



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Assessing Peers as A Predictor on Youth Political Behaviour in Enhancing Malaysian Political Stability

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| ARTICLE INFO | ABSTRACT |
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| Received: Jun 19, 2024 | The objective of this study is to examine quantitatively the influence of peers on the political behaviour among youth in strengthening Malaysian political stability. This study applied a data collection method using a set of questionnaire surveys with 524 participants which were purposively chosen among youths in Klang Valley, including Kuala Lumpur, Gombak, Petaling Jaya, Klang, and Hulu Langat. The descriptive analysis was carried out using SPSS software while Partial Least Square Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) was employed to determine whether the three elements of peers' influence which are group discussion, peer pressure, and identity development affect the youth's political behaviour. The result indicates that all peer group discussions, peer pressure, and peer identity development have a positive correlation towards influencing youth political behaviour among youth in Klang Valley. Gaining a comprehensive understanding of how peers influence the youth political behaviour can provide leaders and policymakers with crucial insights for encouraging knowledgeable peer network. |
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INTRODUCTION

The international community has recognised youths as a positive force for providing new ideas of transformative social change and driving force towards country development and political stability. Some scholar also believe youth political behaviour can be influenced by their peers through three elements which are peer group discussion, peer pressure, and peers' identity development (Demeke, 2022). For instance, peer pressure plays a significant role in shaping youth political behaviour in both Yemen and the United States, hence impacting their political stability. In Yemen, despite the youth formerly protesting the regime, they faced challenges due to lack of unity and peer pressure (Al-Jeddawy, 2022; Rahman et al., 2024). Meanwhile in the United States, youth formed the colour movement to protest racial discrimination (Lac et al., 2018), and this activism, in turn, affected presidential election results, shifting power from Republicans to Democrats (Welton et al., 2021; Nasir et al., 2024).

Furthermore, peer group discussions play a significant role in getting youth interested in politics. By discussing issues like elderly care and education, they learn more and make informed decisions. Seeing peers involved in politics, inspires them creating a culture of political engagement and

stability (Kwan, 2021). For example, in Syria, economic struggles lead many of youths to join the workforce at an early age (Tello, 2023), and the influence of peer pressure pushes some of them to join radical groups like the Islamic State.

Past research analyses various aspects of youth disengagement in political participation, and this trend may lead to uncertainty on Malaysian consociational politics and democracy (Husin et al., 2023). For example, during 15th Malaysian General Election (GE15), youth has made up about 51% of the total number of voters, which collectively have a greater impact on the result of the elections (Achariam, 2022). According to the Minister of Youth and Sports, Malaysian youth are now more courageous in participating to government policy-making (Bernama, 2023a). Nevertheless, the influence of peers on the political behaviour of youths is clearly demonstrated by the participation of 39 youth and student groups in *Bersih* 3.0. This movement actively organizes roundtable conferences involving government and opposition politicians, experts, civil society leaders, academics, and student groups to discuss Malaysia's political landscape (Ghani, 2023). Besides, youth and peer political discussions within *Bersih* significantly influence their political behaviour in several ways through group meetings, helps youth to enhance their political awareness of current issues, and their rights as citizens.

Therefore, this study will focus on the relationships between the three elements of peers' influence, which are peer group discussion, peer pressure, and peer identity development on youth political behaviour in strengthening Malaysian political stability. This study chooses youth between the ages of 18 and 25 since the majority of them are first-time voters after the Vote18 approach has been implemented (Tuah, 2019).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Background and Related Work

The influence of peers group discussion on youth political behaviour

Group discussion is a process when people come together to share their ideas on a topic in a two-way. They may agree, disagree, and negotiate meaning while exploring different sides of the issue. Each participant can express their viewpoint and support it with evidence to reach a logical conclusion (Akram, 2017). In contrast, interpersonal political discussion refers to informal conversations where people establish relationships. It can take various forms such as political talk, conversation, dialogue, or debate, and can happen face-to-face or through technology like texts or emails (Larrisa-Fuentes, 2021).

