

Political Marketing in Malaysia: Emerging Success Factors within A Competitive Electoral Space

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Abstract

This study examines the role of relational political marketing in shaping electoral success within Malaysia's competitive political landscape. Using a qualitative research approach grounded in the Straussian school of grounded theory, the study explores how political parties develop voter relationships and adapt marketing strategies to evolving political dynamics. A constructivist epistemology is adopted, employing semi-structured in-depth interviews with practitioners, scholars, and journalists to analyse key themes in political marketing. Findings

suggest that voter behaviour is increasingly influenced by value-driven messaging, multi-platform engagement, and shifting political alliances, emphasizing the growing significance of relational political marketing in electoral success. The study contributes to the understanding of political branding, campaign strategies, and voter mobilization in Malaysia's evolving democracy.

Keywords: Political Marketing, Marketing, Contemporary Political Marketing Approaches

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore relational political marketing factors that have contributed to influencing electoral success in Malaysia and develop a theory that explains the phenomenon. This is prompted by the evolving political landscape in Malaysia, which has introduced a new set of challenges for politicians and political parties (*Gomez & Rahim, 2021*).

This study is significant as it offers a timely and context-sensitive exploration of political marketing within Malaysia's evolving democratic environment. Amid a fragmented electoral landscape and increasing voter sophistication, understanding the role of relational political marketing becomes crucial for both political practitioners and scholars. By employing grounded theory, the research transcends existing models rooted in Western democracies and constructs a localized theoretical framework responsive to Malaysia's unique sociopolitical dynamics. Moreover, the study addresses an important gap by integrating perspectives from political actors, media professionals, and scholars, thereby offering a multidimensional understanding of how political branding, voter engagement, and campaign strategies interact to shape electoral outcomes. As Malaysia approaches future general elections, the findings provide strategic insights for political stakeholders aiming to foster meaningful voter relationships and promote more accountable, value-driven political communication.

In the wake of the 13th and 14th General Elections (GE13 & GE14), Malaysia witnessed a historic political shift. In GE13, the ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional (BN), failed to secure a supermajority for the second consecutive time and, for the first time, lost the popular vote. Despite this, BN remained in power due to Malaysia's first-past-the-post electoral system (*Mohamed & Hashim, 2022*). GE14 marked an even more significant turning point, as BN lost its grip on power for the first time in history, making way for the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition (*Chin & Ong, 2019*).

The inclusion of Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu) in PH introduced new dynamics to the coalition. Led by former Prime Minister Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad and former Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, Bersatu was seen as both a strategic asset and a liability. On one hand, its Malay-centric approach helped PH appeal to the critical Malay-majority electorate. On the other, Bersatu's origins—formed by former UMNO leaders—led to scepticism among opposition supporters (*Mohamed & Hashim, 2022*).

GE15 further reshaped Malaysia's political landscape, resulting in a hung parliament for the first time in history (*Gomez & Rahim, 2021*). While PH won the largest number of seats, no coalition secured a simple majority, leading to the formation of a "unity government." Former rivals, including UMNO, GPS, and GRS, joined forces to form the ruling government (*Rahman & Anuar, 2023*). The growing role of regional coalitions such as GPS (from Sarawak) and GRS

(from Sabah) in determining Malaysia's political future signifies a crucial shift in electoral power structures (Wong & Wan, 2024).

As Malaysia prepares for GE16, this study aims to examine the evolving success factors in electoral campaigns. Specifically, three key objectives are:

1. Understanding the emerging determinants of electoral success in Malaysia.
2. Analysing how GPS and GRS have become political kingmakers in an increasingly competitive space.
3. Evaluating the intensifying competition for Malay voters and how this will shape future elections.

Insight & Conceptual Development of Political Marketing In Malaysia

To gain context on political marketing in Malaysia, the study would like to examine the evolution of the country's approach towards political marketing by looking at the history and results of previous general elections.

In 1998, the dismissal of Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim triggered an unprecedented political crisis in Malaysia. The ensuing conflict played out across various platforms, including street protests, intellectual debates, and townhall-style speeches known as *ceramah* (Chinnasamy & Roslan, 2015). This struggle culminated in the 1999 General Election (GE10), where the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition emerged victorious over the opposition alliance, Barisan Alternatif. However, despite their win, BN's performance showed a decline, securing only 148 out of 193 seats in the Lower House, down from 162 in the previous election. Many observers noted that the Reformasi movement, which centred around Anwar's personal struggle, injected a new dynamic into Malaysian politics. This movement was seen as both anti-establishment and value-driven, leading to what scholars and commentators referred to as *politik baharu* or "new politics" (Chinnasamy & Roslan, 2015). While BN considered the election result as a reaffirmation of traditional support, the coalition adopted a strategy aimed at preserving the old political order, emphasizing that "the party must dominate the government." This approach led to the establishment of a pragmatic, loyalty-driven political culture within BN, where loyalty became the primary criterion, and rewarding loyalty the main political goal.

Five years after GE10, several key events unfolded that would shape the outcome of the 11th General Election (GE11). The first was the imprisonment of opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim on charges of sodomy and corruption, which many viewed as a political manoeuvre by then-Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad (Chinnasamy & Roslan, 2015). Mahathir, once Anwar's mentor, was accused of using the charges to undermine Anwar's growing influence as an opposition leader. The second significant event was Mahathir's decision to retire after 22 years in power, which energized not only BN members and supporters but also the broader Malaysian population, who were eager for a new political direction. The successor to the Prime Ministership was Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who, through his embrace of Islam Hadhari (Civilizational Islam), positioned himself as a moderate Islamist capable of balancing cosmopolitanism with the traditional values of UMNO and BN's nativist nationalism. These factors culminated in a resounding victory for BN in GE11, where they secured 198 out of 219 seats contested, the largest majority ever achieved in the Lower House (Chinnasamy & Roslan, 2015).

By the time of the 12th General Election (GE12), the momentum from BN's historic victory in the previous election had quickly faded. On one front, former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad launched a steady stream of criticisms against Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's administration, calling it weak, indecisive, and out of touch with UMNO's aspirations. Though Abdullah had been handpicked by Mahathir as his successor, their relationship deteriorated after Abdullah cancelled several development projects believed to be aligned with Mahathir's interests. On another front, the civil movement Bersih—meaning "clean"—demanded a fairer electoral process, free from gerrymandering. Additionally, the release of opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim in September 2004, after the courts overturned his conviction, further revitalized his campaign for socio-political reform (Chinnasamy & Roslan, 2015). These converging factors culminated in GE12, which saw a dramatic reversal of GE11's results. For the first time since 1969, BN lost its two-thirds majority, and, for the first time ever, they lost the popular vote. Despite this, the ruling party retained power due to the first-past-the-post electoral system, securing 140 seats—a loss of 58 seats from the previous election. It marked BN's worst electoral performance, and the situation became untenable for Abdullah, who subsequently resigned as Prime Minister. This opened the door for his deputy, Najib Abdul Razak, to become Malaysia's sixth Prime Minister. If GE10 marked the beginning of the tension between transactional and altruistic politics, GE12 became the defining moment where the lines between these approaches were clearly drawn (Chinnasamy & Roslan, 2015).

With new leadership at the helm, the road to the 13th General Election (GE13) was always going to be challenging. Najib Razak, the designated Prime Minister, was the heir to a political dynasty and represented the hope for an UMNO and BN long devoid of elitist politics. His early tenure seemed promising, as he appeared to continue Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's pragmatic policies, such as abolishing the Internal Security Act, which allowed for detention without trial. However, this hopeful beginning quickly faltered, and Najib's administration soon became mired in scandals. These included allegations of extravagant lifestyles involving Najib's wife and children, ethical concerns related to Felda Global Ventures (a subsidiary of Felda, a key UMNO supporter in rural areas), and, most notably, the 1MDB scandal—a massive global financial scandal that would play a major role in the next election (Chinnasamy & Roslan, 2015). Alongside these scandals, pressure mounted from the civil movement Bersih, which organized large street protests in Kuala Lumpur.

