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Political Communication and Election Campaigning on Instagram During the 14th Malaysian General Election

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Abstract: Researching Instagram as a tool in political communication is a relatively new phenomenon since the platform only began to operate in 2010. However due to its increasing popularity, it is definitely time for more studies to be conducted. World leaders are becoming very prominent on Instagram. They are sharing both personal and political contents and are challenging the usually formal and bureaucratic nature of political communication. Therefore this study attempts to explore how Instagram affects political communication by focusing on how several Malaysian politicians used Instagram as part of their communication and campaign during the 14th general election that was held on May 8th, 2018. Coding analysis was done on the Instagram posts of 8 prominent Malaysian politicians. The results showed that these politicians were very active on Instagram and have extensively used Instagram to campaign during the election thus verifying that Instagram is indeed a vital medium for political communication.

Keywords: Instagram, Malaysia, GE14, Political Communication, Social Media, Internet, Elections

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Abstrak: Kajian Instagram sebagai alat komunikasi politik adalah fenomena yang agak baru kerana platform media sosial ini baru mula beroperasi pada tahun 2010. Namun, kerana populariti penggunaannya yang semakin meningkat dalam kalangan ahli politik, telah menjadi faktor kajian-kajian politik menggunakan media sosial ini giat dijalankan. Ramai pemimpin dunia telah menjadi sangat terkenal di Instagram. Mereka berkongsi kandungan aktiviti peribadi dan politik. Ini merupakan suatu norma baharu dalam komunikasi politik biasa yang bersifat formal dan birokratik. Oleh itu kajian ini cuba meneroka bagaimana Instagram mempengaruhi komunikasi politik di Malaysia. Tinjauan memfokuskan bagaimana beberapa ahli politik menggunakan Instagram untuk berkomunikasi dan berkempen semasa pilihan raya umum Malaysia ke-14 yang diadakan pada 8 Mei 2018. Analisis pengekodan dilakukan pada posting Instagram 8 ahli politik terkemuka di Malaysia. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa ahli politik ini sangat aktif di Instagram menggunakan media sosial ini untuk berkempen semasa pilihan raya. Kajian ini turut mengesahkan bahawa Instagram sememangnya merupakan media sosial yang penting dalam komunikasi politik.

Kata Kunci: Instagram, Malaysia, PRU14, Komunikasi Politik, Media Sosial, Internet, Pilihanraya

Introduction

Case (2002) considers Malaysia to be the best example of a semi-democracy in South- East Asia. Semi-democracies “regularly hold elections, thus offering a snapshot of propriety on voting day, they have limited civil liberties beforehand” (Case, 2002, p. 6). In Malaysia, the opposition is hindered and cannot effectively compete against the ruling government coalition, especially in terms of reaching out to the wider electorate as most media outlets are owned by the government and are “restricted in circulating their party publications” (Case, 2002, p. 7). Such limited democratic affordances can be exemplified by the way the government in Malaysia controls the electoral process. Although there is an independent election commission, called the “Suruhanjaya Pilihanraya”, it has become widely accepted that the commission works in parallel with the ruling elite (Lim, 2005). The commission was established in 1957 under Article 114 of the Federal Constitution. The intended objective of the commission was to allow for the transparent administration and conduct of the electoral process so that it was fair

to all competing political parties. However, this does not mean that the credibility of the electoral system is entirely dependent on the performance of the Election Commission, for the electoral process can be controlled by the legislature and certain government practices. Legislative interference is not the only factor behind the government's control of the electoral process. The ruling government has at its disposal a whole array of state resources, including the command of administrative apparatuses, control over economic resources, and the ownership and regulation of the mass media (Wok & Mohamed, 2017).

The Internet brought democratic change to the Malaysian mediasphere. In the early years of the Internet, opposition parties opted for websites and blogs as a way to reach the population. However, the low Internet penetration at the time did not support the political discourse that was building online. It was mostly the rise of web 2.0 and the social media, together with increase in Internet speed and penetration that online political discourse became mainstream and had since, considerably affected Malaysian politics (Mohamed, 2017). In the previous 2008 and 2013 General Elections; the opposition parties' online popularity grew significantly and so did their electoral gains. This is because Malaysians finally had alternative sources of information. Previously, political news and information mostly came from government-approved sources and political discourses were limited to closed-door discussions. The Internet, notably social media, allowed for all kinds of political news to be freely shared and discussed (Mohamed, 2017). By 2013, the opposition parties had managed to significantly use the Internet to their electoral benefit. While they did not manage to overthrow the ruling government, they were able to win 89 out of the 222 Parliament seats and denied the government at the time the 2/3rd majority they had easily secured for more than 56 years.

