

Political Satire and Its Influence on Youth Political Perception

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ABSTRACT

This article is based on research that explored the familiarity of political satire among youth and examined whether political satire has any impact on the political perception of the youths. A survey was conducted in Kuala Lumpur involving 50 respondents from 18 to 40 years of age. Content analysis was used to explore the forms of political satire. There were seven different forms of political satire analysed in this research, namely, political graphics by Fahmi Reza, political cartoons by Zunar, political anime from a Facebook page entitled “Bro, don’t like that la, bro”, memes from “SarawakGags”, “HarakatDaily” satirical news site, Dr Jason Leong’s satirical tweets on Twitter and parody videos by Douglas Lim. These themes were derived from social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. The study found that political satire has profound impact on the political interests of the youths as it not only helps to increase their political understanding, it also presents political issues in creative and interesting ways. It is argued that political satire will shape the political thinking, especially the youths. However, the direct effects of political satire on voting inclination are still inconclusive and need to be further explored.

Keywords: Political satire, youth, voting, perception

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INTRODUCTION

The political crisis that took place in March 2020, resulting in the fall of the Pakatan Harapan (PH)-led government, came with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic has forced people and organizations all over the world to adjust to new ways of work and life. A rapid increase in digitalization is leading corporations, firms, and educational institutions to shift to work-from-home (WFH). The pandemic and the associated public health interventions undertaken to contain it have resulted in widespread and unprecedented social disruption. It has led to an inevitable surge in the use of digital technologies due to nationwide lockdowns and social distancing norms in the world. This collective trauma has caused schools and businesses to be closed, and an increase in unemployment. Governments all around the world have issued ‘stay-at-home’ orders to the public and mandated children to engage in online learning. As a result, people are now spending even more time with technology while consuming news media, watching television, using social media to connect with others, utilizing lifestyle apps to shop for groceries and other consumer goods, and engaging in home workouts (Nielsen Global Media, 2020).

The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (2020) reported that the demand for bandwidth had increased during the implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO) as people subscribed to video conferencing, online reading, learning, and shopping. With the increase in the use of internet, political satire has gained popularity among social media users. Political satire is an outcome of change in government and political behaviour. Most social media channels are now diffusing political information in satirical forms. Different forms of political satire have become an inevitable part of the daily transmission on social media to gain people’s attention. This research was conducted to better understand how political satire was used as a medium of communication on social media and to examine its influence on the youth political perception. The research is pertinent as political satire has become a medium that communicates information in the form of support or criticism through political graphics, cartoons, memes, tweets, parody videos and so on.

Political satire has been an important part of political discourse in a society. It attracts not only the people who are active in politics but also helps in forming opinions for people who are not active participants in political issues and discussions. This also leads to an increase in the sense of political efficacy and interest. Moreover, political satire is a mix of humour and user-created content.

In this research, the researchers identified the familiarity of political satire among youth and examined whether political satire has any impact on youth political perception. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and so on have been used as a place to share views among youths on current issues, especially on political matters. They often express their opinions freely and tend to accept at face value what they see on social media. The research is, therefore, important as it allows the researchers to examine how the youth react to the different forms of political satire and how they choose to engage with satirical content circulating on social media.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Political Satire

Studies on political satire have undergone rapid developments over the last few decades. Multiple scholars have made a contribution to increase our understanding of the field but the debates on the basic assumptions and definitions that frame the term “political satire” continue.

According to Becker (2012), political satire is the ability to offer commentary on the current state of affairs that is both aggressive and judgmental and at times playful and fun; satire ultimately offers a reinterpretation or reimagining of a political event or text. Political satire serves as a crucial societal force and has been an influential outlet for political commentary and criticism since the days of Jonathan Swift¹ (Becker, 2013). The nature of satire is designed in such a way to keep those in power in check and allow the masses to laugh at our collective folly (Feinberg, 1967). Satire can often take the form of parody, which is ultimately an imitation of an original speech act or text (Gray, Jones & Thompson, 2009).