Political discussion is recognized as crucial for behaviour, as seen in both political socialization (McDevitt, 2006), and prospering democracy (Fearon, 1998). A study on Swedish youth found that discussions with peers were associated with prejudice over time, with this association strengthening as they grew older. Notably, discussions with low-prejudice friends were linked to reduced prejudice over time, while those with high-prejudice peers showed no significant impact (Bohman et al., 2019). Moreover, while parents play a role in youths' political behaviour, their influence decreases over time, partly due to decreased time spent together and reduced confessions to parents as youths grow older (McLeod et al., 2009). In addition, peers outweigh parents and school in influencing political participation during late adolescence (Quintelier, 2015). Similarly, the impact of other socializing agents and background characteristics diminishes compared to communication with peers in early youth (Gotlieb et al., 2015).

Youth engagement in Singapore's politics is encouraged by peers, who serve as channels for sharing political information and opinions. This process of gaining political information obtained through discussions and perspective exchanges on certain issues, such as support for the unfortunate, voting age reduction, and challenges in education and housing (Kwan, 2021). Moreover, Singaporean youth

also show a particular interest in politicians who engage with them and address their concerns. For example, a 23-year-old environmentalist speaking about climate change has motivated peers to become more aware of and concerned about these issues. Furthermore, peer group discussion spreads awareness to other groups and helps youth make more informed decisions, at the same time expanding their political knowledge. In addition, observing peers actively involved in political activities inspires other youth to participate, fostering a culture of engagement within peer groups (Kwan, 2021). New generations of political leaders, serving as role models for their peers, inspire youth to act for systematic change.

Hypothesis 1: There is a positive correlation between peer group discussion and youth political behaviour towards strengthening Malaysian political stability.

The influence of peer pressure on youth political behaviour

Peer pressure refers to the peers' influence have on individuals to change their attitudes, values, or behaviour to fit in with the group (Adimora et al., 2018). It is a form of social influence that leads to conformity with group norms, especially during youth when autonomy and identity development are important (Brown et al., 1986). Moreover, commonly associated with risky behaviours like delinquency, drug abuse, and reckless driving, peer pressure can lead individuals to engage in activities they may not feel comfortable (Steinberg et al., 2007). During early youth, peer pressure is particularly potent as individuals strive to establish their identity and gain acceptance within their social circles.

Peer pressure also plays a significant role in shaping youth political behaviour in both Yemen and the United States. Their role is significant in sovereign nations such as in challenging the Yaman regime of President Ali Abdullah Saleh through protests like the "Friday of Dignity" (Al-Jeddawy, 2022). Even though they initiated activism in Yaman, the lack of unity among youth between joining the Houthi movement that focused on recruiting and indoctrinating youth into joining their armed forces or supporting the Islah movement aimed at addressing youth unemployment and Yemen's economic recovery and peer pressure hindered their ability to cohesively shape political movements (Al-Jeddawy, 2022). Consequently, this led to manipulation by experienced political actors aligned with both the pro-regime and opposition movements which led to youth marginalization.

Besides in the United States, peer pressure has led to the formation of Youth Colour Movement to resist the racial discrimination issues through movement such as *BlackLivesMatter*, and *DREAMers* (Lac et al., 2018). Furthermore during the Trump administration, there was a notable escalation of discrimination against immigrants from Latin American and Muslim-majority countries. This included travel bans, family separations at the border, and biased practices in education such as excessive exams, and school accountability assessments (Welton et al., 2021). Racial disparities also prevalent in the juvenile justice system especially due to the higher likelihood of black and brown youth being subjected to police stops and harassment compared to white youth (Malhotra et al., 2022). As a result, youth especially those with peers from diverse backgrounds, especially Black peers, supported confrontation against racial injustice and human rights violations, which in turn led to their engagement in political activism. This finally resulted in a shift of power from Republicans Party to Democrats Party in Presidential Election (Welton et al., 2021).

Hypothesis 2: There is a positive correlation between peer pressure and youth political behaviour towards strengthening Malaysian political stability.

