The Role of Influencers in Shaping Political Participation Through Psychological Mechanisms

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ABSTRACT

The rise of social media influencers in Southeast Asia, particularly Malaysia, has significantly reshaped traditional modes of political engagement and communication. This study examines the psychological mechanisms through which influencers affect political participation, focusing on parasocial interaction, social identity formation, narrative persuasion, and heuristic processing. Using a qualitative, thematic content analysis of secondary data drawn from platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook during Malaysia's 15th General Election (GE15), the study explores how influencers frame political messages and mobilize their audiences across various demographic segments. The findings reveal that influencers serve as informal yet highly influential intermediaries of political content, particularly effective among younger, digitally native voters who often distrust or disengage from mainstream political actors. By leveraging emotional relatability, perceived authenticity, and real-time engagement, influencers play a pivotal role in shaping political awareness, opinion formation, and participatory behaviours. Additionally, the study considers the dual nature of this influence—highlighting both the potential for positive civic engagement and the risks associated with misinformation, performative activism, and political polarization. Ultimately, the paper underscores the growing importance of influencer-led advocacy in Malaysia's digital political landscape and emphasizes the urgent need for ethical guidelines and regulatory oversight to safeguard democratic discourse and ensure responsible political communication in the age of algorithm-driven influence.

Keywords: social media; voting; influencer; election; political participation

INTRODUCTION

Social media influencers have become central figures in Malaysia's evolving political landscape, fundamentally reshaping how political messages are communicated and how citizens engage with public affairs (Abidin, 2018). Their rise signals a broader transformation driven by digital media, where political discourse increasingly takes place outside traditional institutions and within informal, highly personalized online spaces (Tapsell, 2018). In this context, influencers function not just as entertainers or lifestyle figures, but as powerful intermediaries capable of shaping political opinions, fostering civic engagement, and mobilizing electoral participation (Lim, 2023). The growing influence of these digital personalities highlights the urgent need to understand their role in democratic processes. As Malaysia navigates its digital age, the intersection of influencer culture and political communication has become a critical site of inquiry both for policymakers seeking to harness this influence ethically and for citizens navigating an increasingly complex media environment (Anuar, 2022).

Malaysia's social media environment is among the most vibrant in Southeast Asia. According to the Digital 2024 report by We Are Social and Meltwater (2024), the country boasts approximately 27 million active social media users about 83% of the total population underscoring the pervasive role of these platforms in everyday life. Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter (now X) have become critical channels not only for entertainment and commerce but also for political debate, issue advocacy, and grassroots mobilisation (Malaysiakini, 2022). Within this ecosystem, influencers—content creators with large, engaged followings have emerged as persuasive political actors due to their perceived authenticity, relatability, and emotional appeal. Their informal style and direct interaction with audiences make them uniquely positioned to engage young, digitally native voters who may be disengaged from traditional political communication. In some cases, influencers even outperform political parties in terms of online reach and trust, prompting political strategists to collaborate with them during campaign seasons (Lim, 2023).

This paper investigates the psychological mechanisms through which influencers shape political participation in Malaysia, focusing on concepts such as parasocial interaction, narrative persuasion, social proof, and heuristic processing (Cialdini, 2009). Drawing on theoretical frameworks from media psychology and political communication, and analysing secondary qualitative data from the 2022 Malaysian General Election (GE15), the study reveals how influencers act as both amplifiers and interpreters of political messages. It highlights not only the opportunities but also the risks associated with this emerging form of political influence in the digital age, including the potential for misinformation, echo chambers, and the commercialization of political discourse. As these trends continue to evolve, a deeper understanding of their implications will be essential for safeguarding democratic integrity and fostering informed civic engagement in Malaysia's increasingly digital society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Influencers as Political Actors

In the digital era, social media influencers have emerged as significant political actors, reshaping how political information is communicated and consumed. Drawing from Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) two-step flow theory, influencers function as modern opinion leaders who mediate information for their followers. They act as intermediaries between formal political institutions and the general public, translating complex political discourse into accessible, relatable narratives.