Faced with this mounting pressure, Najib shifted away from any notion of altruism and fully embraced transactional politics. For urban voters, he promised improved infrastructure, notably a 51-kilometer Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) system in and around Kuala Lumpur, with future line extensions. For rural voters and low-income earners, he introduced BR1M, a national cash subsidy program. Meanwhile, the opposition, now known as Pakatan Rakyat (Pakatan) or the People's Coalition, remained focused on value-based approaches. They released a policy manifesto, the "Purple Book," outlining their vision for the country after the election, and championed the concept of "Negara Berkeadilan"

When the results came in, Barisan Nasional (BN) retained power but with an even greater decline in both the majority of seats and the popular vote. Najib quickly framed the outcome as a "Chinese Tsunami," blaming the Chinese community for rejecting the government (Chin, 2013). Pakatan, on the other hand, alleged that the government had stolen the election and

pointed out that, having lost the popular vote for the second consecutive time, the ruling coalition lacked legitimacy (Weiss, 2013).

Much like the path to the 13th General Election (GE13), the journey to the 14th General Election (GE14) was fraught with scandals and pivotal moments that would influence its outcome. The scandal that dominated headlines, not only in Malaysia but globally, was the 1MDB scandal. Described by the U.S. Department of Justice as the largest kleptocratic case in history, 1MDB became Najib Razak's greatest downfall (Wright & Hope, 2018). Additionally, opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim was re-incarcerated on fresh sodomy charges, which many believed were politically motivated to end his career once and for all (Liow, 2018). Pressure from the civil movement Bersih continued to grow, with two massive rallies drawing record numbers of participants (Weiss, 2016).

Perhaps the most significant event, however, was the unexpected return of former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad to active politics. This time, Mahathir not only re-emerged as an opposition leader but also as the Prime Ministerial candidate to challenge Najib. Taking his opposition to Najib to new heights, Mahathir quit UMNO, the party he had led for 22 years, and formed a new party alongside former UMNO vice president and ousted Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin. Together, they formed Bersatu and joined forces with other opposition parties to create a new coalition, Pakatan Harapan (PH), or the Coalition of Hope (Pepinsky, 2018). As in previous elections, PH focused its campaign on value-based messaging, using the 1MDB scandal as a central example of the incumbent government's corruption (Welsh, 2018). In response, Najib doubled down on his transactional politics, expanding BR1M cash handouts and launching ambitious infrastructure projects like the Malaysian-Singapore High-Speed Rail to appeal to voters (Gomez, 2018). But when Malaysians went to the polls on May 9, 2018, they made history by voting in a new government, ousting the 61-year-old incumbent in a stunning electoral upset (Case, 2018).

Over the past two decades, there has been a gradual shift in the values that resonate most with voters. This study argues that one of the key factors behind this change is a paradigm shift from a politics of mutual benefit to one that prioritizes voters' concerns and values. The following section will outline the research methodology employed in this study.

Research Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodology employed to develop a theory on the role of relational political marketing in shaping electoral success, which is the primary purpose of the study. To accomplish this, the research adopts the Nested Model approach for qualitative research, structured into four components: research philosophy, research approach, research techniques, and considerations of reliability and validity.

The study begins its methodological discussion by examining the philosophy that underpins the understanding of knowledge and the paradigm used. From an epistemological perspective, the study adopts a constructivist worldview, aiming to explore the subjective nature of the world, specifically the political meanings and marketing practices in Malaysia. The constructivist perspective asserts that meanings derived from the world are diverse, and regarding the nature of reality in relational political marketing, the study assumes the existence of multiple realities within the phenomenon (Charmaz, 2006).

Within the constructivist framework, the study acknowledges that causal relationships may exist, where key points within the phenomenon interact with each other. However, these relationships are transient and difficult to quantify. Instead of attempting to operationalize a theory based on objective relationships between fixed variables and generalizing the findings to a broader population, the study aims to develop context-independent insights. While this approach may have limitations, it remains a valid and justifiable line of inquiry. In other words, the study intends to construct a theory grounded in the data itself, rather than measuring relationships between pre-existing variables (Charmaz, 2006).

With the research philosophy in place, the next step is to discuss the research approach designed to fulfil the outlined research objectives. This section concentrates on the techniques related to the inquiry strategy, as well as sampling and triangulation. Since the study aims to develop a theory on the role of relational political marketing in achieving electoral success in Malaysia, it employs an inductive approach. In this context, the study observes the selected participants based on a sampling method detailed later in this section.

From the observations, patterns related to the subject matter are identified using the grounded theory approach. Grounded theory is a qualitative methodology that involves aligning or "fitting" the data to the emerging theory itself (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The use of this approach is complemented by a discussion of the research method employed, which is symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism, closely related to the grounded theory movement, is a method designed to explain human behaviour and the tendency to use arguments to create meanings or "images" (Blumer, 1969). Based on these patterns, preliminary codes and categories are developed, with the aim of ultimately formulating a theory on how relational political marketing can assist political operatives in achieving electoral success.

In qualitative research, the fundamental assumption is that no singular, objective reality exists, and the axiological perspective emphasizes that any observed reality must be connected to the researcher's interaction with the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study posits that the most effective method for gathering such a rich array of data is through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. A semi-structured interview is defined as a flexible set of questions framed around a thematic structure, which allows for new discoveries to emerge while ensuring that both the interviewer and the participants remain focused on the topic (Kallio et al., 2016). In terms of duration, each interview lasted between 1.5 to 3 hours, covering a wide range of topics related to the evolution of political marketing in Malaysia.

Next, the study will discuss the inquiry strategy being used to develop the grounded theory. The general procedural approach used are:

1. Concurrent data generation, collection and analysis
2. Writing memos
3. Theoretical sampling
4. Constant comparative analysis
5. Theoretical sensitivity
6. Coding

Each of these methods aligns with the procedural approach advocated by the Straussian school of grounded theory, which aims to provide a thorough understanding of the methodology in question. A key aspect of grounded theory design is the concept of concurrent data generation. This concept involves the researcher first collecting some initial data and building a purposive sample. The data is then coded, after which additional data is collected, coded, and incorporated into the sample. This iterative process allows researchers to analyse the data in parallel with its collection, facilitating ongoing refinement of the study's findings.

Theoretical sampling is defined as a data collection process aimed at generating theory through the simultaneous collection and development of codes or key themes. Effective theoretical sampling relies on making strategic decisions about which participants or data sources will provide the most relevant information to address the study's analytical objectives. For this study, most of the primary data intended for theory development was gathered from three groups of subjects: political practitioners, scholars, and journalists, representing major political parties, media organizations, and academic institutions. A total of 7 participants were involved, with the following breakdown:

- Participant 1 is a political scientist with 3 decades of academic experience plus being one of the co-founders of a major political party in Malaysia.
- Participant 2 is political science professor with 4 decades of academic experience given the national title of *Profesor Ulung* (Eminent Professor) within his field.
- Participant 3 was a former Vice-President of a national party who was once part of the coalition government and has held multiple ministerial posts throughout his 3-decade long career in politics.
- Participant 4 is a journalist with 3 decades of experience covering Malaysian politics.
- Participant 5 is a journalist and media owner with more than 4 decades covering Malaysian politics.
- Participant 6 is a senior pollster and activist for a major party with 2 decades worth of experience in the field.
- Participant 7 is a Vice-President of one of the oldest political parties in Malaysia and has held multiple senior ministerial roles in his near 5 decades involvement in the highest level of political leadership

In qualitative research, validity and reliability are essential to ensuring the credibility and trustworthiness of study findings. Validity refers to the appropriateness of the methods employed in answering the research questions, ensuring that the findings genuinely reflect the investigated phenomenon (Leung, 2015). The researcher must adopt suitable methodologies and engage participants in verifying or challenging interpretations—a process known as member checking (Noble & Smith, 2015).

Reliability, on the other hand, relates to the consistency and dependability of data collection and analysis, meaning that the research process should be replicable with similar results (Turner, 2010). Since qualitative research is often interpretive, reliability is enhanced through rigorous data collection procedures, detailed documentation, and multiple perspectives on the subject matter (Carter et al., 2014).

To enhance reliability and validity, researchers often employ triangulation—a technique that involves using multiple sources of data, methods, or investigators to develop a comprehensive understanding of the studied phenomenon (Patton, 1999). This strategy helps mitigate potential biases and strengthens the overall credibility of the research findings (Leung, 2015).