The 14th general election held in 2018, offered a more sophisticated mediascape for Malaysian politicians to engage with the electorate. New media platforms such as Instagram and Whatsapp offered new avenues and methods of reaching the audiences. Existing platforms such as facebook, twitter and online news portals offered more functions such as live broadcast and better multimedia performances. These developments are to the advantage of the politicians as they can personally reach the electorate without having to consider much about the cost and legal pressures. These platforms offered the politicians,

regardless of their political affiliations, a fair playing field to share their political aspirations (Mohamed, Manan & Ghazali, 2019). This election saw both familiar and new tactics being put into play. Social media's ability to transcend space and its alternative feel makes it an efficient tool to reach out to first-time and young voters who abhor the standard Malaysian campaign fare of rallies and gatherings

Political parties can also cast their election messaging nets further, targeting rural and semi-rural areas that now enjoy better Internet coverage than in the previous elections. More importantly, it allows silent voters to remain informed while exercising concealed support for chosen parties and candidates. With this development, this study will focus on looking at how Malaysian politicians take advantage of these new media platforms by focusing specifically on Instagram. Instagram is relatively new in Malaysian politics, as the politicians in the previous elections did not yet adopt it. The 14th general election was the first time where politicians were able to incorporate Instagram into their media portfolio.

Research Background

Malaysia has high-speed Internet and wide Internet penetration thus Malaysians spend a lot of time online. Not only do Malaysians access Internet very frequently (at least once a day), participation in social networks is also extremely high at 84.3 percent (MCMC, 2017). In terms of social networking sites, Facebook is the most popular and is closely followed by Instagram. Instagram is a photo and video-sharing social media platform created by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger which was launched in October 2010. Since then, Instagram has become very popular, gaining one million users in two just months, 10 million in a year, and up to almost 800 million as of September 2017 (Casalo et al., 2018). Facebook acquired the service in 2012 for approximately 1 billion USD in cash and stock. Today, Instagram is the 6th most popular social media platform with over a billion users worldwide. It is also very popular in Malaysia. According to MCMC (2017), there are 13.74 million Instagram users in Malaysia, an increase from 46.7percent (2016) to 56.1 percent of the population. This is one of the reasons why Instagram is now an important tool for advertisers and marketers to reach the market. It is also why celebrities, politicians or anyone who wants visibility needs to have an Instagram presence.

Instagram is a platform dedicated to highly visual communication. Users can upload up to 10 pictures or videos in a single post and can apply a range of different filters to their visuals as well as limited amount of text. The platform is primarily associated with more artistic shots, which allows followers to like and comment on posts. Unlike other platforms, the image tells the story while the text is secondary. Since 2016, users have been able to post Instagram Stories that disappear after 24 hours and live videos that disappear immediately after the broadcast unless the user saves them to his or her mobile device and recently the introduction of new face filters.

The use of Instagram for political communication is on the rise. The popularity of social media platform has world leaders adopting it as an integral part of their communications. Over the past five years, governments and world leaders have flocked to the mobile photo and video sharing social network to share their official pictures with a worldwide audience. Government use of Instagram as a communications channel is particularly frequent in Europe, Middle East, Latin America and parts of Asia. According to Twiplomacy (2017) 140 heads of state and government, as well as foreign ministers, currently have personal and institutional accounts on Instagram, representing 72.5 percent of all 193 United Nations (UN) member states. Instagram, which claims 600 million active monthly users, has an ever-increasing following – something world leaders and their advisors have not been slow to recognize.

While some politicians are more social media savvy than others, it appears that these politicians agree that visual images are important for their repertoire. According to a survey done by Twiplomacy (2017) on the visibility of world politicians on Instagram, out of 140 world leaders, it is the Prime Minister of India that has the largest following. This may be attributed to the equally large number of the Indian population. American President Donald Trump is quite popular as well, having 9.6 million followers on Instagram. However, former President Barack Obama seemed to be more popular than his successor with 18 million followers. Nevertheless, the number of followers does not indicate how active and interactive a politician is online. According to Twiplomacy (2017), less known world leaders such as Indonesian President Joko Widodo are more active as they post more pictures and content. Malaysian politicians are jumping on the Instagram bandwagon as well.

