

Article

The Impact of Social Media Influencers on Political Participation in Malaysia

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Abstract: This study explores the impact of social media influencers on political participation in Malaysia, with a focus on their growing role in shaping digital political discourse. Based on qualitative analysis of secondary data from academic literature and credible online sources, the paper proposes a conceptual framework that explains how influencers promote political engagement through specific communication strategies and psychological processes. Influencer characteristics such as credibility, personal appeal, and the formation of parasocial relationships are found to foster emotional connections and enhance the effectiveness of political messaging. These factors contribute to increased civic participation both in digital spaces and real-world settings. The study also introduces the concept of micro-level interactions, referring to the everyday and informal exchanges between influencers and their followers, which serve as building blocks for broader shifts in political attitudes and behaviours. While the findings highlight the transformative potential of influencers in mobilising political awareness and action, they also raise concerns regarding misinformation, a lack of transparency, and the ethical implications of politically motivated content. The study offers a theoretical foundation for understanding how social media influencers affect political behaviour in Malaysia, and it provides insights that can inform future research and policy aimed at promoting accountability and safeguarding democratic values in the digital age.

Keywords: Social media; influencers; political participation; credibility; communication; parasocial

Introduction

Recently, social media influencers have emerged as pivotal actors in digital communication, possessing substantial capacity to shape public opinion and political engagement. Their ability to disseminate information and mobilise followers has transformed political participation, particularly in Malaysia, which characterised by vibrant political dynamics and high social media penetration. According to the Digital 2024 report, Malaysia has approximately 27 million active social media users, representing roughly 83% of its population (Hootsuite, 2024). This widespread connectivity underscores the growing importance of digital platforms in shaping civic discourse and engagement.

Within this digital ecosystem, social media influencers, individuals with substantial followings who are perceived as credible and relatable within specific niches, have become influential voices in political discourse. Their growing relevance in Malaysia's political landscape is evident in their engagement with political commentary, candidate endorsements, and mobilisation efforts. Their perceived authenticity and direct communication styles allow them to shape voter perceptions, particularly among younger demographics who favour digital content over traditional media (Wong, 2023b).

During Malaysia's 15th General Election (GE15), numerous influencers played key roles in promoting voter awareness, supporting registration drives, and disseminating campaign messages across platforms like TikTok and Instagram. These actions highlight their ability to galvanise public sentiment and facilitate participation in both online and offline political processes (Rahman, 2023). However, the growing influence of influencers also raises concerns about misinformation, partisanship, and unregulated political messaging. This paper examines the multifaceted impact of social media influencers on political participation in Malaysia. Specifically, it seeks to assess the extent to which influencers affect political awareness and engagement, examine demographic variations in their impact, and analyse implications for political campaigning and public policy.

Literature Review

1. The Role of Social Media Influencers

Social media influencers have garnered attention for their ability to shape opinions and trends across various fields, including politics (Smith, 2020; Brown & Hayes, 2021). Their communication style, often informal, interactive, and emotionally resonant, aligns with the principles of Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), which suggests that audiences actively seek media to satisfy specific needs. These include information, personal identity, integration and social interaction, entertainment, and escapism (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974). Influencer content typically delivers informational value (e.g., simplified political updates), fosters identity and community (e.g., values-based messaging), and provides entertainment or emotional connection (e.g., humour and relatability), thus satisfying multiple gratifications simultaneously. Briones et al. (2012) highlight how influencers amplify political messages and mobilise grassroots support by engaging audiences with relatable and compelling content.

Their role often circumvents traditional media gatekeepers, enabling direct communication with diverse audiences. Beyond mobilisation, influencers impact policy decisions by shaping public opinion and highlighting specific viewpoints (Enli, 2017). This phenomenon is evident across various contexts, including Malaysia, where influencers have evolved into key players in the digital public sphere. The trustworthiness and likeability of influencers boost ~~bolster~~ their credibility, which is central to influencing political behaviour (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953). They employ personal narratives, endorsements, and interactive engagement to foster emotional bonds known as parasocial relationships (Cohen, 2004). Ethical concerns accompany this influence. Critics warn of misinformation and financial motivations behind political endorsements, which can undermine democratic processes (Tufekci, 2018; Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Thus, critical examination of influencer roles in politics remains imperative.