In this study, although in-depth semi-structured interviews serve as the primary data collection method, a multi-method triangulation approach is adopted. This involves incorporating diverse perspectives—such as those from practitioners, scholars, journalists, and commentators—to provide a comprehensive understanding of political marketing and its influence on electoral success (Noble & Smith, 2015). This approach, known as data triangulation, strengthens the research by examining the phenomenon from multiple viewpoints (Carter et al., 2014). By integrating these approaches, the study ensures that the collected data is both accurate and consistent, thereby strengthening the overall quality and trustworthiness of the research findings (Turner, 2010).

Findings

This section will analyse all the relevant data in order to formulate a theory on the role of political marketing in ensuring electoral success. As mentioned in the previous section, the methodology used for this study is grounded theory where an inductive theory is developed based on a specific data set. It is a qualitative study that concerned itself with theory generation, not hypothetical confirmation. To do so, three main points of analyses will be offered which are:

1. Interview Interpretations, Initial Coding & Categorization of Data
2. Intermediate Coding & Selection of Categories
3. Advanced Coding & Theoretical Integration

To showcase this, a summary of the interpretations for all seven interviews will be offered in this study. This will also provide background context for each of the participants to shed light on the origin points of their analyses, political background, and reasons behind offering their ideas and views. This will improve the degree of understanding on the discussions pertaining to political marketing and its impact on electioneering.

Interview Interpretation & Categorization of Data

Interview Interpretation for Participant 1 (P1)

Participant 1 (P1) is the right candidate to start the study as he has the unique distinction of being both a political scientist and a co-founder of one of the most important political parties in Malaysian mainstream politics. Here, he is being interviewed as an academician with a strong standing both theoretically and from a practical standpoint, concerning politics.

For P1, political marketing (PM) is seen as “a form of political idealism put forth by political scientists to help make sense of how political parties approach the whole process of engaging with voters”. It is based on political idealism and is used to shape political campaign style either traditionally or when using social media. Operationally, these legacies could be generally divided or categorised into three divisions mainly the Malay-Muslim voters, Chinese voters, and East-Malaysian voters. These three divisions could share similar aspirations, have differences, and could also come together and work with each other towards a political cause

or compromise. The way that these dynamics come into play is through a sense of dominance each of these divisions exude.

PM also plays an important role in ensuring electoral success by serving as an image building tool by helping parties and candidates to create suitable ideals and ideas to represent themselves with to appeal segments of targeted audiences. It also helps parties to reinvent identity politics to project multiple sense of political identification or affirmations and envisioning a unified front to appeal to many voter bases. Furthermore, For majoritarianism to be achieved, politicians must work hard to cement their relationship with the voters, creating a strong bond with them. This bond could be created by refining political objectives into clear cut deliverables. The manifesto is one of the deliverables, and if expressed through the language of marketing can be viewed not as an outcome but as a marketing plan, a blueprint on how to deliver the best service to voters.

Interview Interpretation for Participant 2 (P2)

As one of the pre-eminent scholars in the field of sociology and political science, Participant 2 (P2) ideation on political marketing (PM) is coloured by his background. His approach here is very much informed by the theoretical underpinnings of his chosen academic disciplines yet still maintained a strong anchoring to social realities of Malaysian politics. In confronting the issues on PM and how PM served as a determining factor for electoral success, P2 offered an analysis that was rooted in a sociological reality that was uniquely Malaysian.

For him, political marketing is a reality that must be framed within a more localised context reflecting the intricacies of the Malaysian experience. This experience was a culmination of events, impact of colonisation and the ebb and flow of history. Only when this sense of “being” considered, a more relevant ideation of PM would be possible and be expressed in a form of a framework, a heuristic of ideas that explained what PM was all about here in Malaysia. Hence, the meaning and operational reality of PM is an outcome of Malaysia’s sociological imagination.

In looking at PM as a logical outcome of sociological imagination, emphasis should be given to the biographical components, i.e., in terms of how PM influenced individuals, family, community and societal structures. P2 argued that as political interactions occurred through the ages here in Malaysia (not just during colonial and post-colonial periods or during the formation of the nation state), there were impacts felt on the biographical factors; with some of the impacts being seismic upon comparison.

Expanding the significance of PM even further, P2 framed the role of PM within a more “operational” outlook through a concept he termed as “electrocacy”. He described electrocacy as a system in which the contested space defined through political machinations would be determined by those who are in power. The electrocacy is essentially the degree of control that a political entity has over the political scene and power structure in Malaysia, and the form of that political entity is most probably a coalition. The coalition will always be in the state of flux, a “rolling” coalition if you will, where parties would come and go. That has played out in recent times that culminated in the change of government 22 months into the formation of the Pakatan Harapan government after GE 14.

If “electrocacy” is about the constant creation of coalition as a means of staying in power, the next line of inquiry would logically be about the opposite of that, the existence of the opposition. Here, P2 offer another interesting concept he deemed as “oppositionism”. He described oppositionism as the breaking of former coalition in power into new ones that exist in obstruction of those in power whose intention is to only wrest power from the status quo. There is no real ideological reasoning behind the opposition, it is only the result of an absent of power rather than any form of sharing of believe or ideology.

The outcome of PM as a linking agent for the biographical factors meant the outlook for PM must be seen as a continuum, a spectrum of approach rather than a step-by-step binary methodology designed to help politicians achieve their goals. P2 described this broad-based understanding as an “Ideal-typical index”. For him, this index is the process of enabling messages or political actions to be understood by the society without superseding the existing structures that helped defined its existence. As a context, he used the interactional force of grassroots politics, saying that both the gap and acceptance of the grassroots towards a party or coalition political ambitions depended less on the outcome of those ambition but more on its “relatability” to what the grassroots consider appropriate or not (remember, this is a Malaysian perspective, not a global one).

Interview Interpretation for Participant 3 (P3)

P3 seemed to look at the issue concerning political marketing (PM) from an idealistic and an operational one. This is perhaps due to his past positions as an MP and the Vice-President of a party that used to be part of the ruling coalition. His insight tended to favour a more practical, rather than a scholarly understanding that was shown by P2. His pragmatism was at times being balanced out by a heightened sense of idealism, often expressed through a desire for a more politically tolerant Malaysia.

When asked about the state of Malaysian democracy, he acknowledged that while there were rooms for improvement, he believed that the system was fair and the main reason behind the opinion was the high degree of participation and how that participation had a bearing in determining the electoral results. This, according to him, makes any sort of effort to induce participation such as PM could further enhance the democratic process.

P3 believed PM would play a crucial role in our political engagement. For him, most parties were relying on media control and parroting the same traditional media-centric messages on social media for mass engagement with audiences and that is no longer sustainable or fair. It was unsustainable as media control tend to favour the party in power and often a consequence of some form of abuse of power. By inferring to a more “market-focused” rather than “tools-focused” approach, political parties would take a more “holistic approach” with its politicking effort thus improving its efficacy and efficiency.

For P3, there was a potential for PM to either be a unifying force or a divisive one, “... for me it is a thing that can be used to unite and also to the thing that could destroy us”. This is especially true when parties or political actors start to dabble with the more questionable side of identity politics and messaging that tend to be racially divisive and abusive. According to P3, PM plus identity politics could be a potent mixture, one that seeks to not only engage with the people but also to manipulate them, often to achieve short-term political gain.

His idealistic view on PM was eventually tempered by a dose of pragmatism, noting that at the end of the day politics was less about ensuring the satisfaction of voters and was ultimately about winning and obtaining power, saying that “satisfaction is secondary, winning an election is the primary concern”. This might seem like an about turn if one was to take the statement at face value, but such dichotomous proclamation underscored two very important realisation about PM; the first being the *limitation* of PM and secondly the need to *transcend* the limitation in order for political actors to fulfil the potential of PM.

Interview Interpretation for Participant 4 (P4)

For P4, Political Marketing (PM) is about the notion of “political imagination”. It can be seen as a continuation to the notion of linking politics with elements of sociological imagination discussed by P2. P4, who was formally trained as a political scientist and later became a journalist and an activist of Malaysian culture, saw PM as way to inculcate a notion of political renewal to help society escape regressive norms. As with other participants, the idealism on display was tempered by a dose of realism and at times even pessimism with the state of the body politics. This was very much in line with his life experiences, the realism of political journalism co-mingling with the shared communal hope of cultural activism leading to a very interesting point-of-view on the application of PM in Malaysia.

