# Internet Use, Political and Civic Participation among Marginalized Youths

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**Abstract**
*Youth political apathy is a global phenomenon that threatens democracies around the world, including Malaysia. The mobilization theory suggests that new communication technologies such as the Internet could increase participation, especially underprivileged group. This quantitative study surveyed marginalized Malay youths in the central region to examine: (i) the level of their Internet use; (ii) the level of their political and civic participation; and (iii) the mediating effect of civic engagement in the relationship between Internet use and political participation. The data were obtained through a questionnaire completed by 400 youths aged 15 to 25 years old living in urban poor areas within the Klang Valley. The results show that their Internet use was still confined to basic activities; their political and civic participation was low; and there was a weak positive relationship between Internet use and participation. Civic participation partially mediated the effect of Internet use on political participation. Future efforts to lure young people back into the political socialization process must be mediated over time by civic participation. Enhancement of Internet skills and early exposure to civic activities will likely bode well for their future political action.*

*Keywords: civic participation; Internet use; marginalized youth; mobilization; political participation*

**INTRODUCTION**

The issue of youth civic and political participation has been a substantive area of interest in academic research because active citizenship is the bedrock of a healthy and functioning democracy. But democracies around the world are in poor health because their young citizens are no longer "active." Much evidence in this research area from the past decade has shown increasing detachment of young people from politics (Bakker & deVreese, 2011). Youth political apathy has become a global phenomenon that threatens to weaken democracies.

Past studies have suggested that one of the ways to strengthen democracy is by increasing civic participation through the development of civil society (Seligson, 1999). Becoming members of community organizations or non-political civil society organizations, for example, increased the likelihood to participate in politics (Huntington & Nelson, 1976; Verba, Nie & Kim, 1978). Not only participating members were exposed to political stimuli, they were also equipped with skills and attitudes for democracy to take root (Pateman, 1970). According to Putnam (1993, 2000), civic engagement is an important precursor to political action. Unfortunately, both are declining.

The disengagement of young people from civic and political activities is well-documented. Recent studies have offered a clear signal indicating the troubling state of civic and political participation of young people (Putnam, 2000; Rosenstone & Hansen, 2003; Skocpol, 2003). Quintelier & Vissers (2008, p. 412) echoed this concern loud and clear: "It is feared that young people no longer participate in voluntary associations or in various forms of civic life" (Marsh, O'Toole, & Jones, 2007; Putnam, 2000; Zukin et al.,2006).

In Malaysia, the issue of declining youth participation in civic and political activities is both important and urgent, considering that nearly half (45.4% or 14.6 million) of the population are youths. Based on the data published by the Ministry of Youth and Sports in 2013, youth political socialization was low, with only 55 per cent voted in election, 36 per cent attended lunch or dinner reception organized by a political party, and merely 34 per cent listened to political talks. Other political indicators fared far worse – only 17 per cent chose to become politicians, 16 per cent wore a button or a sticker of a political party, and worst, only 5 per cent participated in an assembly organized by a political party. The same data also revealed that only 41 per cent followed the nation's political development out of their own interest. In 2007, the Election Commission of Malaysia reported that 4.9 million citizens were eligible to vote but did not register as voters and 80 per cent (3.9 million) of them were between the ages of 21 and 30. A study by the Institute for Youth Research found that only 10 per cent of youth respondents reported that their ideas were given attention by any political parties; 19 per cent were aware of the existence and the differences between political parties in the country; and 33 per cent were aware of the responsibilities of their members of Parliament.

The state of civic engagement also paints a bleak picture. The Malaysian Youth Index reported that the level of youth participation in clubs and associations was "not good" (IPPBM, 2011). Malaysian Youth Statistics 2013 (IPPBM, 2013) revealed that youth participation in volunteering work was the second lowest (19%) out of 16 activities under the lifestyle domain. In stark contrast, the most popular lifestyle activities were watching VCD/DVD (66%) and social media (63%), indicating their tendency for recreational activities.

These data reflect the indifference of young people towards political socialization process, through which they learn civic skills and engage in civic activities (Rahim, 2007; Lin et al., 2010). Malaysian Youth Index 2006 survey reported that political socialization among youths was moderate. Many of them did not participate in political socialization activities, in particular, voting. This is disconcerting because election is part of the political socialization process for young people.

Another agent of political socialization is the Internet. Scholars and politicians believe that Internet can bridge the gap between youths and political process (Quintelier & Vissers, 2008). Evidence from a large body of political socialization research has shown that everyday life media use is an important means by which youths develop their competence as citizens (McLeod, 2000; Shah, McLeod, & Lee, 2009). Over time, the discussion on Internet's effect and democratic engagement has gained an unprecedented prominence in contemporary communication research (Bakker & deVreese, 2011; Bennett, Wells & Rank, 2009; Buckingham, 2008; Dahlgren, 2009; Livingstone, Bober & Helsper, 2005; Loader, 2007).

The relationship between Internet use and participatory behavior has been explored for decades but scholars are conflicted in their claims (Lin et al., 2010). The optimists believe that not only Internet increases participation, but it also mobilizes new groups who are underrepresented or previously not active in traditional forms of participation. On the other hand, the skeptics argue that intensive Internet use causes people to withdraw from public life (Quintelier & Vissers, 2008). Regardless which side of the argument one leans on, it is important to test this relationship in different democracies. This study examines the relationship in a non-Western democracy.

From the perspective of the discipline, the issue of declining civic and political participation continues to receive extensive study and attention from political scientists, social science researchers, academic scholars, and policy makers simply because the landscape has changed. Like everything else, the Internet has altered the way we look at the same phenomenon. If anything, the Internet has made it even more complex. For example, the task of defining participation today extends beyond conventional forms such as voting and party membership. Scholars have included newer forms of engagement, often referred to as online participation. Traditional or otherwise, civic and political participation continues to raise more questions in its current declining state.

