1

Introduction: Politics and Social Media in Malaysia

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Malaysia, like other Southeast Asian countries, has extremely active online communities. The drivers behind the rapidly growing online communities are basically youths, new technological developments such as mobile phone applications and the lowering of data costs. Young Malaysians, like their counterparts elsewhere in the world, are digital natives who grew up with smartphones and Internet access as part of their daily lives. The advent of social media applications, such as Facebook, Instagram and X (formerly known as Twitter), makes social interactions via online platforms the default mode to connect with friends, communities and the world. Furthermore, Internet connection costs have fallen dramatically. Many telecommunication companies in Malaysia offer unlimited prepaid and postpaid data access of 3GB for as low as RM30 (US$7.50) a month, which enables users to use applications such as WhatsApp and Facebook at RM1 a day. Statista Research Department (2023) found that as of May 2022, some 97.7 per cent of Malaysian respondents stated that their favourite communication

application was WhatsApp. The dramatic drop in Internet costs is similarly mirrored by a fall in hardware prices. The cheapest smartphone in the Malaysian market at the end of 2022 was about RM300 (US$75) while second-hand smartphones cost around RM100 (US$25), which allows users to install and use basic applications such as WhatsApp, Telegram, X and even Facebook Lite. In fact, costs of more advanced smartphones have dropped significantly as well such that it is not uncommon for young professionals for change their smartphones once or twice a year. The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission Internet Users Survey 2023 showed that the country's Internet penetration rate stood at 97 per cent of the total population at the beginning of the year, of which 81 per cent used at least one social media platform (Shamsher 2023).

According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), social networking sites are web-based services that allow people to build public or semi-public profile in a system in order to share a connection; they can also view and cross-list their relationships with others in the system. Traditionally, communities that are separated in time and space face the dilemma of bringing people together as they had to be physically present to interact. Social media has bridged this gap by providing new resources to enable people to be "together" despite being separated by time and space (Wenger et al. 2005). Online communities are virtual spaces where people and entities with shared interests congregate to communicate and exchange information and ideas (Autio, Dahlander, and Frederiksen 2013; Kim et al. 2008; Miller, Fabian, and Lin 2009; Plant 2004). According to Rheingold (1994b), virtual communities are "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace." He added, "… virtual communities are cultural aggregations that emerge when enough people bump into each other often enough in cyberspace. A virtual community is a group of people who may or may not meet one another face to face, and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks" (Rheingold 1994a). These groups of people with shared interests interact using online technology (Rheingold 1993) and their frequent connections form a social structure (Dahlander and Frederiksen 2012).

Online communities have proliferated in tandem with the universal development of digital and mobile technologies (Faraj, Jarvenpaa, and Majchrzak 2011; Rheingold 2000). These virtual groups have many social configurations from small close-knit clusters to platforms that host billions of users (Resnick and Kraut 2011). Various technological platforms have supported the evolution of online communities, such as bulletin boards, email lists, Usenet groups and forums. The introduction of the browser and the World Wide Web's (Web 1.0) hypertext interface in 1993 enabled more people to easily access the information superhighway by just clicking and browsing the graphical interface. Online communities congregated on websites to share information and limited interaction. Web 2.0 expanded this trend by facilitating ease of networking that enabled communities to learn and collaborate globally, thus expanding the reach of peer-to-peer interactions (Wenger, White, and Smith 2009).

Such online communities have evolved to be digital "third places", as opposed to a person's first and second places which are home and work respectively, where people can informally socialize and establish relationships without any pressure. According to Oldenburg (1999), the "third place" offers individuals relief from the demands of work and home life, and provides inclusiveness and belonging by allowing individuals to participate in the group's social activities. The "third place" also strengthens community ties through social interactions, fosters commitment to local politics through public discourse, and promotes safety and security via open and visible interaction. The "third place" is a vital outlet for building and maintaining of social capital (Oldenburg 1999; Putnam 2000). While Oldenburg envisioned the third place as a physical venue or location, scholars such as Jones (2002) argue that the Internet can provide a virtual third place where community is "formed, maintained and revitalised", based on his review of Kendall (2002)'s ethnographic study of a computer-mediated community. While Soukup (2006) admits that there appears to be similarities between third places and virtual communities, there are also significant differences as the former are localized communities that are social levellers and accessible. For Turkle (1997), traditional third places differ from computer-mediated contexts because the latter's interactions are dependent on simulation, thus changing the participants' experience. Soukup (2006) suggested the term "virtual

third place" as the interaction "transcends space and time and alters identity and symbolic referents via simulation". He argues that virtual localization can occur through discourse and other signifiers which become symbolic spaces. Meanwhile, Wright (2012) retheorized the concept of third place space as a non-political online discussion space where political talk can emerge, which can form "a portion of the public sphere" (Habermas 1991).

Daily political discussions are an important aspect of democratic citizenship as it is through such conversations that "citizens construct their identities, achieve mutual understanding, produce public reason, form considered opinions, and produce rules and resources for deliberative democracy" (Kim and Kim 2008). These everyday exchanges have been shown to influence people's political attitudes (Huckfeldt, Mendez, and Osborn 2004), which leads to the formation of public opinion "in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body" (Habermas 1991). Such political talk can occur in online "third spaces": public spaces beyond the home (first space) or work (second space) where people can meet and interact informally and where political talk, planning and action can occur.

The emergence of social media has advanced the expansion of online communities as these technological networks expedite the sharing of ideas, thoughts and information. The first social networking site was Six Degrees, launched in 1997, which allowed people to connect with strangers. Next came blogs, which were online diaries such as LiveJournal, launched in 1999, and WordPress which enabled anyone to "pen" their thoughts; their readers could also comment. Popular bloggers could build a community of followers. Friendster then emerged as an online community platform for people to make new friends and date. The early twenty-first century saw the appearance of LinkedIn as a social networking space for professionals to connect for career advancements. MySpace and Facebook then became popular networking sites where members can create profiles, connect with their friends' friends, share text and photos, as well as join groups with like-minded strangers who have similar interests. Other top social media sites include Reddit where users can share content, discuss topics and also vote for the most popular stories.

X, on the other hand, is a micro-blogging site where users can only post up to 280 characters, while Tumblr allows users to publish

blogs, follow other bloggers as well as comment. Meanwhile, Flickr, Snapchat, Instagram, Pinterest, YouTube and TikTok focus on the sharing of visual content such as photos and videos. Online communities also exist on instant messaging groups such as WhatsApp, Signal and Telegram. Specialized online communities exist on Discord, which started from the gaming community, and Quora, which connects the average Internet user who has a question to experts in specific fields who can provide answers.

Today, online communities are *de rigueur* among Internet users. According to Ruby (2023), there are 4.9 billion social media users as of 2023 and the number is expected to rise to 5.85 billion by 2027. The average social media user, led by millennials and Gen Z, interacts with at least six platforms, spending about two hours and thirty-five minutes daily. Thus, online communities are the new "public sphere" where people constantly discuss issues of the day, which can influence the formation of "public opinion". Web 2.0 has expanded the public sphere in Malaysia by enabling more citizens to participate in the democratic process, through information dissemination, mobilization or crowdsourcing and fundraising (Leong 2015). It has also become a barometer of public opinion as it facilitates reactions from netizens about current sociopolitical issues (Leong 2021).

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ONLINE COMMUNITIES

According to Preece (2000b), an online community consists of:

a) People who socially interact for their informational and relational needs; some may perform tasks such as leading or moderating;
b) A shared purpose or common interest such as information exchange or services which is the community's raison d'être;
c) Policies that govern the community's social interactions such as underlying guidelines, protocols, rituals, rules and laws that regulate behaviour; and
d) Technological platforms that support and facilitate social interactions virtually.

Communities are not just entities; they are a process (Fernback 1999) because they develop and evolve continuously. Their fluid nature makes online communities different from other groups as their

existence and success are contingent on their members' voluntary participation and intrinsic motivation (Faraj, Jarvenpaa, and Majchrzak 2011). Successful online communities usually have a large supply of content that can entice new members to join. One way to develop online communities successfully is to identify and encourage existing group members who have the characteristics, skills and motivation to create content that will, in turn, attract new members (Resnick and Kraut 2011). The success of online communities is highly dependent on the content that is produced by its members, hence the uphill battle is to attract a critical mass of people who can create vibrant content that would attract new members and retain existing ones. Failure to do so would result in inactive and dormant groups.