2. Social Media Influencers and Political Engagement in Malaysia

High digital connectivity and political vibrancy in Malaysia shape the growing relevance of influencers. Influencers act as intermediaries bridging political entities and the public, especially among youth (Ahmad & Hashim, 2020). One study from Jue Jun Tan (2023) shows that young Malaysians rely heavily on social media for political information and, that this reliance enhances their political efficacy, which in turn increases their offline and online political participation. In a media landscape often criticised for bias, influencers offer alternative viewpoints, raising awareness about ~~of~~ civic responsibilities and political events (Tan et al., 2021). Influencers mobilise followers during elections through campaigns and voter drives (Lee, 2022; Cheng & Lee, 2023). As mentioned earlier, their approach frequently meets users' informational and social interaction needs, reinforcing UGT's relevance in the Malaysian context.

Ethnic diversity and linguistic segmentation shape influencer strategies, with some tailoring content to specific communities. This reflects Malaysia's socio-political complexity (Raj, 2020). New media, including influencers, play a critical role in shaping political knowledge structures among first-time voters in Malaysia (Allam et al, 2024). Nonetheless, misinformation, echo chambers, and algorithm-driven content visibility pose challenges to the effectiveness of influencer-driven engagement (Wong, 2023a). Case studies from both the 2018 and 2022 general elections illustrate how influencers have significantly contributed to

political mobilisation, especially among youth (Haris, 2021; Rahman, 2023). By integrating global perspectives with Malaysia-specific developments, this review illustrates the dual dynamics of influencer engagement, its promise for civic empowerment and its risks in an unregulated digital space.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative content analysis approach to explore the relationship between social media influencers and political participation in Malaysia. The analysis is based exclusively on secondary data sourced from peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, policy documents, and credible digital media publications published between 2018 and 2024. Sources were selected based on their relevance to the research focus, particularly those addressing influencer communication and political engagement in Malaysia or similar socio-political contexts. Materials that lacked empirical grounding, focused solely on commercial influencer marketing, or did not pertain to Malaysian political dynamics were excluded.

Instead of formal sampling or coding, this study used interpretive reading to identify recurring themes in the selected literature. Key concepts such as credibility, parasocial interaction, mobilisation strategies, and the role of misinformation were identified through an inductive, thematic interpretation of the content. This interpretive synthesis facilitated the development of a conceptual framework that connects influencer characteristics to mechanisms of political participation. While this reliance on secondary qualitative data provides valuable conceptual insight, it does not capture the lived experiences or perceptions of influencers and their audiences. Future research could benefit from incorporating primary data collection methods such as interviews, surveys, or ethnographic content analysis to deepen understanding of audience-influencer dynamics and the practical impact of digital political messaging.

The Findings

1. Influence on Political Awareness

Social media influencers play a critical role in shaping political awareness among Malaysian citizens, particularly within the digitally engaged youth demographic. Unlike traditional media figures, influencers often build personal rapport with their followers through continuous content sharing, direct interaction, and authenticity. This fosters trust and makes political messaging more accessible (Lee & Lim, 2021). Their content strategies frequently include interpretive commentary on current events, simplified breakdowns of policy issues, and personal reflections that humanise political discourse. For example, during the 2022 Malaysian general elections, several high-profile influencers used platforms such as Instagram and TikTok to demystify complex political topics, endorse candidates, and promote voter education campaigns (Cheong, 2022). These efforts resulted in heightened political discourse within their digital communities, evidenced by increased user engagement in comments, shares, and live discussions.

Their accessibility and relatability distinguish them from institutional actors. Followers perceive influencers as peers rather than distant authorities, which enhances message retention and the perceived legitimacy of their content (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). In many instances, influencers act as interpreters of political events, helping followers understand issues in layman's terms, often inflected with humour, personal anecdotes, or visual storytelling. Interactive communication further reinforces political awareness. Platforms such as *TikTok* and *Instagram Live* enable real-time engagement, allowing followers to pose questions and receive immediate responses. This bidirectional flow fosters a participatory culture and stimulates political curiosity, particularly among first-time voters (Ng, 2022).