Many past studies on the effect of Internet on youth's democratic participation tend to treat young people as one homogeneous group, frequently sampled from the general youth population. However, not all youths have equal access to opportunities to participate in nation-building activities. This study seeks new evidence in this area by focusing on youths living in marginalized communities. It is important to focus on this particular segment of society as past studies have found that marginalization hindered their participation in social, political and economic processes (Othman et al., 2016).

The symptom of declining participation is acute. Despite on-going efforts by the government to find a cure, young Malaysians remain disengaged. Therefore, it is important to conduct a study to further investigate non-participatory behavior but from the perspective of marginalized youths.

As scholarly debate on the topic marches on, the lack of youth participation remains a social concern. This calls for a research that will investigate the extent of Internet effects on civic and political participation. The specific objectives of this study are: (1) to determine the level of Internet use, political participation and civic participation, (2) to examine the relationships among Internet use, political participation and civic participation, and (3) to test the mediating effect of civic participation on the relationship between Internet use and political participation.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Marginalized Youths

The subjects of this research are young people aged from 15 to 25 years old living in marginalized communities. Marginalized areas are defined by the total household income per month. For monthly household income of below RM2,000, marginalized areas include rural areas such as traditional village areas, estates, new villages, and land development areas. For monthly income of below RM3,500, marginalized areas include urban poor areas, the low-cost flats built under the People's Housing Program (*Projek Perumahan Rakyat*), better known as PPR.

PPR is the government's initiative to relocate squatters and meet the needs of low-income groups for housing. The Ministry of Housing and Local Government, through the National Housing Department, is the implementing agency for PPR Projects across the country. Currently, there are three types of PPR namely, multi-storey flats, five-storey "walk-up flats" and terrace houses.

Youths from marginalized communities are often left behind in mainstream development, denying them equal opportunities to participate in economic, political, cultural and social activities (Othman et al., 2016). This study focuses on marginalized youths because of their low socio-economic status, which has a significant impact on their development and participation.

### Internet Use

The issue of youth disengagement has generated numerous studies on the effects of Internet on civic and political participation partly because youths are heavy users of the medium. They are often referred to as the 'Internet generation' or 'digital natives.' In 2014, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission reported that just like many Asian or Western countries, Internet usage among young Malaysians was very high. Youths between the ages of 15 and 24 years old accounted for 17 per cent of the population but 36 per cent of Internet usage. A report by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) ranked Malaysia fourth in the world in terms of active young Internet users, representing three-quarters of Malaysia's youth population (Malay Mail, 2013). The 2006 Malaysian Youth Index reported that the media penetration rate among young people in the country was 'very good.'

Majority of young Malaysians have a high exposure to media and information technology. This study complements existing data by examining the level of Internet use among a minority group, that is, the marginalized youths. Based on their low socioeconomic status, it is anticipated that their Internet use is limited. Since the Internet explosion, heavy use of the medium by young people has been linked to political and civic participation. Thus, it would

be interesting to explore the pervasiveness of the medium – that even if its use is limited, the Internet can still influence participation. Specifically, this study examines four types of Internet use: informational use, recreational use, online communication activities and services (Norris & Jones, 1998; Shah et. al, 2001; Quintelier & Vissers, 2008; Bakker & deVreese, 2011).

### Political Participation

Political participation has been defined as the activity of citizens to influence political decisions (Brady, 1999). Over time, the definition has grown in terms of activities (van Deth, 2001), creating a very broad, almost universal, spectrum.

Past scholars have operationalized political participation to include activities such as attending a political meeting, rally, and contacting a public official or a political party (McLeod et al., 1996; Milbraith & Goel, 1977; Xenos & Moy, 2007); distributing flyers with political messages, contacting a civil servant, wearing a badge or a T-shirt with political messages, (Ekström & Östman, 2015); donating or collecting money, signing a petition, contacting a politician, and being a member of a political party (Quintelier & Vessers, 2008); and following newspapers and television in election times to learn about politics and political parties, sending letters to newspapers or magazines to comment on articles (Bakker & deVreese, 2011).

This study focuses on traditional or offline forms of political (and civic participation) for three main reasons. First, according to Putnam (2000), "online interaction does not involve the face-to-face contact necessary to build social trust, which can be instrumental in stimulating political participation" (p. 414). Second, this study tests the mobilization theory's claim that the Internet increases traditional forms of participation of underrepresented groups such as youth and women. Third, it is anticipated that the lack of economic resources would limit the marginalized youth's access to broadband service and therefore, it is likely that they would devote their leisure time to offline activities.

### Civic Participation

Civic participation refers to "formal group memberships and social participation" (Shah, 1998, p. 479). It fosters community building through collective action aimed at mutual benefit that builds up trust, leading to a healthy and functioning democracy (Shah et al., 2005; Ostrom, 1990).

Shat et al. (2005) measured civic participation by how often respondents engaged in volunteering work, attending a club meeting, working on a community project, attending a community or neighborhood meeting, and working on behalf of a social group or cause. Other scholars operationalized civic participation in terms of the following activities: club memberships (Putnam, 2000); participation in any extracurricular activities on campus, volunteering activities in a student's neighborhood outside his or her school (Lin et al., 2010); recycling activities (Schudson, 2007); participating in community activities (Levine, 2007; Sherod et al., 2002; Thorson, 2012; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004; Zukin et al., 2006); doing volunteer work, working on a community project, contributing money to a social group or cause, and attending a community or neighborhood meeting (Kwak et al., 2004; Putnam, 2000; Shah, 1998; Shah et al., 2001).

***Internet Use and Political Participation***

In many parts of the world, Internet has showed unprecedented impact in recent elections. Most notably, the result of the 2018 United States presidential election was often linked to President Obama's effective use of social media as communication tools to gain support from younger voters, who were heavy users of Internet (Smith & Rainie, 2008).