Actively engaged users are the heart and soul of an online community; its lifeblood is dependent on the people who join it. Vibrant discussions lead to information exchange and the development of new ideas. Continually changing user-generated content differentiates online communities from the more static and less interactive web pages. However, members in online communities are often transient, joining and leaving at will, which may cause a high turnover rate (Dabbish et al. 2012; Ren, Kraut, and Kiesler 2007). Despite this, there is usually a core group that keeps contributing and sharing, as well as retaining the online community's "institutional knowledge" (Ransbotham and Kane 2011), which helps newcomers navigate the group. Even if there are participants who leave the virtual group, the influx of new people will help to rejuvenate the group and maintain membership levels. It is important to draw people into the community and encourage them to participate and continue coming back. Online conversations expressing ideas, comments, reactions, jokes, reflections and suggestions keep community members engaged so that they keep returning to the group. Electronic word-of-mouth from existing members can also draw new people into the group. There are many reasons why people are interested in joining an online community—some want information or support and empathy in dealing with issues, while others want to share their knowledge and ideas, debate about politics, or discuss new interests. They are those who join to have fun interacting with others, meeting new people and developing friendships (Nonnecke and Preece 1999; Preece 2000a). Sometimes, Internet anonymity encourages people to freely disclose their innermost thoughts and

true self; they become hyper-personal (Lea et al. 1992; Spears, Lea, and Lee 1990; Walther 1996) and this may lead to the fast formation of deep connections (McKenna, Green, and Gleason 2002). Thus, an online community exists to serve its members' informational and relational needs (Fisher 2019).

Anyone who joins an online community is considered a participant, and the community's character can change when people join and/or leave. Dominant group members have a strong impact as they tend to direct the group conversation (Wallace 1999) and alter the overall character of the community. This means there will be other members who are silent due to shyness or fear of negative reactions, and of being misunderstood or misquoted (Nonnecke and Preece 1999). Depending on population size, tensions between groups can skew the characteristics of online communities. For the virtual group to survive, there must be reciprocity among its participants (Rheingold 1994a). According to Wallace (1999), reciprocity of self-disclosure on the Internet is powerful. People who disclose some personal information about themselves will find others reciprocating by revealing intimate details about themselves. This exchange of information helps to build relationship ties. Nevertheless, some prefer to hide their real identities behind multiple fake accounts for the purpose of trolling or cybertrooping as part of cyberwarfare. Such fabrications affect the integrity of the online community and cause distrust among its members which can negatively impact relationship ties.

While some actively participate by commenting or posting user-generated content, some prefer to lurk by just remaining silent and observing the conversations (Nonnecke and Preece 1999). Lurkers have many reasons why they do not actively participate in online groups such as their concerns about privacy and safety, as well as personal factors such as culture, motivation and emotional involvement or detachment. They may be more interested in obtaining information rather than socializing with others (Preece 2000e). Some online communities schedule invitations to professionals to lead discussion sessions so that group members can pose questions for the experts to answer. Such chats can elevate the level of conversation and change the knowledge hierarchy within the online community (Preece 2000e). Lastly, an online group is often managed by moderators or administrators, and mediators—each with different roles and tasks. Moderators or administrators will

review user-generated messages and content posted in the online community to ensure that participants follow guidelines. Disciplinary action can be taken by moderators or administrators to suspend or remove participants from the online group for breaching community rules. Mediators, on the other hand, are less active and are activated to settle disputes (Preece 2000e).

Participants in online communities do not necessarily maintain their roles throughout their membership in the group. Lurkers may one day decide to be more active participants, and those already active may become group experts or be invited to become moderators. The Reader-to-Leader Framework (RLF) describes four roles in online communities:

a) Reader—visiting, reading, searching, returning
b) Contributor—posting, reviewing, rating
c) Collaborator—engaging with others and collaborating to create content
d) Leader—mentoring newcomers, setting policies, monitoring users, and promoting participation (Preece and Shneiderman 2009)

These roles are not exhaustive but are common categories of participation in online communities, and the proportion of readers who transition to leadership is minimal. According to Nielsen (2006)'s 90-9-1 rule of online participation, 90 per cent are usually lurkers who "read or observe, but do not contribute"; 9 per cent will contribute a bit over time, while the 1 per cent minority lead the group conversation. The RLF gives an overview of how online participants can transition from being a passive reader to becoming a more active contributor and collaborator that shares or generates content, to gaining leadership to drive conversations in the online community. Although the framework suggests that the progression is linear, there is also the possibility that participants can move in a non-linear fashion (Gilbert 2017).

The community's purpose can involve any or all of the following:

a) Exchange information: To broadcast information to members or obtain answers to questions, which can be uni- or multi-directional. Information exchange can occur during online conversations.

b) Provide support: To give emotional support, either verbally or non-verbally, to members.
c) Enable communication: To allow participants to socialize informally through virtual chatting either synchronously or asynchronously via light-hearted banter.
d) Discuss ideas: To generate and develop viewpoints that involve deeper reflection and analysis. The discussion pace will be slower and may become heated or go off-topic, thus requiring action from the moderator (Preece 2000f).
e) Organize real events such as a protest or demonstration. The online community becomes the most powerful tool in organizing people into real world activities.

The purpose of the online community is one factor that influences people's interactions (Wallace 1999) as well as the group's character. Patient and emotional support communities had more empathy and lower hostility, based on a research of 100 listserv and bulletin board communities (Preece and Ghozati 1998a, 1998b). In comparison, religious, political and cultural communities had more frequent aggressive comments with minimal empathy (Preece 2000e). First impressions and outward projections are important when attracting new people into the community. The group's name, description, and/or statement of purpose will assist potential members to decide whether its aims are aligned with the person's needs, and thus, is worth joining. For newcomers, knowing the community's clear purpose will deter those who are less committed as well as reduce the risk of participants being frustrated because the community does not meet their expectations (Preece 2000e). Online communities that have clearly stated objectives are more likely to attract people with similar attitudes, ideas and goals. Therefore, like-minded people are attracted to each other and are usually less hostile; this creates a stable community. Broad-based communities, on the other hand, are more likely to have participants with different expectations. This may lead to interpersonal confrontations and frustrations when these expectations are not met. However, there is some evidence that suggests that cross-posting of off-topic ideas from outside the community can positively impact the conversation (Whittaker et al. 1998). Although initially each member may have a set of beliefs that may not necessarily align with the online community's

beliefs, as he or she interacts with others, they will integrate into the group by either adopting, adapting and potentially discarding prior beliefs (Davidson et al. 2019).

Traditionally, when people meet face-to-face, first impressions are formed based on non-verbal cues, including visual and aural characteristics, and content of self-disclosure. When people join online groups, they are unable to view a person's physical and aural attributes and this affects the formation process of first impressions (Walther 2013). Even photos on social media offer insufficient information about people. The social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE model) suggests that the absence of visual cues in groups using computer-mediated communication can cause people to become depersonalized (Lea et al. 2000). Because people cannot "see", they may not realize that people are different from them, especially when people join an online group discussion and focus on the task at hand rather than talking about personal matters (Walther and Carr 2010). Early research proposed that the lack of non-verbal cues in online groups would affect impression formation and cause communities to be impersonal and sterile (Keisler, Seigel, and McGuire 1984; Siegel et al. 1986). However, other scholars believe that meeting in online communities can eliminate the chances of prejudging someone based on appearance (Wallace 1999), which is a positive development. The absence of non-verbal cues about one's physical characteristics can magnify the attraction of members towards each other. Although they experience depersonalization, they are aware of their shared common characteristics and links which is their overarching social identity. People may have vague impressions about individuals in the group and might not sense individual differences in members, but the overarching similarity of belonging to a larger group identity may result in participants forming exceptionally strong bonds to the group itself (Walther 2013).

Online communities have some advantages that offline groups do not have. Firstly, all communications are digitalized and can be archived. This means that the behaviours of group members can be "captured forever" in cyberspace (Fineman 2014; Paul-Choudhury 2011). Secondly, online communities benefit from artificial intelligence (AI) technology that can execute searches and use algorithms to match people and content, as well as notify people about potentially

interesting content and events. Each social media platform has different functions to allow community creators or founders to control the access and ability of group members to participate in the community (Resnick and Kraut 2011). Online communities can also accommodate more members compared to offline ones since they are not limited by geographical and temporal boundaries, which expands online public spaces for virtual sociability as endless numbers of communities can be formed (Brändle 2019).