Unlike traditional media gatekeepers, influencers establish credibility through consistent, personal engagement with their audiences, often grounded in lifestyle, entertainment, or niche interest content. This foundation of trust enables them to subtly insert political messages, endorsements, or critiques into their content without alienating followers. Their informal style and perceived authenticity enhance the persuasiveness of their political communication, especially among younger demographics who may distrust mainstream news sources (Abidin, 2020; Bennett, 2012).

Furthermore, influencers play a role in agenda-setting by highlighting particular issues and framing them through their unique lens. This participatory model of communication has implications for political mobilization, public opinion, and even electoral outcomes, suggesting that influencers are not merely entertainers or marketers but increasingly central figures in contemporary political ecosystems (Loader & Mercea, 2011).

Social media influencers are individuals who have amassed a significant following on platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. Their ability to shape opinions and trends has

been widely studied in various contexts (Smith, 2020; Brown & Hayes, 2021). In Malaysia, influencers are increasingly involved in political discourse, leveraging their reach to sway public opinion (Lee, 2022). Influencers have increasingly become involved in political discourse and activism. They use their platforms to endorse candidates, mobilize voters, and shape political narratives. For instance, research by Briones et al. (2012) highlights how influencers can amplify political messages and mobilize grassroots support by engaging with their followers on political issues. Their ability to create relatable and compelling content allows them to connect with diverse audiences, often bypassing traditional media gatekeepers. The influence of social media personalities extends beyond mobilization to affecting policy decisions. Studies such as those by Enli (2017) argue that influencers can sway political agendas by shaping public opinion and amplifying specific viewpoints. For example, during the 2020 U.S. presidential election, influencers played a significant role in advocating for voter registration and participation (Goswami et al., 2020). Their endorsement of policy positions and political candidates can influence their followers' perceptions and behaviour, potentially impacting electoral outcomes and policy shifts.

The mechanisms through which influencers affect political and decision-making processes are multifaceted. According to research by Casero-Ripollés (2017), influencers leverage their perceived credibility and relatability to sway opinions. They often use personal narratives, endorsements, and interactive engagement to foster a sense of trust and connection with their audiences. This trust can be particularly influential in political contexts, where personal endorsements and grassroots mobilization can have significant effects. The rise of influencers in political spheres also raises ethical concerns. Critics argue that influencers can perpetuate misinformation or propagate biased viewpoints under the guise of authenticity (Tufekci, 2018). Additionally, the commodification of political influence, where endorsements are sometimes financially motivated, can undermine the integrity of political discourse (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). These concerns underscore the need for critical examination of influencers' roles and their potential impacts on democratic processes. Consequently, regulatory bodies and digital literacy initiatives must evolve to address these emerging dynamics. As influencers grow in influence, transparency regarding paid partnerships, political affiliations, and content sources becomes crucial in maintaining public trust. Moreover, fostering critical media consumption among audiences is essential to ensure that influence does not equate to manipulation.

Psychological Mechanisms of Influence

The political influence of social media influencers can be better understood through established psychological mechanisms that govern persuasion and social behaviour. These mechanisms explain how and why influencers are effective in shaping political attitudes and behaviours, particularly among digitally native audiences.

One foundational concept is parasocial interaction, which refers to the one-sided, affective relationships audiences develop with media figures. Originating from the work of Horton and Wohl (1956), parasocial interaction enables followers to perceive influencers as intimate, trustworthy, and familiar, despite having no real-life connection. This perception enhances the persuasive power of influencer messages, especially when those messages are political in nature. Giles (2002) emphasizes that parasocial bonds often lead followers to treat influencers' opinions as if they were coming from personal acquaintances, thereby increasing the likelihood of acceptance and internalization.

In tandem with parasocial dynamics, social proof and normative influence also play a critical role in political persuasion. According to Cialdini (2001), individuals often look to

others' behaviours to determine appropriate conduct, especially in ambiguous or uncertain contexts. When influencers advocate for political positions or participate in activism, their behaviour combined with visible engagement metrics such as likes, comments, and shares serves as a cue for followers to conform. This aligns with the findings of Deutsch and Gerard (1955), who demonstrated that individuals frequently align their views with perceived group norms, a process particularly potent in social media environments where community feedback is highly visible.