Oftentimes, satire could be the highlight of a one-sided point of view. Political satire garners the attention of people through the political events. At its very core, and in contrast with more traditional forms of information media or straight news content, satire is designed to engage its audience in a more critical and cognitively engaging political and social experience (Young, 2013, 2020). In today’s global media environment, there are numerous examples of political satire, such as *The Colbert’s Report* that mimics an evening news broadcast on Comedy Central Channel, and the more investigative satire of John Oliver’s *Last Week Tonight* on HBO (Home Box Office) and *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee* on TBS (Turner Broadcasting System) (Bode & Becker, 2018).

However, one can argue the boundaries between serious critical reflection and pure entertainment, between politics and satire that have been blurred. It is still an open debate whether political satire has facilitated political engagement, whether the art is a mere form of political expression, or whether it has only generated cynicism and disengagement among the spectators. The debate takes place in a growing complexity of both modern media environment and contemporary politics.

Political Cartoons

Previous studies on political cartoons have focused on their nature and functions. According to Walker (2003), political cartoons play a key role as a form of political communication. Walker contended that political cartoons are known as prevailing weapons for communicating political issues as cartoon messages can easily be absorbed by people and transmitted in mass virality. Besides, political cartoons portray social importance as it sets social agenda and to deliver satirical commentary that aims to transform the social and political norms of society.

Minix’s (2004) study discovered the nature and settlements of political cartoons where cartoonists use their creativity and talents in representing issues of public interest through their illustrations which exploit a wide range of visual rhetoric such as humour, blending and exaggeration to communicate social issues in society. Furthermore, his findings examined the cartoonists’ use of visual rhetoric to serve as a persuasive device to convey messages. Duus (2001), who studied the ancient development of political cartoons in Japan, found that political cartoon was used as a form of political critique in the Japanese media as a channel to express one’s political perceptions.

¹ Jonathan Swift is an Anglo-Irish satirist considered as a master of the closely allied forms of political pamphleteering and satire.

Political Memes

The concept of memes was developed by Richard Dawkins (1976) in which he used it to refer to minimum cultural information units that move between individuals and generations through the process of replication or transmission. Memes could be in the form of songs, videos, catchphrases or images. Nowadays, memes have attained a different level of popularity. There are several websites created only for memes such as 9GAG, SarawakGags, or memebase.com. Besides, since memes are common among social media users, public relations and advertising professionals use memes creatively and actively to communicate their messages in order to attract the audience. Politicians also use memes in political campaigns or even at political rallies that aim to develop public opinion and as a tool for propaganda to entice more voters (Bauckhage, 2011).

Parody Videos

According to Holman and Harman (1986), parody means an imitation intended to ridicule or criticize. Bakhtin (1981, p. 76) views the parodistic act as “an arena of conflict between two voices” in a hostile contrast, where the second represents a “semantic authority” with which the audience is expected to agree. This highlights the importance of grasping the basic understanding of comic satiric relationship. Rossen-Knill and Henry (1997) outlines four characteristics of parody: (1) the intentional verbal representation of the object of parody, (2) the flaunting of the verbal representation, (3) the critical act, and (4) the comic act. The approach adopted by the parodist to revamp an older text or images includes, caricatures to substitution, addition, subtraction, exaggeration, condensation, contrast, and discrepancy (Rotermund, 1963; Davis, 2013).

Parody and satire go hand in hand when they involve humour in criticism and commentary. Moreover, satire is referred to as “the use of humour, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people’s stupidity or vices, particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues” (“Satire”, 2005). This comes in contrast to the standard definition of a parody: “a literary or musical work in which the style of an author or work is closely imitated for comic effect or in ridicule” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Ultimately, parody and satire apply humour as an instrument to convey a message. The motivation of a parody is to comment on or criticize the work that is the subject of the parody. The significant difference here is that satire uses an artistic work as the vehicle for the message, provides criticism and commentary about the world.