When asked about the state of electoral democracy, he was hesitant to acknowledge the system here as “an electoral democracy, as such”, echoing the doubt of P2. For him the whole system was very much “animalistic, the arena is very antagonistic”. The actions of political actors, especially with regards to the contested space of elections were described as “primordial, it is raw and essentialist in nature. It is a dog-eat-dog situation As the discussion starts to focus on the application marketing concepts within the area of political engagement, he acknowledged that even here in Malaysia the application of PM was quite sophisticated. This was seen through the hiring of multinational PR consultants, widespread usage of social-media engagement and may other low-tech and high-tech applications. Yet, underneath the veneer of sophistication, P4 believed that PM was still riddled with “a streak of sophistry”. Sophistry, which can be defined as “a ruse disguised as a clever argument” was described as a “... negative message designed to get people to react animalistically towards a party’s political enemies. This makes the political landscape to become very animalistic”.

What that negative and animalistic message was about is “an entrenched populism that is evolving from a raw version we had earlier”. When asked to explain, the version that we had earlier was heated racial rhetoric often repeated either in traditional media or during political campaign or ‘ceramahs’ (political speeches) in order to stoke fears within the population. The version being propagated now was still about racial rhetoric but was being “packaged” using present-day technology, peppered with narrative and videos to reinforce the messaging and presented to the public in a slick package. This was at the heart of political engagement here in Malaysia. PM would become the process “... of selling this particular ideology” to the public and price being given as an exchange for this is “power”. For P4, all of this constituted a continuation of a powerplay or hegemony of a political elite that was a heritage from our colonial history where sowing mistrust allowed our colonial master to engage in “divide and rule” approach in governance.

When the discussion shifted into the topic of politics and culture, P4's tone changed to a more hopeful one; his ideas now papered less with invective pessimism and more with optimism. From a cultural standpoint, the very spectre of identity politics actually was sourced from something that is more benevolent which was a sense of pride. According to P4, some of those within the political elite took advantage of "... *maruah politik* (political pride) is a real sense within the society, especially among the Malays. It is not a sense of ownership; it is a sense of value-sharing. We can see this in our history where our courts were filled by Indian-Muslim Bendaharas (Chief Ministers) and emissaries from foreign empires. What happened was people took advantage of this sense of pride and started to use it to stoke fear among us, among the Malays especially". In Malaysia, one of the things that mattered in politics was symbolism. P4 explained symbolism as "... a way that we understand things, the "*tersurat*" (apparent) and "*tersirat*" (hidden) that we show through our words, actions and how we communicate with others. He gave an example using the 1MDB scandal where what matters was not just the transgression but how the actions of those deemed responsible for the scandal went against the sense of duty that symbolised the Malay's logic of custodianship of political leadership.

In making sense of the idea of political imagination from a more operational approach, P4 insisted in describing PM as a "paradox"; a force in which positive values and bad intentions co-mingle. For him, PM is a place where "... ethos and chaos were similarly embraced. The key elements to be embraced by PM included the challenge to reduce or even remove (even if it is quite impossible) "bad" elements and ultimately only go for the "positive ethos". The next discussion was on having a preponderance towards an orientation based on sound policies and engagements, a more "product oriented" approach in PM. While the approach is very much product driven, it must be developed "organically" where the market grew in tandem with the growth of its citizenry political awareness. This, when embraced, would allow political actors, parties and coalitions in building a more relevant and distinct political brand and not just a reactionary political force. All and all, in making the calculus on how to engage the electoral via PM, a political economy that was based on the ability to engage the voters would matter more than just the "selling" of political conviction. In short, PM could be seen as a factor in shaping the political imagination by acting as a balancing force within the process of political engagement.

Interview Interpretation for Participant 5 (P5)

With some 4 decades of experience in journalism and media and spending around a decade being at the helm of one of the oldest English dailies in Malaysia, suffice to say P5 had a lot of experience when it comes to politics and dealing with politicians. He was also one of the pioneers of political blogging, now seen as a veritable past-time for many Malaysians in the age of social media.

When examining his ideas on Political Marketing (PM), P5 tend to see it as a form of narrative that starts and ends with the idea of political power. Political actors needed to engage in PM in order to secure power; they must also employ PM in order for the voters to understand what they intend to do with the power. This narrative was pragmatic but never naïve. It was being presented in a very nuanced way, showcasing both a wide-eyed view that reflected P5's experience with politics and a sense of hopefulness that managed to remove any overt sense of pessimism. In fact, P5 was one of the least pessimistic participants being interviewed and

very much went against the stereotype associated with members of the press and their attitude towards politics.

When asked about how he understood the whole concept of PM, he presented a 4-tier approach of what encapsulate the meaning behind the notion. The first approach is what he called "... the manipulation of politics itself". Here, what political actors would be using their capacities in order to gain some sense of "belonging" into the political scene of the country. That presence could come from a sense of duty, ideological adherence, community representation and even notoriety. In most cases, it would be a combination of these factors and how the factors were shaped to fit into either the mould set by the party or an individual's representation of politics. The second approach is the idea of "... putting forward political intention". Here, political actors ought to position themselves in a unique and discernible way; unique here meaning that politicians were able to distinguish themselves first within their party or movement and next within the electoral. The next approach is all about "... using political means to send a message" so that the audience not only understands the intention of political players but also as way to garner electoral acceptance of the message and intention itself. According to P5, most politicians seemed a to be "syok sendiri" (self-absorbed) with the importance of their social or political message, failing to find a meeting point between what they believed in and what the society expects. The fourth approach is all about putting the first three elements discussed earlier together into a cohesive "political brand". According to P5, "For me political marketing is not about political ideology but more of a political system, a way of telling people about yourself. It is a narrative, an on-going story about building a political brand". Just like a business, marketing meant creating a projection about who you are, what you do and the values you represent. Doing so would allow a better connection between either the politician, party or coalition and the public.

In operationalizing PM, political operatives must approach the process using multiple approaches. It would depend on what the point of engagements was and what would be the objective of the engagement. The approaches could include social media campaigns, the tried-and-true ceramahs and home-to-home visits, PR blitzes and many other choices. Although the possibilities of applying PM seemed endless, P5 believed that it was still in its infancy. He said as of now, most parties seemed to apply some form of PM in terms of branding, pre- and post- election activities but not much else. "... yes, I think it (PM) is still in its infancy not least because if I were to ask any politicians what is PM, I will either get a blank stare or 10 different answers if I ask 10 different people". Having said that, he was confident that PM will play a more prominent role in the future. He then reminded that one focal point for operationalizing politics is culture, and this would be true for PM as well. For him, any form of messaging, be it in terms of policies, ideology or opinions, will constantly be intertwined with culture, whether party culture or societal ones. Hence, any form of PM engagements or activities must always conform to cultural expectations that were either internally or externally derived.

At this stage, the interview has entered into a discussion on PM orientation and P5 firmly believed that a product-orientation is key when it comes to PM here in Malaysia. According to him, "... product-based orientation is not only the most suitable, it is the most dominant way of doing marketing". He said all the factors that were discussed earlier, from political positioning to image consciousness pointed to a set of expectations that must be fulfilled by

political actors in order for their effort to be rewarded through support from the electoral. This logic also follows the dominance of race-based politics. Not only that, because of the importance of exercising power through majoritarian rule, any party or coalition that could promise a path towards achieving this would be considered as “viable”, thus would be seen as the more obvious or attractive choice. Nonetheless, this devotion towards a product-based approach carried an important caveat in that whatever “product” that politicians are offering to the masses, it must be done in a way that were considerate towards unity and our society’s diversity. When asked about the position of service-orientation within Malaysia’s PM, P5 was quite optimistic saying that there is now a serious movement towards inculcating such an approach within Malaysia’s political landscape. This could especially be seen in the work and effort presented by parties such as DAP, PAS and PSM.