Almost all the prominent politicians have an account and a significant number of followers. This indicates that these politicians are aware of the significance of Instagram.

On the other hand, it was found that 18.3 percent of social media users in Malaysia shared political views. Lee (2017) argued that while this percentage may be fairly moderate, it should be noted that the Internet is an important source of information for those who access it (90.1 percent) and social media is one of the main online information portals (86.9 percent). Therefore the popularity of social media and its impact on political communication is indisputable. Given the importance of social networking sites, one would expect political parties and politicians to have invested effort and time to develop greater social media presence. Khairy Jamaluddin is an example of a Malaysian politician who is very popular on social media. In 2017, he was the most followed politician on Instagram (866,000 followers) and Twitter (2.28 million followers). Among the reasons why he is popular is because he is considerably young compared to other Malaysian politicians. In his Instagram, he shares photos of how he maintains a healthy and fashionable lifestyle and when he posts about politics it would usually be in a creative manner like in the form of a short drama. At the same time, he is also very responsive on Twitter. He would reply to comments and share interactive posts such as memes and polls. However, after May 2018, Khairy's popularity has been surpassed by the newly re-elected Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir who's Instagram followers currently stands at 1.3 million.¹

While many studies on social media and politics in Malaysia have focused on Facebook (Zainuddin et al., 2017) (Lee, 2017), studies on Instagram are still limited. This is because researching Instagram as a tool in political communication is a relatively new phenomenon since the platform only began to operate in 2010. However, due to its increasing popularity, it is time for more studies to be conducted.

Realizing the potential Instagram has to offer to the study of political communication, this study attempts to explore how Instagram affects political communication in Malaysia by focusing on how several Malaysian politicians used Instagram as part of their communication

¹ (<https://www.instagram.com/chedetofficial/?hl=en>)

and campaign during the 14th general election. This study investigates and discusses how Malaysian politicians utilized Instagram in their campaign efforts by scrutinizing the posts and issues put forth during the campaign week that occurred between April 28th, to May 8th, 2018. By understanding how this small group of politicians use Instagram, it is possible to better understand the role of social media and visual communication on politics and elections.

Methodology

According to Liebhart & Bernhardt (2017), visual imagery on politicians' Instagram accounts as material pictures, which are the basis of immaterial images, can be used as indicators to the study of images. However, the use of Instagram in political communication as both a means of staging a political personality and a form of image management has not been sufficiently studied yet. The production, selection, and distribution of visual imagery in terms of image management by politicians may thus help to shape the image of persons or groups of persons, their behavior and lifestyle as well as their character traits (Fillimonov et al, 2016). The framework outlined above leads to the research questions that intend to identify how Malaysian politicians used Instagram during elections. How do these politicians and their media team (if they had any) project and manage desired ideas and sentiments through the visual images they share?

To understand this problem, content analysis was adopted. Content analysis is a quantitative data collection method which can provide the descriptive and exploratory data that will be able to answer the research questions. Several studies that looked into the relationship between politicians and Instagram had adopted content analysis.

Similarly, Towner and Munoz (2017) used content analysis to compare the posts and issues shared by Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders running up to the 2016 American presidential primary. Content analysis was also used by Liebhart and Bernhardt (2017) in their study that looked at how Instagram was used by Austrian President, Alexander Van Der Bellen presidential election campaign in 2016. These studies have all developed a content sheet that measured basic functions of Instagram. It includes the kinds of Instagram post, the type and length of captions and the numbers of comments. Similarly, a content sheet that recorded the basic functions of Instagram was

developed for this research study. This content sheet also included other categories based on the researchers' early observation of numerous Malaysian politicians' Instagram accounts. The unit of analysis was each Instagram post available in the selected politicians' account. Each post was screen-captured, archived, and manually recorded and analyzed by a trained coder. The study looked at the different aspects of Instagram content such as the types of the post whether it is a single photo or multiple photos or even a video. It also looked at the number of posts and the photo captions. Other areas that were looked at included the characteristics of each post and the issues that the politicians highlighted. Data were collected during the campaign week that lasted for two weeks to the night after the election starting from April 28 to May 10th, 2018. Malaysian election law dictates that all parties are only allowed to campaign in the specific timeframe stipulated by the Election Commission. As such, any form of election campaign such as political rallies, gatherings and even media coverage can only be done during the given timeframe.