Political parody is a manifestation of political satire, whereby it serves as an expansive act that aims to elicit a laugh to discredit a politician or a political party or ideology by making fun of it, often aiming in turn at political persuasion (D’Errico & Poggi, 2013). In this research, parody videos are portrayed as political parody that serves as a form of political satire.

Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)

The ELM explains how persuasion is used as a tool to influence perceptions. Petty and Cacioppo (1980) argue that this theory measures people’s readiness to create engagement especially in elaboration. This highly depends on their motivation and competence to do so. In other words, people are more motivated to elaborate when the message is important to them. This model also suggests that when a person is presented with information, he/she processes it on a certain level of elaboration. They either express it on a high or low elaboration which comes from their level of effort when they come across a persuasive message. Then, the level of elaboration dictates whether the message is processed in two ways which are central route processing or peripheral route processing. Central route processing simply means the users are interested in the message. This is where they will pay greater attention and evaluate the quality and strength of the argument presented in the message. Attitudes that are created or reinforced in this manner are regarded to be more durable and resistant to counter-arguments. The primary path is logic-based and relies on evidence and facts to convince people about the validity of an argument (Yocco, 2014). On the other hand, peripheral route processing means the audience is paying less attention to the message while being influenced by aspects like visual presentations, fame, emotions and enticements. Attitudes might change or be reinforced in this manner based on the effectiveness of the influence of different aspects other than the message. These are the two routes of persuasion in the elaboration likelihood model. Moreover, according to McClure (2016), different forms of political satire use the cognitive and the peripheral route to communicate and influence public opinions. This tool of awareness uses humour and sarcasm as elements for persuasion.

Priming Theory

According to Moy, Tewksbury and Rinke (2016), priming interprets how individuals discern and give responses to their political and social environment. This theory was developed by Iyengar, Peters and Kinder in 1982. Initially, social psychologists used this theory to understand how human process information and make a judgement (Dillman, 2009; Valenzuela, 2009). Priming plays a crucial role in amplifying hot issues on social media. Iyengar and Kinder (1987) argued that issues influence the so called “standards by which governments, presidents, policies, and candidates for public offices are judged” (p.63). Likewise, there is a rising fear from the belief that mediated satirical content trivializes the political and media systems, thus widening and increasing the already established democratic deficit and political apathy among the youths, respectively (Baum, 2005; Moy, Xenos & Hess, 2005a). Generally, political infotainment on social media is portrayed through satire, comedy or even humour -- a vital platform for political information acquisition and attitude formation, rivalling the mainstream news (Kim & Vishak, 2008; Moy, Xenos & Hess, 2005b).

METHODS

A qualitative method was adopted to gather the data that comprised a survey. This study was conducted in Kuala Lumpur involving 50 youth respondents from the age of 18 to 40 years old. A survey was used to explore the forms of political satire. There were seven different forms of political satire analysed in this research, namely, political graphics by Fahmi Reza, political cartoons by Zunar, political anime from a Facebook page entitled “Bro, don’t like that la, bro”, memes from “SarawakGags”, “HarakatDaily” satirical news site, Dr Jason Leong’s satirical tweets on Twitter and parody videos by Douglas Lim. These themes were derived from social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Certainly, it can be argued that political satire is a form of political communication by itself (Purcell, 2010). Secondary data from articles, journals, and online newspapers were also obtained to support the findings.

A computer administrated survey using Google Form was used to gauge the respondents’ perception of political satire, including their demographic background, patterns of social media use, and their familiarity with different forms of political satire on social media. The respondents’ perception was measured based on a five-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree).