Interview Interpretation for Participant 6 (P6)

As a long-time activist and political operative/pollster, P6’s idea of political marketing (PM) is coloured by the notions of engagement, reform and progressive thoughts. Her political idea and education stem from years of struggle within the more underground campus political activism of the 90’s and that involvement brought fresh perspective on how to incite political responses from the masses. Her thoughts were both street smart and less encumbered by theoretical carefulness of other more conservatively inclined politicians and academicians interviewed. When her views ran contrary from those interviewed previously, it provided a strong counterpoint and when her views echoed others, it came from a different angle and offered fresh perspectives and ideas.

She believed that Malaysia’s democratic space has improved over the years, describing the mid-90’s as “the dark days” for Malaysian democracy based on her personal experience within the *reformasi* (reform) movement but conditions have improved through the years, culminating in the GE14 change of government. While there were democratic discrepancies happening, but the space, especially the electoral space, has proven to be both resilient and becoming more open. She attributed this positive change to the democratization of technology and media, especially the recent advent of social media, that created venues for the public to be more involved not just in politics but in other aspects involving public interest.

When asked about the meaning behind the concept of PM, P6 seemed quite excited about the discussion making the assertion that she studied marketing formally at the tertiary level. It was also the part that elicited the most extended response. For her, PM is first and foremost all about “political branding”; the work that you put in to prepare on how you are going to be singled out by the voters. “It is all about putting everything into a cohesive package. From your taglines like ‘ada apa bossku’ and ‘reformasi’ to the focus of your election campaigns. PM is all about that sense of awareness that you create for yourself”. The purpose behind all the political branding efforts was to induce a “first-in-mind” effect in the decision making “black-box” inside the mind of voters. Labouring further on this point, she explained that PM ought to refer to the “modus operandi” of political actors in dealing with voters. It must take into account what to do pre-engagement, preparing the right content and approach during the engagement, and finding ways to improve your relationship efforts through post mortem analyses. This MO would be formally applicable during election campaign periods whereby day-to-day interactions could see a combination of planned activities and a more ad-hoc

approach. She added that the main driver behind the interactions is having a relatable agenda that spoke towards the concerns, values and aspirations of the electoral.

The purpose behind PM was multi-pronged, the first being all about improving the marketability for candidates and the party/coalition. She said, "... politics by nature is both predictable and unpredictable. There are strongholds and also seats that are very competitive, meaning no one party can claim to be the favourite. Factors such as demography, delineation and others would play a role. It is here that marketing could play the most important role. Through proper engagement, you can improve your chances, especially when your party and candidate become more prominent", Another important reason behind indulging in PM was to help with resource allocation for campaigning or other forms of engagements. This is important especially for opposition parties who were competing against the ruling coalition who usually has a lot of incumbent advantages, especially in terms of using government resources. Through PM, there would be more clarity in terms of what to achieve, what would be the priority for the party, and how many and what type of resources needed; especially in terms of formal party and electioneering activities.

Another aspect of PM that she acknowledged as being very relevant in politics today was the importance of "empowering the neglected". For her, political engagements should not just be limited to power struggles, it must also be about ensuring equality and a greater voice and involvement of the marginalised and minorities. "Women, youth, the disabled and the indigenous people are some those who are still being marginalised. If you are serious about using politics for the betterment of all then you must not just engage them, but allow them to engage the larger society using your political platform". She then used one of her party's grassroot campaign called "Bidadari Selatan" (Southern Angels) as an example. The campaign's objective was to empower the women of Southern Johor and to highlight the issues concerning violence against women, child marriage and discrimination against the disabled. She said those who were involved were not just partisan politicians but those who felt strongly about the issues, and that in turn will play a role in improving your image within the community while projecting the right amount of concern for real and substantive issues.

When asked about the veracity of identity politics and its impact on PM, she acknowledged that identity issues like race, religion and in Malaysia where national language and education were also part of the milieu of identity were highly influential in our politics. She said "... that is why I choose to be part of a political movement that doesn't put these issues as its 'selling' point but seek to promote reform and justice". For her, identity politics at times insidious influence on Malaysian politics could be countered through activism. "We can rise above the sometime 'cheap' politics that seek to take advantage of these (identity) issues by creating awareness that not everything about politics is about 'us against them'. Fear is not everything. Yes, some of those issues have substance, like national education and language, and we should work together to improve things, not fight with each other". P6 believed PM ought to be embedded with a more inclusive message, a sense that political success must not be based on divisions but ensure togetherness. Having said that, she did temper her idealism with a dose of pragmatism by noting that there were factors that will play a role in determining how far an inclusive message is acceptable within our society. She said, "... we have to acknowledge that there are still those who believe in the politics of race and supremacy". She then added whether people accept or reject those ideas at times do depend on geographical

and demographic factors of the electoral But she refused to let this fact totally dampened her idealism, noting that doing so was tantamount to “politics of surrender”. Instead, it is the responsibility of every political stakeholder to stake out a more incisive and inclusive messaging and see their PM activities planning as venues to incite change that goes beyond the “*bangsa-agama*” (race-religion) questions.

Next, the discussion has now shifted on the notions or ethos that guided the overall implementation and approach of PM. In discussing the importance of trust, P6 saw PM as a means of inculcating trust, and the trust being inculcated occurred during or due to the engagement between political actors and the public. In other words, PM could be seen as an agent of trust in which the trust would then be earned through engaging with voters. What would be the driver, or to use the words of P6, ‘pengisian’ (content) of the engagement meant to get trust of voters? The drivers would be the party’s or coalition’s ideology and philosophy. Through these fundamental tenants of realpolitik, people would understand your stand as a politician and can then make an informed decision on whether to support you or not. Another antecedent for trust highlighted by P6 was service; whereby the service being rendered endeared politicians to their constituents and this would eventually strengthen the trust between the two. On the concept of commitment, P6 believed that showcasing a sense of commitment to the voters is key and through this that commitment would be reciprocated to the party or candidates. And just like trust, service served as the precursor to earn commitment from voters. Another important antecedent with regards to commitment was activism. How activism worked in this regard is through a sense of togetherness fostered through shared believed and conviction, especially the ones realised through social work and community involvement. This sense of commitment could also be further enhanced by having the right people either seen as political leaders or being representatives of constituents. By having the right people, engagement programs, campaigns and other PM-based activities would be conducted effectively and efficiently. According to P6, a combination of these ethos would create an indelible bond with the electoral and then would finally be translated into loyalty, both as loyalty to the political cause and perhaps more importantly loyalty as voters during elections.

Interview Interpretation for Participant 7 (P7)

As a senior politician holding office in one of the oldest parties in the country, P7 had the experience of being part of the political elites. That experience entails both the highs of senior ministership positions and the lows of losing grips on power. Being a conservative leaning politician accustomed to winning more than losing, his idea on political marketing (PM) tends to be more internally derived, an “inside-looking-outside” point-of-view of marketing. His ideation of PM reflected a high degree of pragmatism whilst being firmly grounded to present realities, especially when it comes to demographic veracities. Most importantly perhaps, his ideation on politics is informed by his conservatism rather than fully coloured by it; enabling a more balanced and nuanced view on PM.

Firstly, P7 was asked on the present state of the electoral democracy in Malaysia and he noted that the condition of our democracy is healthy, open and well contested. “Overall, the democratic process in Malaysia is good where rights concerning election, the right to choose are not only enshrined in the constitutions but is being duly protected by everyone. There are those who accused the government of manipulating the system to retain power, but we know

that when it comes to following the will of the people, we will always respect that". He noted that having a healthy democracy should lead to improved engagement with the public hence benefiting a party's PM approach. "... for me, what we have here is very good if not one of the best democratic systems especially compared to some countries in the region. It allowed everyone to compete healthily and communicate well with the voters."

Next, P7 was asked about the meaning(s) behind the concept of PM; for him the concept was first and foremost about an exchange or commerce that occurred between political actors with the voters whereby the party /coalition could be seen as the product and the voters as customers. According to him, "... (PM) is about how to effectively sell our 'product' to the voters". He then adds that the exchange process is not just transactional in nature; instead for PM to be effective it needed to be "strengthen from within" i.e., derived from effective internal strategic choices. The first factor needed to be developed internally is image, the way a party or coalition is being perceived by the public/voters. For P7, the notion of 'image' was not just something you inculcate through PR or social media engagement. It was also not just about party's position on issues, history or ideology; 'image' here deals with perception that is predicated on integrity, the sense that a party is being honest and not being involved in corruption. "What we are really selling to voters is our integrity. When they have that belief, their confidence on us will increase." This would then serve as the building block for PM that was internally driven.