Coincidentally, in the same year, the Internet also played a significant role in the Malaysian political tsunami. The outcome of the 12th General Election demonstrates the collective power of the Internet generation by exercising their right to vote. Similarly, the 1999 and 2004 elections also demonstrate the power of young people in determining the results of an election. In the Pengkalan Pasir by-election in 2005, nearly 40 per cent of the voters in the area were youths, aged between 21 and 40 years old (Rahim, 2010). Given this empirical evidence, it is hypothesized that:

H1: Internet use is positively related to political participation.

***Internet Use and Civic Participation***

Media consumption has also been associated with civic participation. Political communication research has demonstrated that news media consumption plays an important role in civic participation (McLeod et al., 1996; Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001). Shah et al. (2005) found that informational uses of the mass media have pro-civic consequences. Other studies on Internet use have also suggested similar findings: (i) informational uses of the Internet encouraged community involvement and foster civic participation (Norris, 1998; Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001); (ii) "individuals who use the Internet to explore interests, gather news, and exchange ideas have been found to be more socially and politically engaged" (Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001, p. 535); and (iii) heavy Internet use had a positive correlation with increased involvement in voluntary organizations (Shah et al., 2005; Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001). According to Davis (1999), Jones (1995), and Rheingold (1993), Internet's flexibility in terms of accessibility and its ubiquitous nature may promote civic engagement. These findings lead to the second hypothesis:

H2: Internet use is positively related to civic participation.

***Civic Participation and Political Participation***

A landmark study by Putnam (1993, 2000) has demonstrated that civic engagement is an important precursor to political participation. Huntington and Nelson (1976) argued that participating in community organizations led to politics. Verba, Nie, and Kim (1978) also found that participation in non-political civil society organizations led to political participation due to exposure to political stimuli. Therefore, it can be predicted that:

H3: Civic participation is positively related to political participation.

### Internet Use, Political Participation and Civic Participation

Political socialization process is necessary in nurturing democratic participation. The road to active citizenship is long and paved with many challenges and intervening factors. Past scholars have found that political participation is preceeded by active involment in civic activities (Putnam, 1993; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Thus, this study examines the indirect effect of Internet use on participatory behavior by exploring the role of civic participation as a mediator.

Many studies on youth political communication in a democratic society tend to focus on the direct relationship between Internet use and political/civic participation. This leaves a theoretical gap in understanding the indirect effect of Internet use on participatory behavior. One potential mediator of this relationship is civic participation. Past scholars have found that civic engagement precedes political action (Pateman, 1970; Huntington & Nelson, 1976; Verba, Nie & Kim, 1978; Putnam, 1993).

To better understand how Internet use influences political participation, this research explores the role of civic participation as a mediator. Mediating variables explain how or why media effects occur (Baron & Kenney, 1986). According to MacKinnon et al. (2012), a mediating variable explains the process by which one variable cause another. Therefore, we further hypothesize that:

H4: Civic participation mediates the relationship between Internet use and political participation.

### Mobilization Theory

Past academic discussions concerning the effect of Internet use on participatory behavior revolve around a debate between supporters of the mobilization theory and the time-replacement theory. Mobilization theory (Norris, 2001) claims that not only Internet increases traditional forms of participation, but it also mobilizes underrepresented groups or people who were previously not active. Time-replacement theory (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000) counter-argues that Internet decreases participation because time spent online cannot be devoted to other activities.

This study tests the mobilization theory for two reasons. One, it predicts the relationship between Internet use and participatory behavior. Two, the theory specifically identifies a particular group that would demonstrate its strongest predictive power. The explosion of Internet use in post-industrial societies has led Norris to this prediction, seeing how the new technology reduces the cost of accessing information, communicating, and participating:

By sharply reducing the barriers to civic engagement, leveling some of the financial hurdles, and widening the opportunities for political debate, the dissemination of information, and group interaction, it is thought that more people will become involved in public life (Norris, 2000; p. 6)

Drawing insights from the mobilization thesis, this study attempts to explore whether Internet's overwhelming power is pervasive enough to mobilize youths from less privileged strata to become active citizens.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Figure 1 shows the research framework, constructed based on a mediation assumption and mobilization theory as discussed in the literature. According to Norris (2001), the Internet has the potential to attract new groups who were underrepresented in more traditional forms of participation. Mobilization theory is often used by scholars to explain the effect of Internet on political and civic participation. For instance, according to Adriaansen et al. (2010), and Strömbäck and Shehata (2010), mobilization thesis claims that there is a positive relationship between media use, political trust, and political participation. Evidence of mobilization in recent years has often been associated with young people. A popular example is how the use of social media by Barrack Obama helped him mobilize young people to participate in the 2008 United States presidential election (Ekström & Östman, 2015).
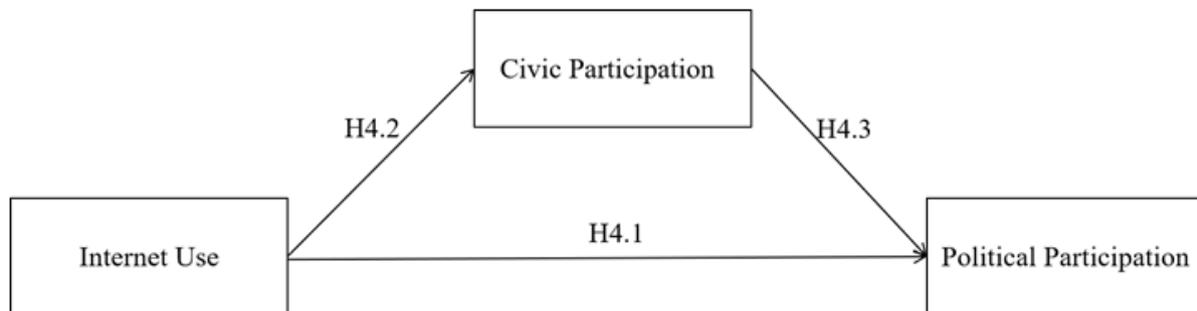