RESULTS

Demographic Profile

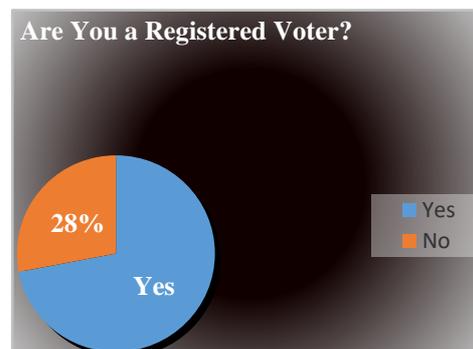


Figure 1: Distribution of Registered Voters among Respondents

In Figure 1, 72% of the respondents were registered voters while 28% were unregistered voters.

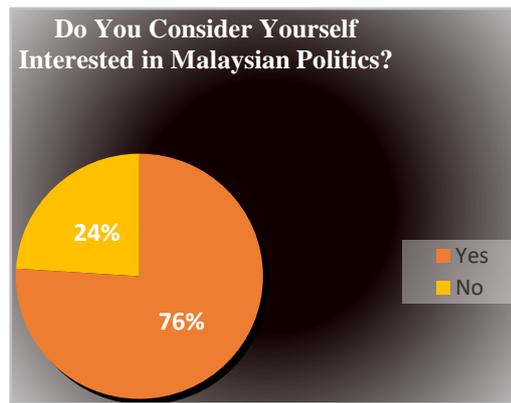


Figure 2: Distribution of Respondents' Interest in Malaysian Politics

Figure 2 shows respondents' interest towards Malaysian politics where 76% were interested while the 24% were not.