Another important element in PM is segmentation, meaning here the ability to identify specific target audience meant for specific messaging, engagement or intended outcome. "... so, our marketing approach now is different from the past. We can no longer assume that everyone's way of thinking is the same. There will be differences between those aged 50 years and above as compared to those aged 20. We must customize our engagement with these different group of people in order to improve our chances of winning their hearts and minds". The other purposes behind include planning party workflow, engagement approaches, social media messaging, campaigns and other political activities. The purpose here is to pair the most effective activities to the right segment in order to get the most out of any PM campaign or approaches. PM should also emphasize engaging audiences via multiple channels, stating that "... parties cannot be relying on ways that they are familiar or comfortable with. As voters become more sophisticated, parties must also match that sophistication. We must be able to use multiple approaches to reach our diverse set of voters."

As the discussion veered into the ethos of PM, the first notion being discussed was the impact of identity politics especially issues concerning race-based politics. Like other participants before him, he acknowledged that the notion was very much the influential sentiment in Malaysian politics. This might seem unsurprising considering his conservative credentials and the fact his party has been benefiting from and trafficking in identity politics for the longest time; but his thoughts were still tempered by present realities. "In Malaysia, even as the social situations are changing, race politics is still an important issue. It is the cornerstone of our political struggle; it gives meaning to our political struggle and makes for greater participation from the society." Having said that, he grounded the statement with an understanding that "... slowly but surely this notion is set to change". This inevitability, he believed, stem from the changing social context of Malaysia where the people are valuing other ideas more than race-based politics. "We accept that present realities call for the acceptance of race-based

politics, but ultimately we must make preparation for a future where it (identity politics) no longer drives politics. P7 believed that conservative politics in Malaysia must discover new political touchstones, struggles that could reshape its relevancy for the future. This include reshaping its political focus on providing greater societal participation, more focused economic discussion and a better 'packaging' for conservatism. "... we must accept that change is inevitable, conservative politics in Malaysia cannot rely on identity politics all the time."

Shifting the topic to political marketing orientation, P7 internal-first approach was reflected in his whole ideation of the orientation a party must take vis-à-vis PM. For him, "... perception and confidence about the party is built by having a solid product on offer". Hence, for him a product orientation is almost sacrosanct, the be-all-and-end-all of PM. "... when our product is weak, nobody is going to be confident on the party. That is why we must always strengthen our product, straighten our image and ensure our ambition matches the expectation of the public". When pressed further about other orientations worthy of consideration, he believed that service could act as a "complementary approach that can help strengthen our core product". Through service, a party could ensure that the position or power that was gained through elections could be effectively translated into action.

Summary of Interview Interpretations, Initial Coding & Categorization of Data

Overall, 192 codes were curated from all seven interviews. The method used for the coding process was line-by-line coding whereby every line of the transcribed interviews was being comparatively analysed with one another to systematically derived a form of emergent unit of analysis. It is also known as a method of constant comparison that is used to strategically interrogate or explore deductive inquiry on the main source of information. The initial coding process was done manually and was later incorporated into Nvivo12 for the intermediate coding process to come. Below is an example of how the initial coding done via the constant comparative method.

Table 4.1

Example of comparative analysis within a single narrative

Data Section for P3	Initial Codes
<i>When asked about the state of Malaysian democracy, he acknowledged that while there were rooms for improvement, he believed that the system was fair and the main reason behind the opinion was the high degree of participation and how that participation had a bearing in determining the electoral results. This, according to him, makes any sort of effort to induce participation such as PM could further enhance the democratic process.</i>	1. Democratic Process
<i>When referring specifically to the role and meaning of PM, he said PM played an important role by creating a heightened sense of awareness for the voters concerning information, issues and sentiments that shaped their understanding on politics and electioneering.</i>	2. Critical Role
<i>He added while there was no denying the importance of PM, its pursuit within the political landscape has been limited and neglected. He cited that the neglect was the consequence of a lack of resources of parties here in Malaysia.</i>	3. Neglected by Political Actors

Intermediate Coding & Properties of Categories

In this section, the study is presenting the next phase in the construction of a deductive theory concerning the role of relational political marketing (PM) in ensuring electoral success. Here, the study will take the 192 initial codes and will characterize them into distinctive, insightful, and more broad-based categories. The design of this approach was highlighted in chapter three and will employ the constant comparison method. Here, the study will expand the comparison of codes across multiple narratives, comparing data with other data and triangulate those data points across multiple experiences and nodal points to build a more compelling understanding of the phenomenon.

Table 4.2

Example of comparative analysis across multiple narratives

Participants	Data Sections	Codes	Category
P7	<i>This might seem almost overtly pragmatic but as with positions taken before this, P7 predicated this outlook on the sense of responsibility for parties or coalitions to accompany that flexibility with an effective communication approach. it is the responsibility of every political stakeholders to stake out a more incisive and inclusive messaging and see their PM activities planning as venues to incite change that goes beyond the "bangsa-agama" (race-religion) questions.</i>	Effective Communication	COMMUNICATION
P6	<i>Continuing the theme of co-dependency between politicians and voters, another aspect that must be examined is the interplay between the political will exerted by political bodies and the degree of political awareness of voters. While more should be done in terms of improving overall political education and awareness, the level has increased, and this helped to skew the relationship to the voters' favour. There is more to be done in inculcating more awareness towards the political process and PM should be a platform for this.</i>	Agent of Change	COMMUNICATION

From the 192 codes developed through line-by-line coding, a total of eight categories were identified. These were:

1. Ethos – Value-based criteria that determined PM's impact on electoral success
2. Operational – Tactical aspects of PM
3. Definitions- How the concept of PM was understood & applied
4. Communications – Dealing with messaging & communicative aspects of PM
5. Relational – Relationship marketing aspects of PM

6. Demographics – Demographics development affecting PM
7. Identity Political Factor – The impact of identity issues on the application of PM
8. Orientations – The philosophy behind PM's implementation

Categorical development allowed for a higher degree of data abstraction and extraction thus allowing the experiences of the participants to further explicate the process of PM being investigated. The following sections will provide the properties discussion, the interpretative processes and critical examinations on each of the eight properties.

Categorical Development Discussions

The very first theoretical category deals with 'Ethos', the notion that political marketing must embody certain value-driven agenda for it to be a representation of the intent of political actors. Ethos is also representative of the expectations that the electoral market has on the political actors vying for their votes. Operational aspects such as election manifestoes, promises and contracts (which will be discussed in detail in another category; Operational) are contingent to the values expounded by those very aspects.

The second category emerging from the initial coding process was "Operational"; the tactical aspect of PM enabling the execution of your plan and empowering the political apparatus with the means of achieving whatever ends being intended. There must be a realisation that this study would not be able to examine every single aspect of a party, coalition or candidate's operational activity as the list is almost endless. Instead, the study looks at operational aspects more as the fundamentals or the philosophical underpinnings of political manoeuvring and tactics.

The third category to arise from the initial codes developed earlier was definitions; notions on how PM is being understood and implemented here within Malaysia's political market. In examining this advanced code, some degree of sensitivity must be placed upon the differences in how PM is being regarded across different types of theoretical samples and how those differences interact with each other to create a more inclusive set of understanding on the role of PM. Based related codes that were identified, there were two domains of interaction for the category. The first being how PM was seen as an influential agent and the second domain was the understanding on the shifts, ebb, and flow within the political understanding of Malaysians. In deciphering the idea behind the influence of PM, the participants were offering discussions ranging from sociological impressions of PM to its role within the political system.