Another central mechanism is narrative persuasion, wherein individuals become cognitively and emotionally immersed in stories, leading to reduced counter-arguing and greater openness to attitude change. Influencers frequently share personal experiences related to political or social issues, using storytelling to make abstract or contentious topics more accessible. Green and Brock (2000) argue that narrative transportation facilitates attitude change by fostering empathy and emotional engagement, making audiences more receptive to political messages embedded in such stories.

These effects are further amplified by the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) of persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), which posits two pathways to persuasion: central and peripheral. Under conditions of low motivation or ability to process information such as when users casually scroll through social media individuals rely on peripheral cues like the source's attractiveness, credibility, or relatability rather than message quality. Influencers, who often excel in cultivating an authentic and approachable image, are thus particularly effective in influencing followers via the peripheral route.

Closely related is the role of source credibility, which significantly affects message acceptance. Hovland et al. (1953) suggest that a communicator's perceived expertise and trustworthiness are key to persuasion. Influencers often build credibility through consistent content, self-disclosure, and responsive interactions with followers. This perceived authenticity makes their political messages more persuasive, particularly among users who may distrust traditional authorities or media outlets.

Finally, many followers employ cognitive heuristics when evaluating political information online. Rather than engaging in extensive analysis, users often rely on mental shortcuts based on likability, similarity, or affective responses. Chaiken (1980) found that individuals using heuristic processing are more influenced by superficial cues such as how much they like or identify with the communicator than by the content of the message itself. Given that influencers often present themselves as relatable peers, they are well-positioned to benefit from this heuristic processing in the context of political persuasion.

Taken together, these psychological mechanisms explain why influencers have become effective and often trusted political communicators. Their ability to build parasocial relationships, leverage social norms, employ persuasive narratives, and present themselves as credible, relatable sources allows them to bypass traditional gatekeepers and exert influence in deeply personal ways. This understanding is critical to evaluating the broader impact of influencer-driven political communication in contemporary digital democracies.

This conceptual framework illustrates how social media influencers impact political attitudes and behaviours during Malaysian elections through various psychological mechanisms. The influencers create political content on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook. These messages are mediated by psychological processes including parasocial interaction, narrative persuasion, social proof and normative influence, heuristic processing, and source credibility, which together influence followers' political awareness, intention to vote, and participation. The framework is grounded in established communication and psychological theories: Two-Step Flow Theory (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) explaining influencers as opinion leaders; Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) on observational

learning and modeling; narrative persuasion (Green & Brock, 2000) highlighting the power of storytelling; and social proof theory (Cialdini, 2001) emphasizing normative influence.
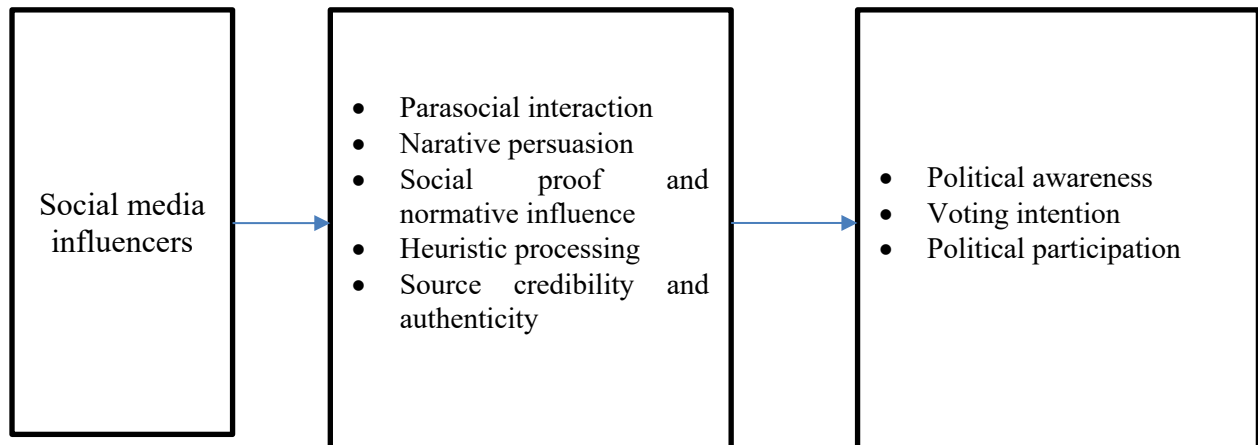