Another advantage of online communities is the ability to reach and spread information among "weak tie" social connections—those whom a person does not directly know but has links to those with "strong ties" to the person, for example, a friend of a friend. People with weak ties are less similar and therefore have access to different types of information compared to a person's network of strong ties that have similar knowledge (Granovetter 1973). Social media platforms, therefore, function as intermediaries between people and their prospective weak tie connections (Wellman and Gulia 1996). People can search and join online communities on topics of interest, thus meeting those with weak ties who have different social circles and possess diverse information.

COMMITMENT, SOCIAL PRESENCE AND COMMON GROUND

Commitment is about the "feelings of attachment or connection" of members to the community and underlies their willingness to be part of the group and contribute to it (Preece 2000a). People who are more committed tend to be better satisfied and contribute more, leading to improved performance. They are also less likely to look for alternatives and leave the group (Mathieu and Zajac 1990). However, in virtual communities, referents of belonging are flexible, which allows variations in group membership and loyalty. Netizens can be members of many online communities, playing different roles in each one. Furthermore, virtual groups often have less stringent criteria for inclusion and exclusion. Technological platforms also allow members to easily join and leave virtual groups at a click of a button, hence it is more difficult to forge a sense of commitment among online members as relationship ties among members may be weak. In this situation, online

relationships are less intense compared to face-to-face ones (Brändle 2019). Online communities find it more challenging to instil commitment among their members because there are many other similar groups in cyberspace that people can join without geographical constraints. New members are also usually less committed to a community compared to established members (Resnick and Kraut 2011).

Even if bonds between online members are often weak, shallow, short-lived and merely instrumental, there is still the possibility of stronger intensive relationship ties developing over a period of months due to the emotional aspects, especially if members share a common interest, commitment or solidarity despite being strangers (Brändle 2019; Preece 2000a). Online relationships can also be strengthened if members collectively produce common resources that are openly shared in cyberspace, giving rise to the emergence of values such as trust and altruism. Unlike offline communities, relationships in virtual groups are often decentralized and horizontal. Therefore, it is possible to build relationships and a sense of community on the Internet (Brändle 2019).

To do so, online community members need to be "socially present" on the technological platform. Social presence theory (Short, Williams, and Christie 1976) discusses how media can convey a sense of the participants being physically present, with face-to-face communication as the standard of assessment. This concept originated from social psychological theories of interpersonal communication and symbolic interactionism (Biocca et al. 2001; Biocca, Harms, and Burgoon 2003; Rice 1993; Sallnäs 2005; Tu 2001). Social presence is dependent not only on spoken words but also on verbal and non-verbal cues, body language and context (Rice 1987, 1993); it affects how participants sense emotion, intimacy and immediacy (Rice 1993). Although the theory originated from non-mediated interpersonal communication, social presence is often discussed today in the context of computer-mediated communication (CMC).

Social presence is linked to the concept of immediacy, which are non-verbal behaviours such as facial expressions, eye contact and body movements that could result in more intensive closeness in communication (Wiener and Mehrabian 1968). Interpersonal communication scholars (Biocca, Harms, and Burgoon 2003; Gunawardena 1995; Gunawardena and Zittle 1997; Reio Jr. and Crim

2006; Rice 1993; Rourke et al. 2001; Sallnäs 2005; Tu 2001) have also studied social presence in the context of Argyle and Dean (1965)'s concept of intimacy, which suggests that eye contact, physical proximity, the intimacy of topics and smiles are components that develop equilibrium for intimacy. If any component changes, the other components compensate to maintain equilibrium. For example, if two people are physically close to each other, they are likely to have less eye contact.

Social presence theory was then extended to mediated communication by Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) in the field of social psychology and telecommunications, and today it is widely used in the area of CMC. In mediated communication, intimacy levels are affected by interpersonal elements such as physical distance, eye contact, smiles and personal topics. For example, in text-only systems, both task and social information function in the same single verbal/linguistic channel which cannot transmit non-verbal cues (Walther 1994). Thus, it is not surprising that Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) found greater intimacy when people use television than audio-only communication. As for immediacy, Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) argued that it enhances social presence and that individuals can convey immediacy and non-immediacy verbally as well as non-verbally. Thus, social presence, which is "the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships" (p. 65), is an important factor in a communication medium. Social presence influences how individuals perceive their discussions and relationships during the communication process. In their view, social presence is the unidimensional quality of the medium and varies among different media as the latter affects the nature of the communication and interacts with its purpose. While social presence is influenced by the user's subjective perceptions about the medium, it is also dependent on the medium's objective ability to transmit verbal and non-verbal cues (Short, Williams, and Christie 1976). Thus, social presence theory suggests that digital media have varying abilities to transmit social cues that facilitate social presence in computer-mediated interpersonal communication.

Short, Williams, and Christie (1976)'s study led to the development of media richness theory in relation to social presence (Kehrwald 2008). Media richness theory is similar to social presence theory but

examines communication from a media perspective by describing the medium's capability for immediate feedback through conveying cues and involving various senses (Daft and Lengel 1986). Media that allow synchronous and immediate verbal and non-verbal cues during communication such as video and phone calls are high in social presence as they are very similar to face-to-face communication, hence better at facilitating social connectedness. Video calls have more social presence than voice calls (Sallnäs 2005) as it combines verbal and non-verbal cues during communication.

On the other hand, text messaging and email are asynchronous and have fewer communicative cues, which are why this form of media has a lower social presence (Nguyen et al. 2022). This may result in misunderstandings and frustration which disrupts relationship development, thus those who communicate using media with limited social presence need to work harder to compensate for missing non-verbal information. Experienced users can find ways to deal with the absence of visual cues (Rice and Barnett 1986). Social information processing (SIP) theory (Walther 1992) discusses how, despite the absence of non-verbal cues, people can form impressions and know each other individually through online platforms to a level similar to real-life interactions. In such situations, people adapt their interpersonal as well as instrumental communication using any available cues in the digital channel that they are using. In text-based CMC, social information is perceived through the language content and style characteristics, as well as the timing of messages (Walther 2013). One way is to adopt a conversational online writing style that is non-confrontational and use linguistic softeners such as phrasing a comment tentatively or choosing neutral words to avoid the perception of being aggressive (Wallace 1999).

However, not everyone has the linguistic ability and an extensive vocabulary to be able to communicate effectively. While spoken language always has emotional or physical cues through voice tone, hand or eye gestures and other visual elements, these are not present in text-based digital communication. To solve this issue, some systems have developed functions that enable participants to use icons, photographs or 3D avatars to represent themselves as a way to increase social presence. Emoticons are keyboard symbols that are combined to make pictures such as "<3" for heart (Novak et al. 2015), and emojis are pictographs

of faces, objects and symbols introduced by Shigetaka Kurita in Japan in the late 1990s to provide emotional and contextual cues behind textual communication on a mobile Internet platform (Skiba 2016). For example, a smiley emoticon or emoji may be added to indicate intentions or feelings and assure the other party that the comment is well meant. Emojis and emoticons act as non-verbal surrogates to inform the message recipient of the sender's facial expression, thus delivering additional social cues to support understanding of the message (Hamza 2016) and reduce the risk of miscommunication. Therefore, text messaging conversations that have high synchronicity and use visual cues such as emoticons and emojis can also create a stronger social presence compared to asynchronous text conversations without visual cues (Hsieh and Tseng 2017; Park and Sundar 2015). In text messaging apps where traditional interpersonal social cues are limited, one can creatively use functions such as emoticons and emojis on digital communication platforms to achieve a high social presence (Baym 2015).

It is possible for people who use text-based digital communication platforms to form strong relationships if given sufficient time (Walther 1993); it just takes longer to establish the relationship as both parties need to send more messages to develop a common understanding. There is evidence that some people can develop flourishing social relationships using this form of digital communication (Spears and Lea 1992). A study by Antheunis, Valkenburg, and Peter (2010) found that interactive text-based CMC was more dynamic in forming impressions compared to static photos and self-descriptions on social media profiles.

Thus, when there is sufficient social presence or compensatory methods to overcome the absence of social cues on digital platforms, participants in the communication process can achieve common ground which is a mutual belief that they have a shared understanding and validation (Clark and Brennan 1993). People in online communities often start off as strangers and need to initially interact to establish common ground that becomes the foundation of the relationship (Spa 2004). Once common ground is achieved, then group members will have a greater commitment to each other, hence building stronger relationship ties in the online community, which boosts its growth and development.

