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## **Theoretical Analysis of Social Media Research in Malaysian Journals and Doctoral Dissertations from 2004-2015**

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### **Abstract**

*Preceding literature indicates many scholars are deeply involved in understanding the social media phenomenon; however, depth assessment on the theoretical foundations of social media-related studies is still scarce in Malaysia when compared with Western research trends analyses. This study reflects on the stature of social media research from 2004-2015, particularly on theoretical aspects. The paper content analyzed scholarly articles in Malaysian journals and doctoral dissertations conducted in Malaysian universities to trace the theoretical footings and trends. Additionally, social media scholars were interviewed to grasp on the underlying reasons for theoretical application in Malaysia. The results illustrate theoretical presence among Malaysian scholars were higher than*

*the Westerners. The most frequently utilized theories were uses and gratifications, agenda setting and diffusion of innovations. Malaysian scholars explained the theories selected for their studies were based on research background, their personal connection to theories and relevancy of those theories towards social media related issues. Additionally, cited theories were mostly employed as theoretical framework, followed by mere reference and comparison of theories. Although theoretical application is prevalently higher than the West, the practice of theory building and extension is still limited. Therefore, this study recognized the need for improvements on theoretical advancement and conceptualizations.*

*Keywords: social media, research trends, theoretical application, Malaysia, mixed methodology*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Ever since the social media emergence, the new communication technology is seen thriving, as users are fully embracing the application in their everyday life. People are adopting social media in their lives to create messages or information, portray ideas or share opinions and to stay connected with other users online (Mustafa & Hamzah, 2011). It is also easy to comprehend, user friendly and entertaining in interacting and socializing online. In particular, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) segmented social media into six types, including blogs and microblogging (i.e. Blogspot or Twitter), social networking sites (SNS) (i.e. Facebook or MySpace), content communities (i.e. YouTube or Flickr), collaborative projects (i.e. Wikipedia), virtual social world and virtual game world. Globally, statistics illustrate there are about one billion Internet users in Facebook, 200 million are profusely tweeting on Twitter, 800 million watches YouTube and 200 million are on LinkedIn (Pick, 2013).

Recently, Malaysians has also shown keen interest in using social media to connect, communicate and socialize with others. Based on the findings in Yahoo! Net Index Study conducted in 2011 on “Internet Trends, Digital Development and Online Behavior in Malaysia”, our country is the leading country in social networking across Southeast Asia (News Straits Times, 2011). More than 90% of Malaysians are seen to be connected with other users online via Facebook, making it the leading social media network in the country (MCMC, 2017; Ahmad, Chang, Mustafa, Ibrahim, Mahmud & Dafrizal, 2012). Other users in the nation are on Instagram (56.1%), YouTube (45.3%), Google+ (28.3%), Twitter (26.6%), LinkedIn (9.1%) and other lesser known social networking sites (0.9%) (MCMC, 2017). Furthermore, Malaysia is also ranked in eighth place globally (62%) in September 2016 for possessing active accounts on top social network (We Are Social, 2016). The statistics above portrayed social media has evolved greatly in Malaysia.

The widespread adoption of social media among Malaysians has opened up numerous research opportunities for scholars. Explicitly, social media research in Malaysia has been increasing, denoting that scholars are actively exploring on the usage, issues and effects of social media on the users. Since the inception of social media, some scholars perceived that aspects of communication and media were undergoing rapid change (Khang, Ki & Ye, 2012; Baran & Davis, 2012). The new media technology has altered mass communication to interactive digital communication (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008) where it is multi-directional, giving more control for users to create, select, send, receive or alter user generated content or messages (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001). Other than extending the mass media with more media choices to

communicate, the development of social media also changes how people communicate with each other (i.e. their communication patterns and habits), how people consume media content and the impact of social media that may be slightly different from conventional media (i.e. newspapers, magazines, radio and television).

In the state of social media, the new communication technology is perceived to be more transactional. Users are no longer passive media audiences (Wei, 2008), but rather active and more engaging ones as the media content can influence the receiver and the receiver can also affect the sender. Social media users are also known as prosumers or producers (Khang, Ki & Ye, 2012) because they have the power to create, use, receive and alter media content. The multi-directional communication also leads to the users' own perceptions and decisions when interpreting those messages (Chafee & Metzger, 2001). These changes have revolutionized the media environment because the impact differs from the conventional media such as print media, radio and television.

