

# The Use of Twitter By Malaysian Celebrities as An Election Campaign Instrument: A Review of the Literature

Shafezah Abdul Wahab, Fatimah Yazmin Yahaya, Zuliani Mohd Azni

Faculty of Communication & Media Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Cawangan Melaka, KM 26, Jalan Lendu, 78000 Alor Gajah Melaka

Hainnuraqma Rahim

Faculty of Business and Management, Center for Islamic Philanthropy and Social Finance (CIPSF), Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Cawangan Melaka, KM 26, Jalan Lendu, 78000 Alor Gajah Melaka

To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v12-i11/15269> DOI:10.6007/IJARBS/v12-i11/15269

*Published Date:* 14 November 2022

## Abstract

This article discusses the context of Malaysian celebrities' use of Twitter as an election campaign tool. This article will discuss three goals concerning this problem: the relationship between celebrities and politics; the function of social media democracy in political campaigns; and the role of social media literacy in election campaigns. This research is essential because celebrities in Malaysia are increasingly using social media, particularly Twitter, to influence and win votes for the party's victory because they already have their followers and admirers. The content analysis method is used in this research to examine celebrity involvement and electoral campaigns. This phenomenon is interpreted as an emotional shift when celebrities are allowed to comment on their Twitter timelines. This is clear in GE-13's questioning of celebrities' attempts to promote their political opinions via Twitter by posting disparaging and unclear remarks about rival parties.

**Keywords:** Celebrity, Election Campaign, Twitter

## Introduction

Local celebrities' participation in politics is increasingly recognized as a pragmatic shift in Malaysian politics (Zafran & Takiyuddin, 2018). The involvement of celebrities in politics is not new, as various singers and actors, including Datuk Wan Aisyah Wan Ariffin (Aishah), Tengku Intan Tengku Abdul Hamid (Dayangku Intan), Hairie Othman, and Herman Tino, competed in the 13th General Election (GE-13) in 2013. Shahrol Shiro and Anne Ngasri are also well-known celebrities who were involved in politics in Malaysia. This indicates that GE-13 has made

history in the scenario of art and politics in the country, although it is not the first time that celebrities have participated in elections, since Abu Bakar Ellah was ahead of other celebrities in GE-11 in 2004. Another star politician is Datuk Khaidhirah Abu Zahar. Not only did she win the Rim State Legislative Assembly (DUN) seat in the 2021 Melaka State Election, but she was also chosen as the Deputy Speaker of the Melaka State Assembly.

The popularity of new media, particularly social media platforms such as Twitter, has the potential to serve as a catalyst for gaining voter support in GE-13. The problem emerges when celebrities assume that social media is the goal and cornerstone of their campaign. Due to the increased participation of celebrities in politics, more art industry consumers are paying attention to every bit of information tweeted by celebrities regarding Malaysian politics and political parties. According to Tumasjan et al (2010), Twitter is the most user-friendly instrument because it allows messages to be communicated simply, easily, and effectively. In truth, each tweet may be able to influence and acquire successful Twitter votes, influencing the election results. However, in order to meet a party's political goals and problems, the level of a celebrity's participation in Twitter campaigning must be determined in relation to the content of the posted tweets.

Therefore, to what extent does a message sent through Twitter affect or influence a party's ideology or manifesto? The question is whether these celebrities are merely utilizing Twitter to vent their hatred at the opposing party, or if they are using it as a clean political platform. Meanwhile, the interpretation of media without borders familiarizes people with social media communication. Celebrities, particularly those who have become political activists, are no exception. There's also the question of whether these celebrities are just used as machines, with major rewards from the campaign process based on how frequently they tweet about the political party manifestos and political ideology.

This article outlines three aims in relation to this problem. First, consider the connection between celebrities and politics. Second, the role of social media democracy in political campaigns. Third, the role of social media literacy in the election campaign. This research is significant because celebrities in Malaysia are increasingly using social media, particularly Twitter, to influence and earn votes for the party's triumph. This is due to the celebrity's position, as they already have their own followers and fans.

## **Literature Review**

### **The Relationship between Celebrities and Politics**

The 2004 appointment of the late Jins Shamsuddin as a senator was an acknowledgement of the celebrity's talent (Astro Awani, 2017). Beginning with the Puteri UMNO creation of space for celebrity participation, it became the cornerstone of celebrity participation in national politics. Along with the 12th and 13th GEs and the time after the 13th GE, the 12th and 13th GEs also show a pattern of growing celebrity involvement.

Even so, the nomination of two opposition celebrities led to an increase in celebrity involvement in politics until 2017. Based on the time period given, it can give more information about the celebrity's role in Malaysian politics.