The influence of identity development on youth political behaviour

The process of identity development is shaped by both, personal experiences and societal influences (Adams et al., 1996). During adolescence, cognitive development allows individuals to form a sense of self based on exposure to the role models and identity options (Erikson, 1980; Elkind, 1998). This

period known as an identity crisis, a crucial stage where individuals must make decisions that shape their growth and differentiation. Identity is formed through exploring options and making commitments based on these explorations. Failure to develop a clear identity can lead to confusion about one's role in society (Erikson, 1980).

A study among North-American youth has revealed that those with well-developed identities tend to demonstrate higher levels of prosocial behaviours, such as community service and humanity, especially when peer groups offer support and encouragement for civic involvement. When youth witness their peers actively engaged in civic activities, it inspires them to also participate and contribute to their communities (Crocetti et al., 2012). This underscores the influential role of peer identity development in shaping youth political behaviour. The presence of supportive peer networks enhances the clarity and commitment of individual values and beliefs, fostering a stronger sense of purpose and direction among youth. As a result, they are more motivated to engage in positive civic actions, including political participation. Besides, youth with well-developed identities are more likely to endorse behaviours of social responsibility, which further encourages their involvement in political activities (Crocetti et al., 2012). Understanding the significant influence of peer identity development on youth political behaviour can inform interventions aimed at promoting greater youth participation in society. By leveraging the power of peer relationships to cultivate a sense of civic responsibility and active engagement, initiatives can effectively address issues such as political disengagement among youth.

Peer identity development plays a crucial role in shaping the decisions of youth in Syria which navigate the challenges of economic instability and political turmoil (EEAS, 2022). Close friendships create a strong sense of belonging and solidarity among peers facing similar struggles. The unstable economic situation has resulted in many youths and peers from poor families to get into the workforce in order to provide financial assistance to their family (Tellon, 2023). Besides, peer pressure may also influence some youth to join radical groups such as Islamic State. The research conducted by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (Holden et al., 2015) indicates that peers and intimate friendships with youngsters are factors that entice individuals to join conflict groups (Holden et al., 2015).

Hypothesis 3: There is a positive correlation between peer identity development and youth political behaviour towards strengthening Malaysian political stability.

METHOD

Sample size and data collection procedures

A total 524 Malaysian youths in Klang Valley have been participated in this study. The study acquires purposive sampling among youth between aged 18-25. Various variables, including gender, age, education level, ethnic, religion, place of origin, political affiliation, and been vote in any election in Malaysia. The study was carried out using a quantitative approach to aid the researchers in generating the most accurate research evidence. In each district of Klang Valley, 120 questionnaires were distributed. The data was analysed using descriptive and inferential analysis in the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) application. To address the study's research questions, Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) were used.

Measure

The questionnaire was divided into three segments, and the first section focused on demographic information. The following section was on the peer's influence that been divided into three indicator which are peer group discussion, peer pressure, and peer identity development. While, the last part was on the youth political behaviour. The score for each item were measured by using Likert's scale

of 5, which fell into the range of 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – neutral, 4 – agree, and 5 – strongly agree (Hair et al., 2022).

RESULTS

Data analysis

Based on the information provided earlier, Table 1 displays distinct demographic characteristics of respondents.

Table 1. Demographic profile of respondents

| Characteristics | Total respondent (<i>n</i> = 524) | Percentage (100%) |
|------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Gender | | |
| Male | 101 | 19.30 |
| Female | 423 | 80.70 |
| Age of youths | | |
| 18 years old | 6 | 1.10 |
| 19 years old | 36 | 6.90 |
| 20 years old | 98 | 18.70 |
| 21 years old | 156 | 29.80 |
| 22 years old | 103 | 19.70 |
| 23 years old | 81 | 15.50 |
| 24 years old | 36 | 6.90 |
| 25 years old | 8 | 1.50 |
| Ethnicity | | |
| Malays | 360 | 68.70 |
| Chinese | 100 | 19.10 |
| Indians | 44 | 8.40 |
| Others | 20 | 3.80 |
| Place of origins | | |
| Rural area | 138 | 34.90 |
| Urban area | 330 | 63.00 |
| Metropolitan area | 11 | 2.10 |
| Voted in any elections | | |
| Yes | 52 | 9.90 |
| No | 472 | 90.10 |

Table 1 indicates that the total number of respondents is 524, which consists of 101 male respondents (19.3%) and 423 female respondents (80.7%) with education level ranging from foundation to master's level. Regarding the age range of the youth, most of the respondents (29.8%) were 21 years old, followed by 22 years old (19.7%) and 20 years old (18.7%) respectively. For the ethnic background of the youth, 68.7% of the respondents are Malays followed by 19.1% identify as Chinese, 8.4% as Indians, and 3.8% as belonging to others religion. Out of 524 respondents 90.1% had previously participated in elections, while 9.9% had not.