The notion was also agreed by Idid (2014), where he indicated the need to understand the diffusion of social media in Malaysia. He mentioned "concepts of media audience, effects of media, space of communication and time have been changed" (Idid, 2014, p.14). These changes of communication patterns and habits are also contributing to the advancement of theories in explaining and understanding the new aspects of social media. According to Baran and Davis (2012, p. xvii), "theories was in ferment as new perspectives challenged long-standing assumptions". Past studies indicated that there are a few scholars who believed that existing mass communication theories are still useful in understanding new communication technology such as social media, but efforts need to be made in refining and ensuring that these theories are suitable with the new approaches of social media (Weaver, 2000; Scolari, 2009). Thus, it is imperative to understand the theoretical aspects of social media related studies to further comprehend the significance of social media diffusion and its consequences on society and recognize the current state of social media development and research in Malaysia.

Undeniably, social media research in Malaysia has increased significantly consistent with the progression of this new media technology. There are diverse issues concerning social media that were investigated on such as privacy, identity and reputation, media effects, usage and gratifications, public relations on social media, politics in social media and more (Mun, Li, & Fernandez, 2011; Ishak, Sidi, Jabar, Sani, Mustapha & Supian, 2012; Hamid, Ismail, Ishak & Yazam, 2013; Beers, 2014; Abdulahi, Samadi & Gharlegghi, 2014; El-Kasim & Idid, 2016). Nevertheless, even though social media research has been rising in the communication field, attempts to understand the issues and concerns regarding the state and patterns of social media studies are still limited in Malaysia. Prior studies have also showed that it is essential to review past research to see the development of a certain field (Cho & Khang, 2006) to allow observation of trends in research. With the fast-changing media landscape from traditional to social media, it is imperative for us to identify the gaps, issues and insights on the state of theoretical application for future research directions on social media. According to Kamhawi and Weaver (2003), the importance of determining research trends is to identify the patterns, frequencies and stature of mass communication research and the progression of social media technology in the country.

In the recent years, a number of scholars have traced along research scholarship in the area

of mass communication, Internet, new media and social media to identify the direction of the field as well as research trends and patterns (Kim & Weaver, 2002; Khang, Ki & Ye, 2012; Zhang & Leung, 2014). In Malaysia, few attempts have been made to comprehensively analyze research trends in the mass communication discipline, specifically on theoretical application (Hassan & Salleh, 1990; Merican, 2005; Idid, 2014). Consistent with the increasing adoption of social media in Malaysia, scholars have also investigated on the patterns and issues in research related to social media in selected journals pertaining to microblogging (i.e. Twitter), collaborative projects (i.e. wikis) and content communities (i.e. YouTube) (Alias, DeWitt, Siraj, Kamaruddin & Daud, 2013; Alias, Sabdan, Abdul Aziz, Mohammed, Hamidon & Jomhari, 2013; Alias, Razak, elHadad, Mat Noh, Kunjambu & Muniandy, 2013). So far, these studies have focused on research topics, issues category, sampling, research method and data analysis. Nonetheless, studies pertaining to understanding the theoretical foundations of social media related studies are still limited when comparing with the theoretical trends analyses in the Western countries. Henceforth, in fulfilling the gap of addressing theoretical understandings in social media related studies, this paper intends to assess trends and patterns of theoretical application in social media research.

## **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The objective of this study is to examine the theoretical application and trend in social media related studies on Malaysian users. Intrinsically, this present study aims to address the following questions:

RQ1: What is the frequency of theory driven studies related to social media on Malaysian users?

RQ2: What are the types of theories employed in social media research?

RQ3: How are the cited theories used in social media research?

RQ4: What are the scholars' reasons to using a certain theory in their social media research?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Past Theoretical Assessment in Communication Research**

Prior studies postulated that theoretical development has always been a major concern among scholars in the field of communication and media. Theory is defined as organized set of concepts and explanations that helps to investigate, interpret and understand relationship of a certain issue or phenomena that occurs regularly (Keyton, 2006; Baran & Davis, 2012). Specifically, theories help us organize, collect and describe a problem in the social world, relationships of the problem, underlying reasons to explain the relationship as well as the links between the problem, relationships and findings (Miller, 2005; Potter & Riddle, 2007).