The study drew on the Instagram posts of 8 prominent Malaysian politicians. These politicians were selected based on 1) candidacy in the election 2) prominence in Malaysian politics such as the level of power they have within their respective parties and 3) Instagram activity which requires the selected politicians to be active and have a significant number of followers. The three main coalitions that contested in the election were the then incumbent government coalition, *Barisan Nasional* (BN); the main opposition coalition, *Pakatan Harapan* composed of four main parties that are *Parti Keadilan* (PKR), *Parti Pribumi* (PBM), *Parti Amanah Malaysia* (AMANAH) and Democratic Action Party (DAP); and the smaller Islamist coalition, *Gagasan Sejahtera* led by the *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (PAS). Samples were taken from each coalition in the attempt to have a more representative data. The 8 politicians selected were:

Table 1: list of sampled politicians with their political roles and number of followers

	Name/party	Prominence	IG Followers (as of May 2018)
1.	Najib Razak (BN)	• BN President	165k
2.	Hishamuddin Hussein (BN)	• UMNO Vice President • Defense Minister	165k
3.	Khairy Jamaluddin (BN)	• UMNO Youth Chief • Youth Minister	866K
4.	Mahathir Mohamad (PH)	• PH Candidate for PM • President Party Pribumi	106K
5.	Azmin Ali (PH)	• Keadilan deputy president • Menteri Besar Selangor	72.9K
6.	Nurul Izzah	• Keadilan Vice President	167K
7.	Hadi Awang(PAS)	• Pas President	21.5K
8.	Ahmad Dusuki (PAS)	• Famous preacher	265K

*the number of followers listed in the table were recorded on April 28th, 2018, the first-day election of campaign

Research Results

All of the politicians used Instagram during the time of the study. However, there was quite a variation. Some were posting a lot while others posted less. Ahmad Dusuki of PAS had 61 posts while Dr. Mahathir of Pakatan Harapan posted only three.

Table 2: The most active politician according to the number of posts

Politician	Frequency	Valid Percent
Ahmad Dusuki	61	36.3
Nurul Izzah	27	16.7
Azmin	21	12.5
Hadi	20	11.9
Hishamudin	15	8.9
Khairy	13	7.7
Najib	8	4.8
Mahathir	3	1.2
Total	168	100

Table 2 explains the number of posts posted by politicians. When compared to the other politicians selected in the sample group, Ahmad Dusuki of PAS is probably the least experienced. Although he has a large number of Instagram followers, he was mostly identified as a preacher rather than a politician. But during the weeks running up to the election, it was Ahmad Dusuki who posted the most on Instagram. With 61 posts, Dusuki was more productive than the second most active politician, Nurul Izzah, who had 27 posts. This was followed by the other politicians respectively Azmin Ali (21), Hadi Awang (20), Hishamuddin (15) and Khairy Jamaluddin (13). The two main party leaders and candidates for the Prime Minister post, Najib Razak and Mahathir Mohamad, were the least active on Instagram. Najib Razak only posted 8 photos and Mahathir Mohamad posted 6. It was also interesting to uncover that PAS president Hadi Awang was also active on Instagram and had more posts compared to both Najib Razak And Mahathir combined. At the same time, it appears that PAS politicians are more active than the politicians from the other parties as the total of their posts amounted to 81 and this is almost 48.2 percent of the total posts. This somehow undermines the many studies that claimed PAS to be the least social media savvy (Salman et al., 2016) (Lee, 2017). The number of Instagram posts by the party's politicians show that they are very much aware of the importance of having social media visibility. However, this does not indicate that they are the most effective because the number of posts alone is not a strong indication of impact and effectiveness.