However, the role of influencers is not without pitfalls. The rapid dissemination of misinformation, intentional or otherwise, poses significant threats to informed political engagement (Raja, 2023). Unintentionally sharing biased or factually incorrect content is a risk for influencers, particularly when framing political issues as trending topics instead of policy debates. Additionally, commercial incentives may compromise message authenticity, as influencers might be paid to endorse political figures or parties without transparent disclosure, leading to ethical concerns about manipulation and bias (Tufekci, 2018). Furthermore, the echo chamber effect is widespread, exposing followers primarily to opinions that align with their

preexisting beliefs. Such an effect can exacerbate political polarisation and limit exposure to diverse viewpoints, thereby undermining the development of critical political thinking (Tan & Wong, 2023). While influencers contribute positively to increasing political awareness through engagement, accessibility, and relatability, there are clear limitations to influencer-driven activism. The impact is often episodic, driven by trending moments rather than sustained advocacy, and it tends to encourage digital slacktivism, where online gestures like likes or shares substitute for meaningful offline action. This trend underscores a need for deeper strategies to convert digital awareness into long-term civic engagement.

2. Impact on Political Engagement

Beyond raising awareness, social media influencers significantly influence political engagement, defined here as both digital and offline activities related to civic participation, including voting, advocacy, protests, and policy discourse. A growing body of research shows that influencers can move their followers from passive awareness to active political behaviours (Brown & Hayes, 2021; Freeman, 2017). In Malaysia, political engagement facilitated by influencers is especially prominent among young adults aged 18–34, a demographic that consumes and interacts with political content almost exclusively through digital platforms. According to the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC, 2023), 74% of internet users consume political content via social media, and 55% of these users report that influencers directly affect their voting decisions.

Influencers accomplish their mission ~~this~~ through persuasive communication, using their platforms to advocate for voter registration, issue-based campaigns, or political rallies. Influencer-initiated ~~initiated~~ hashtags, live streams from political events, and informational videos have been instrumental in mobilising voters during election ~~electoral~~ cycles. In the 2022 Malaysian general election, influencers including political commentators, activist personalities, and entertainment figures actively encouraged their followers to register, vote, and share political content, resulting in a significant increase in youth turnout (University of Malaya, 2023). Political discourse has also shifted, as influencers have taken up the mantle of issue framing. This process includes framing debates around governance, corruption, civil rights, and public service delivery. Followers exposed to these frames often engage in online political conversations, campaign for issues, or even attend offline events such as town halls or protests.

A 2023 survey by the Malaysian Institute of Economic Research (MIER) found that 65% of respondents who follow political content from influencers experienced a change in opinion or behaviour, such as signing petitions, donating to political causes, or actively participating in online debates. However, while these findings suggest significant influence, it is important to note that such data reflect self-reported perceptions rather than direct causal relationships. This phenomenon reflects the strong emotional and cognitive resonance influencers establish through parasocial relationships, which act as conduits for behavioural influence (Cohen, 2004). Nevertheless, the depth of political engagement driven by influencers is uneven. Bridging this gap requires influencers to develop sustained, issue-based advocacy that extends beyond election cycles and fosters real-world participation.

While many followers engage through digital means such as liking, sharing, or commenting fewer translate this into sustained offline engagement like civic volunteering or policy advocacy. Moreover, the lack of long-term engagement strategies among influencers may lead to episodic rather than enduring political participation. In essence, influencers have become powerful mobilisers for ~~of~~ political engagement. However, sustaining this engagement over time and transitioning from digital activism to structural political participation remain challenges for Malaysia's democratic maturity.

3. Demographic Variations

Multiple demographic factors, including age, gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and geography, shape the impact of social media influencers on political participation in Malaysia. These variables influence how political content is received, interpreted, and acted upon.

Age remains one of the most significant determinants. Younger Malaysians, particularly those aged 18–25, exhibit the highest levels of engagement with politically active influencers. As digital natives, they are

highly familiar with platforms like *TikTok* and *Instagram* and often regard influencers as more credible than traditional political figures (Tan, 2023). In contrast, older Malaysians typically rely on mainstream media for political information, are more sceptical about influencer content, and participate less actively in influencer-led political discourse.

Gender also shapes engagement patterns. Female audiences tend to respond more to influencers who discuss themes like gender equity, education, healthcare, and social justice. Narratives focused on personal empowerment or community well-being particularly resonate with them (Lim & Abdul, 2022). Meanwhile, male followers are more drawn to content focused on economic reform, policy debates, and political rivalry, reflecting divergent interests rooted in social roles and identity norms.

Socioeconomic status affects both access to content and the nature of engagement. Individuals from higher-income backgrounds are more likely to follow influencers who address issues such as taxation, entrepreneurship, and urban development. In contrast, those from lower-income households gravitate toward influencers who discuss education access, employment, public assistance, and cost-of-living concerns (Nguyen & Yeo, 2024; Hassan, 2023). These distinctions highlight how material conditions shape political consciousness.