DIGITAL INTIMACY AND SOCIAL CAPITAL THEORY

There are three key phases in contemporary sociological studies of intimacy. First is the exercise of "free" choice in modern interpersonal relationships that promote compatibility and friendship within elective intimacies instead of familial duties (Giddens 1992). The emphasis on choice led to more fluid intimacies in the second phase with the emergence of diverse forms of social dependency based on the friendship paradigm and non-conventional partnerships, often described using terms such as "friends as family" and "families of choice" such as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) relationships (Roseneil 2000; Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan 2001) or "personal communities" with friends, neighbours and workmates, as well as relatives (Spencer and Pahl 2006). The rise of personal communities and individual networks resulted in the third phase of "networked individualism"—from tight bonds to fluid systemic interactions based on individuals with shared interests rather than groups or places (Haythornthwaite and Wellman 1998; Wellman 2002). Networked individuals develop new social skills and strategies such as managing self-presentation and personal boundaries in digitally supported networks (Rainie and Wellman 2012). Such individuals are embedded in a "network public culture" (Boyd 2011) where modern intimacy and friendship is about choice, agency, flexibility, respect, mutual disclosure and companionship.

While scholars such as McGlotten (2013) are concerned that virtual intimacies are failures or "diminished and dangerous corruption[s] of the real thing" (see also Attwood 2006; Chambers 2013; Hobbs, Owen, and Gerber 2016, Jamieson 2013), such mediated intimacies via contemporary social media platforms can be understood through the commodification of relationships built into the digital infrastructure. Today's digitally mediated friendships emphasizes social connectedness and sharing rather than exclusiveness and privacy. Social media platforms such as Facebook promote openness and service free at the point of use but gathers its users' data for profit (van Dijck and Poell 2013); it exploits "friendship" as a powerful symbol of interpersonal democratization (Chambers 2013). The implication is that connectedness is more powerful through disclosure and reciprocity, so Facebook steers users to share highly personal information instead of having private and exclusive connections.

Bucher (2012) and van Dijck (2013) state that digital and technical norms operating on these social network sites circumscribe users' connections to each other. In fact, Bucher (2012) proposes the concept of "algorithmic friendship" to describe socio-technical dimensions of online friendship programme sociality. Berlant (2008) discusses the creation of intimate publics through mass media textual discourse as scenes of mass intimacy, identification and subjectification. She suggests that an intimate public operates "when a market opens up to a block of consumers, claiming to circulate texts and things that express those people's particular core interests and desires". Intimate publics create shared worldviews and emotional knowledge which "flourishes as a porous, affective scene of identification among strangers that promises a certain experience of belonging and provides a complex of consolation, confirmation, discipline, and discussion". Hjorth and Arnold (2013) argue that social media "constitute a new socio-technical institutionalisation of public intimacy".

Intimate encounters and self-representations on social media can generate more and/or deeper social connections as well as platform engagement such as time spent paying attention and generating data (Dobson, Carah, and Robards 2018). Bollmer (2018) states that intimacy is a "structure of feeling" that is arranged around the imagined presence of others and longings for connection, rather than direct reciprocity, and social media is able to represent, facilitate and archive people's social and emotional investments. People keep logging on in search for the "good life" promised by intimacy (McGlotten 2013), and Facebook has capitalized on this by packaging and repackaging historical digital traces of users' lives and relationships, and resurfacing these for them to review (Robards 2014). A study by Hopkins and Ryan (2014) found that the practice of sharing self-images, jokes and memes on Facebook fosters affective connections and social belonging for youths from disadvantaged rural communities who are starting university together. Facebook enables these youths to build community and support networks which results in social mobility. These studies show that intimate and everyday sharing on social media have an affective impact on its users and may lead to potentially enduring changes. According to Dobson, Carah, and Robards (2018), such social media connections, attachments and relationships, and the kind

of "everyday activism" that builds digital intimacy can potentially develop constitutively into social capital.

For communities to be successful, there must be cooperation and trust. Three conditions must be in place for cooperation to exist (Kollock 1998). Firstly, the chances of individuals interacting again must be high, otherwise, people might act without thinking of the consequences of their behaviour on other members because there is no future culpability. Thus, it is important to establish common ground in ongoing relationships, which is helped when there is social presence. Online communities that see people joining and leaving without commitment and consequences are likely to have minimal cooperation and civil interactions. Registration may deter casual hopping from community to community. Secondly, members should be able to identify with each other such that it encourages responsible online behaviour as there are social consequences. Furthermore, like-minded people are inclined to share a common understanding more than those from whom they differ (Granovetter 1982; Walther 1994), and discussing a shared passion or problem may effectively foster cooperation and relationship ties. Thirdly, if people anticipate that they are likely to interact with others in the future, they are more likely to behave reasonably (Walther 1994). What is acceptable behaviour will depend on the community's purpose, members' activities and attitudes, and governing policies. For example, political communities may be more tolerant of heated remarks compared to education communities (Preece 2000c).

Trust is another factor that is needed for communities to become successful. According to Figallo (1998), trust is essential in online communities as it is the glue that holds together relationships between group members, and is the core of any community. Fukuyama (1995) stated that "trust is the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest, and cooperative behaviour, based on commonly shared norms, on the part of the members of the community". Thus, group members should be encouraged to be responsive and reliable as this will help to build community trust.

Research on face-to-face groups where members have some similarities show that there is a state of "swift trust" where people act as though they can trust each other, even though they may not know

each other personally. After interacting over time, group members learn about each other's skills, abilities and overall reliability, which leads to "enduring trust" (Meyerson, Weick, and Kramer 1996). In online groups, it may be more difficult to form swift trust due to a lack of visual and social cues unlike in offline settings. However, the SIDE theory suggests that online participants in some situations can form positive first impressions based on their similar overarching identity to the group which leads to the formation of swift trust. However, for online groups to be successful, there should also be enduring trust. While some scholars such as Handy (1995) are pessimistic about the ability of online groups to form enduring trust due to the lack of non-verbal information and social cues unlike in face-to-face communication. However, other studies show that virtual group members can make judgements on trustworthiness based on online behaviour, for example, types of messages and responses, despite the lack of non-verbal social cues (Iacono and Weisband 1997). A study by Walther and Bunz (2005) also found that rules and structured management are beneficial to group behaviour and engender trust, and that online groups can accommodate and compensate for the limited social and verbal cues in CMC.

Communities, including online ones, are a collection of interconnected social relationships (Marquis, Lounsbury, and Greenwood 2011), and cooperation and trust among group members will engender goodwill, resulting in social capital (Putnam, Feldstein, and Cohen 2004). Social relationships bring about social capital which is a valuable resource inherently embedded in social relations that can be mobilized to facilitate action, which includes trust, reciprocity, common norms and shared beliefs within the social network of relationships. Social capital is "the goodwill available to individuals or groups. Its source lies in the structure and content of an actor's social relations. Its effects flow from the information, influence, and solidarity it makes available to the actor" (Adler and Kwon 2002).

Firstly, social capital provides people with access to quality information that is relevant and timely, which gives them an advantageous position (Burt 1997, 2009; Uzzi 1997). Secondly, social capital also produces influence in a community network because of reciprocal obligations between group members and a sense of

connectedness that accumulates in the social relationships (Coleman 1988) which can be utilized to perform tasks (Sandefur and Laumann 1998). Research by Steinfield, Ellison, and Lampe (2008) showed that the amount of Facebook friends is associated with one's self-reported level of social capital because of the ability to search for help and resources from others, especially those with weak ties that are present in the social media platform.

Social capital theory, therefore, reflects "a primordial feature of social life … that social ties … often can be used for different purposes" (Adler and Kwon 2002). Lastly, social relations can also persuade group members to comply with norms and beliefs, as well as develop a commitment to collective objectives. Thus, solidarity, which is the feeling of unity, can develop from social capital. When people share common interests or objectives, there is little need for formal controls (Sandefur and Laumann 1998).

In a study conducted on an online community in the United Subang Jaya (USJ) suburb in Klang Valley, Shafiz and Kamarul (2014) found that there are some elements of social capital as most people join an online community to get to know other members better which promotes a sense of belonging. The virtual platform also serves as a medium of communication to discuss and vote on community issues in a forum moderated by the webmaster. The online community also uses this virtual platform to decide on the appointment of its leaders. In addition, community members also help each other by offering financial help and support to others in need, or services to the handicapped and elderly. The community members also feel respected and have built some level of relationship that engenders togetherness and sociability. Most of them belong to at least one volunteer organization such as residents' associations and neighbourhood watch groups. Such acts of volunteerism are an indicator of the existence of social capital which promotes and sustains the loyalty and commitment of its members. However, the level of trust is still limited as they are unlikely to ask their virtual neighbours for assistance with daily chores and errands. Another study conducted by Wan Munira and Nabila (2011) on multi-ethnic online communities found that such groups widen communication and social networking, which contributes to the development of social capital and integration.