H4: Civic participation mediates the relationship between Internet use and political participation

H4.1: Internet use is positively related to political participation

H4.2: Internet use is positively related to civic participation

H4.3: Civic participation is positively related to political participation

**Figure 1**: *Research Framework*

In addition to predicting *relationship* between media effect and participation, the mobilization theory is also instrumental in identifying specific *groups* that would be mobilized by the media. According to Norris (1999), previously unavailable technologies are especially powerful in mobilizing members of underprivileged or underrepresented groups who lack socioeconomic or psychological resources. Other scholars' identification of these *groups* includes: (i) young people (Eden & Roker, 2002; Norris, 2001; Zukin et al., 2006); (ii) new individuals and groups of individuals who until now have remained outside the participation process (Delli Carpini, 2000; Ward, Gibson, & Lusoli, 2003); and (iii) groups that have traditionally participated at a lower level than other groups, such as young people and women (Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal, 2008).

Therefore, mobilization thesis serves as the blueprint of this study's theoretical framework not only because it predicts the *relationship* between Internet use and participation, but it also identifies young people as underprivileged or underrepresented *group*.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Research Design and Method*

The basic premise of this research is the declining civic and political participation among youths. The research is both descriptive and explanatory. The former lies in gathering data that help us understand the fact and dimensions of the phenomenon while the latter explores why the phenomenon is happening. Therefore, the research design was based on both the descriptive ('what?') and explanatory ('why?') nature of the research questions. This study adopted a cross-sectional quantitative method, focusing on youth living in marginalized communities in the Klang Valley.

To explore the 'why?' question, this study developed causal explanations. Three direct causal relationships were developed among Internet use, political and civic participation. In addition, the study also developed a more complex causal model of both direct and indirect causal relationships based on the three direct causal relationships. The resulting mediation model was used as the research framework shown in Figure 1 above.

### *Population and Sampling Procedure*

This study was conducted in four parliamentary constituencies in the Klang Valley, which includes the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur, and the adjoining cities and towns in the state of Selangor. It is now referred to as Greater Kuala Lumpur. The parliamentary constituencies are Kota Damansara, Klang, Seri Kembangan, and Kerinchi.

The subjects of the study were Malay youths, aged from 15 to 25 years old, living in marginalized communities within the central region. Marginalized communities in urban areas are defined as those living in low-cost apartment complexes in cities, better known as 'Projek Perumahan Rakyat' (PPR), predominantly populated by the Malays.

Based on data from the Department of Statistics Malaysia, there were 1,095,592 youths living in the Klang Valley area. The sample size (n = 400) was determined using a formula by TaroYamane (1976). To make the sampling process more practical, a multistage sampling was used to divide the large population into smaller and smaller units at each stage. The multistage sampling method used in this research was a combination of stratified random sampling (probability sampling technique) and purposive sampling (non-probability sampling technique).

In the first stage, stratified random sampling was used to sample youths based on the parliamentary constituencies in the Klang Valley. The four locations selected were Kota Damansara, Klang, Seri Kembangan, and Kerinchi. In the second stage, a sample was drawn from each of the selected parliamentary constituencies using purposive sampling.

### Instrument and Measurement

Questionnaires were the primary research instrument used in this study. There were 47 questions (items), organized in three sections. All the questions in the instrument were developed using "adapt and adopt" approach, guided primarily by the findings of literature review. The data were collected through a self-administered survey.

### Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.0. The data were first entered into SPSS and then screened for errors. The errors were corrected before total scores for the scales were calculated. Univariate analysis was performed by running descriptive analysis on demographic items, Internet use, civic participation, and political participation. Inferential statistics were then used to test the hypotheses. Finally, a causal steps approach was used to test whether statistical mediation is present in the model. Independent Variable

*Internet use* was conceptualized into two domains: (i) time spent online, and (ii) the various forms of Internet use (Quintelier & Vissers, 2008). Time spent online was operationalized by asking respondents how many hours they use the Internet in a day. Forms of Internet use were operationalized by asking the respondents how frequent they performed 13 online activities in a week, on a scale that spans from "rarely" (1) to "very frequently" (5).

### Dependent Variable

*Political participation* was operationalized by asking respondents how frequent they performed the following activities as Malaysian citizens: (i) meeting with government officials to solve a problem; (ii) wearing buttons to protest; (iii) meeting with elected representatives to solve a problem/give views; and (iv) participating in activities organized by a political party.

### Mediating Variable

Civic participation was operationalized by asking respondents how frequent they performed the following activities as Malaysian citizens: (i) participating in charity and welfare work; (ii) volunteering to help the poor, the disabled, or natural disaster victims; (iii) discussing current issues in the media with family or friends; (iv) participating in recycling activities; (v) reporting neighborhood crimes to the police; (vi) lodging a complaint regarding a service or vandalism or unsatisfactory government service; and (vii) contacting mass media to express views on an issue, opinion, or complaint, or to give acknowledgement or recommendation.

### Validity and Reliability

Since an instrument comprises a set of scales for its corresponding set of constructs, the process of validating a new instrument must therefore take into account the calculation of Cronbach's Alpha value to test its reliability and validity.

The Cronbach's Alpha value indicates the level of internal consistency of the scale. A reliability coefficient of .70 or higher is considered as acceptable or adequate (Cortina, 1993). Table 1 shows the Cronbach's Alpha values obtained from the pretest and the actual study.