GE-13, which is regarded as the mother of all elections, also acquired its own distinctiveness as an increasing number of celebrities publicly supported their various parties. An increasing number of artists, including actors, singers, and lawyers, are pursuing careers in disciplines that are vastly distinct from their original professions. The media climate and political landscape of every democratic nation are in a perpetual state of flux. This includes being encouraged by fresh names in the political world, such as this well-known group.

Politicians and celebrities are distinct categories. Politicians must be members of a party and become the party's driving force in order for that party to win the election and form a government that would determine the country's destiny. Meanwhile, celebrities represent artistic fields such as singing and acting that convey artistic goals to be imparted to followers who are likewise composed of varied socioeconomic groups (Amiruldin, 2012). In the framework of these two areas, politicians and celebrities must have the public's recognition of their respective qualities, abilities, and popularity. Without these characteristics, both politicians and celebrities will be shunned by society. Celebrities that are intelligent, inventive, and always preoccupied with their careers draw the attention of many. They may not have the time to participate in politics directly (Itar & Utusan Malaysia, 2012).

The influence and power of celebrities are strong enough when they are seen as a strong brand to fight for the welfare of the people. Therefore, the new media arena is a good place for this group to voice their opinions. If we look at celebrities' social sites such as Twitter and Facebook, they display views, expressions, opinions, and political stances by the celebrities involved. The participation of celebrities in political parties is also seen as something positive. When talking about it in a political context, the participation of celebrities in political parties proves that they have political awareness and want to defend what they enjoy now (Amiruldin, 2012).

Even so, when celebrities began to turn into political activists, the use of new media and social media became the main platform for them (celebrities) to convey political ideology because it was seen to provide a more significant flow of interaction between the community. This new media stream is seen to have credibility and is important in shaping the election results. The younger generation on average likes or trusts the new media more than the mainstream media because the new media can help the government, or any party erode the accusations thrown by the opposing party. Through the support of this digital media, the younger generation also gains political development through this new medium, giving direct feedback to the people and being able to make corrections to the problems, complaints, and deficiencies they encounter. Digital media, especially social media, is considered as important as mainstream media. Social media as a new tool for political communication influences current developments in political campaigns. Together with traditional media, social media is being used more and more for things like political marketing, getting people to vote, and public debate (Shamsudin, 2019).

### **Social Media Democracy in Political Campaigns**

It cannot be denied that for the democratic process to be successful, it needs information to enable the citizens of a country to make wise decisions. This is due to the competition and privatization of the media. Many political news emphasizes negativism due to excessive emphasis on conflict and scandal issues (Kepplinger, 2002). Thus, access to authentic and

quality information from various media for every citizen is important. The emergence of new technology is said to provide a space where individuals are free to voice their opinions because cyberspace is not controlled by any sovereign power.

Likewise, Hayes (2008); Abbe et al (2003) argue that the media can help election candidates highlight certain issues to be discussed in the election campaign, and if voters agree with the issue, it will influence their voting behavior. Communication technology is only a platform for channeling information. Communication technology alone will not bring any change in the democratic process. A fair election should focus on justice and equality for all parties in the context of free campaigning and speech. Daud et al (2009) found that print media, which is a method of disseminating information that has been used conventionally since the beginning, has been further intensified with the emergence of media electronics such as television, radio, and computers.

The revolution in the development of information dissemination media was expanded with the speed of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), which triggered a new phenomenon of information dissemination through online applications such as blogs, YouTube, WhatsApp, and the most active; Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram. The sophistication of this latest medium is seen to be so influential and widespread because information can be delivered quickly, effectively, and efficiently. So, society's reliance on this new method has changed the way they think about something, which will have an effect on the choices they make about which candidates and parties they want.

The combination of this very unique and global information-channeling medium has been proven to influence people's perceptions and actions, so much so that Malaysia witnessed a significant political reform after the results of the 14th Malaysian General Election were announced. Zakaria and Sulaiman (2009) found that alternative media had a significant impact on changing the voting trend of the Malaysian community. At the same time, new politics that focuses more on the issue of corruption, corruption, and misuse of power have become the main issues of this media cry. People are no longer influenced by old politics such as ethnic, language, religious, and regional issues. This change in trend indicates that alternative media exists as an important medium in the presentation of new political issues and has an impact on voting trends in this country. Political communication via the Internet has transformed political discourse, political participation, and election campaign methods in a country, thereby contributing to the development of a free and democratic environment (Jankowski & van Selm, 2008; Hara, 2008; Karlsen, 2010; Balabani & Mustapi, 2010; Hall & Sinclair, 2011; Liu, 2012).

### **Social Media Literacy in Election Campaigns**

Meanwhile, beyond newspapers, radio and television media, the Internet has become an important resource for political campaigns. It acts as a vehicle for mobilizing transparency and openness and generating various points of view that broaden the spectrum of democracy in order to win votes. The democracy of the mind related to the use of the Internet can be seen during the Reformation event in 1998. The use of the Internet in Malaysia at that time was raised as a "political event" when a lot of information was disseminated through the cyber world that tried to influence the minds of the people.