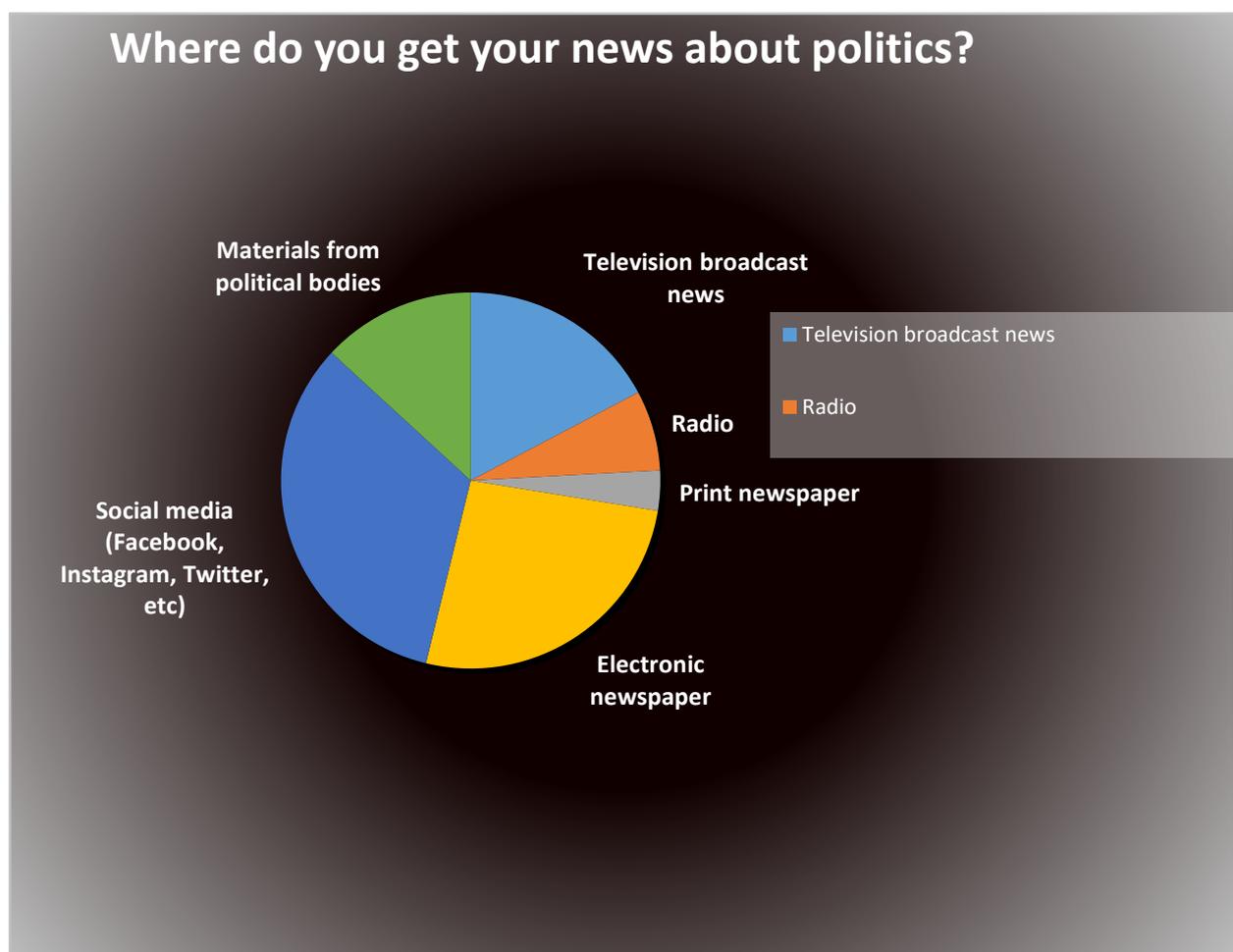


Figure 3: Distribution of Respondents' Sources of News about Politics

Figure 3 shows the different platforms used by the respondents to obtain news about politics. Social media platforms such as blogs, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc., came on top as main sources of news at 96%, followed by electronic newspaper (76%), television broadcast news (50%), materials from political organisations, radio (20%), and print newspaper (10%).

Familiarity of Political Satire among Youth

In this section, the researchers included images and videos taken from the social media to represent the familiarity of political satire among youth. The respondents' responses are based on a five-point Likert scale (1=Not Familiar at All to 5=Extremely Familiar).

Table 1: Respondents' Familiarity of Different Forms of Political Satire

Level of Familiarity	Not Familiar at All	Slightly Familiar	Somewhat Familiar	Moderately Familiar	Extremely Familiar
Forms of Political Satire					
Sample A: Political Graphics by Fahmi Reza	5 (10)	4 (8)	2 (4)	7 (14)	32 (64)
Sample B: Political Cartoons by Zunar	9 (18)	4 (8)	8 (16)	9 (18)	20 (40)
Sample C: Political Anime by "Bro, Don't Like That La, Bro" Facebook Page	4 (8)	5 (10)	11 (22)	8 (16)	22 (44)
Sample D: Memes by SarawakGags	9 (18)	4 (8)	12 (24)	7 (14)	18 (36)
Sample E: HarakatDaily Satirical News Site	16 (32)	7 (14)	6 (12)	7 (14)	14 (28)
Sample F: Dr Jason Leong's Tweets on Twitter	11 (22)	5 (10)	6 (12)	12 (24)	16 (32)
Sample G: Parody Videos by Douglas Lim	4 (8)	3 (6)	1 (2)	13 (26)	29 (58)

Note: Percentages are shown in brackets

As shown in Table 1, most of the respondents were familiar with the different forms of political satire presented to them, except for Harakat Daily Satirical News Site. Thirty-two respondents (64%) were extremely familiar with Fahmi Reza's political graphics while only two (2) respondents (4%) were somewhat familiar. For Zunar's political cartoons, 20 respondents (40%) were extremely familiar while four (4) respondents (8%) were slightly familiar. Twenty-two of 50 respondents (44%) were extremely familiar with the political anime -- "Bro, Don't Like That La" -- as opposed to only four (4) respondents (8%) were not familiar at all. Eighteen (18) respondents (36%) were extremely familiar with the memes from SarawakGags compared with only four (4) respondents (8%) who were slightly familiar.