In one of the research trends analyses in the West, DeFleur (1998) assessed the communication research scholarship to see the most widely used theoretical perspectives in mass communication. His findings showed magic bullet, uses and gratifications, modeling theories, adoption of innovations and agenda setting were among the popular communication theories at that time (DeFleur, 1998). Then, in 2003, Kamhawi and Weaver found majority of mass communication research lack in instilling theories with only 30.5% theory-based articles from 1980-1999. Additional 9% seems to entail a theory in their studies. And within these theory-driven articles, the most commonly utilized theories were information processing, uses and gratifications, media construction of social reality, hegemony or critical theory, cultivation,

agenda setting and diffusion of innovations (Kamhawi & Weaver, 2003). Still, the study recommends for greater theoretical construction in the future.

A year later, Bryant and Miron (2004) conducted a content analysis on leading communication journals such as *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *Journal of Communication* and *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* over 44 years (1956-2000) to examine the major research trends in communication theory. The results found that absence of theory was apparent with only 32% of 1,806 data collected mentioned some form of theory. These authors identified 26 widely used theories in communication research. Theories that were most mentioned were agenda setting and uses and gratifications. Other utilized theories include media dependency theory, framing theory, social learning theory, media hegemony, knowledge gap theory, cultivation theory, social construction of reality, McLuhan's Sense-extension, diffusion theory, Lerner's Modernization theory, cognitive dissonance, four theories of the press, Information theory of media, four function theory, cybernetics, system theory, linear models, attribution theory, two-step flow, symbolic interactionism, Piagetian theory, functionalism, behaviorism, psychoanalytical theory and Marxism theory.

Compared to DeFleur (1998) as well as Kamhawi and Weaver (2003), this study not only examined the most frequently used theories, but also investigated on how the cited theories were used in research. Bryant and Miron (2004) found that 48.03% of the articles were only referring to a theory, 26.13% utilized theory as theoretical framework, followed by comparison of theory (7.9%), critique theory (4.31%), propose a theory (3.16%), test new theory (2.58%), integrate theories (2.01%), and expand theories (1.87%) (Bryant & Miron, 2004). Moreover, Bryant and Miron (2004) also extended their theoretical analysis with the latest journal articles from *Communication Research*, *Mass Communication & Society* and *Media Psychology* from 2001 until 2004. The findings portrayed framing, agenda setting, cultivation theory, uses and gratifications, mediation models or theories, third person effects, social cognitive or learning theory and selective exposure were among the most frequently studied theories. These authors also looked into how the theories were used in newer research. Theories were applied as mere reference (45%), followed by theoretical framework (23%), theory construction (18%) and critique of theory (14%) (Bryant & Miron, 2004).

Few years later, Potter and Riddle (2007) analyzed media effects related studies in selected journals including *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *Journal of Communication*, *Communication Research*, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *Critical Studies in Mass Media*, *Communication Theory*, *Media Psychology*, *Human Communication Research*, *Communication Monographs*, *Communication Education*, *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, *Mass Communication Review*, *Journal of Advertising*, *Audio-visual Communication Review* and *American Political Science Review*. In this study, the most widely cited theories were cultivation theory, agenda setting and uses and gratifications. Their findings also mentioned that theoretical usages in media studies were still limited and needed improvement in theoretical development.

Hence, a dominant theoretical trend can be seen in previous communication and media research trends analyses, which is the absence of theoretical application. And within the literature, the most frequently applied theory in communication and media research were uses and gratifications, agenda setting, cultivation theory, diffusion of innovations, critical theory, information processing, media construction of social reality and social learning (DeFleur, 1998;

Kamhawi & Weaver, 2003; Bryant & Miron, 2004; Potter & Riddle, 2007).

### **Past Theoretical Assessment of Communication Research in Malaysia**

In Malaysia, the state of theoretical application in communication research was also similar with the West. Theoretical contribution in communication and media related research was still lacking and needed improvement in future endeavors. Hassan and Salleh (1990) and Idid (2014) said Malaysian scholars were rarely conceptual or theoretical in their research. However, among the theory driven studies, the most prevalently used communication theories were agenda setting, diffusion of innovation, spiral of silence, third person effects and uses and gratifications (Hassan & Salleh, 1990). Furthermore, Hassan and Salleh (1990) and Idid (2014) mentioned theoretical usages among Malaysian scholar were mostly application of existing theories from the West. These scholars debated that Malaysian scholars should not only adopt Western theories in developing and testing hypotheses in the communication field, but they should also conduct more fundamental research that apply or develop new or integrated concepts and theories that are more relevant to our society's cultural setting, values and more.