Even so, the glorious moment of the Internet as an alternative source of information was during the 12th General Election (GE-12), where the use of blogs to some extent caused a political tsunami in the Peninsula. The approach of campaigning through the digital world or cyber war fueled the 2008 GE campaign. Website visitors increased dramatically during the week following the nomination. From a democratic perspective, blogs may be seen to democratize information where the government is no longer the sole source of information. However, just like in the ancient Greek democracy, democracy is not for everyone until a new media transformation occurs when social media such as Twitter and Facebook arrive (Berita Harian, 2017). If blogs democratize information, social media is seen to popularize it. With social media, anyone, including artists, can convey information or political views without restriction.

The trend has seen the social media platform Twitter become the main choice of celebrities in political campaign efforts to ensure that the candidates and parties represented get a big victory in the elections and thus shape the new government. The use of Twitter allows anyone who has an opinion on a matter to express it. Writing skills are not required because the only criteria sought is the ability to write in 250 characters or just enough for others to understand. The popularity of new media, especially social media such as Twitter, can be a catalyst for efforts to gain the support of voters. What becomes a problem is when celebrities think that social media is the goal and the basis of their struggle. The tendency of celebrities to be political on Twitter has seen more art industry fans focus on every character of information tweeted by celebrities about Malaysian parties and politics.

The use of Twitter is made the easiest platform because it can translate the message to be conveyed simply, easily, and clearly. In fact, each tweet may be able to influence and attract successful Twitter votes in influencing the election results. However, the celebrities' involvement in campaigning using Twitter needs to be identified in relation to the content of the downloaded tweets so that it achieves the political goals and struggles of a party. Meanwhile, the interpretation of borderless media makes society more familiar with communicating using social media. Celebrities are no exception, especially artists who are now political activists.

### **Conclusion**

Placing external candidates or those from different fields of politics is not unusual nowadays, and the involvement of Malaysian celebrities in politics is still regarded as minor. However, there is no denying that when both the government and the opposition use their popularity to gain support, celebrities become a powerful group. Some of them have even run-in general elections.

According to the reviews of the literature, celebrities' involvement in politics was viewed as a platform for fighting for celebrities' rights. Joining a political party entails more than just supporting celebrities' struggles; it also entails looking beyond a religion's, nation's, and country's fate and future. Joining a political party allows celebrities to gain rights and play a role as members. This means they can run for party positions. Celebrities must remember that being a politician and belonging to a political party are not the same thing.

Celebrities must first study politics in order to transform the country by practicing democratic practices, which include the right to choose and be elected as a person in a position to steer the party. It is necessary to be honest and sincere in carrying out one's responsibilities as a party member, rather than becoming swept up in the "trend" that is full of glamour and always causes controversy. Before standing in front of an audience to speak and comment on current politics, they should arm themselves with political science, neuroscience, and communication skills so that every speech, idea, and behavior does not become a laughingstock or, worse, a source of national division.

During the 13th and 14th Malaysian election, there has been an increase in the number of politically knowledgeable local celebrities who have aided the winning parties. Despite the fact that they are few in number, their presence on social networking sites, particularly Twitter, is noticeable. When related celebrities serve as independent speakers with only 250 characters, the political campaign of the party they represent benefits. Indeed, social media communication technology, particularly Twitter, allows celebrities to participate in political dialogues and discussions with the general public. Twitter is compared to a public sphere because it allows users to express their political opinions. This is sufficient because it will assist the country in becoming a better, more equitable, free, principled, and open democracy.

When celebrities are allowed to comment on their Twitter timelines, this phenomenon is interpreted as an emotional shift. This is evident in contesting celebrities' attempts to broadcast their political stance through Twitter by making derogatory and ambiguous remarks about opposing parties in GE-13 and GE-14. When all candidates were confirmed by their respective parties, Twitter engagement increased. This is when the battle intensifies, with numerous manipulations and deceptions taking place. BN party celebrity representatives are seen as eager to inform the campaign movement through political tours throughout the election. Representatives of the PKR have also been seen aggressively posting recordings of party speeches as well as photographs of candidates campaigning for votes on Twitter. While celebrities represent PAS, the majority of tweets posted on the street were negative and portrayed the opposition party negatively.

However, more in-depth research, particularly looking at other perspectives on celebrities and how they use social media in political campaigns especially during GE-15, is required so that this relationship can be understood in the context of a more complete Malaysian formation with the help of celebrities who are known for their ability to market talent and popularity while also working to create a more democratic government through social media.