Interestingly, 16 respondents (32%) were not familiar with Harakat Daily Satirical News Site compared to six (6) respondents (12%) who were slightly familiar. In the meantime, 16 respondents (32%) were extremely familiar with Dr Jason Leong's satirical tweets as opposed to only five (5) respondents (10%) who were slightly familiar. Lastly, as for Douglas Lim's parody videos, 29 respondents (58%) were extremely familiar while one (1) respondent was "somewhat familiar".

Perception of Political Satire and Its Effect on Political Interest

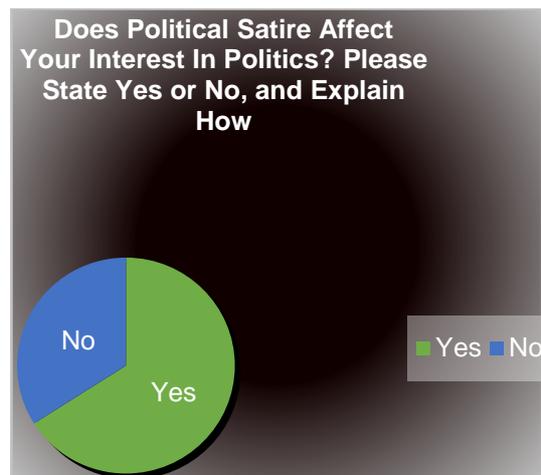


Figure 4: The Effect of Political Satire on Respondents' Interest in Politics

Figure 4 illustrates the effect of political satire on the respondents' interest in politics. Thirty-three (33%) of the respondents said that political satire does affect their interest in politics as opposed to 17% who responded otherwise. Some of the responses from respondents who said political satire has had an effect on their interest in politics are compiled as follows:

"It's easy to understand [about politics and about] what's been happening [around us through political satire]" *Respondent A*

"[Political satire] helps [to] highlight the main [political] issues of [the day] and exposes the mismanagement by the government" *Respondent B*

"Yes, [political satire has affected my interest] because it points out the truth in a sarcastic way! The truth is just the truth and it hurts for some who got to learn how to deal with these satires maturely because it seems politicians can't accept criticism" *Respondent C*

"Yes, as I believe [political satire] allows the audience [to] engage with the content and raise awareness through humour and satire" *Respondent D*

For those who responded negatively, their responses are as follows:

"No. I don't really have much opinion on politics" *Respondent E*

"No, because I don't like politics so it does not affect me at all" *Respondent F*

Table 3: Perception of Political Satire

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Political satire can reveal the weaknesses of our political leaders and institution	25 (50)	18 (36)	5 (10)	2 (4)	0
Political satire reinforces my political beliefs	11 (22)	21 (42)	15 (30)	3 (6)	0
Political satire helps me express my political opinions	19 (38)	21 (42)	8 (16)	2 (4)	0
Political satire helps me understand why voting is important	24 (48)	18 (36)	7 (14)	1 (2)	0

Note: Percentages are shown in brackets

Table 3 shows the respondents' perception of political satire. Twenty-five respondents said that political satire can reveal the weaknesses of political leaders and institution while only two (2) respondents disagreed. A majority of the respondents also said that political satire reinforces their political beliefs, indicating political satire's importance and influence in shaping the respondents' political attitude. Most of the respondents also believed that political satire helps them in expressing their political opinions and in increasing their understanding of the importance of voting.

DISCUSSION

Based on the findings, a majority of the respondents were familiar with the given forms of political satire except for Harakatdaily satirical news site. This is because Harakatdaily is less popular on social media and rather uncommon to many users especially the youth.

The most popular to the least popular political satire by the order of ranking is as follows: 1. Fahmi Reza's political graphics, 2. Douglas Lim's parody videos, 3. political anime by "Bro, don't like that 1a, bro", 4. Zunar's political cartoons, 5. memes by SarawakGags, 6. Dr Jason Leong's satirical tweets, and 7. Harakatdaily Satirical News Site.