CONTENT AND COMMUNITY MODERATION

No doubt social media has enabled ordinary people to create and publish content online with minimal technical skills at the touch of a button. Instantaneous communication applications also allow people to share their ideas or favourite contents to others, without any institutional or news media gatekeepers to manage the flow of information and communication. Social media platforms enable more people directly connect with each other, offering them new opportunities to speak and interact with a variety of people, and organizing them into networked publics (Baym 2015; Benkler 2006; Boyd 2011; Bruns 2008). While this enlarges the public sphere for discussion, the erosion of media gatekeeping has also resulted in the emergence of negative phenomena such as fake news, trolling and flaming (Gerbaudo 2022) as well as pornography, obscenity, violence, illegality, abuse and hate (Gillespie 2018).

Hence, the need for content moderation, which is the "organised practice of screening user-generated content (UGC) posted to Internet sites, social media and other online outlets, in order to determine the appropriateness of the content for a given site, locality, or jurisdiction" (Roberts 2017). The inappropriate content can be removed by the moderator who are either volunteers or, in a commercial context, by individuals or firms who receive remuneration. There are various moderation styles on different sites, platforms and communities, depending on the rules or community guidelines. While there are volunteer moderators who carry out their duties in their own groups or online communities, the growth of Web 2.0 sites has resulted in tech and online media companies having to resort to content moderation, especially in the comments sections. Some media firms use in-house human moderators or technological interventions such as word filtering, disallowing anonymous postings or removing the comments section (Roberts 2017). Social media platforms must, in some form or another, moderate: to protect its users and also remove offensive, vile or illegal content. However, the challenge is the drawing of the "proper boundaries of public expression" and deciding "when, how, and why to intervene" by balancing between different value systems, political ideologies and cultural wars across national, cultural and linguistic boundaries (Gillespie 2018).

Community policies are important so that moderators have guidelines that they can act upon in deciding what to retain and remove to justify their actions. These statements document the principles that have been established over time when dealing with contentious situations. Most platforms usually have two main documents: "terms of service", which is a contract that describes the obligations between the social media platforms and their users, and "community guidelines", which lays out the platform's expectations of appropriate content and behaviour (Gillespie 2018). The purpose of community guidelines is articulate the platform's ethos that will honour and protect online speech while preventing offence and abuse. It also signals to lawmakers that further regulation is unnecessary due to the platform's diligence, and to advertisers that the platform is a safe space for commercial appeals (Gillespie 2018).

As online communities on social media platforms grow larger in size by recruiting more members, there is a risk of attracting unsuitable persons who may behave inappropriately and disrupt the activities of current members, especially new users who may not be aware of group norms. Furthermore, different people may have contrasting interests that conflict. Large online discussion groups, especially those that deal with controversial topics, such as religion or politics, attract trolls who enjoy flaming conversations by posting inflammatory, irrelevant or off-topic messages that provoke emotional responses from others (Schwartz 2008). Also, Internet users can hide behind the veil of anonymity, which reduces inhibitions towards aggressive online behaviour (Preece 2000d) as people have less social accountability. Users do not need to communicate face to face; they can camouflage themselves behind the computer screen, thinking that no one knows or can trace them. They may also think that they will not encounter other members again, so they are less restrained in venting negative comments and launching ad hominem attacks by trolling or flaming (Preece 2000e). Members can also create online personas that are different from their offline identities, even to the extent of switching gender (Preece 2000d). Also, some members may prefer that the discussion stay on-topic, but others may want to interact with others whom they are familiar with on matters of mutual interest (Resnick and Kraut 2011).

Communication in online communities is technologically mediated, which means that users may not be able to detect non-verbal

interpersonal cues that are present during face-to-face interactions. The prevalent mode of online communication is textual; with fewer social cues to monitor, this may lead to misinterpretations and misunderstandings. In such cases, there must be mechanisms in place to regulate the behaviour of group members by limiting inappropriate conduct that is damaging to the online community (Resnick and Kraut 2011). Community guidelines are basic policies that provide a behavioural framework for group members for social growth. As the online community grows with the increasing influx of members, it develops and forms its character and such social policies and structure set the expected code of civil conduct for participants. Achieving the balance in planning and developing social policies that are understandable and acceptable to online group members requires skill and sensitivity. Online communities are more likely to succeed when early social planning adequately discourages inappropriate behaviour while supporting its purpose and facilitating its evolution (Preece 2000b).

Therefore, some established members of their online communities help to govern the online community by becoming moderators and/or mediators. Moderators generally try to ensure reasonable behaviour and help to direct activity within the community, but their actual roles and responsibilities may vary depending on the group's moderation policy. Mediators, on the other hand, have a less active role as they are usually activated to settle disputes; they may even serve several groups at once (Preece 2000e). Moderators and mediators have the important role of preventing flaming (Preece 1998) and trolling. Moderators, especially, have other tasks such as filtering and monitoring messages to ensure that only appropriate posts are published. Unsuitable posts and spam should not be allowed to disrupt the conversation among members. The aim is to keep a high ratio of relevant messages in the online community, which is also known as the signal/noise ratio (Collins and Berge 1997; Salmon 2000). Other than managing the ebb and flow of the conversation and content and keeping peace in the community, they keep the group focused and "on-topic" as well as manage the frequently asked questions (FAQs) by directing people to the section, answering questions or updating regularly. They also manage membership by adding, removing or suspending members in the community. Moderators also manage content by allowing

their publication, removing undesirable ones that breach community guidelines, or archiving old content that is no longer relevant (Collins and Berge 1997; Salmon 2000).

Nevertheless, the sheer volume of user-generated content may overwhelm human moderators and take a toll on their mental health, hence the use of artificial intelligence (AI) to improve the moderation process by using technology to filter out improper content. Automated AI systems can identify potentially harmful content, increasing the speed and effectiveness of the overall moderation procedure (Darbinyan 2022). Meanwhile, there are online groups that do not have any moderation due to lack of resources or the ideological belief in absolute free speech. However, such communities run the risk of descending into chaos which might deter potential new members, as well as potential legal liabilities due to improper comments (Grimes-Viort 2010).

Moderating online communities can be very time-consuming and exhausting as the moderator not only needs to be the group expert but also have good interpersonal and communication skills and manage the personalities of different group members. To understand people's online behaviour, one ought to have some insight into cognitive and social psychology (Wallace 1999). Moderators need to strike a balance between rigidly enforcing the community's rules and regulations and allowing freedom of speech of its members to converse in the group. A good moderator who has skills and experience (Collins and Berge 1997) will be able to negotiate walking on that tightrope, but this is not something that one learns from school as most are either self-taught or learn by observing other moderators (Feenberg 1989). Thus, not many people are willing to be moderators in online communities as it can be a thankless, unappreciated task as some members chafe at having to follow rules. In situations where there is a dispute, mediators can be called in to resolve the issue (Preece 2000e).

Moderation techniques may vary in different online communities because of their diverse purposes. For example, scholarly discussion communities (Collins and Berge 1997) are likely to have moderators who focus on ensuring that the conversation stays on track, while moderators in distance education communities would direct discussions that support learning goals and scholarly topics (Salmon 2000). On the other hand, online communities that discuss controversial political and religious issues are likely to engage in heated debates whereby moderators have

to actively arbitrate. In contrast, online support communities tend to be more peaceful, and moderators can be less involved (Preece 2000e). Online communities ought to have clearly stated moderation policies that direct behaviour that the moderator and group members can refer to; this reduces confusion and claims of unfair treatment (Preece 2000e). Policies are needed to determine who is allowed to join the online community, the preferred communication style and appropriate conduct, as well as consequences for non-compliance. In some virtual communities, policy statements are formalized statements while others have suggested codes of conduct that are less formal (Preece 2000e).