Ethnicity introduces additional layers of complexity in Malaysia's multicultural context. Influencers often tailor their content linguistically and culturally to specific communities such as Malay, Chinese, Indian, or indigenous groups. While this ethnic targeting can increase relevance and resonance, it also risks reinforcing communal divisions. For instance, Bumiputera-focused influencers may emphasise affirmative action, whereas Chinese-language influencers might focus more on education policy (Soo & Ramasamy, 2023). These dynamics call for culturally sensitive approaches in political communication.

Geography, especially the urban-rural divide, further differentiates engagement. Urban youth generally benefit from better digital infrastructure and greater exposure to diverse influencer content. In contrast, rural communities may face technological constraints and are less likely to engage with politically active influencers unless the content is distributed via widely accessible platforms like *Facebook* or *WhatsApp* (Zainal & Teh, 2024). Finally, the intersectionality of these factors creates distinct engagement patterns, particularly for individuals such as a young, rural Malay woman from a low-income background. Understanding such layered identities is essential for researchers and political stakeholders aiming to develop inclusive and effective digital political strategies (Chen & Kim, 2021).

4. Implications for Political Campaigns

The increasing role of social media influencers in political communication has prompted a strategic recalibration of campaign tactics by political parties and candidates. In Malaysia, particularly during recent general elections, political actors have recognised the importance of integrating influencer marketing techniques into their digital outreach strategies to engage younger and more digitally literate voters (Papageorgiou, 2018; Wong, 2023b).

Strategic Advantages of Influencer Integration

Influencers offer unique advantages that traditional campaign tools often lack. Their perceived authenticity, relatability, and direct audience access enable them to present political content in a conversational, emotionally resonant manner. Platform-specific strategies have been increasingly used, with *TikTok* being favoured for viral short-form content, *Instagram* for visual storytelling and influencer-brand synergy, and *Twitter/X* for rapid news cycles and hashtag activism. These tactical differences significantly shape campaign messaging and audience targeting.

Such variation allows for the humanisation of political messaging, often transforming complex policy discussions into digestible and emotionally engaging narratives (Luttrell & McGrath, 2021). For instance, influencers may employ personal stories, visual content, or humour to frame political issues in a way that enhance message salience and increase audience retention. Political campaigns have increasingly leveraged platform specific dynamics. On *TikTok*, short form video content optimised for virality allows political messages to reach millions within hours, especially when endorsed or amplified by popular creators.

On *Instagram* and *Twitter* (now *X*), visual storytelling and hashtag activism facilitate targeted mobilisation and issue framing. During Malaysia's 2022 General Election (GE15), political parties collaborated with digital creators to amplify youth centric messages, focusing on voter education, anti-corruption themes, and inclusive governance (Wong, 2023b).

Ethical and Regulatory Concerns

Despite these advantages, the use of influencers in political campaigning also raises important ethical and regulatory challenges. Malaysia should align its political endorsement regulations with global standards, such as requiring clear disclosures like 'ad' or 'sponsored' for paid political content, mirroring commercial advertising norms set by jurisdictions like the United Kingdom's Advertising Standards Authority or the United States Federal Trade Commission.

A major concern involves transparency in political endorsements. Unlike commercial influencer partnerships, where advertising regulations require the use of tags such as 'sponsored' or 'ad', political influencer endorsements are often ambiguous or undisclosed, leaving followers unaware of potential financial or ideological affiliations (Freelon & Wells, 2020). This opacity can mislead audiences and compromise the integrity of political discourse. Moreover, influencers are not typically bound by journalistic codes of ethics or electoral regulations, enabling the unchecked spread of misinformation or manipulated narratives. The 2024 report by the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS) warns that up to 40% of political content shared by influencers may contain unverified claims, misrepresentations, or ideologically biased perspectives, often disseminated without editorial oversight. This not only distorts democratic debates but can also amplify populist, polarising, or conspiratorial rhetoric. The blurring of lines between entertainment and political advocacy presents another challenge. Influencers who mix lifestyle content with political messaging may inadvertently trivialise policy issues, reducing civic engagement to trend based, episodic participation. This raises concerns about the commodification of democracy, where political behaviour becomes subject to social media trends rather than informed deliberation (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013).