Peer group discussion

Peer's influence was measured based on works by Cohen (1973), Pathak (2004), Klostad, (2010). Among the four items are "I discuss political issues with my peers," "I participated in voting process based on recommendations from my peers," "My political stance mostly influences by peers," and "My peers encouraged me to be involved in the political parties' discussions." The indicator's peer

group discussion has a Cronbach Alpha reliability of 0.709, and the item's reliability is valid since the value is greater than 0.7.

Peer pressure

Peer pressure relationship was measured based on the works of Dahl et al. (2013), Samsi (2014), Lantos et al. (2015), and Harell et al. (2016). Some examples of the nine items are as follows "My peers encouraged me to join a political campaign," "My peers and I will attend programs related to political campaigns," "I wore a party button in the last election campaign because my peer did," "I distributed party leaflets with my peers before the elections," "I donate money for the election campaign because of my peers," and "I and my peers participated in political demonstrations such as the peaceful protest after the election." The indicator's peer pressure has a Cronbach Alpha reliability of 0.892, and the item's reliability is valid since the value is greater than 0.7.

Peers' identity development

Peers' identity development was measured by the studies of Russo et al. (2016), Couto et al. (2020), Nkansah et al. (2022). Among the six items are "Peers influence my interest in politics," "I am aware of political issues because of my peers," "My political beliefs are significantly influenced by the opinions of my peers," "My political views align with my peers," and "My political participation is affected by my peers who share similar political stances." The indicator's peer's identity development has a Cronbach Alpha reliability of 0.862, and the item's reliability is valid since the value is greater than 0.7.

Youth political behavior

Youth political behaviour was measured based the research of Dahl et al. (2013), Samsi (2014), Lantos et al. (2015), and Harell et al. (2016). The 12 items that were used are "I involved in unconventional forms of political participation like protest," "I involved in demonstration that led to advocates for fair elections in Malaysia," "I take part in demonstrations to change the current political system for the better," "I was involved in a demonstration to speak out youth issues that are neglected by the government," and "I join part in nonpartisan organizations because the government is corrupt." The indicator's youth political behavior has a Cronbach Alpha reliability of 0.910, and the item's reliability is valid since the value is greater than 0.7.

Table 2. Measurement model

| Construct | AVE | Composite reliability |
|----------------------------|-------|-----------------------|
| Political Behaviour | 0.514 | 0.924 |
| Peer Group Discussion | 0.537 | 0.722 |
| Peer Pressure | 0.544 | 0.895 |
| Peers Identity Development | 0.592 | 0.884 |

Table 2 above indicates the composite reliability (CR) determined from the factor of loadings of the attributable observable variable by each of the stated latent components. Based on the table above, all variables obtained CR ranging from 0.498 to 0.863, which according to Hair et al. (2022), values greater than 0.40 are considered credible.

Table 3. Hypothesis Testing

| Construct | Beta Value | t value | p value | Result |
|---|------------|---------|---------|----------|
| Peers group discussion > Political behaviour | 0.096 | 1.674 | p<.001 | Accepted |
| Peer pressure > Political behaviour | 0.363 | 7.599 | p<.005 | Accepted |
| Peer identity development > Political behaviour | 0.132 | 2.358 | p<.001 | Accepted |

Table 3 presents the path coefficients and their significant values. All the direct path coefficients, are significant. In hypothesis H1, this study expected that the peer group discussion would positively and significantly influence the youth political behaviour. Furthermore, in hypothesis H2, this study anticipated that the peer pressure would positively influence the youth political behaviour. As predicted, the findings in Table 3 confirmed the hypothesis. In hypothesis H3, this study also expected that the peer identity development would positively and significantly influence the youth political behaviour. As predicted, the findings in Table 3 confirmed the hypothesis.