To further evaluate the reliability of the instrument, seven experts from five local universities were identified to review the "adapt and adopt" instrument.  In addition, a series of workshops were also organized to improve the instrument.

**Table 1**:  Cronbach's Alpha values obtained from the pretest (n = 100) and actual study (n = 400)

| Variables | No. of items | Cronbach's Alpha (pretest) | Cronbach's Alpha (actual study) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Forms of Internet use | 13 | .769 | .874 |
| Political participation | 4 | .772 | .872 |
| Civic participation | 7 | .881 | .907 |

## FINDINGS

Table 2 shows the distribution of frequency and percentage according to the respondents' age, sex and education level.  Nearly half of the respondents (42%) were in the age bracket of 18 to 22 years old.  Slightly more than half of the respondents were male (56%).  More than a quarter of the respondents (38%) reported that their highest education level is Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM) and only 5% were degree holders.  The data reflected their socio-economic background where people from low household income are often associated with lower education level.

**Table 2**:  *Distribution of frequency and percentage according to respondents' age, sex and education level*

| Items (n = 400) | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Age | | |
| 15-17 | 135 | 34 |
| 18-22 | 158 | 42 |
| 23-25 | 107 | 24 |
| Sex | | |
| Male | 224 | 56 |
| Female | 176 | 44 |
| Highest educational level | | |
| UPSR | 34 | 8 |
| PMR | 97 | 24 |
| SPM | 150 | 38 |
| STPM/STAM/Matriculation | 23 | 6 |
| Certificate | 25 | 6 |
| Diploma | 49 | 12 |
| Degree | 20 | 5 |
| Other | 2 | 1 |

Table 3 shows that the minimum and maximum number of hours spent online were 1 hour and 19 hours per day, respectively.  The average number of hours spent online was nearly six hours per day, which was well within the range of an average Internet user in Malaysia.  The

Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission reported in 2015 that Malaysians spent an average of 12 hours a day on the Internet and a total of 3 hours 3 minutes a day accessing the Internet on their cellphones (The Sun Daily, 2015). However, unlike average Malaysians, marginalized youth have limited financial resources to pay for broadband fees, as reflected by the lesser average hours spent online in a day.

**Table 3**: *Minimum and maximum values of time spent online in a day (n = 400)*

| Item (n = 400) | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | SD |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| How many hours do you use the Internet in a day? | 1 | 19 | 5.930 | 3.926 |

The first objective of the study is to determine the level of Internet use, political participation and civic participation of the marginalized youths. Table 4 shows the distribution of mean, percentage and standard deviation according to respondents' Internet use. The results show that they either rarely or occasionally used the Internet for various activities. Limited financial means to pay for broadband access could possibly curb them from using the Internet more frequently. The most popular activity was communicating with friends (mean = 3.950). This is consistent with the findings of the Internet Users Survey 2017, which reported that nearly all Internet users (96.3%) in Malaysia communicated online by text using over-the-top (OTT) messaging platform (MCMC, 2017). Also referred to as "value added," OTT messaging is prevalent among Internet users primarily because it allows communication with anyone, any time at any place. Coupled with the fact that smartphone is the most popular means (89.4%) for users to access the Internet, it is therefore expected that communicating with friends was the most popular online activity among the marginalized youths.

The least popular activity was transferring money using e-banking service (mean = 2.550). Limited financial means and the fact that 76% of the respondents were still students could be the primary reasons. However, the Internet Users Survey 2017 reported that financial activity was not popular among Internet users in Malaysia. In fact, only 41.7% of Internet users in Malaysia used e-banking service, placing it in the bottom half, out of 17 online activities. Therefore, in addition to socioeconomic background, other factors such as trust gap, online security, and cyber crime could also hinder people from using e-banking service.

Table 4 also shows the corresponding types of Internet use. The results indicate that informational and recreational use were the more popular types of Internet use among the marginalized youths. Interestingly, informational use was popular only if the information that the respondents were looking for was related to education, news, and entertainment – but not politics (surfing political parties' websites or social media was the second least popular online activity). This result is important for two reasons. One, it proves the lack of interest in politics among marginalized youth and two, it also hints that content, rather than medium, is more powerful in predicting one's participatory behavior. Besides, evidence of youth political apathy documented in the literature has already pointed towards this direction.

Lastly, the tendency of the respondents to use Internet for recreational activities (uploading pictures or videos and playing games) mirrors the results of the Internet Users Survey 2017 where recreational activities dominated the interest of Malaysian Internet users. In terms of skills, the marginalized youths' online activities were still confined to basic use of the Internet.

**Table 4**: *Distribution of mean, percentage and standard deviation according to respondents' Internet use*

| Item (n = 400) | Type of Internet Use | Mean | Percentage | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Communicating with friends | Online communication activities | 3.950 | 79.0 | .996 |
| Surfing for educational contents | Informational use (education) | 3.780 | 75.8 | .980 |
| Uploading pictures/videos on Facebook/Instagram | Recreational use | 3.590 | 71.8 | 1.202 |
| Reading current news/sports/ entertainment online | Informational use (news) | 3.530 | 70.6 | 1.191 |
| Finding content for entertainment/ traveling purposes | Informational use (entertainment) | 3.410 | 68.4 | 1.116 |
| Playing games | Recreational use | 3.260 | 65.2 | 1.386 |
| Creating groups on social media to discuss youth-related issues | Online communication activities | 2.970 | 59.4 | 1.337 |
| Surfing websites on environment, volunteerism, charity work, etc. | Online communication activities | 2.960 | 59.2 | 1.215 |
| Commenting/voicing opinions on current issues in blog/news | Online communication activities | 2.960 | 59.2 | 1.271 |
| Surfing government websites for jobs, paying license, etc. | Services | 2.840 | 56.8 | 1.419 |
| Shopping online | Services | 2.690 | 53.8 | 1.405 |
| Surfing political parties' websites/ social media | Informational use (politics) | 2.610 | 52.2 | 1.324 |
| Transferring money using e-banking service | Services | 2.550 | 51.0 | 1.461 |

Note:  1 = very rarely; 2 = rarely; 3 = occasionally; 4 = frequently; 5 = very frequently

Table 5 shows the distribution of mean, percentage and standard deviation according to the respondents' political and civic participation.  The results indicate that the marginalized youths either rarely or occasionally participated in political activities.  Low levels of political participation are often associated with poor citizens.  In their landmark 1995 'Citizen Participation Study,' Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (as cited in Lawless & Fox, 2001; p. 363) suggested that "low-income citizens often do not have the financial resources, free time, civic skills, or level of engagement necessary to participate effectively."  This also holds true for marginalized communities in Malaysia as demonstrated by the results.