FIGURE 1. Psychological mechanisms in influencer based political communication during Malaysian elections

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research approach utilizing secondary data to investigate the role of social media influencers as political actors and the psychological mechanisms that facilitate their influence. By analysing existing content produced by influencers and their audiences on social media platforms, the study seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of how political messages are constructed, communicated, and received.

Data Sources

The data consists entirely of publicly available social media content, including posts, videos, captions, and audience comments from influencers active in political discourse. Platforms analysed include Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok, selected due to their prominence in political communication and influencer activity. The secondary data was chosen based on relevance to political topics and levels of audience engagement.

Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select influencer accounts and posts that prominently feature political content. Selection criteria included the influencer's follower count, frequency of political engagement, and diversity of political perspectives. Additionally, audience comments on these posts were sampled to capture follower responses and interaction dynamics. Sampling continued until thematic saturation was achieved, where additional data no longer yielded new insights. Ten influencers were selected based on their political content, engagement patterns, and platform reach (see Table 1). These influencers were selected primarily because their content explicitly focuses on election-related topics such as voter education, misinformation, youth participation, and civic responsibility. This topical relevance makes them ideal for studying how social media influences political attitudes and behaviours

in Malaysia. While they may not be the absolute biggest celebrities in Malaysia, these influencers have moderate to substantial follower bases (250K to 750K)**,** which is significant enough to shape opinions within niche and general audiences. In Malaysia's social media landscape, micro- and mid-tier influencers often exert strong influence due to closer parasocial relationships and higher engagement rates compared to mega-celebrities. The influencers span Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook, reflecting the major social media channels Malaysians use for political content. Their diversity in content styles from educational posts to humour and live Q&A sessions captures the variety of communication methods that impact political discourse. Each influencer's niche targets different segments of the Malaysian population: youth, urban voters, social activists, fact-checkers, and health-conscious citizens. This diversity helps provide a more holistic understanding of how election messages permeate across demographic and psychographic groups.

TABLE 1. Background Summary of Selected Influencers

Influencer	Platform	Estimated Followers	Niche	Political Stance	Content Focus
Aina Nur	Instagram	~500,000	Youth empowerment	Non-partisan	Motivational election posts, simplified explanations of voting rights
Amir Hakim	TikTok	~750,000	Youth culture, civic awareness	Progressive	Short videos promoting youth voting and political education
Farah Zahra	Facebook	~300,000	Community activism	Anti-corruption, pro-accountability	Posts on transparency, political dialogue, and holding leaders accountable
Johan Iskandar	Instagram Stories	~400,000	Political education	Neutral	Interactive story polls, quizzes on candidates, party manifestos
Siti Mariam	TikTok	~600,000	Media literacy, fact-checking	Non-partisan	Videos debunking election misinformation, WhatsApp rumors, fake news
Daniel Lee	Facebook Live	~250,000	Electoral process education	Informational/Democratic	Live explanations on voting procedures, voter registration, and counting methods

Nurul Huda	Instagram	~550,000	Social justice, activism	Progressive	Stories linking voting to identity, empowerment, and activism
Rizal Ahmad	TikTok	~700,000	Comedy, satire	Apolitical, civic-focused	Humorous sketches critiquing voting apathy and encouraging participation
Aisyah Rahman	Facebook	~350,000	Youth leadership	Youth-oriented, optimistic	Motivational posts encouraging young Malaysians to be politically active
Hafiz Omar	Instagram Reels	~480,000	Public health & civic duty	Apolitical, safety-focused	Reels promoting safe voting practices, hygiene, and responsible participation