5. Conceptual Framework: Influencers' Psychological and Communication Mechanisms

Figure 1 illustrates how influencer characteristics, communication strategies, and psychological mechanisms interact to influence political participation. Influencers' credibility and appeal establish the foundation for audience persuasion. Through framing political issues and fostering parasocial relationships, influencers evoke emotional responses and deepen engagement. These processes motivate both online (sharing, commenting) and offline (voting, rallies) political actions. This framework integrates communication theory (e.g., framing theory), psychological concepts (parasocial interaction), and political participation models, providing a comprehensive understanding of influencer impact in digitally mediated political landscapes. Each component of the framework is grounded in empirical findings presented in this study:

Influencer Traits (Credibility, Relatability, Appeal)

Audiences are more likely to trust influencers who they perceive as credible and authentic. Relatability enhances identification, particularly among youth audiences who seek voices that reflect their values and lived experiences. Appeal, whether based on expertise, attractiveness, or likeability strengthens message acceptance. These traits serve as the foundation for persuasive communication, setting the stage for message reception and influence (Lee & Lim, 2021; Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019).

Communication Strategies (Framing, Content Style, Engagement)

Influencers strategically frame political content to increase clarity and resonance. Framing involves highlighting certain aspects of an issue (e.g., injustice, urgency) to shape perception and prioritise it. The style of content, whether humorous, emotional, or informational, affects how audiences process information. Moreover, active engagement tactics such as polls, Q&As, and direct messaging enhance interactivity and create a sense of community, encouraging sustained attention and dialogue (Cheong, 2022; Tan et al., 2021). Platform affordances significantly influence how influencers frame and deliver political content. For example,

Instagram and TikTok support emotionally resonant, short form video content that enhances narrative engagement, while Twitter (X) promotes concise, text-based political debate and real-time interaction (Keller, 2020). Understanding these dynamics is crucial to analysing the scope of influencer's impact across digital spaces.

Psychological Mechanisms (Parasocial Bond, Emotional Resonance)

Followers often develop one sided emotional relationship with influencers, known as parasocial bonds. These bonds mimic real-life friendships, making messages from influencers feel more personal and trustworthy. Emotional resonance, triggered through shared experiences or expressive storytelling, deepens psychological engagement. These mechanisms explain why audiences may internalise political messages and feel motivated to act (Cohen, 2004; Freeman, 2017). Audience characteristics such as age, political orientation, and media literacy significantly mediate the strength of influencer impact. For instance, younger individuals with lower political efficacy may be more influenced by parasocial bonds, while those with high media literacy may critically assess influencer messaging before engaging politically (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003; Vraga & Tully, 2021).

Political Participation Outcomes

The cumulative impact of influencer traits, strategic communication, and emotional engagement drives political participation. Online, this includes sharing political posts, commenting on issues, and participating in digital campaigns. Offline, this influence translates into more tangible forms of activism, such as voting, attending rallies, and engaging in advocacy work. Evidence from GE15 and related activism demonstrates how influencers catalyse these behaviours, particularly among previously disengaged groups (Rahman, 2023; MIER, 2023). The rise of influencers in political discourse is not without risks. Influencer content can sometimes oversimplify complex issues, spread misinformation, or foster political polarization. Moreover, the performative nature of online activism often called 'slacktivism' raises concerns about the depth and authenticity of political engagement (Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Morozov, 2011). These dynamics highlight the need for a more nuanced evaluation of influencer-led political mobilization.