DISCUSSION

The study focused on the elements of peer influence including peer group discussion, peer pressure, and peer identity development on youth political behaviour towards enhancing Malaysian political stability. The findings of this study are consistent with previous studies such as Yaakub et al. (2023) and Campos et al. (2016), indicating a significant relationship between peer influence and youth political behaviour either through elements of group discussion where youth engage in frequent face-to-face contact with friends while studying serves political interest among youth (Ting et al., 2021). Meanwhile, through peer pressure, youth are motivated to participate in activities like protests in order to gain approval from desired social groups (Renström et al., 2020). Research has demonstrated that youth who participated in civic activities tended to develop their identities and more positive social attitudes, such as a sense of responsibility towards assisting others (Crocetti et al., 2011).

Peer group discussion

The findings of this study indicates that group discussions among youth have a positive impact on youth political behaviour. The group discussions among peers and youth can be conducted through oral or non-verbal interactions, since social media has emerged as a new medium for political discussion offering a more efficient way to provide political information, interpersonal communication between youth and peers as it allows for quick dissemination of information. (Nor et al., 2017). Others issues during the group discussion including positive economic development that to create jobs opportunities and increase inflation rates. Besides, fair initiatives on owning a first home and Malaysian youth also want equal access to education including various educational equipment such as tablets (Azil, 2022).

Despite that, one latest study reported that youth have less confidence to participate in group discussions than arguing and debating on political issues due to a lack of political knowledge (Kasmani, 2023). These findings have also been supported by a study by the Malaysian Youth Development Research Institute (IYRES) showed that the score for the political socialization domain among youth has declined from 29.3% in 2019 to 27.7% in 2020 (Sualman, 2022). This decline shows the extent to which youth's ability to rationalize voting for political parties has diminished because youth engagement through the process of socialization and discussion with peers, diminished.

The initiatives taken by Malaysian's government in enhancing political discussion among youth and peers has existed for a long time ago. It was been implemented through education in schools such as History syllabus. The syllabus introduced the citizenship themes covering topics such as values as Malaysian citizens, national loyalty, unity, discipline, effort, and productivity (Razak, 2020). In these classes, youth engage in discussions with their peers through the exploration of historical events,

students analyse the impact of past political movements and leaders, sparking an interest in politics and motivating them to become more politically engaged. These discussions often extend to contemporary political issues, providing a platform for students to express opinions, debate viewpoints, and consider the implications of political decisions.

Peer group discussions enable them to understand their role as active citizens and discuss ways to contribute to their communities through political engagement. They also obtained basic political knowledge on civic responsibilities such as voting and community involvement. Besides History syllabus, the *Rakan Demokrasi* program also launched by the Ministry of Youth and Sports to encourage youth, especially those aged 15 and above, to engage in political discussions to enable youth to understand the basic values and principles of politics and to strengthen political awareness among the younger generation because interpersonal discussions about political news are among the important factors in understanding political news compared to exposure to political information from the media (Muhammad, 2023).

Peer pressure

Meanwhile, for the elements of peer pressure, the findings of this study show that peer pressure significantly influences youth political behaviour. This finding is closely related to the previous work which demonstrate youth join political campaigns, wear a party button, distribute party leaflets, and donate money for the election campaign to satisfy their peers. (Russo et al., 2016). Despite that, the elements of peer pressure in Malaysia tend to be a negative influence like skipping school, engaging in alcohol consumption, smoking, and substance abuse. This negative form of peer pressure in Malaysia also influences youth to leave school and work to earn money leading to a decline in academic performance (Bahaudin, 2023).