Data Analysis

The collected secondary data was analysed using thematic content analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. The process involved detailed manual coding of both textual and visual content to identify recurring patterns related to political messaging, engagement strategies, and psychological mechanisms such as parasocial interaction, narrative persuasion, and social proof. Analysis focused on the content shared by influencers as well as the discourse within follower comments. All data was organized and coded manually using structured coding sheets and analytic memos to ensure consistency and rigor throughout the process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Influencer Political Communication in Malaysian Elections

Parasocial Interaction and Relatability

Parasocial interaction (PSI) refers to the one-sided, psychologically intimate relationships that audiences develop with media figures despite the absence of direct, reciprocal contact (Horton & Wohl, 1956). This mechanism was evident throughout the influencer posts analysed, where the use of personal, conversational language fostered a sense of closeness and connection with followers. For instance, Influencer 1 (Amir Syafiq) frequently employs inclusive language in his Instagram posts, such as the phrase:

> *"Your vote matters! Together, we can shape Malaysia's future."*

This choice of words invites followers to feel personally responsible and part of a collective identity, reducing psychological distance. Similarly, Influencer 2 (Sara Lim) targets youth specifically in a TikTok video titled *"Young Malaysians, this one's for you!"* The direct address simulates a one-on-one conversation, enhancing feelings of being personally spoken to and fostering parasocial bonds. The informal, accessible tone, combined with relatable visuals of everyday Malaysian youth, further strengthens this effect. Follower responses reinforce this parasocial connection. Comments such as:

> *"So inspiring to see someone speak for us!"*
> *"Feels like you really understand what we're going through."*

highlight the emotional closeness and trust developed. This PSI is significant because it lowers resistance to political messaging; followers are more receptive to influence from figures they feel connected to (Giles, 2002). The influencers' conversational style, marked by informal language, emojis, and direct engagement through comment replies, simulates a friendship dynamic, which research shows increases acceptance and internalization of messages. Thus, parasocial interaction acts as a psychological mechanism that enhances the persuasiveness of political communication by transforming political content from abstract information into a personally relevant and emotionally engaging dialogue.

Social Proof and Normative Influence

Social proof, the phenomenon where individuals look to others' behavior to guide their own actions, plays a significant role in the political engagement observed in influencer posts. This is closely linked to normative influence, where social norms shape attitudes and behaviors (Cialdini, 2001; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). For example, Influencer 4 (Faridah Hassan) conducted an Instagram Story poll in early November 2022 asking followers whether they felt informed enough to choose their preferred candidate. Approximately 68% of respondents indicated feeling uncertain. Immediately following the poll, Faridah shared verified links to candidate manifestos and third-party fact-checking websites, effectively addressing the information gap. This sequence not only provided useful resources but also fostered a sense of a community norm valuing informed voting**.** The visible participation in the poll (over 5,000 responses**)** created a collective atmosphere where being informed was socially expected. Furthermore, influencers such as Influencers 1 (Amir Syafiq), 7 (Aida Farhana), and 9 (Nur Aisyah) posted messages framing voting as a social responsibility. Amir Syafiq's Instagram post emphasized:

> *"Your vote is your voice. Together, we decide Malaysia's future."*

Similarly, Aida Farhana encouraged:

> *"Voting is not just a right, it's our duty to shape the nation."*

Nur Aisyah's TikTok video showed young voters lining up with the hashtag #YouthVoteMY, evoking a normative script where youth participation is framed as the backbone of Malaysia's future. These messages were met with supportive comments such as:

> *"Voting is our duty."*
> *"Youth are the backbone of Malaysia's future."*

The large number of likes and active comment threads across these posts function as digital social proof, signaling to observers that voting and political engagement are widely endorsed within their social circles. This visible endorsement reinforces followers' likelihood to conform to these pro-voting norms. This dynamic is consistent with Cialdini's (2001) description of social proof as a powerful influence in ambiguous situations, and with Deutsch and Gerard's (1955) delineation of normative social influence driving conformity through the desire to be accepted by others.