The fourth category emerging from the initial codes was communication. PM, just like any form marketing approach, would rely on communication as its main engine for engagement. This study discovered two main spheres in terms of how communication played a significant role in ensuring electoral success vis-à-vis PM. The first domain would be about how communications helped with effective engagement and the second one dealt with the level of communicative sophistication needed to engage in PM effectively. To get the best understanding from this category, constant comparison with the first category (Ethos) and second one (Operational) is crucial to the process. As data being compared between these three categories, the realisation was that ethos served as the guiding principles behind the

communications effort within PM and operational efficiency is considered essential to the overall efficacy of the communicative process.

The fifth category to emerge from the initial codes was relational; defined here as the relationship marketing aspects of PM. From a traditionalist marketing standpoint, relationship marketing is seen as an approach that focuses more on satisfaction and retention of customers rather than increasing sales or revenue. In PM, the relational approach follows the same trajectory where political actors are looking to gain from encouraging loyalty through long-term engagement with voters.

The fifth category developed from the line-by-line coding was demographics, an understanding on how demographics development within Malaysia's political market. In this category, three main domains of discussion emerged from the initial codes. The domains were impact of age on political marketing PM, rural-urban divide, and influence of education on political understanding. Examining the data points for these three domains, it was interesting to note some of the contradictions between the participants especially when it came to issues concerning age and education.

The seventh category emerging from the line-by-line codes was identity politics. Identity politics can be defined as the any issues pertaining to the usage of identity markers like race, religion, language and even educational system as means to achieve political mileage. According to all participants, identity politics is very much a mainstay in Malaysian politics and in political marketing (PM). This study identified two spheres of influence could be deduced which were the present realities of identity politics, and preparing for a future without relying on identity politics.

The last category to emerge from the initial codes was orientations; the guiding philosophy behind the implementation of PM. Here, two orientations were given prominence by the participants which were product and service orientations. Product orientation can be defined as a believe that what a party stands for becomes the focal point in generating support from the voters. It is a conviction-based approach in PM; as long as a party offer what it deemed as a superior product then voters will believe in it. On the other hand, service orientation is a more voters-based approach in which a party believe that its performance will be judged based on the ability to render effective service to the voters. Hence, the discussion within this category centred around the disceptation between brand and voter centric approach within PM.

Table 4.3

Summary of Intermediate Codes

Intermediate Codes	Summary
1) Ethos	Value-based criteria that determined PM's impact on electoral success
2) Operational	Tactical aspects of PM
3) Definitions	How the concept of PM was understood & applied
4) Communications	Dealing with messaging & communicative aspects of PM
5) Relational	Relationship marketing aspects of PM
6) Demographics	Demographics development affecting PM
7) Identity Political Factors	The impact of identity Issues on the application of PM
8) Orientation	The philosophy behind PM's implementation

Advanced Coding & Theoretical Integration

From the eight categories emerged previously, the next step was to refined them further using advanced coding. Also known as axial coding, this process would allow the study to further advanced the analysis on the phenomenon of PM. This analysis would then be showcased using a narrative form that attempts to integrate the advanced codes together to present an emergent theory on PM.

To help with the process of advanced coding, the study would use Scott's Conditional Relationship Guide approach. The method was used to integrate proper context onto a grounded theory analysis and induce theoretical maturation. Here, it is used by imbedding action verbs to describe conditions within the category, enabling a more in-depth elaboration on what binds some of the categories together and how these categories interact within the ambit of PM, as exemplified below.

Table 4.4

Example of the Use of the Conditional Relationship Guide

Category	Ethos	Operational	Identity Politics	Communication
What	Value-based criteria impacting how PM is being perceived by the public	The tactical aspects of PM's implementation, concerning both day-to-day & long-term effort	The impact of identity issues on the application of PM	Dealing with messaging & communicative aspects of PM
Why	Because actions of political actors alone are not enough, voters also form ideas on how politicians stand on things, their attitudes and their sense of believes	Because parties must conduct themselves effectively & efficiently, have goals that resonates with voters' expectations. They have to embody a sense of 'professionalism'	A cornerstone of Malaysian politics, built upon the foundation of race, religion and cultural issues. But the legitimacy is being constantly questioned	Engagement with voters increases acceptance and awareness. Communications also key in 'selling' a party, ideology or movement to get support in return
How	By looking at how voters examine, understand, process and react to the presence of political actors within the electoral market	By outlining the fundamental aspects of a party's day-to-day operations, level of sophistication and degree of engagement	By understanding the historical context, impact and resonance of identity politics & how it impacts PM	By looking factors contributing towards the effectiveness of communications & how political actors deal with messaging
Consequence	Forming a sense of believe towards a party	Ensuring effectiveness & efficiency in engagement activities and beyond	Preparing for a political reality with less impact coming from cultural & identity issues	Enabling a sense of control over messaging and engagement efforts conducted

Action	Relates to obtaining power... dimension, alongside Operational & Identity Politics categories	Relates to obtaining power... dimension, alongside Ethos & Identity Politics categories	Relates to obtaining power... dimension, alongside Operational & Ethos categories	Relates to engaging with voters... dimension, alongside Relational & Demographics
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Category	Relational	Demographics	Definitions	Orientations
What	Issues and concepts about relationship marketing aspects of PM	Demographics development affecting the trajectory of PM	On how the concept of PM was being understood & applied	The philosophical underpinnings behind the implementation of PM
Why	Because strong relationship marketing strengthens voter's commitment & overall PM approach	Because identifying relevant demographic factors enable improvement across the board for PM's execution	Because having a clear understanding enables a more focused execution of PM	Because fundamental philosophy acts as a guide on how you engage and focus on what is important for your party
How	By identifying factors that strengthen bond and trust with voters	By looking at the most impactful demographic realities; Rural-Urban Divide and Age	By examining the many different strands that build the understanding for PM	By examining which orientations offer the best guide towards electoral success, most noted Product followed by Service
Consequence	Improving the capacity towards trust and commitment by voters	Preparing for the most impactful external electoral market factors on PM	Enabling a higher degree of planning and preparation for political actors on PM	Creates a strong base to craft specific marketing effort towards achieving electoral success
Action	Relates to engaging with voters... dimension, alongside Communication & Demographics	Relates to engaging with voters... dimension, alongside Relational & Communication	Relates to projecting PM in a meaningful way dimension, alongside Orientations	Relates to projecting PM in a meaningful way dimension, alongside Definitions

The Conditional Relationship Guide helped to extend the advanced coding process, aid in the integration of categories into higher-order axial dimensions and helped develop three

important dimensions to guide the theoretical integration narrative. Based on the analysis above, two dimensions were deduced further which are:

1. Obtaining power, holding on to power and using power effectually via a new political narrative; “politics of pride.”
2. Engaging with voters effectively through a product centric political marketing orientation.

Each dimension represents an important strand of PM especially in its role in helping political actors achieve electoral success and a combination of interacting categories done in accordance with the principle of constant comparison between codes, between categories and codes with categories. What follows will be a narrative discussion on all the elements for the study and its theoretical integration.

Theoretical Dimension One: Obtaining power, holding on to power and using power effectually via a new political narrative; “politics of pride.”

When discussing the role of political marketing (PM) and its resultant impact on electoral success, it is inevitable that the discussion begins and ends with the notion of *power*. There is no denying that the ultimate outcome of any political actor competing within an electoral sphere is power. It is also arguably the most obvious as well. However, there are elements that transcend the obvious here especially with regards to the full notion in understanding power, PM, and electoral success; that political movement is not just about *how* one obtains power, it is also about *what* to do with power once it is in one’s hand. The categorical grounded theory factors for this dimension were ethos, identity politics, definitions and operational. Most political parties tend to focus their efforts on gaining power without realising those inculcating strategies on using the power effectively would have a significant impact on their success in election.

In this narrative strand, the discussion will be centred around how the questions and understanding of power ought to be understood beyond its nature as a strategic political outcome but also from an operational standpoint. The first notion here is all about streamlining political strategy. One of the most talked about features in PM by the participants was the embrace of business-like practices and corporatization. Ultimately, corporatization emphasizes three things; result-orientation, repeatability, and flexibility. Political entities must understand that who they are, in the sense of what party they represent, will start to matter less than what they do. Hence, ideas like political deliverables, election contract that is specific rather than too general must be central to the electoral effort. As such, politicians must understand that power could only be ‘sowed’ by focusing the right effort in obtaining it.