One of the government initiatives to curb drug abuse crime from spreading out to other youth and peers is through public awareness campaigns such as the Integrated Campaign Towards Drug-Free Malaysia and Juvenile Crime 2023 together with treatment and rehabilitation among youth (Bahaudin, 2023). These initiatives align with the broader goal of strengthening political stability, which encompasses factors such as the absence of violence in the country (Hurwitz, 1973). Besides that, Peers Leaders programs also been introduced in the primary and secondary schools of Malaysia to reduce the problem of misbehaviour among peers (Othman et al., 2019). Through the program, peers can help fellow youth through several methods that have been outlined by the module such as always trying to improve themselves from various aspects, reporting to the counselling teacher about cases that can harm themselves and peers, and inviting friends to obey rules, and community and religious norms.

Regarding peer pressure's relation to youth political behaviour, youth, overall, are still in dilemma, in the recent GE15, because their tendency suggests they would support the *Parti Perikatan*, but youths' perspectives are not fixed. They will consider peer influence, family, and the ruling government (Bernama, 2023b). On the other hand, youth also questioned the need for them to return to their hometowns to fulfil their voting responsibilities in the State Elections in six states because most of their friends are not going back for the State Elections. The reason for this is they have just fulfilled their civic duty of voting during the GE15 previously (Bernama, 2023b). This was proven when the turnout percentage for the State Elections had not reached 60%, because of the financial burden as the elections are in the middle of the month and transportation is not offered to university students (Aziz, 2023).

Peer identity development

Peer identity development also show a positive relationship with youth political behaviour. Peer identity development begins to influence when the youth identify models or individuals that seen as examples or role models by them. Through acceptance of this role model, youth started to identify

characteristics they admire or want to emulate (Marcia, 1980). In the situation in Kedah, Malaysia, there is a tendency for young voters to prioritize leaders who work for the people and are seen as committed to approaching youth (Bernama, 2023b). This indicates that leaders who actively interact with youth and implement initiatives that benefit them will receive more support than others political leaders. Manifesto like *eBelia Rahmah* and *Menu Rahmah* introduced by the political actors later appointed as Minister of Domestic Trade and Cost of Living led him to won the GE15. One of the young voters said to support the political actors as the initiatives seem directly benefit youth. Young voters aged 19 years old suggested that assess initiatives like these positively and may influence their voting choices.

The Malaysian government has made significant efforts to build national identity among peers and youth through various initiatives, particularly in the education sector. One initiative is highlighted in the statement by the Federal Ministry of Education of Malaya in 1956, commonly known as the Razak Report. This report emphasizes the importance of Malay language as the national language of Malaya while also acknowledging the need to preserve and sustain the languages and cultures of non-Malay ethnic groups living in the country. The report outlines the necessity for all schools to adopt a common educational curriculum, regardless of the language of instruction, to ensure that students share a unified educational experience. Furthermore, the report underscores the ultimate objective of the educational policy to bring together children of all races under a national education system, with the national language as the main medium of instruction, albeit acknowledging that progress towards this goal must be gradual (*Kementerian Pendidikan Persekutuan Tanah Melayu, 1956*).

Additionally, the National Cultural Policy, outlined by the Ministry of Culture in 1971, further reinforces the efforts to build national identity by emphasizing principles such as the indigenous peoples of the Malay Archipelago as the core of the nation's culture, the acceptance and adaptation of other cultural elements, and the importance of Islam in shaping the national culture. These policies and initiatives reflect the government's commitment to fostering a sense of belonging and unity among the diverse population of Malaysia, particularly among peers and youth, through education and cultural integration (*Kementerian Kebudayaan, 1971*).

CONCLUSION

The peers influence of political behaviour had resulted in the observance of the variety of political behaviour among youth in Klang Valley, Malaysia. Most of the youth were found to be influence by the peers through peer group discussion, peers' pressure, and peer identity development. The study on peer's influence on political behaviour is important and significant as the discussions on this topic remain less prevalent compared to effect of peer influence on social issues such as smoking or bullying in Malaysia. Government initiatives such as Program *Rakan Demokrasi*, *Kempen Semangat Patriot Merdeka*, and Malaysia Future Leaders School aimed at promoting youth political awareness by chance facilitate meaningful peer interactions within a political context. By encouraging youth engagement in politics, these programs not only influence political behaviour but also indirectly cultivate healthy peer relationships. This holistic approach to youth development contributes to social and political growth, empowering youth to form meaningful connections and make positive contributions to society.

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