**Table 5:** *Distribution of mean, percentage and standard deviation according to respondents' political participation and civic participation*

| Item (n = 400) | Mean | Percentage | SD |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Political Participation** | | | |
| Meeting with government officials to solve a problem | 2.480 | 49.6 | 1.362 |
| Participating in activities organized by a political party | 2.310 | 46.2 | 1.401 |
| Meeting with elected representatives to solve a problem/ give views | 2.310 | 46.2 | 1.392 |
| Wearing buttons to protest | 2.190 | 43.8 | 1.319 |
| | | | |
| **Civic Participation** | | | |
| Discussing current issues in the media with family or friends | 3.410 | 68.2 | 1.149 |
| Participating in charity and welfare work | 3.120 | 62.4 | 1.242 |
| Participating in recycling activities | 3.080 | 61.6 | 1.191 |
| Volunteering to help the poor/the disabled/natural disaster victims | 3.040 | 60.8 | 1.240 |
| Reporting neighborhood crimes to the police | 2.880 | 57.6 | 1.360 |
| Lodging a complaint regarding a service/vandalism/ unsatisfactory government service | 2.840 | 56.8 | 1.346 |
| Contacting mass media to express views on an issue, opinion/ complaint or to give acknowledgement/ recommendation) | 2.560 | 51.2 | 1.321 |

Note:  1 = very rarely; 2 = rarely; 3 = occasionally; 4 = frequently; 5 = very frequently

It is interesting to note that the most popular political activity was meeting with government officials to solve a problem (mean = 2.480).  This makes sense because most of the respondents live in the People's Housing Program or *Projek Perumahan Rakyat* (PPR) flats.  PPR is an initiative by the Malaysian government and over the years, the communities have often been plagued by infrastructure and social problems such as faulty lifts, clogged drains, inefficient rubbish management, limited parking space, vandalism, drug addiction, loitering, and illegal bike racing.  It is therefore quite common for the community to meet with government officials to discuss these issues.  For example, in 2015, the Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) started a Block Leader program to tackle social issues at PPR flats while the Welfare Department (JKM) introduced a Home Help Services to help the underprivileged elderly and the disabled (The Star Online, 2015).  On the other hand, meeting with elected representatives happens much less frequently as their presence is often associated with the election's four-year cycle.

The least popular political activity was wearing buttons to protest (mean = 2.190).  This is probably due to a higher cost of participation since the marginalized youths would have to bear

the transportation cost to go to a protest. In comparison, meeting with government officials would normally take place in the community hall within their residential area.

Table 5 also shows that the marginalized youths either rarely or occasionally participated in civic activities. This only confirms the disengagement of young people from civic activities as documented in the literature. In addition, this finding is also consistent with the results of the Malaysian Youth Statistics (IPPBM, 2013). The national survey reported that participating in volunteerism work was the second least popular (19%) out of 16 leisure activities. Recreational activities such as social media and watching movies dominated their free time, proving that Malaysian youths – marginalized or not – generally prefer to spend their free time on entertainment-related activities.

The most popular civic activity was discussing current issues in the media with family or friends (mean = 3.410). Out of the seven civic activities, this is probably the easiest one to participate. In terms of scope, it is the least 'active' form of participation. According to Gibson et al. (2005), "the less active or less demanding forms of engagement are most common (i.e. voting and discussing politics), with more active types of engagement (joining a political organization, donating money or demonstrating) being less frequent" (p. 569).

On the other hand, the rest of the civic activities (participating in charity/welfare work and recycling activities, volunteering to help the poor, reporting neighborhood crimes, lodging a complaint, and contacting mass media to express views) are far more 'active' in terms of scope, and therefore require more time and efforts. Similarly, Bakker and deVreese (2011) measured the following activities as 'active' traditional (offline) participation: (i) sending letters to newspapers or magazines to comment on articles, (ii) protesting or complaining by mail or telephone about decisions taken by the government or public administration, (iii) participating in demonstrations, and (iv) actively engaging in discussions during debates or lectures.

Overall, the results show that the levels of their political and civic participation were low. These findings are similar to past studies that show political apathy is a global phenomenon. Explanations run a gamut, from concrete predictors such as socioeconomic background discussed above to more intricate and intangible factors such as interest, awareness, attitude, and perception.

The second objective of this study is to determine the relationships among Internet use, political participation and civic participation. Figure 2 shows the results of the Spearman's correlation test on the three hypothesized relationships. The relationships were found to be statistically significant (p < .05) and the correlation coefficients indicated positive relationships. Therefore, H1, H2 and H3 were supported. However, the relationship between Internet use and civic participation was weak, meaning, a more frequent Internet use would not lead to increased civic participation. The relationship between Internet use and political participation was moderate. These results do not deviate from past data, which show that people from poor areas are less active in political and civic activities due to the lack of economic resources to participate. Another important point to note is that the marginalized youths are not frequent Internet users, making it unlikely for the medium to influence their political and civic participation.