Hence, this quest of power must be driven by a narrative, a sense of purpose that will capture the political imagination of the voters. When asked about the dominant narrative for Malaysian politics, all seven experts interviewed mentioned the atavistic pull of identity politics here in Malaysia that is driven by race, religion, and other ethno-centric markers. On the same token, all seven experts here agreed that identity politics, if left unchecked, could bring more harm than good, especially when it dominates the political discussion to the point of becoming the only issue worth contesting, thus becoming in a sense a contest between identities that are now at odds with each other. Hence, a new narrative ought to emerged

and any political entity that manages to tie itself to this will probably be dominant soon. This new narrative is all about collective pride rather than disparate identity tropes.

What is the “politics of pride”? It refers to a concept deeply rooted in society, particularly among the Malays, where pride is centered not on ownership but on shared values. However, this sense of pride has often been manipulated by politicians to stoke fear, especially within the Malay community. In Malaysia, symbolism plays a vital role in political discourse and marketing. It serves as a means of understanding ideas through both the 'tersurat' (explicit) and 'tersirat' (implicit) meanings expressed in words, actions, and interactions. For the Malay electorate, cultural pride and shared values are central to their identity. Politicians, therefore, have a responsibility to act as custodians of these values, fostering unity rather than exploiting them to create divisions within the electorate.

While this factor is particularly significant among the Malays, it is equally relevant when considering other ethnic groups within the electorate. Political parties representing the Chinese community, such as the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), often leverage symbols of economic progress, meritocracy, and modernity. These symbols align with the Chinese community's aspirations for education, business growth, and equitable governance. Similarly, Indian political parties like the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) and grassroots movements such as Hindraf draw on symbols of resilience and struggle, including imagery of estates, labor movements, and historical figures like Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. These resonate deeply with the Indian community's historical and ongoing fight for equality and representation. Understanding the politics of pride offers valuable insights into how political dynamics shape voter behaviour within ethnic communities while contributing to the broader narrative of Malaysian identity.

Theoretical Dimension Two: Engaging with Voters effectively by Projecting Political Marketing in a meaningful Way

The second narrative thread of the emerging theory on political marketing (PM) highlights the significance of effectively engaging with voters. Before delving deeper, it is crucial to first understand the concept of "engagement" or "engaging with voters" and its relevance to PM. According to the participants interviewed, engagement transcends mere communication, particularly one-way communication. Instead, it represents a combination of interactive efforts, strategic messaging, and political optics aimed at fostering meaningful, long-term relationships with voters and the public.

The theoretical foundation consisted of communication, relational, demographic, and orientation categories, as outlined earlier in the intermediate category analysis. Communication emphasized the core aspects of fostering meaningful interactivity and became central to all engagement efforts. Relational factors focused on the intrinsic and extrinsic objectives of engagement, emphasizing ways to build trust and commitment for a deeper connection with voters. Demographics highlighted the importance of identifying key stages or venues that require attention, serving as a guiding framework for marketing activities. Lastly, orientation referred to adhering to a specific PM philosophy that shapes and directs overall electioneering efforts. The theoretical discussion will be structured around these categories.

The concept of communication in the context of political marketing (PM) centres on two key ideas: its role as a facilitator of engagement and the extent to which communicative efforts are applied to enhance that engagement. As a facilitator, communication acts as the gateway and foundation for any interaction with the public and voters. This role is especially significant given the dominance of social media in contemporary politics. Simply posting a tweet or message is insufficient; there must be follow-ups, curated responses, consistent messaging, and other strategies to enhance the overall effectiveness of the approach. Another crucial element is the speed and reach of communication by political actors. As politics grow increasingly dynamic and disruptive, the ability of parties to adapt and respond swiftly to the evolving and unpredictable nature of political engagement is vital for success. Regarding the application of communicative efforts, the focus is on their level of sophistication. Participants were less concerned about technological advancements themselves and more focused on how communication functions as an interpreter of social events. Communication should serve as a channel that provides meaningful information, enabling better decision-making, particularly in crafting messaging content and refining political optics.

Regarding relational factors, political actors must recognize that the foundation of building strong relationships lies in effectively managing voter expectations. Regularly engaging with voters and staying attuned to a wide array of issues—such as hot-button topics, long-term challenges, local matters, and national or international concerns—enables political parties to connect better and tailor their messaging to reflect the electorate's mood and priorities. Building relationships also requires an acute understanding that voters are often influenced more by emotions than by facts. Therefore, significant effort and resources should be allocated to fostering emotional appeal, complemented by factual accuracy. This combination allows politicians to cultivate a deeper and more meaningful connection with the public they aim to serve and represent. Another essential aspect of forging stronger bonds with voters is establishing a robust grassroots movement. As participants noted, Malaysian politics remains largely community-driven rather than nationally oriented, making a strong localized presence a critical factor for electoral success. This approach is often reinforced by efforts to develop the personal branding of candidates, creating an image that aligns with voter expectations. Together, these elements contribute to a more comprehensive and impactful political engagement strategy.

Another category to consider is demographics, which examines how the structural composition of the electorate influences political marketing's (PM) effectiveness in achieving electoral success. When discussing demographics, it is helpful to view them as the "stage" on which PM strategies are presented or performed. Respondents identified three key demographic factors with the most significant impact on PM: age and the rural-urban divide. These factors present both challenges and opportunities for political actors striving for electoral victory. Age was universally acknowledged as a critical factor in PM. It directly influences the operational strategies of political parties, particularly as societies shift toward a more youth-oriented demographic. This shift impacts media consumption habits, campaign methods, and various other aspects of political engagement. The rural-urban divide is another significant demographic factor, shaping both general politics and PM strategies. This divide has long been a contested space in Malaysian politics, often characterized by a simplistic view that rural populations hold more conservative values, while urban communities are more liberal and sophisticated. However, participants noted that such assumptions are overly

simplistic. Malaysia's society includes many "in-betweeners"—individuals who exhibit a mix of rural and urban values depending on their circumstances. Political actors must acknowledge this complexity, as traditional, clear-cut notions of political values are no longer as influential as they once were.

Finally, understanding the right orientation to guide PM strategies is essential for effective political engagement. Based on the data gathered in this study, two primary orientations were identified as relevant to PM in Malaysia: product orientation and service orientation. A product orientation focuses on developing PM strategies that highlight the party's brand identity. This approach positions the party's core values and principles as the main "selling point" to voters. As a result, parties must prioritize internal marketing, robust brand building, and clear messaging to ensure voters understand what the party stands for. The second orientation, service, emphasizes a voter-centric approach, where political parties are seen as duty-bound to act in the public's best interest. Participants noted that service orientation plays a critical role in complementing a product-based approach. By demonstrating trustworthiness and commitment to the public, service-oriented actions enhance outcomes such as trust and credibility. Moreover, service orientation aligns closely with engagement, as offering tangible services for the public's benefit helps parties appear more appealing and relatable to voters.

Conclusion

To conclude, political marketing (PM) goes beyond securing electoral victories; it also involves demonstrating the operational efficacy of power through clear deliverables and strategies. Central to this discourse is the concept of collective pride, transcending identity politics' divisive tendencies. Experts highlighted that Malaysia's identity politics, driven by ethnicity and religion, risks deepening societal fractures. A shift toward a unified narrative rooted in shared values and cultural pride could foster collective identity and political stability. For instance, while Malay political discourse often leans on cultural symbolism, non-Malay communities leverage themes like economic progress and resilience, illustrating how pride and symbolism shape voter behaviour. Politicians must balance these dynamics to nurture unity rather than division.

Engaging voters meaningfully forms the second dimension of PM, emphasizing interaction, trust-building, and tailored communication. Engagement requires strategic, two-way communication, particularly in the age of social media, where responsiveness and tailored messaging are key. Relational strategies focus on emotional resonance and grassroots presence, enabling deeper connections with voters. Additionally, demographic factors like age and the rural-urban divide shape PM strategies, challenging political actors to address the nuanced values of "in-between" populations. Successful PM also relies on two orientations: product, which emphasizes a party's brand identity, and service, which prioritizes voter-centric approaches. Together, these strategies foster trust, credibility, and long-term political relationships, ultimately determining electoral success in Malaysia's complex socio-political landscape.

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