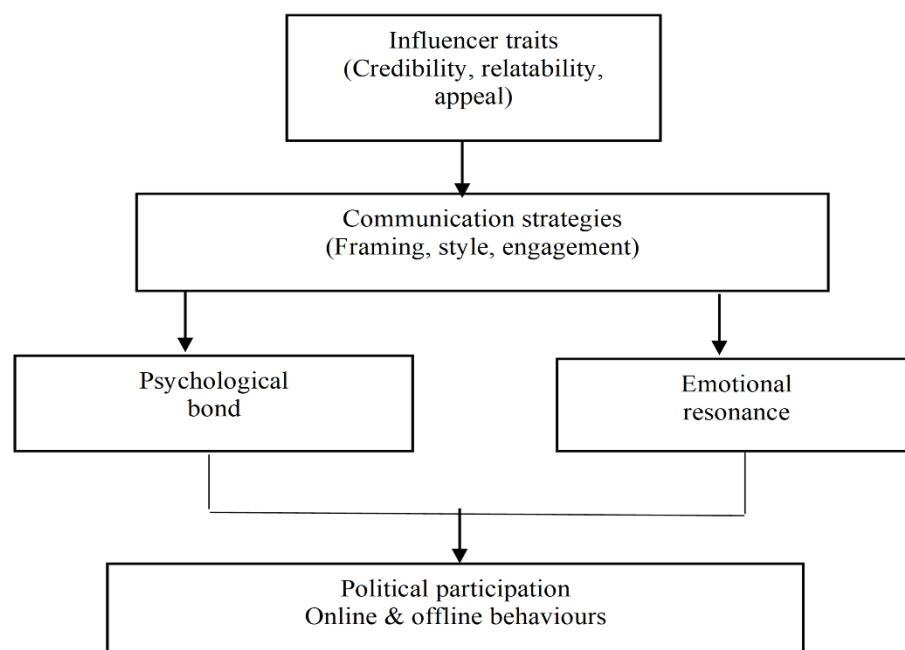


Figure 1. Influence of social media influencers on political participation through communication and psychological mechanisms

Discussion

1. Recommendations For Campaign Strategy and Policy

To navigate the evolving landscape of political communication, campaign strategists, regulatory bodies, and digital platforms must adopt comprehensive and ethically grounded approaches to engaging with social media influencers. In the Malaysian context, the Election Commission (EC) could consider formalising digital campaign regulations, while the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) should strengthen its enforcement mechanisms against political misinformation and undisclosed sponsorships. First, there is a pressing need to establish clear and enforceable standards for transparency in political endorsements. Influencers should be required to disclose any form of political sponsorship or affiliation when promoting political parties, candidates, or issues. Such transparency would help maintain public trust and reduce the potential for manipulation or misinformation. Equally important is the promotion of digital and media literacy among the electorate, particularly younger and first-time voters. Educational initiatives should focus on equipping individuals with the skills to critically evaluate political content online. Integrating media literacy into school and university curricula would strengthen citizens' ability to identify biased or misleading information, thereby fostering a more informed and discerning electorate.

Ethical guidelines tailored specifically for influencers involved in political communication should also be developed. Such guidelines should promote accuracy, uphold democratic values, and encourage respectful discourse. Collaborative efforts between civil society organisations–electoral commissions, and influencer networks could help institutionalise such ethical standards and promote responsible content creation. Monitoring and accountability mechanisms should be enhanced to reduce the spread of false or harmful political content. This includes real-time content moderation tools, independent fact-checking collaborations, and transparent reporting systems during election periods. Greater cooperation between regulators, technology companies, and academic institutions would support a more secure and trustworthy digital political environment. Finally, in Malaysia's multicultural society, it is essential that political communication through influencers be inclusive and culturally sensitive. Campaigns should aim to foster interethnic understanding and national unity, avoiding rhetoric or strategies that reinforce communal divisions. Influencers can play a positive role in promoting inclusive narratives that resonate across different cultural and linguistic communities. By embracing these strategies, political campaigns can harness the persuasive power of influencers while upholding democratic integrity and social cohesion.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing body of research on digital political communication by examining how social media influencers shape political participation in Malaysia. Through a qualitative synthesis of academic literature and digital trends, it proposes a conceptual framework that delineates the communication and psychological mechanisms by which influencers influence political awareness, engagement, and mobilisation. By unpacking influencer traits, messaging strategies, and audience responses, the framework offers a comprehensive lens to understand influencer-driven political engagement in digitally mediated societies. The study advances theoretical understanding by linking micro-level influencer, follower interactions to macro-level shifts in political behaviour, integrating perspectives from political psychology, media studies, and Malaysian electoral dynamics. It also gives useful advice provides practical insights for political campaigners, digital platforms, and regulatory bodies aiming to leverage or govern influencer activity during elections. While the study is limited by its reliance on secondary data and a Malaysia-specific context, future research can address these gaps by empirically validating the framework through interviews, surveys, or content analysis. Further testing of the framework's robustness and applicability would involve comparative studies across regions and electoral systems, along with experimental designs. As digital ecosystems evolve, sustained scholarly inquiry is essential to ensure that influencer power enhances democratic participation rather than erodes it.

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Informed Consent Statement: Any research article describing a study involving humans should contain this statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. For studies not involving humans, please exclude this statement.

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