In contrast, the relationship between civic participation and political participation was strong. The more the marginalized youths engage themselves in civic activities, the more

likely they will participate in political activities. This outcome mirrors Putnam's (1993, 2000) discovery of direct positive relation between civic participation and democracy. This can be attributed to the role of civic engagement in building social capital.

The results also show that the associations among the three variables were statistically significant ($p = .000$). Based on the causal steps approach (Baron & Kenny, 1986), at the bivariate level, each of the following conditions necessary to test for the possible role of a mediator had been met:

(i)       the Independent Variable predicts the Dependent Variable,
(ii)      the Independent Variable predicts the mediator, and
(iii)     the mediator predicts the Dependent Variable.
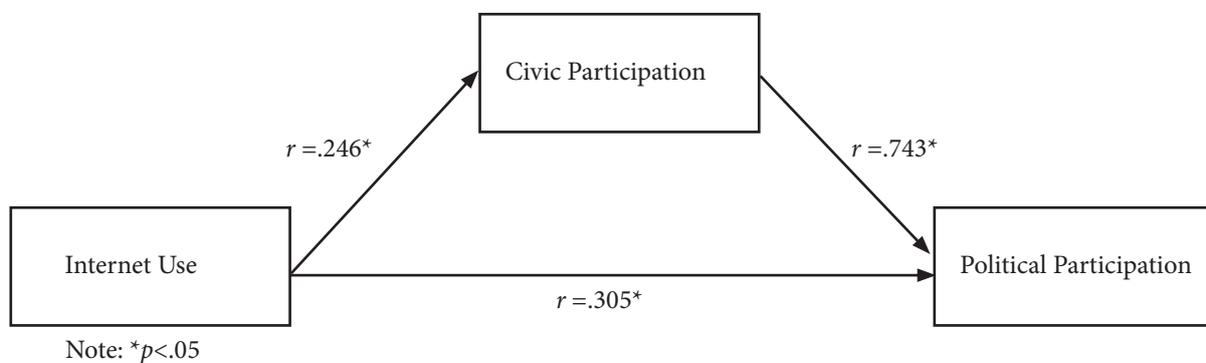


Note: *$p<.05$

**Figure 2**: *Correlation coefficients for the relationships between Independent, Mediating and Dependent Variables*

Partial correlation test was then used to analyze the mediating effect of civic participation in the relationship between Internet use and political participation. To test the influence of the mediator on the independent and dependent variable, zero-order correlation and controlled variable tests were performed simultaneously. The results in Table 6 show that after controlling for the respondents' civic participation, the relationship between Internet use and political participation was still statistically significant ($p = .000$), indicating that mediation occured.

The results also show that when the effect of the mediator on political participation was controlled, the strength of the relationship between Internet use and political participation was reduced from $r = .305$ to $r = .168$. This indicated a partial mediation. It can be concluded that civic participation partially mediated the relationship between Internet use and political participation. Hence, H4 was partially supported.

**Table 6**: *Zero order and partial correlations among Internet use, political participation, and civic participation*

| Control Variable | Variable | Internet use | Political Participation | Civic Participation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| none | Internet use | 1 | | |
| | Political participation | *r* = .305 *p* = .000 | 1 | |
| | Civic participation | *r* = .246 *p* = .000 | *r* = .743 *p* = .000 | 1 |
| Civic participation | Internet use | 1 | | |
| | Political participation | r = .168 p = .000 | 1 | |

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Despite claims of screen addiction among young people, the results of this study indicate that the marginalized youths are not frequent Internet users, primarily because of their socioeconomic background. Youths from low household income families would not be able to continuously pay for broadband fees or subscriptions. Because they are marginalized economically, they are also marginalized technologically, hindering them from becoming active and skilled Internet users. It is possible that the impact of Internet as a socialization agent – that plants seeds for political and civic interest to grow – was not fully experienced by the marginalized youths.

The study also shows that their Internet use was still at a basic level. The marginalized youths were digitally divided by far more advanced Internet users. The more privileged youths, who come from higher economic strata, are probably better equipped with online skills to benefit from advanced use of the Internet such as creating groups on social media to discuss current issues or signing online petitions. This imbalance sustains a gap between mainstream and underprivileged youths.

Digital divide has always been defined as the gap between those who have access to technology and those who do not. The Malaysian government, through the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, had introduced an initiative called 1Malaysia Internet Centre (PI1M) in 2007 to offer broadband Internet access to PPR residents. In 2015, the Ministry of Federal Territories launched the METRO WiFi to provide free WiFi access to 44 PPRs around Kuala Lumpur. With such initiatives to bridge the gap, digital divide today is no longer a problem of access. It is an issue of competency. In its strategy paper for the Eleventh Malaysia Plan, the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) wrote that the transformation of Malaysia into an advanced economy will hinge on mindset and behavior change of businesses, citizens and the public service towards a data-driven culture. To make this transformation possible, immediate action is required to change youth's mindset and behavior to one that extends beyond just basic Internet use.

Overall, the results of this study conform with the view that the lack of resources is the primary reason for low political participation among poor citizens. Most political participation

literature also indicates that citizens from poor areas do not have enough material and social resources to motivate their participation (Cohen & Dawson, 1993; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995).  As evident in the data, even though the marginalized youths have some contacts with government officials, they are substantially less likely to participate in political activities.  In their landmark 'Citizen Participation Study,' Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) attributed low political participation among low-income citizens to lack of financial resources, time and civic skills.  Rosenstone and Hanse (2003) believe that people with higher incomes tend to be more involved with politics due to greater resources available to them.