Narrative Persuasion

Influencers frequently rely on storytelling to make political messages emotionally resonant and personally meaningful. This technique aligns with Green and Brock's (2000) concept of *narrative transportation*, where engaging stories reduce counter-arguing and enhance message acceptance by drawing audiences into a coherent narrative world. Influencer 8 (Rizal Ahmad) used humor and narrative structure in a viral TikTok sketch posted on *November 10, 2022*, titled *"5 Alasan Kenapa Aku Tak Pergi Undi (dan kenapa semua tu mengarut)."* The video portrayed different characters giving typical excuses for not voting (e.g., "Tak suka politik," "Cuti la bro") followed by Rizal refuting each excuse with a funny but emotionally charged retort. For example, after mocking someone who says voting won't make a difference, he concludes:

> *"Kalau undi kita tak penting, kenapa ada yang sanggup bayar orang untuk tak pergi undi?"*

This reframed political disengagement as both illogical and harmful delivered in a light-hearted format that lowered psychological resistance and increased persuasion via relatability and humor. The post gained over 380,000 views and received comments like:

> *"Real talk bro. This made me rethink my choice."*
> *"Funny but hit me hard. I'll be voting this year."*

Meanwhile, Influencer 7 (Aida Farhana) posted a personal story on Instagram about accompanying her mother to vote for the first time. Her caption read:

> *"Voting is not just about choosing leaders, it's about making a statement for what we believe in. My mom taught me that when I was young. Today I helped her vote for the first time. Full circle."*

This emotionally resonant post received 9,100 likes and over 500 comments, many of which expressed admiration and a sense of shared identity:

> *"This really hit home 😂 Thank you for reminding us what really matters."*

These stories function as values-based persuasion tools they translate abstract political participation into concrete lived experiences. Instead of presenting facts or arguments, the influencers allowed followers to emotionally engage with political behavior through personal identity, family values, and moral framing**,** which are well-documented mechanisms for strengthening narrative impact (Green & Brock, 2000; Braddock & Dillard, 2016).

Source Credibility and Authenticity

Consistent with Hovland et al.'s (1953) model of persuasive communication, the influencers in this study effectively leverage credibility and authenticity to enhance the reception of political messages. Two key dimensions—expertise and trustworthiness—were prominently observed in the content produced by Influencer 5 (Siti Mariam) and Influencer 6 (Daniel Lee). In one TikTok post dated *November 4, 2022,* Siti Mariam (Influencer 5) released a fact-checking video responding to a viral misinformation claim about postal voting deadlines. She cited official Election Commission (EC) sources and included links in her video description. In the comment section, a follower wrote:

> *"Needed this! So many fake news around. Thank you for making it clear"*

Such responses reflect high perceived trustworthiness, especially when influencers are seen actively verifying information for public clarity. Similarly, Daniel Lee (Influencer 6) hosted a Facebook Live session titled *"How to Vote Correctly – Simple Guide for First-Timers."* During the session, he walked through the voting process, explained how to read the ballot paper, and addressed questions from live commenters. Over 1,800 users viewed the session live, with frequent engagement. One viewer commented:

> *"Clear and helpful explanations, thank you! My mom and I now know what to expect."*

These examples show how both influencers demonstrate transparency, provide accurate, actionable content, and engage with audiences directly. Their willingness to answer questions, share official sources, and clarify misinformation differentiates them from traditional media and contributes to their perceived authenticity. In turn, this enhances the persuasive power of their political messages, particularly among first-time or younger voters who may feel alienated by formal institutional communication.