Table 3: Types of Instagram posts

Type of post	Frequency	Valid Percent
Photo (single)	105	62.5
Photo (multiple)	32	19
Video	31	18.5
Total	168	100

Instagram allows for different types of postings. The main type of posting is the photo. Users can opt for a single photo per post or a gallery that allows for up to 10 photos per post. Users can also create a collage that enables them to design a single collage of up to 9 photos per post. Each post can be accompanied by a text caption of up to 2200 characters and 30 hashtags. Video posts can be shared on both the main feed (60

seconds) and in Instagram stories (15 seconds). Instagram Stories is a feature that lets users post photos and videos that vanish after 24 hours. Content shared to stories won't appear on the profile grid or in the main Instagram feed. In 2016, Instagram introduced its live video function that allows users to broadcast live videos that will stay available for 24 hours.

There were a total of 168 posts shared by all of the politicians studied. Majority (62.5 percent) of the politicians are still conservatively using Instagram as they were mostly posting single photos and not making the most of the options made available by Instagram. The politicians posted almost the same amount of videos (31) and multiple photos (32). None of the politicians posted photo collages at the time of the study. A few politicians did create Instagram stories but the study did not analyze them because the researchers were not able to decide on the best approach to measure the stories because they were shared in parts that could be uploaded at any time and they were only available for 24 hours making it difficult for the coders to keep up with the contents.

Table 4: Content of Instagram Posts

Type of Content	Frequency	Valid Percent
Professionally produced campaign materials	62	36.9
Campaign activities	90	53.6
Objects/things	6	3.6
Personal activity	10	5.9
Total	168	100

There are no written or unwritten rules when it comes to the kinds of contents politicians can upload on Instagram. Because Instagram is both personal and public platforms, politicians have been known to upload a range of content from political statements or hard-hitting announcements to fun selfies and the food they eat. The politicians studied here also do not seem to set any boundaries on their Instagram. All of them have mixed formal political contents with informal everyday life randomness. For example, on the day after the campaign period started which was on April 29th, Najib Razak posted about a *nasi lemak* burger (see picture 1) with a caption that simply compared the traditional *nasi*

lemak, a popular Malaysian dish usually offered at breakfast with the more hipster *nasi lemak* burger that at the time was made available at McDonald's, a popular fast-food franchise. Posting what seemed to be a non-political photo at the official start of the election was an interesting choice. Was Najib trying to appear unaffected by the campaign heat or was he really trying to make a symbolic political comparison? Was the traditional *nasi lemak* a representation of the legacy of his more authentic, long-running government coalition? Was he trying to imply that his opponent, Pakatan Harapan is the new but not original, *nasi lemak* burger? Only Najib Razak could answer these trivial but interesting questions. This vagueness is the advantage of Instagram. It allows politicians to play with the audiences' perceptions. What appears to be a personal photo could also be a political statement. The *nasi lemak* photo invited numerous comments and discussions among Instagram followers. Some took it literally while others try to uncode what Najib was trying to say. Regardless of the feedback, the post gathered the peoples' interest, Najib Razak managed to get people talking. Other photos were more straightforward. On the day before the election that was on May 8th, Najib posted a photo of him sitting with a group of fishermen with a caption that detailed his political achievements and campaign manifesto (see picture 2). The post was obviously portraying Najib as a concerned statesman. In the photo's caption, Najib detailed his initiatives while in the office where he had helped the fisherman in Pekan whose were facing difficulties with 3 months subsistence allowance.



Picture 1: Najib Razak posting about food



Picture 2: Najib Razak on campaign trail and detailing his political contribution.

Because the study was specifically conducted during the campaign period, 53.6 percent of the content uploaded by the politicians were related to their campaign activities. The second most popular kind of contents was professionally produced campaign materials. A total of 36.9 percent of the contents shared were materials that were categorized as public and were professionally produced for campaign purposes. Examples included a professionally photographed image of the politician on campaign trails as well as campaign posters. Picuture 3 is an example of a professionally-produced poster designed to inform about Azmin Ali’s campaign tour. Other kinds of contents were also shared but were of insignificant number. Again, this could be because the politicians were focused on their campaign at the time. Other contents that were shared include personal activities (5.9 percent), objects (3.6 percent).