### **Past Theoretical Assessment of New Media and Social Media Studies**

In going along with the advancement of social media technology, scholars have also explored on the state of theoretical conversations in Internet, new media and social media related studies. Literature showed that some scholars believed with social media penetrating into the communication and media industry as one of the important means in interaction, the application changes the users' habits, as well as its role and effects on each individual and society (Craig, 1999; Scolari, 2009). It can be perceived that theories of the mass media may not be applicable to understand the new media or social media phenomenon, thus, implicating the need to assess on the theoretical applications trends among scholars in this field.

Previous studies indicated that theoretical application in new media or social media studies were still limited. In particular, Western scholars have conducted quantitative content analysis to understand on the research trends pertaining to Internet, new media, social media and social networking sites (SNS) in selected communication journals (Kim & Weaver, 2002; Cho & Khang, 2006; Khang, Ki & Ye, 2012; Zhang & Leung, 2014). In 2002, Kim and Weaver conducted a study on the Internet-related research to see the theoretical and methodological trends in communication journals between 1996 and 2000. Findings of the study stated theory-based communication research on Internet was low with only 96 articles. The most commonly employed theories were uses and gratifications, information processing, diffusion or adoption theory, dependency theory, hegemony theory, media use patterns, personal relations, agenda setting and persuasion.

Several years later, Wei (2009) investigated on the research trends and patterns of new media technology studies in China from 2000 until 2007. The theoretical application in new media related research in China was lower than the Western analyses with only five theory based papers from 69 articles. Findings stated that the prevalently cited theories were McLuhan's media-centered theory, agenda setting and democracy theory. Another example is Khang, Ki and Ye's (2012) scholarly work on the research patterns and trends on social media studies in advertising, communication, marketing and public relation fields from 1997 to 2010. One

of the research trends that the authors drew out was measuring the theoretical application in social media research. About 40% of the sample assessed referred to certain concept, theory or theoretical framework. This is an apparent increase of theory-based research when compared to past theoretical analyses on new media or social media research. The results stated social information processing theory was the mostly used theory, followed by uses and gratifications, relationship management theory, agenda setting, framing and diffusion of innovation.

In Malaysia, although there are a few studies that have assessed on the research trends and occurrences concerning social media research, such as Twitter, wikis and YouTube in journal articles (Alias, DeWitt, Siraj, Kamaruddin & Daud, 2013; Alias, Sabdan, Aziz, Mohammed, Hamidon & Jomhari, 2013; Alias, Razak, elHadad, Mat Noh, Kunjambu & Muniandy, 2013), but we still lack in understanding the theoretical conversations of social media related studies on Malaysian users. Past studies have identified trends in topics, issues category, sampling, research methods and data analysis techniques, thus, implicating a need for us to understand the theoretical footings of social media scholars in the country. Therefore, past literature from the Western countries above has provided a framework of analysis to identify the theoretical trends in research, which is understanding theoretical application in research, which theory is mostly employed in communication and social media research as well as how the cited theories is used in those studies. With this framework (See Figure 1.0), we would then be able to compare the theoretical patterns of social media studies on Malaysian users with the examination executed by the Western scholars.

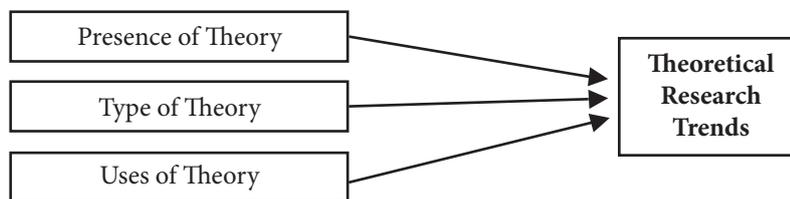


Figure 1: Framework of Analysis

## METHOD

The present study employed a mixed methodology of quantitative and qualitative approach. Both content analyses and in-depth interview were conducted. These methods utilized purposive samplings. The content analysis was conducted to have a detailed indication of theoretical trends in the social media research literature, whereas, the in-depth interview was employed to discern on the underlying reasons for theoretical application from the perspectives of social media scholars in Malaysia.