Online communities often have membership requirements and screen potential new members to ensure their suitability before they can join. Completely open groups that allow anyone to join and leave may be convenient, but this opens the community to abuse as unscrupulous people may troll, spam and flame, in addition to scamming others. Thus, online communities often have a registration process for new members who need to provide a login name and password and wait for a while before their membership application is approved. This policy decision is to deter less serious or shady characters from joining the online community to create chaos and trouble (Preece 2000e). It is easier for members to voluntarily leave the virtual group at the click of a button, but there should also be policies in place should the group moderators or administrators decide to remove a person for not adhering to community guidelines. Community policies also protect members from breaching national laws in areas such as hate speech, pornography, obscenity, terrorism and other criminal offences. These guidelines give some form of legal protection for online community founders and administrators (Preece 2000e). Although this might be a deterrent in attracting newcomers, a free-for-all online community without rules might become a wild and unpleasant environment for its members.

To protect moderators from criticism, most online communities make their moderation rules public. Having guidelines for civil behaviour will reduce the risk of aggression among participants (Preece 2000a). Policies should guide behaviour in the community but be sufficiently flexible to facilitate fruitful conversations that promote sociability and relationships among its participants. Having a balance is important to support information exchange and communication (Preece 2000a).

Too much community governance may cause community members to feel like they are in a classroom with a schoolteacher imposing rules everywhere, but if there are minimal guidelines, then the online community may be affected by negative content in a toxic environment. Thus, community governance regulates behaviour to prevent crises and issues from surfacing (Preece 2000e). Online community policies and their execution shape community membership and behaviour, and subsequently influence its overall group character. This, in turn, will attract like-minded members to keep returning to the online community as well as entice new participants (Preece 2000a), which influences its evolution. Therefore, the impact of online policies and governance on participants can make or break the online community.

DIGITAL DEMOCRACY, SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND THE POLITICAL POTENTIAL OF ONLINE COMMUNITIES

During the early days of the Internet, scholars such as Papacharissi (2002) expanded on the Habermasian concept by calling it as a "virtual public sphere" as many of its interactive features offered new forms of democratic discourse and participation. However, the development of social media or Web 2.0 public sphere is different from Habermas (1991)'s normative model; instead of being a decentralized and networked system, it is now a highly commercialized space that is dominated by large corporate platforms such as Facebook and X, and the rise of instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp and Telegram as well as video-sharing platforms such as TikTok which revolves around simple low-intensity instantaneous interactions such as social media reactions (Gerbaudo 2022) that require minimal effort beyond pressing a button—Facebook likes, haha-s, wows and shares; X retweets and loves; YouTube likes and comments. The "popularity" of any content is measured by the aggregated collection of users' individual reactions which is then fed into social media algorithms that determine the visibility of different contents and ultimately their influence. Thus, it would seem that digital democracy has become "reactive"; online discussions on issues, incidents or statements become ongoing micro-referendums with different factions stating

their positions. According to Gerbaudo (2022), social media reactions appear to resemble an ongoing public opinion poll. Despite the hope that the Internet's network-like structure would decentralize power from the elites to the citizens (Barlow 2019; Shirky 2010), Web 2.0 is experiencing enormous concentration as tech giants such as Google, Apple, Facebook and Amazon dominate the market (McChesney 2014) and in essence control the structure of online discussions and interactions.

Gerbaudo (2022) argues that the social media public sphere is plebeian rather than bourgeois because its dominant collective actors are "online crowds" rather than "publics", and that interactions are more "affective" rather than informational and cognitive because the aim is to mobilize affects and emotions. These are also known as "affective publics" (Papacharissi 2015, 2016) who congregate on social media platforms to engage in "trending topics" by using hashtags, like buttons, re-tweets, re-shares and @mention functions that "invite affective attunement, support affective investment, and propagate affectively charged expression", suggesting that logic and rationality are often secondary to emotional reactions that arise from being wired into a socially mediated event. The digital crowd are not necessarily from the same class, but gather around spaces of socialization, entertainment and informal discussion. Social media platforms offer "expanded possibilities for the formation, coordination and control of collective behaviour" (Dolata and Schrape 2016) because "like-minded" individuals can easily gather based on common interest and connected conversations. Crowd-like phenomena can emerge as online users can easily gather at short notice and engage in digitally mediated forms of collective action; they can disappear and reappear in a different form later (Gerbaudo 2022). These non-organized collective "online crowds" may lack physical proximity but are digitally experiencing a form of "crowding" (Dolata and Schrape 2016), a trend that was earlier observed by Poster (2001) who said that the Internet was becoming the new place of public crowding, replacing physical spaces like street corners, squares and taverns for social interactions. Such online crowds can quickly transform into physical crowds (Gerbaudo 2012) such as Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter—social movements that emerged on the back of popular Internet hashtags and viral memes circulated by social media crowds. Similarly, Bernie

Sanders campaign during the 2016 Democratic primaries and Donald Trump's election victory the same year were spearheaded by "digital armies" of committed supporters who constantly shared content and mobilized people to participate in campaign events.

According to Tufekci (2014), social movements can be conceptualized as collective actors with "capabilities" and that digital media are instruments with affordances that enable social movements to develop certain capabilities such as engagement, protests, occupation, synchronization, visibility, publicity, logistics, coordination and attention. Social media is integral to social movement and that communication is a form of organization. Although these digital protests and movements are strong in some dimensions such as attention, coordination and publicity, they may have less impact on areas such as elections and policy changes due to lack of institutional capacity. Their ability to build an infrastructure for collective decision-making is limited because the rapid development of social media-enabled movements makes them vulnerable to "tactical freezes" when the movement starts to garner public attention (Tufekci 2017). Low intensity of online participation in social movements may weaken commitment levels and cause, leading to "slacktivism" (Gladwell 2010).

Volatility in the social media public sphere is due to technological structure of social media, which fosters a high degree of individualization or "networked atomisation". Social media are "personal media" (Papacharissi 2002) as these accounts belonging to specific individuals, rather than a collective group, that form the basic unit of the social organization (Wellman 2001). The social media public sphere has enabled individual Internet users to collectively express themselves online, and their reactions, views and sentiments can be aggregated in the form of metrics that measure public sentiments. Therefore, the reactions of online crowds can influence the political climate, resulting in politicians adjusting their positions when they encounter negative reactions online. Social media public sphere is an important arena for politicians, parties and social movements to navigate by using appropriate political strategies to harness the power of online crowds and their online reactions to build and display support for their causes.

Online communities have the potential for political purposes such as mobilization, petitions, protests and campaigns. Hence, online

communities do not necessarily exist only on the Internet; some may be hybrid. Members may actually meet each other physically first, and subsequently, form an online community, or they may interact online and later meet offline. The first type can be characterized as a virtualized online community; the second as de-virtualized. Also, group members who interact online and offline are not the same, thus the hybrid structures can intersect in each community. Such online and offline interactions between its participants can help strengthen the community.

Online communities also can be categorized based on various factors: evolution versus formalized creation, digital platforms for communication (e.g., social media, webchats, forums, wikis, blogs or microblogs), or topic of focus. Therefore, the structure and organization of political online communities can be very different (Smitten 2008). The common theme in such online communities is their objective and drive in playing their role to influence the political process and sociopolitical system. Online communities can use the Internet to organize themselves internally as well as interact with the outside world. There are many ways where online communities may operate politically, for example, articulating and aggregating interests, garnering political support, as well as political socialization and recruiting of political personnel (Fuhse 2005). Interactivity is one of the important aspects of digital technology in promoting democracy in society (Endres and Warnick 2004; Heeter 1989; McMillan and Hwang 2002; Stromer-Galley 2004; Stromer-Galley and Baker 2006; Stromer-Galley and Foot 2002; Sundar, Kalyanaraman, and Brown 2003; Warnick et al. 2005) as it enables citizens to communicate horizontally among themselves, and for them to communicate vertically with elites.

In democratic discourse, anonymous expression is seen as important because it allows unpopular opinions by marginalized, disadvantaged or isolated members of a community to be published without fear of recrimination (McKenna and Bargh 1998). However, anonymity also allows people to attack others through flaming and trolling. Anonymity is both a shield and a sword—it can protect the freedom of expression of weaker minority groups, but it can also cause chaos in online communities as people express their views with minimal personal accountability (Stromer-Galley and Wichowski 2011).