**Corresponding Author**

Shafezah Abdul Wahab

Faculty of Communication &amp; Media Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Cawangan Melaka, KM 26, Jalan Lendu, 78000 Alor Gajah Melaka

**References**

- Abbe, O., Goodliffe, J., Herrnson, P., Peterson, K. (2003) Agenda setting in congressional elections: The impact of issues and campaigns on voting behavior. *Political Research Quarterly* 56 (4), 419-430
- Itar, A. A. (2012). 'Mampukah Artis Berpolitik?', *Utusan Malaysia*.
- Ismail, A. Z. A. A. M. T. (2018), Penglibatan Selebriti dalam Politik Malaysia dari 2000 -2017. *Jurnal Wacana Sarjana Vol 2 (2) Jun 2018*.
- Astro Awani. (2017). 12 fakta anda perlu tahu mengenai seniman legenda, Jins Shamsuddin 2 Mac. <https://www.astroawani.com/berita-malaysia/12-fakta-anda-perlu-tahu-mengenai-seniman-legenda-jins-shamsuddin-134144>
- Amiruldin, B. (2012). 'Artis Sertai UMNO untuk Balas Budi, kata Pengerusi Tetap', *Sinar Harian*.
- Balabanic, I., Mustapic, M. (2010) Political communication on internet in Croatia 2009. Analysis of webportals of election candidates for mayors: Zagreb, Split, Rijeka and Osijek 43 (4), 307-316.
- Berita Harian. (2017). Nilai kesahihan maklumat di media sosial 24 Februari <https://www.bharian.com.my/kolumnis/2017/02/252338/nilai-kesahihan-maklumat-di-media-sosial>
- Hall, T. E., Sinclair, B. (2011) The American internet voter. *Journal of Political Marketing* 10 (1-2), 58-79.
- Hara, N. (2008) Internet use for political mobilization: Voices of participants. *First Monday* 13 (7), 7-10
- Hayes, D. (2008) Does the messenger matter: Candidate-media agenda convergence and its effect on voter issue salience. *Political Research Quarterly* 16 (1), 134-146
- Jankowski, N. W., Van Selm, M. (2008) Internet-based political communication research: Illustrations, challenges & innovations. *Javnost* 15 (2), 5-16
- Kepplinger, H. (2002) Mediatization of politics: Theory and data. *Journal of Communication* 52 (4), 972- 986.
- Daud, M. S., Idrus, M., Ahmad, J. I. (2009) Pilihan raya umum Malaysia ke-12: Media elektronik sebagai platform penyebaran maklumat. In: Worrn Hj. Kabul, Shireen Haron, Mat Zin Mat Kib, Abdul Kadir Rosline (eds) *Prosiding seminar politik Malaysia: Landskap politik Malaysia pasca pilihan raya ke-12*. Pusat Penerbitan Universiti (UPENA), Universiti Teknologi MARA, Sabah.
- Zakaria, N. A., & Sulaiman, N. (2009). Media alternatif sebagai agen perluasan ruang bersuara: Kajian kes pilihan raya umum ke-12. Dlm Worrn Hj. Kabul, Shireen Haron, Mat Zin Mat Kib & Abdul Kadir Rosline. *Prosiding seminar politik Malaysia: Landskap politik Malaysia pasca pilihan raya ke-12*. Sabah: Pusat Penerbitan Universiti (UPENA), Universiti Teknologi MARA.
- Lewicki, D., Ziaukas, T. (2000) The digital tea leaves of election 2000: The internet and the future of presidential politics. *First Monday* 5 (12), 1-12.
- Liu, F. (2012) Politically indifferent' nationalists? Chinese youth negotiating political identity in the internet age. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 15 (1), 53-69.
- Lusoli, W., Ward, J. (2005) "Politics makes strange bedfellows" the internet and the 2004 European parliament election in Britain. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 10 (4), 71-79
- Papacharissi, Z. (2004) Democracy online: Civility, politeness, and the democratic potential of online discussion groups. *New Media and Society* 6 (2), 259-283.

- Samsudin, A. R. (2019) What can we learn about social media influence in the Malaysian 14th General Election? *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication* Volume 29, Issue 2, Aug 2019, p. 264 – 280.
- Schulz, W. (2004) Reconstructing mediatization as an analytical concept. *European Journal of Communication* 19 (1), 87-101
- Schulz, W., Web, R., Quiring, O. (2005) Voters in a changing media environment. *European Journal of Communication* 20 (1), 55-88
- Tumasjan, A., Sprenger, T. O., Sandner, P. G., & Welpe, I. M. (2011). Election forecasts with Twitter: How 140 characters reflect the political landscape. *Social Science Computer Review*, 29(4), 402-418.
- Wicks, R. H., Souley, B. (2003) Going negative: Candidate usage of internet web sites during the 2000 presidential campaign. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 80 (1), 128-144
- Yin, R. K. (1994). "Case Study Research: Design and Method." 2nd. Ed. Thousand Oak. Calif: Sage.