In addition, when it comes to political participation, the Malaysian government's stand has always been at odds with the interests of youth development.  In one end, national initiatives such as the National Youth Development Action Plan and the 9th Malaysia Plan set out to empower youth for the future.  Yet, until recently – after 47 years – young people were prohibited by the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 (UUCA) from taking part in in-campus political activities.  The ending of the 60-year reign of the ruling Barisan Nasional could signal the beginning of a new era for youth empowerment, marked by Syed Saddiq's distinction of being the youngest ever federal minister, not just in Malaysia but also in South East Asia.

In marginalized communities, the low levels of civic participation among young people can be explained in terms of the scope of the activities.  The extent of the efforts required to carry out the activities characterizes their participation into two types – active and passive.  They are more likely to participate if the activities require less time and efforts.  In other words, the more passive or the less demanding the activities are, the more likely they are interested to participate.  This is also true in Western context.  Gibson et al. (2005) found that civic activities carried out in the form of a discussion (passive participation) are more popular among youths, compared to those that demand them to be more resourceful such as organizing a demonstration.

As predicted by the mobilization theory, the results show that the Internet has the potential to draw underprivileged group to become more active citizens.  Although the statistical significance and the direction of the relationship between Internet use and participation are aligned with the mobilization hypothesis, the strength of the association however differentiates the marginalized youths from the general youth population.  In recent years, evidence of mobilization seems to indicate a strong relationship between Internet use and participatory behavior, as demonstrated by the results of elections.  So why does the result of this study point to a different direction?

One possible explanation can be linked to the levels of their Internet use.  During the 2008 United States presidential election, Obama recognized that young voters are also heavy Internet users.  Capitalizing on the timely opportunity, he turned to social media as the main channel of communication to effectively mobilize young voters.  In contrast, the marginalized youths in this study are not heavy users of the Internet.  The descriptive results of this study show that they rarely or at most, occasionally perform online activities.  Many past studies have associated heavy Internet use with increased social capital and civic awareness, which leads to increased interest and efficacy, creating a chain reaction that eventually encourages participation.  In this case, the full impact of Internet as a mobilizing agent was not fully experienced by the marginalized youths because their online engagement was impeded by their low socioeconomic status.

Interestingly, the relationship between political and civic participation was found to be strong. This can be attributed to the role of the former as a precursor to the latter. In his landmark study of Italian politics, Putnam (1993) describes civic engagement as an important precursor to political action, upon discovering a direct positive association between civic participation and democracy. Many other scholars share similar observation (Pateman, 1970; Huntington & Nelson, 1976; Verba, Nie, & Kim, 1978; Verba, Schoolman, & Brady, 1995). Although this strong association appears to render Internet's role in democratic participation inconsequential, it is important to note that the levels of Internet use are still low among the marginalized youths. This could change in the future when digital divide is narrower, allowing them much greater use of the Internet that could potentially mobilize them towards democratic participation.

More importantly, this study shows that civic participation partially mediates the relation between Internet use and political participation. Engagement in civic activities can be considered as a "warm-up" for marginalized youths to prepare themselves for future participation in political activities. As in a physical activity, if we do not warm up before exercising, we risk injuring ourselves. In the context of this study, if young people are not allowed to warm up by engaging themselves first in civic activities before exercising their political muscles, we risk losing their interest. Worst, we risk injuring our democracy. This conclusion mirrors Putnam's discovery that civic engagement is an important precursor to political participation.

This study has several limitations. First, it only focuses on traditional (offline) forms of participation. Thus, the anticipated behavioral outcomes due to the reduction of participation cost made possible by the Internet as argued by the mobilization theory cannot be observed. Second, the study is limited by its conceptualization of Internet. But in reality, Internet use is a multidimensional concept that renders the relationship between Internet use and participation far more intricate. The effect of Internet use depends on a complex combination of factors such as personal and social characteristics, usage patterns, and the specific content and context of the medium (Bakker & deVreese, 2011).

Future scholars replicating this study should include newer forms of civic and political participation made possible by the Internet, such as creating online environmental groups, donating, signing online petitions, visiting political websites, and reading online news. Not only the inclusion of online participation will counter the argument that heavy Internet use leads to decreased participation, but it will also make the mobilization case stronger. Theoretically, this helps increase the accuracy of the prediction made by the mobilization theory. Second, future research should explore the multidimensional nature of Internet, beyond its general and specific use as conceptualized in this study. Shah et al. (2005) have suggested exploring Internet use patterns that encourage learning and dialogue to understand how Internet complements traditional media. Linaa Jensen (2013) has recommended examining user-generated content (made popular by social media) rather than websites since "the Internet has moved from an age of information to an age of communication and networking" (p. 348). Examining intricate patterns of Internet use will help increase the predictive power of the mobilization theory.

Traditionally, young people, in many ways, viewed participation in political activities as 'none of my business.' Politics was a popular subject in conversations among adults throughout Malaysia's heartland, and young people were often told to 'go away' when they tried to participate in the discussion. By way of cultural norms and generational differences, they were excluded from the very process that facilitates political socialization. In fact, they have been excluded for so long that any effort to reconnect them to political activities seems futile. Our youth do not

'suddenly' become active citizens just because the government wants them to. This cannot be done directly and abruptly.

The democratic mobilization of young people must be mediated over time by something that will help ease them back into the political socialization process. First, put them at their ease, then lessen their discomfort. Youth empowerment is not an event. It is a process, albeit a long and painful one. This study has found the silver lining – civic participation could mediate this process, as shown by the results. Therefore, early and continuous engagement in civic activities is likely to bode well for their future political action.

Ultimately, the new government must look beyond existing policies and actions. The efforts and financial resources invested in youth empowerment have not been proportionate with the outcomes. No matter how capable they are or can be – intellectually, emotionally or socially – young people will not automatically become "active" unless the government includes them in the process. What is needed therefore is inclusion in the truest sense of the word. Youth must be co-participants of the political process as part of their everyday life, and not simply as beneficiaries or as distant observers looking in from the outside.

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