Online community members may discuss the main purpose of the group on their digital platforms, as well as choose their leaders in e-polls. Virtual groups can function like a "school for democracy" because political socialization can occur due to interactions between group participants which form their political attitudes. Digital media can also be used to mobilize passive members and recruit new supporters by describing the issue at hand and requesting for financial support or political action. Political campaigns can reach out to the public through websites and social media pages that contain relevant information about the issue, current events, actions and success stories. One can also assess public opinion on current issues through online polls. Online communities can also support other campaigns by sharing or republishing content in their groups (Smitten 2008). Online campaigns can also have an offline dimension. For example, online communities can organize an online petition or email protests to politicians or authorities. Digital technology can be used to organize supporters and members for physical protests and demonstrations. Content in prominent online communities may also capture the attention of traditional media which may feature their position or content, and this may attract the attention of politicians who may be pressured to take some form of action to address the highlighted issues.

However, if the political online community is unable to clearly define or agree collectively about its objective(s), then it will not have a clear direction and plan of action, which will weaken the group. Online communities also face offline structural issues such as legislative and executive threats from the authorities who may pass obstructive laws and arrest members as they perceive these groups as disrupting the system and challenging the power structure (Smitten 2008). Furthermore, the Internet is inundated with many groups since anyone can easily start an online community. To gain attention and be taken seriously by politicians and the authorities, online communities need to build up credibility. In essence, online communities may be successful in raising public attention, but offline action needs to happen to effect political change.

Online social networking sites are often seen as revolutionary as they allow more citizen participation in the form of information dissemination and content creation. The networked population gains greater access to information and opportunities to participate in public

discussions, which may result in the group taking collective action (Iosifidis and Wheeler 2015). Web 2.0 advances plurality of expression and constructs information and communication networks that diffuse centralized power and democratize political expression (Castells 2012). The networked society constitutes of autonomous connected individuals connected to digital and social media that allow for public access and creation of multidimensional range of opinions and values that can shape political behaviour and outcomes. Thus, the Internet has the potential to influence social movements by using communication for online mobilization and protest actions and has facilitated the development of epistemic communities and advocacy networks (Keck and Sikkink 1998).

ONLINE COMMUNITIES AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN MALAYSIA

In Malaysia, due to the fractured nature of its multiethnic and multireligious polity, the online community is highly polarized, reflecting the politics of the country. Malaysia has often been described as a country divided by "2Rs", which are race and religion (Loh and Chin 2023). There are permanent tensions between the major ethnic groups—Malay, Chinese and Indian. On top of this, there are political tensions between East and West Malaysia (Chin 2019). Constitutionally, all Malays are legally Muslims and Islam has a status as the official religion of the Federation. In the 2020 Malaysian census, *bumiputera* (sons of the soil), which include the Malays, constitute about 69.4 per cent of the population while the ethnic Chinese and Indians constitute about 30 per cent. Since the country achieved its independence in 1957, the ethnic Malay majority has enjoyed a constitutionally protected special status, while other ethnic minorities experienced treatment as second-class citizens (Chin 2009, 2022). The affirmative action policies called the New Economic Policy (NEP), which were put in place to support the majority Malay population in the 1970s, are widely seen by the Chinese and Indians as holding them back from their full potential. The resentment being treated as second-class citizens is reflected in the non-Malay social media across all ages and segments. The rise of political Islam in the past three decades has added another dimension

to the polarization as the Malay polity adopted Islam as the core part of their political identity (Chin 2021). A significant portion of the Malay population believes that Islam should play the pivotal role in the country's public policies while increasing number of conservative Malays hold the view that Malaysia should be an Islamic state. Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (Malaysian Islamic Party—PAS) has openly advocated for Malaysia to be turned into an Islamic state. On top of the political divide by race and religion, language is also a barrier. Each of the major ethnic groups—Malay, Chinese and Indian—prefer to use their own language in political groupings and this is reflected in the social media space as well. While most Chinese and Indian Malaysians understand *Bahasa Malaysia* as they study the national language in public schools, most Malays do not understand Mandarin or Tamil. Most Malaysian Indians do not understand Mandarin as well and vice-versa.

In the Borneo states, the divide is even more complicated. In both Sabah and Sarawak, there are more than thirty indigenous groups and more than fifty languages and dialects in each of these Borneo states. The largest group in Sabah is the Kadazandusun while in Sarawak it is the Iban. Both these groups have a significant number of speakers, and this is reflected in the social media groups in these states.

Previously, such polarizing divisions were kept control as the then Barisan Nasional (BN—National Front) government controlled traditional media—newspapers, television and radio—through legislation and ownership, either direct or indirect. This meant that it could dictate the dominant public narrative to ensure that it maintained its political hegemony, and there was little room for alternative viewpoints to emerge in the public sphere. The advent of the Internet in the late 1990s broke the BN government's media dominance (Chin 2003) as the opposition strove to use new information and communication technologies (ICTs) to propagate their ideology to the public such as email listservs, online discussion lists, Usenet groups, short message service (SMS), political websites and blogs. The Internet was seen as a "liberation technology" by 2010 (Diamond 2010) as it enabled the opposition to bypass the government's strict media controls.

In Malaysia, SMS was used during the 2004 general election while sociopolitical blogs influenced the 2008 general election as they provided alternative information to the government-controlled news on traditional media. When social media developed, online communities

emerged as netizens interacted regularly through technological platforms and developed relationships (Gruzd, Wellman, and Takhteyev 2011), which facilitated communication, networking and mobilization among the populace. A study conducted by Leong et al. (2020) on Bersih, a social media-enabled movement that advocated for clean and fair elections in Malaysia that eventually morphed into a transnational coalition, found that clustering and structuring emergence enabled the movement to evolve across three different phases from dispersed individuals to dispersed groups, eventually resulting in a networked group. In Bersih's situation, social media enabled a global network of active groups to be linked to a core group of city coordinators who could consolidate resources and capabilities. Unlike other digitally enabled social movements where core groups are loosely defined and unstructured, Bersih's structuring emergence, through relational and cognitive mechanisms, led movement members to assign roles to core group members which reduced conflict and maintained commitment movement (Leong et al. 2020). Social media also enabled diverse framings of the cause by different groups in Bersih to converge and align by enabling open large-scale deliberations (Leong et al. 2020), which is a critical condition for the emergence and sustainability of collective action (Benford and Snow 2000; McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996). Social media also enabled Bersih's participants to highlight any event or issue that relates to its cause. A study by Lim (2017) also found that Malaysian society felt a sense of "civic responsibility" to support the Bersih movement and contribute to the public discourse by organizing and disseminating information online using their personal (and public) social networking sites. Online attention on its activities, such as the support for overseas Malaysian to vote, showcased the movement's success, which is critical for maintaining its momentum and ability for large-scale mobilization that can influence the political environment (Leong et al. 2020).

Realizing that its political dominance was being chipped away by the opposition's mastery of ICTs, the then BN government decided to jump on the bandwagon and joined its political competitors in cyberspace by establishing its New Media Unit and recruiting political bloggers; these subsequently morphed into cybertroopers who were well-versed with social networking sites. Facebook and other social media platforms such as X (formerly known as Twitter) were used

in the 13th general election (GE13) in 2013, while Facebook Live and WhatsApp were prominent GE14. In a study conducted by Johns and Cheong (2021), WhatsApp's closed architecture and end-to-end encryption made it useful for activists and communities to resist and subvert state-based surveillance and control of public conversations on social media. Meanwhile, TikTok became influential during the recently concluded 15th general election (GE15) in 2022, especially on first-time voters who could automatically vote upon reaching eighteen, thanks to the passing of the Undi 18 (Vote18) Bill.

The reliance on social media as the main political communication tool in Malaysia has amplified tensions and polarization surrounding race and religion. Politicians and political parties use simplified and emotive messages in order to score political points. For example, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) propagated a narrative that Malay voters would sell out their race and religion if they voted against the party. During the recent 15th general election in 2022 and six state elections in 2023, PAS's TikTok campaign gained traction among the conservative Malay-Muslim votes who were exhorted that it was an "obligatory holy struggle" to defend their faith by voting not just for a political party but for an Islamic government that upholds the Quran (Leong 2023; Chin 2023). Welsh (2020) states that polarization has exacerbated because some Malaysian political parties no longer have strong grassroots connection and patronage resources after 2018. Coupled with the loss of media control of the dominant narrative, party leaders use race and religious divisive rhetoric to attract undecided voters and compensate for their loss of reliable grassroots support, which has exacerbated polarization in the country. Such simplistic messages and slogans that call on voters' support while demonizing political opponents such as "Anything but UMNO", "No to DAP [Chinese]", "Save Malaysia [from Najib and UMNO]" and "Protect Islam" are easier to communicate to the populace as it taps on their emotional insecurities and righteous indignation rather than discussing substantive issues and policy reforms.