Picture 3: An example of a professionally produced campaign material

Table 5: Target of Instagram posts

Message Target	Frequency	Valid Percent
Voters	119	70.8
Opposition Parties	32	19.1
Barisan Nasional	12	7.1
Government	3	1.8
Islamic Group	2	1.2
Total	168	100.0

To understand how Instagram is being used for political communication, it is vital to learn about to whom who politicians hope to reach when they post content. When they post random everyday materials, it could be that they are simply sharing a piece of their life to their followers regardless of the followers' political inclinations. However, during the election campaign, it was obvious that the politicians were focused on informing and influencing the voters (Ceccobelli, 2018). 70.8 percent of the posts were targeted to specific voters. the politicians' target audiences were identified through the content and caption of the post. For example, Hishammuddin Hussein specifically refers to his constituency "Sembrong" in many of his posts. The photos clearly showed that he was campaigning in Sembrong and the accompanying captions specifically referred to his particular constituency (see Picture 4).



Picture 4: Hishammuddin Hussein targeting Sembrong voters

Most of the posts were professionally-produced campaign materials indicating the politicians’ manifestos and what they would like to offer the potential voters. Dr. Mahathir who only had 3 posts throughout the study also focused on campaign materials. He first posted a photo of him and his wife on nomination day with a caption that asked for support and votes for Pakatan Harapan. His second post, dated on May 4th, 2018 was a poster depicting him as a Jedi master, a powerful character derived from the massively popular Star Wars movie franchise (see picture 5). This poster resonates with the younger voters who may relate Dr. Mahathir to a Jedi master that is old but very wise and could lead and save Malaysia. On May 10th, the day after the election, Dr. Mahathir posted a victory photo of him with other Pakatan Leaders accompanied by a caption that thanked the voters and a pledge to make good on Pakatan Harapan’s manifestos and promises (See picture 6).



Picture 5: Dr. Mahathir’s campaign poster depicting him as a Jedi Master



Picture 6: Victory photo of Dr. Mahathir with Pakatan Harapan leaders

The second biggest target was the opposition parties (19 percent). Because this research was done before the election, political parties that were part of Pakatan Harapan and Gagasan Sejahtera such as PAS and PKR were grouped into the category of ‘Opposition Parties’. In this sense, the posts were mostly coming from the politicians of the opposition parties who were targeting their party members. The third biggest targeted audience are members of Barisan Nasional (7.1 percent). Similarly, Barisan Nasional politicians were targeting their members. Picture 7 shows how Hadi Awang dedicated a post promoting his live broadcast to PAS electoral machinery and volunteers. Probably the politicians were all playing safe, as they were not posting contents that were aimed to shame or criticize the political opponents.

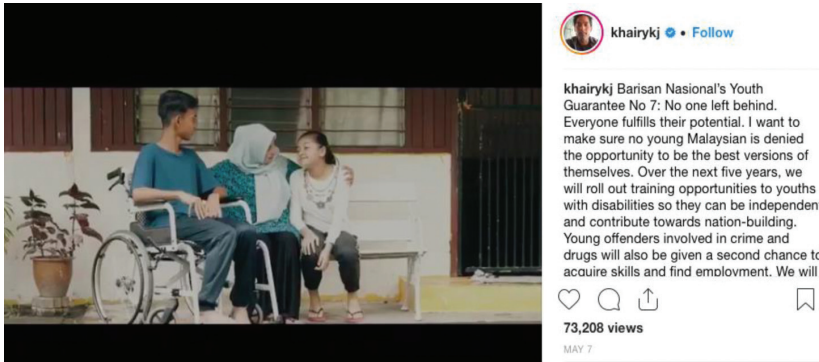


Picture 7: Instagram post targeted to Opposition Parties (PAS)

Table 5: Issues shared on Instagram

Issues shared	Frequency	Valid Percent
Election Campaign	136	81.4
Public administration	8	4.8
Others	8	4.8
Economy	6	3.6
Local politics	5	3
Leadership	4	2.4
Total	168	100