### Sampling of Content Analysis and Selection of Articles/theses

Particularly, the content analysis focused on published papers pertaining to social media in selected Malaysian academic journals within the communication, media, social sciences and humanities disciplines that were classified in the Malaysian Citation Index Website (Malaysian Citation Index, 2015). Bryant and Cummins (2007) lamented that scholars should assess journals from the early years to the recent decades to know where a certain field has been and its future directions. This paper also conducted content analysis on doctoral theses on social

media from selected universities in Malaysia that offers PhD in Communication and Media. The sample was drawn from the year 2004 until 2015. The year 2004 was chosen as the start of analysis to mark the early years of social media as one of the mainstream media channel (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Khang, Ki & Ye, 2012), whereas, 2015 signifies the current state of social media development. The unit of analysis was the entire-full-length article or thesis on social media, involving counting of each articles or thesis that mentioned the context of study for frequencies.

Implicitly, this present study selected 21 influential communication, media, social sciences and humanities journals in Malaysia. For the communication and media field of areas, seven journals were utilized as sample including *Malaysian Journal of Communication*, *Malaysian Journal of Media Studies*, *Global Media Journal-Malaysian Edition*, *Journal of Language and Communication*, *The Journal of the South East Asia Research Center for Communication and Humanities (SEARCH)*, *Journal of Media and Information Warfare* and *Journal of Human Development and Communication*. For the social sciences and humanities discipline, this study content analyzed 14 journals comprising of *Journal of Malaysian Studies*, *International Journal of Asia Pacific Studies*, *The Asian Journal of Humanities*, *eBangsi (Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities)*, *AKADEMIKA (Jurnal Sains Kemasyarakatan dan Kemanusiaan)*, *SARJANA*, *JATI: Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*; *PERTANIKA (Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities)*, *Universiti Tun Abdul Razak e-Journal*, *Voice of Academia*, *International Academic Research Journal of Social Sciences* and *Journal of International Studies*.

In selecting the doctoral theses, this current research focused on universities in Malaysia that provide PhD program in Communication and Media. Philosophy dissertations were also examined because this study aims to include all studies related to social media on Malaysian users from 2004 to 2015. A total of 21 universities were included such as Universiti Malaya (PhD of Media Studies); Universiti Sains Malaysia (Doctor of Philosophy, Communication); Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (Doctor of Philosophy, Communication); Universiti Putra Malaysia (PhD in Mass Communication or PhD in Human Communication); Universiti Utara Malaysia (Doctor of Philosophy, Communication); Universiti Teknologi MARA (PhD in Communication or Doctor of Philosophy of Information and Media Warfare); Universiti Teknologi Petronas (PhD in Social Science and Humanities – Journalism Communication and Media Studies); Universiti Malaysia Perlis (PhD in Social Science, Communication – Media Studies); International Islamic University Malaysia (PhD in Communication); Monash University (Doctor of Philosophy – Communications and Media Studies); University of Nottingham (PhD in Modern Languages and Cultures – Media); Infrastructure University Kuala Lumpur (PhD in Communication); Open University Malaysia (Doctor of Philosophy, Communication); International University of Malaya-Wales (Doctor of Philosophy, Professional Communication); Asia eUniversity (PhD in Arts – Media Studies); Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (Doctor of Philosophy Communication); Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka (PhD in Technical Communication – Media and Communication); University Malaysia Sarawak (Doctor of Philosophy, Communication Studies); Curtin University Sarawak Malaysia (PhD in Media, Culture and Communication); University Malaysia Sabah (PhD in Communication) and Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (PhD in Communication – Human Communication/Organizational Communication). The doctoral theses were searched through the Malaysian Theses Online (MyTo) database to find dissertations on social media. With information from the database on the theses' title, year, author and university, we then search the online libraries of the stated university to find the indicated theses title or any other studies on social media

towards Malaysian users from 2004-2015. If the theses are available online, we download the dissertation for data collection process. If there are no online versions of the thesis, we would then go to the libraries of the universities to go through their repository in collecting and coding data.

The selection criteria were undertaken through a search on the following relevant keywords in the abstract section of the research articles and doctoral theses: “new media”, “social media”, “social media usage or adoption”, “social media effect or impact”, “online social network” or a particular social media (i.e. Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, Flickr, wiki, others) and the research must be on Malaysian users. Specifically, this study defined social media research as studies that explored on the usage and impact of social media on the Malaysian users. Social media refers to collaborative project (i.e. Wiki), blogs and microblogging (i.e. Blogspot or Twitter), content communities (i.e. YouTube or Flickr), social networking sites (i.e. Facebook), virtual game world and virtual social world (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

### **Measure**

Adopting the analytical framework from past literature of theoretical trends analyses of communication and social media related studies (Kamhawi & Weaver, 2003; Bryant & Miron, 2004; Khang, Ki & Ye, 2012), this current study examined the following variables in garnering the theoretical patterns of social media research: (1) *presence of theory*, (2) *the most prevalently applied type of theory* and (3) *uses of theory in research*.