The study found that a majority of the respondents agreed that the different forms of political satire had enhanced their understanding about politics.

Based on the respondents' perception to political satire, we believe in its ability in motivating the youth to participate in the political process more actively and in increasing their political literacy.

Politics has always been considered as the realm for grown men. Most youths feel discouraged to take part in politics as political parties are still largely dominated by the elites of yesteryears – whose political ideals are not compatible with that of the youths'. This explains why in the country's electoral history, only a handful of youth contested as candidates in elections.

Political satire has indirectly encouraged the youth to participate more in the political process through their presence and responses to political issues on the social media. The youths have long been marginalised because of their age, lack of experience and inadequate opportunities. This, however, is set to change with the popularity of political satire among the young people as they are expected to shape the country's political landscape. Political satire also empowers the youth in that it has allowed them to acquire knowledge about democracy and equip them with the tool to explore political issues of the day. Through political satire, the youth can learn more about the government's basic functions, policy-making and the importance of good governance. Besides, many youths also shun politics because it has always been associated with greed, manipulation of power and self-serving politicians. Political satire helps to expose the other side of politics to the youth. At the same time, it also educates them on the use of politics in nation-building and governing. In order to enhance the involvement of youth, it is necessary for the country to provide an enabling environment and as well as appropriate evidence-based programmes on youth development.

Perception of Political Satire

A majority of the respondents agreed that political satire plays a key role in revealing the weaknesses of political leaders and institutions, reinforcing their political beliefs, helping them to express their political opinions, and teaching them on the importance of voting.

The Covid-19 pandemic has laid bare the inability of some governments across the globe in managing their public healthcare system. Corruption, lack of priority and mismanagement of public funds are among the problems faced by some countries especially in the developing world. As governments are struggling to cope with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, people use political satire to reveal the weaknesses of political leaders and institutions. Double standards, confusing SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures) and broken public healthcare system are among the issues highlighted in satirical fashion to attract people's attention.

The youth particularly turn to political satire on social media to learn more about political issues. As political satire is partly humorous and satirical, they are more attracted to it than the more conventional and formal media channels.

Political satire allows the youths to see things from different points of view and helps shape their political belief which is not necessarily similar to the one held by the establishment, based on the survey conducted in this research. Once satirical political messages are shared on the social media, it goes viral from one user to the other. The messages not only generate interest but evoke responses, encouraging the youth to speak out and to publicly share their opinion. A case in point is the Undi18 campaign movement. Undi18 is a Malaysian youth movement that successfully advocated for the amendment of Article 119 (1) of the Federal Constitution to reduce the minimum voting age in Malaysia from 21 to 18 years old (Undi 18, n.d.). Undi 18 has sparked and brought youth empowerment to life in Malaysia. Many Malaysian youths are coming forward to fight for their right. With the rise of political satire, youth are no longer afraid to voice their opinions on social media or even organize peaceful protest like #LAWAN² to fight bad governance, corruption and systemic racism in Malaysia. The link between political satire and voting inclination is unclear but it opens the minds of the youth about their sense of responsibility as voters.

CONCLUSION

Political satire has profound impacts on the political interests of the youths. Political satire not only helps to increase the political understanding of the youths, it also presents political issues to the youths in creative and interesting ways. Political satire is expected to grow and become more popular in the country's political scene. It will shape the political thinking of the youths and influence the way they vote in the coming elections. The direct effects of political satire, however, on the voting inclination of the youths, are still inconclusive and need to be explored further.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research is a result of about a year of hard work in which several people have been involved and played a big role in its completion. We would like to extend our deepest gratitude to the respondents who have been involved and participated in this study, directly or indirectly. Their invaluable inputs have enabled us to complete this research and we are so grateful for that.

² #LAWAN is a rally organized by Sekretariat Solidariti Rakyat that demanded the resignation of Malaysian 8th Prime Minister, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin.

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