Johns and Cheong (2021)'s study on WhatsApp showed that unverified information such as rumours and conspiracy theories flow more freely through WhatsApp groups due to insularity within a closed "socio-technical system" that result in users only trusting insiders and rejecting mainstream news and "official" accounts as inauthentic and

fake. While these encrypted instant-messaging applications are "safe spaces" where activists and other political communities can retreat into to avoid state surveillance or censorship, the lack of "moderating mechanisms" meant that there are minimal checks on the validity and quality of information being circulated in these private groups, compared to social media which is more public. Furthermore, false information is easily spread through WhatsApp due to its emotive content that creates a sense of anxiety and urgency that causes users to suspend rational judgement. If the information is received from a known and trusted contact, users are more likely to believe its validity; combined with the forward function's haptic qualities and the end-to-end encryption security, they are more likely to share by forwarding to various WhatsApp groups that they belong to. The constant forwarding results in the virality of the content which may reinforce and normalize conspiratorial belief.

Increasingly, Malaysian voters obtain their news from social media echo chambers that reflect and reinforce their own beliefs, perspectives and ideologies. Memon (2017) argues that millennials obtain news and opinions mainly from social media channels, which they also use to comment and debate. Echo chambers are "a bounded, enclosed media space that has the potential to both magnify the messages delivered within it and insulate them from rebuttal" (Jamieson and Cappella 2008), a situation where people are in as a result of media supply, distribution and/or their own demand. While some netizens prefer to seek out "attitude-consistent" (Arguedas et al. 2022) information that reinforces their preexisting views, some end up in "filter bubbles" where algorithms influence the personalization of search engine results and social media feeds that create "a unique universe of information for each of us" (Pariser 2011) which contains what we agree with and hides information that we dislike to reduce cognitive dissonance. These developments fuel polarization as people become insulated from exposure to ideologically different viewpoints which will diminish mutual understanding and subsequently lead to a situation where people become so extreme that they share very little common ground. Clearly, the digital media-tization of politics in Malaysia has intensified feelings of discontent which results in increasing polarization in society.

In Malaysia, other than ethnic and religious cleavages, there is also the language divide. This is especially true of political-theme pages or groups. The end result is the creation of "language-bubble" echo chambers where people from the same language group often reinforce each other's views. While online communities who use vernacular languages are often from the same ethnic group (Malays—*Bahasa Malaysia*, Chinese——Mandarin and Indians—Tamil), those that converse primarily in English consist of members from various ethnic groups but are primarily from the middle- and upper-class groups whose preferred *lingua franca* is English, which adds to the complexity in cyberspace. This is, of course, not unique to Malaysia and is often seen in political social media spaces where users prefer to flock to pages, groups and sites that reflect and reinforce their political views, leading to increasing polarization in the political spectrum.

Meanwhile, the other 13 per cent of the Malaysian population comes from the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak where the demography is completely different. There are more than thirty official ethnic groups in Sarawak and more than forty in Sabah. Politically, these groups can be broadly divided up into three major groups: Muslim *bumiputera*, non-Muslim *bumiputera* and Chinese. This three-way divide is reflected in the online communities as well, especially in political social media groups.

WHAT THIS BOOK IS ABOUT

The objective of this book is to explore the development of social media and emergence of politically active cyber-communities in Malaysia, with an emphasis on how the ethnic-based political parties used the cyberspace to promote their platform and agenda. As a plural society with multiethnic, multireligious citizens, there is no single online social media site or platform in Malaysia that encompasses the main public discourse. Instead, there are many social media sites that populate the Malaysian social media environment, drawing inhabitants from similar ethnicity, religion, language or region. Malaysia's polarization caused by race, religion and regional divide will play central themes in the book which aims to investigate the environment of such social media sites and cyber-communities in various ethnic, religious, language and regional groups and gain comprehensive understanding of how

they operate in Malaysia's cyberspace. It is impossible to cover the entire spectrum of online communities in Malaysia, thus a small volume such as this will have to choose which community to study and understand.

What is clear from this collection of chapters is that social media is now the dominant form of political communication in Malaysia. This has led to some writers claiming that the upcoming Malaysia elections can be won by social media. This claim is not without foundation. In the 2022 presidential elections in the Philippines, Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr., the son of the late kleptocrat Ferdinand Marcos, was able to win the elections with the biggest margin in decades. Many observers cite social media as the key reason why he won the vote despite his family's dismal human rights record and wholesale theft of the Philippines (Mendoza 2022; Arugay and Baquisal 2022). Marcos was able to use Facebook and TikTok to dominate the narratives during the campaign and this is reflected in the final results. Marcos won 31.6 million votes against his nearest opponent, Leni Robredo, who took in only 15 million votes. There is no reason to think that such a scenario cannot happen in Malaysia.

Lastly, the book hopes to contribute to the theoretical discussion on how these online communities have empowered minorities in Malaysia and allow groups to organize themselves and provide a voice to their political interests. While it is not possible to study every politically active group on cyberspace, we have a selection of case studies which we think will shed enough light on the political cyberspace in Malaysia.

Chapter Two deals with the Malay online community, politically the most important segment of Malaysia's cyberspace. Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani and Azahar Kasim provide an overview of Malay-language sociopolitical online sites and cyber-communities, focusing on political parties such as the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu), Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) and their supporters. The chapter explores the differences and similarities between members of the various Malay-language online communities as well as the current sociopolitical issues that dominate the online public discussions.

In Chapter Three, Ahmad Farouk Musa and Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid analysed the space occupied by the Islamists in Malaysia. The

chapter focuses on the role of the Islamic Renaissance Front (IRF) as a case study of a Muslim online community that discusses and highlights reformist issues relating to the practice of Islam in Malaysia in the digital world based on Habermas's concept of the public sphere. The chapter explains IRF's transformation from using the brick-and-mortar approach to the digital tools sphere due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Through video conferencing tools and social media platforms, it has managed to reach a wider audience and give a voice to marginalized groups while promoting a progressive Islamic reform discourse that actively engages with modernity.

In Chapter Four, Yuen Beng Lee, Ng Miew Luan and Jerry Tan Yang Sheng deal with Mandarin-speaking online communities. This chapter examines various Chinese language sociopolitical online communities that exist on social media. Specifically, it focuses on cyber-groups that discuss sociopolitical issues that affect the Chinese language community. These include political parties such as the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Democratic Action Party (DAP), including its supporters. The chapter also covers Chinese language civil society and non-governmental groups such as Dong Zong and the United Chinese School Committees' Association of Malaysia.

In Chapter Five, Anantha Raman Govindasamy and Kavitha Ganesan examine the consumption and dissemination of information relating to political and socioeconomic discourse among Malaysian Indian online communities. In the chapter, they explore how the various cyber-platforms such as emails, blogs, online forums, online media and even text messages have played a crucial role in reshaping Malaysian Indians' perception on the then-ruling Barisan Nasional government, as well as specific issues such as Tamil schools, urban poverty, Hindu temples and general matters relating to good governance, corruption, human rights and ethnic supremacy in Malaysia. The authors also discuss the use of social media tools such as WhatsApp and Facebook as a source of information and platform for discussion and debate, especially among the younger generation, and this had an observable impact during the 14th general elections in 2018. In this chapter, based on documentary and close observations, the authors argue that online communities have become an alternative voice and a catalyst for Malaysian Indians' newfound voice.

In Chapter Six, James Chin looks at political communities using social media in the Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak. He argues that many of these groups are using the social media to mobilize and reinforce state nationalism. The parochial nature of these groups means that local issues predominate discussions. For example, the issue of "PTI" or undocumented migrants is raised in all Sabah groups while this is largely absent in Sarawak groups. The common theme for both groups is the controversy over the Malaysia Agreement 1963 (MA63).

In Chapter Seven, Clarence Devadass, Pauline Pooi Yin Leong and Tan Meng Yoe examine how Christian communities in Malaysia discuss sociopolitical issues affecting mainstream Catholic and Protestant online communities, including those from the evangelical and non-denominational churches. The chapter reviews the different sociopolitical issues that arise in the online community discussions, especially in relation to the Bersih protests. The authors also analyse how the Christian online communities react to sociopolitical issues that affect the practice of their faith in social media communities as well as their ideological worldview as a minority religion in an Islamic-dominated country.

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