### **Presence of Theory**

Using a codebook as the research instrument, we coded each journal paper and doctoral thesis according to theoretical application in social media research. Firstly, each article or thesis is coded to see whether it is *theory-based or not*. Drawing upon the meaning of theory from past studies, we defined a theory, theoretical framework, concept or model as a set of organized explanation to test and understand about the relationship of a certain social media issue or phenomena (Keyton, 2006; Baran & Davis, 2012; Kim, Hayes, Avant & Reid, 2014; Khang, Han, Shin, Jung & Kin, 2015). For the article or thesis to be coded as theory-driven, it must be able to mention a specific name of theory, theoretical framework or model.

### **Type of Theory**

In distinguishing the types of theory employed in social media studies on Malaysian users, this study categorized according to *communication theories* and *non-communication theories*. If one of the social media study referred to more than one theory, we coded it as multiple theories. For each category, the name of the theory must also be coded for the analysis.

### **Uses of Theory in Research**

Next, this study also examines how the cited theories were used in the journal papers or doctoral theses and the frequency of its uses. We coded this part by categorizing theory-based papers or theses according to the grouping from Bryant and Miron (2004), (1) *using a theory as mere reference*, (2) *using theory as theoretical framework*, (3) *comparison of two or more theories*, (4) *critiquing a theory or theories*, (5) *proposing a new theory*, (6) *testing a new theory*,

(7) *integrating two or more theories or (8) expanding a certain theory.*

### **Sampling of In-Depth Interview and Coding Procedures**

The sampling of the in-depth interview is also purposive, which comprise of social media scholars in Malaysia. The informants were selected based on the following criteria: experience (expertise and number of years in the academic field of communication), publication (number of publication papers or books on social media or new media) and availability to participate in this study. A total of six informants from Klang Valley, Negeri Sembilan and Penang were interviewed. All of the informants were communications and social media scholars from the universities in Malaysia. An interview guideline with open-ended questions based on the research questions were designed for the questioning of the informants. The in-depth interviews were then transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis.

### **Inter-coder Reliability**

This study utilized the Cohen (1960) *kappa* (K) to obtain the reliability of the content analysis. A total of 10% of the 92 journal papers and 10% of the 16 doctoral theses were measured by the first author and a communication graduate as the second coder. For both journal article and doctoral theses content analyses, this present study achieved an average inter-coder reliability of .88 vs. .95. The two coders independently analyzed randomly selected papers and theses for the inclusion as social media studies, and the agreement was 100%. For the content analysis of journal papers, 9 randomly selected articles were independently coded. Approximately 2 doctoral theses were also coded for inter-coder reliability. The inter-coder reliability coefficients was 1.0 vs. 1.0 for presence of theory; 1.00 vs. 1.0 for type of theory; and .70 vs. 1.0 for uses of cited theories in research. In addressing the reliability of the in-depth interview, this study pre-tested the interview guidelines that were conceptualized. Explicitly, we pre-test on the first two informants of the interviews to identify whether the questions are suitable and applicable to answer the research question. It was found that all of the questions are relevant to achieve the research objective and we also extended the interview protocol with more probing questions to understand the reasons for theoretical usage.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Frequency of Theory-Driven Social Media Research in Malaysia**

Of the 3014 articles published in the selected communication, media, social sciences and humanities journals in Malaysia from 2004 until 2015, only 92 (3.1%) articles were concerning social media. However, 13 social media articles were excluded from this research because the studies were not on Malaysian users but from other countries such as Australia, India, Indonesia, Italy, the Middle East, the Philippines, Singapore and Somalia. Henceforth, after the data reduction, this study explored on the research trends of 79 social media articles that were on Malaysian users (See Table 1). The findings also showed that the Malaysian Journal of Communication and PERTANIKA were dominant publication venues for Malaysian social media research. Not only that, results also connoted that social media studies were mostly published in communication and media related journals than other disciplines.