The issues that politicians share on their Instagram are also a vital indication of how Instagram is being used for political communication. In a study on issues agenda and Instagram, Towner and Munoz (2017) found that in the 2016 Democratic Presidential primary campaign between Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders, both politicians had used their Instagram accounts to focus on economic issues. However, Hillary Clinton also focused on education and racial equality while Sanders focused on campaign financing and income equality. As such, politicians are using Instagram as a platform for them to highlight issues they feel are important. When it comes to issues, it appears that the politicians in this study were mostly posting about the election and not much else (81.4 percent). They were more focused on highlighting their campaign activities and justifying their manifestos than sharing about specific issues. However, in highlighting their manifestos, several politicians did offer promises to help certain demographics overcome issues. Khairy Jamaluddin or better known as 'KJ' has always been very active on Instagram. He had the most followers during the study period. However, during the campaign week, he had only posted 8 posts. While all the posts were campaign materials, KJ did focus these posts on his promises to the youth. KJ who is a Barisan Nasional politician was at the time the incumbent Minister of Youth and Sports. He had a series of videos that detailed his eight promises to the youth. Videos that explained the first five promises were uploaded before campaign week and were not coded for this study. The 3 other videos uploaded during campaign week highlighted KJ's three promises to youth which were 1) more inclusiveness in policies focusing mostly on the orang Asli and the disabled (see picture 8) 2) the establishment of a National Football Program that will improve Malaysia's position in world football and lastly, 3) quality of life for youth by establishing cost-effective housing, education and lifestyle packages (see picture 8). It is safe to say that KJ had the most sophisticated media presentation on Instagram. All his manifestos were presented in videos and were dramatized in a way that not only attracted the audiences but also made clear his political aspirations. Instagram allowed KJ to offer promises that appeared to be relevant in the life of his voters. His videos that depicted the lives of everyday youth managed to present the voters' realities that no posters or campaign speeches can capture. The other issues that were shared by the politicians in this study were public administration (4.8 percent), economy (3.6 percent), politics (3 percent) and leadership (2.4 percent).

Picture 8: Picture of Khairy Jamaludeen

Conclusion and Discussion

With the increasing popularity of Instagram and the significant role played by social media in influencing media users, it is undeniable that Instagram is a vital component in political communication. Just like other social media platforms that blur the boundary between the public and private as well as the personal and political. Instagram allows politicians to be in control of how they communicate with their desired audiences. Not only can politicians have the ability to select and design the messages they want to send out, but they can also curate the image they want to portray. Former US president Barack Obama has been known to be a popular leader not only in the US but also around the world and many (Abroms & Lefebvre, 2009) (Hong & Nadler, 2012) has attributed this to his impeccable social media presence. On Instagram especially, he is shown to be a combination of a good leader and an approachable personality. Photos of him working in the oval office sits in between photos of him playing with his dogs and a photo of him having a laugh with his wife.

Similarly, Malaysian politicians are building their own social media presence. The results of this study have shown that Malaysian politicians are very active on Instagram. They are posting photos and videos that are both personal and political. Najib Razak's post on Nasi Lemak is a testament of this. In his attempt to build a more approachable persona based on a mutual interest in with his Instagram followers, he had managed to also build a platform for discussion among his followers. This personal portrayal of political life is powerful as it informs the

audience that there is more to them as politicians. Behind their political persona, these politicians have hobbies, preferences, interests and maybe even a humorous side that can help the politicians and their audiences create a mutual understanding and build a unique bond that transcends the bureaucratic and formal nature of political communication that often distances politicians from their intended audiences.

Instagram also allowed these politicians to build their own campaign without having to depend on the traditional mass media. This is especially relevant to Malaysian politics where freedom of media and freedom of expression is very much limited by the practice that protects the reigning political power. Before Pakatan Harapan took over the government, the whole mainstream media machinery such as public radio and television as well as the newspapers were only available to the ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional. Therefore, the Internet and social media were the main media platforms that can be used by the opposition parties to reach out to the people. This was very much evident when the result showed that politicians from the opposition parties, namely PAS were more active on Instagram. By mostly posting about their manifestos and campaign activities and producing professional campaign materials further indicate that these politicians were carefully using their personal platforms to promote their political agenda. In all fairness, social media offers a democratic space for all politicians. This study has shown that all the politicians regardless of parties, inclinations and ideologies were able to freely use Instagram to their benefit. Even politicians from Barisan Nasional which had full control of the mainstream media were taking their campaigns and manifestos to Instagram. Therefore, it could be argued that it is really on social media that the election campaign took the course.

In a nutshell, this study has shown that like other world leaders, Malaysian politicians adopted Instagram as a vital component in their political communication. Instagram became more useful during election time as it allowed these politicians to have their own personalized media to campaign and reach specific audiences. Because this study is exploratory, it is limited to understanding how politicians use Instagram, it is not designed to uncover the level of interactions these politicians have with their followers. A more in-depth study that measures the responses and feedback received by the politicians through the number

and kinds of comments given by the politicians' followers can further explain the effectiveness of Instagram as a political media.

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