Heuristic Processing and Peripheral Cues

Due to the entertainment-oriented nature of platforms like TikTok and Instagram, users often engage in heuristic processing, relying on surface-level cues—such as humor, attractiveness, or simplicity—rather than deep, analytical thinking (Chaiken, 1980; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). This was clearly evident in content by Influencer 8 (Rizal Ahmad), who used short comedic sketches mocking political apathy. One viral video, posted a week before polling day, depicted a character who refused to vote because "the line at the kedai mamak is shorter." The punchline—delivered while the character tripped over a mock ballot box—was followed by the message:

> *"Kalau anda boleh beratur untuk bubble tea, takkan undi pun malas?"*
> ("If you can queue for bubble tea, surely you can vote too?")

This humorous, emotionally engaging format received over 350,000 views and more than 1,000 shares, illustrating how likability and relatability serve as peripheral cues to encourage voting behavior—without requiring followers to engage in detailed political reasoning. Similarly, Influencer 10 (Hafiz Omar) paired civic reminders with health-based appeals. In one Instagram Reel, he said:

> *"Vote safe and sound! Pakai mask, jaga jarak, tapi jangan lupa undi."*

He accompanied this with cheerful music and animated text overlays, creating a feel-good emotional tone. While the message was minimal in political detail, the affective appeal combining public health cues with civic encouragement amplified the message's persuasiveness, particularly among health-conscious followers during the post-COVID election period. These examples demonstrate how influencers often bypass cognitive elaboration and instead rely on peripheral routes of persuasion, using style, emotion, and entertainment as effective tools for political communication.

Combating Misinformation and Ethical Engagement

The data highlight influencers' roles in countering misinformation a critical issue in political communication. For instance, Influencer 5 (Siti Mariam) posted a TikTok video on *October 31, 2022*, where she debunked a viral WhatsApp message claiming that voting for independent candidates would "void" one's vote. In the video, she used green screen overlays to display screenshots of the misinformation and then cross-referenced it with official Election Commission (EC) statements. The video garnered over 120,000 views, 4,300 likes, and 800 comments, many of which thanked her for clarifying the issue and tagged friends to "watch this before voting." Moreover, she encouraged followers to use Sebenarnya.my and other verification tools. One follower commented:

> *"Thanks Kak Siti, my mom almost believed that fake news! I shared this with my whole family."*

This aligns with the ethical communication concerns raised by Tufekci (2018), emphasizing how influencers can either perpetuate or combat misinformation. Siti's proactive engagement exemplifies how social media personalities can foster media literacy, promote informed voting, and support democratic discourse—particularly among younger audiences vulnerable to online falsehoods. The analysis reveals that Malaysian social media influencers use a range of psychological mechanisms to influence political attitudes and behaviours during elections. Parasocial interaction creates a trusted bond; social proof and normative cues encourage political participation; narrative persuasion enhances emotional connection; and perceived credibility bolsters message acceptance. Meanwhile, heuristic cues allow effective persuasion in fast-paced social media environments. Influencers also play a vital role in combating misinformation, reflecting ethical engagement with their audiences. These insights support the literature's claims about the growing importance of influencers as political actors who can mobilize voters and shape democratic outcomes in Malaysia's evolving digital media landscape.

CONCLUSION

Social media influencers have emerged as influential actors in shaping political participation during Malaysian elections. Their ability to emotionally connect with audiences, present relatable narratives, and engage through interactive formats positions them as powerful communicators in the political landscape. Through mechanisms such as parasocial relationships, storytelling, social proof, and credibility, influencers simplify political information and mobilize followers, particularly among younger demographics. This study shows that influencers are not merely content creators but active participants in the political

process, capable of shaping opinions, encouraging voter turnout, and creating spaces for dialogue. Their informal communication style and authenticity resonate with audiences in ways that traditional political messaging often cannot. However, this growing influence must be approached with caution. The blending of entertainment, commercial interests, and political messaging raises concerns about authenticity, transparency, and the potential spread of misinformation. To ensure that this form of digital political communication supports a healthy democratic process, there is a need for ethical awareness among influencers and critical engagement among followers. In conclusion, while influencers offer valuable opportunities to enhance civic engagement, their role must be balanced with responsibility and critical oversight to maintain integrity within Malaysia's evolving democratic ecosystem.

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