**Table 1**  
Frequency of social media articles on Malaysian users

Journal Name	Frequency of articles on social media research from 2004-2015	Percentage (%) (n=79)
Malaysian Journal of Communication	24	30.3
PERTANIKA Malaysian Journal of Media Studies	12	13.9
eBangi	9	11.4
Journal of Media and Information Warfare	7	8.9
Global Media Journal-Malaysian Edition	7	8.9
Journal of Malaysian Studies	7	8.9
AKADEMIKA	5	6.3
SEARCH	3	3.8
Voice of Academia	2	2.5
Journal of Language and Communication	2	2.5
Journal of Human Development and Communication	1	1.3
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>100</b>

Moreover, from the 21 universities that offer PhD in Communication and Media, only 16 doctoral dissertations were pertaining to social media research. But, two of the theses were excluded from the sample because those studies were from PhD in Language and Social Sciences. Furthermore, two more doctoral theses were excluded from the sample as those studies focused on Indonesian and Sudanese users. Thus, a total of 12 doctoral theses were included in the sampling of the content analysis (See Table 2). The findings stated that both Universiti Putra Malaysia and Monash University have the most social media related studies on Malaysian users.

The analysis implied that social media research in Malaysia was in formative stage with the low numbers of published articles and doctoral dissertations between the timeframe of 2004 and 2015. However, it represents a very active area of discipline as the numbers of studies keep increasing over the time span. This is similar with previous suggestions and reports that state only 5.5% articles were on social media in advertising, communication, marketing and public relations journals in 1997-2010 (Khang, Ki & Ye, 2012). New media related studies in China were also low (Wei, 2009). With social media recently penetrating into the mainstream communication of our country's media landscape, this research trend is rather comprehensible as scholars still lacks of training and expertise on the subject matter. Thus, we also foresee that a growing number of social media research will likely happen in catching up with the advancement of social media in the nation.

**Table 2**

Frequency of social media related theses on Malaysian users

University	Frequency of doctoral theses on social media from 2004-2015	Percentage (%) (n=12)
Universiti Putra Malaysia	4	33.3
Monash University	4	33.3
Universiti Malaya	2	16.8
Universiti Sains Malaysia	1	8.3
International Islamic University Malaysia	1	8.3
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>100</b>

### Theoretical Application in Social Media Research

In this study, theory is referred to as a set of guidelines or organized system that helps to explore and explain certain phenomenon. Based on the theoretical assessment on social media studies on Malaysian users, about 62% of the 79 published articles on social media appeared to be theoretically driven. Other studies did not indicate any theoretical presence in their research (38%). As for the content analysis of doctoral theses, all of the 12 social media related dissertations implicated that they utilized an explicit theory, theoretical framework, concept or model in their studies.

The trends mentioned above actually contradict with findings from preceding literature. Prior studies asserted that lack of theoretical application was one of the major concerns in Internet, new media and social media studies in the West (Kim & Weaver, 2002; Khang, Ki & Ye, 2012). Low applications of theories in those studies were apparent (27-40%) (Kim & Weaver, 2002; Cho & Khang, 2006; Wei, 2009; Khang, Ki & Ye, 2012). Past research also stated that, in 1970s until 2013, theoretical application of mass communication studies in Malaysia were low, particularly in building theories (Hassan & Salleh, 1990; Merican, 2005; Idid, 2014). Merican (2005) also agreed with the notion as he perceived Malaysian scholars lacked in using, evaluating and building theories. Therefore, it can be distinguished that social media related studies on Malaysian users were mostly driven by theories, illustrating that scholars have evolved. This ultimately portrayed an encouraging pattern in theoretical application, further validating the accuracy of the findings.

This study also made comparative analysis of theoretical presence results between two timeframes to see the theoretical evolution in social media research. In particular, this research assessed between the eras of social media emergence (2004-2009) and the current stature of social media research (2010-2015) in Malaysia. Findings indicated that in the first half, many scholars did not build their research on a theoretical foundation, which may be due to the lack of skills, insights and experience in the social media discipline as it is still a new field in communication. Over a significant period of time, when social media is becoming an increasingly popular application and research phenomena, the latter period portrayed that social media research in Malaysia became more theoretically solid. This symbolized that Malaysian scholars became

more aware on the importance of theoretical application to further comprehend the social media phenomenon (see Table 3). Thus, it can be assumed that although the theoretical footings was insufficient during the early years of social media research, but with the new technological developments, theoretical expertise and improved facilities today, researchers are becoming more theoretically oriented in their studies.

