding on certain political issues. Besides news, they agreed that political advertising is considered as a secondary and confirmatory political source for them to seek more political information. They also share the information with their friends and family. Political advertising messages also help them to understand the political situation. Besides that, they agreed that social media have a significant role in their political information-seeking, where the social media can be one of the main political information sources. Political parties also use social media to disseminate their political advertising messages to ensure their political messages will reach the target audience, especially the young voters.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In political campaigns, contesting political parties and candidates will develop a strategic campaign to influence and persuade their voters and supporters. At the same time, the process of information-seeking is actively done by voters to get full information about certain issues. Based on the findings, economic issues had an influence on young voters' political situation. Some economic issues such as 1MDB influence their perception towards the government. Parents also had a significant impact on their political situation. Political advertising plays a significant role as a source of information during election campaigns. This research is an exploratory study; the objective of the study takes to analyze whether political advertising has an impact on young voters' political situation and information needs. The research tries to understand how political situation will affect young voters' information-seeking behavior. Based on the discussion, we found that the young voters in this discussion were concerned with the political situations that happen in this country.

They do share their information with their friends and families. Their concern on the political situation may influence political parties in developing their political messages. Meanwhile, political advertising is found to be an important source for their information-seeking. Political advertising does have some influence on their political situation, where it influences their trust on certain issues. Therefore, more research will be conducted to see the full impact of political advertising on this target group. Young voters' political participation is important for any demo-

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cratic country. This target group is openly exposed to various types of information. Even though there are some empirical findings that mentioned a low level of political participation among this group (Kaid et al., 2007) and a lack of confidence, however, in this study, some of them make a rational reason saying that as a student, they are not allowed to participate in politics. This is because in Malaysia, there is a law that governs the participation of higher institution students. At the same time, their participation is needed to ensure that the political agenda carried by political parties will be supported by this target group. However, some of them are indirectly involved in the political process by doing some machinery works during the election campaigns and some of them show interest to participate in politics later. Meanwhile, similar to the other studies done by some scholars, political advertising does play an important part, especially in the process of information-seeking among

this group. Even though political advertising is not the main information source, however, it does influence this target group to get political information from the contesting parties. Some political advertisements created by political party do help them in understanding some political issues.

As mentioned by Franz and Ridout (2007), political advertising messages do have a relationship with this group,especially in their decision-making process. Finally, this study needs to do more analysis due to some limitations, especially in getting the participants in this discussion, we think that political parties need to do more engagement, especially finding the strategic method to approach them so they will have a positive thinking about political parties in this country. Some uncontrolled political information does influence their political situation. Therefore, more research on political advertising and information-seeking effect needs to be done.

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