**Table 3**

Theoretical application between two periods of time

Social Media Research	Frequency of social media research in the first phase (2004-2009)	Frequency of social media research in the second phase (2010-2015)
Journal Articles	7	72
PhD Dissertations	2	10
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>82</b>

### Types of Theories Most Commonly Used in Social Media Research

Not only this study looked into the theoretical presence in social media studies, but it also delved deeper into the theoretical trends by identifying the most commonly employed types of theories. From the findings of the 49 theory-driven social media related papers in the Malaysian journals of communication, media, social sciences and humanities, the study revealed 47 different types of theories or models were frequently utilised from the years 2004 until 2015. Moreover, there were certain theories or models that were cited in two or more articles pertaining to social media. Predominantly, theories that were mostly mentioned in the published articles were *uses and gratifications theory* (9), followed by *constructivist theory of learning* (4), *agenda-setting theory* (2), *diffusion of innovations theory* (2), *social penetration theory* (2), *media richness theory* (2), *social presence theory* (2), *technology acceptance model* (TAM) (2), *communities of practice theory* (COP) (2) and *dialogic communication theory* (2) (see Table 4). The other remaining 37 theories were used over the other papers. For PhD dissertations, results found 17 theories or models in the 12 theses on social media. Some of the theories were cited in more than two theses on social media. Intrinsically, the most widely employed theory in doctoral thesis was *uses and gratification theory* (2), followed by *diffusion of innovations theory* (2) and *media systems dependency theory* (2) (see Table 5). The different types of theories used in Malaysian journal articles and PhD dissertations implicated that researchers in the nation were discovering on the issues of social media from many perspectives (communication and other disciplines) to understand more in-depth on the adoption and consequences of social media to the society. This further coincides with the role of academic research in contributing to the assimilation of knowledge and to solidify theoretical footings among scholars. Yet, only a limited number of those theories were applied in two or more journal articles or PhD theses, denoting that only a small amount of dedicated following of certain theories among Malaysian scholars.

Apart from the findings of the content analysis, the in-depth interviews with Malaysian social media scholars have also discussed on the widely employed theories in exploring the social media phenomenon. The findings discussed that there are two types of theories that scholars employed such as communication theories and non-communication theories.

**Table 4**

Theories utilised in social media articles on Malaysian users

Theories	Frequency (n)
Uses and gratifications theory	9
Constructivist theory of learning	4
Agenda-setting theory	2
Diffusion of innovations theory	2
Social penetration theory	2
Media richness theory	2
Social presence theory	2
Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)	2
Communities of practice theory (COP)	2
Dialogic communication theory	2
Media systems dependency theory	1
Framing theory	1
Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT)	1
Public sphere concept	1
Multistep flow theory	1
Dynamic awareness theory	1
U-curve model	1
Communication privacy management (CPM)	1
Modernisation theory	1
Uncertainty reduction theory	1
Life satisfaction theory	1
Theories	Frequency (n)
Horman's exchange theory	1
Strength-of-weak-ties theory	1
Self-categorisation theory	1
Fogg's prominence-interpretation theory	1
Socio cultural theory	1
Social exchange theory	1
Information-seeking theory	1
Domain theory	1
Social influence theory	1
Cues filtered out approach	1
Lens model approach	1
Heuristic principles	1
Scaffolding strategies	1
Elaboration likelihood model	1
Motives and frequency model	1
Pedagogy, Social interaction and Technology model (PST)	1
Rank's model of persuasion	1
Searle's speech act framework	1
Baskaran local language referent framework	1
Jackson and Bradford's model for confidence policing	1
Second-order model of empowerment	1
Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP)	1
Social network component	1
Herbert's taxonomy of compliment response strategies	1
Hermeneutics	1
Online peer review framework	1
<b>47 Theories</b>	<b>66</b>

Note: One journal article may use more than one theory, thus, the frequency of theories will be different from the frequency of journal articles.

**Table 5**  
Theories mentioned in social media related theses

Theories	Frequency (n)
Uses and gratifications theory	2
Diffusion of innovations theory	2
Media systems dependency theory	2
Social capital theory	1
Constrict theory	1
Lens model approach	1
Berlo's Sender-Message-Channel-Receiver (SMCR)	1
Tholkaappiya Meypaatiyal theory	1
Agenda-setting theory	1
Priming theory	1
Media theory	1
Actor network theory	1
Delleze and Guattari's concepts of rhizomatic assemblages	1
Manual Delanda's social assemblage	1
Self-presentation theory	1
Citizenship theory	1
Communities of practice theory (COP)	1
<b>17 Theories</b>	<b>20</b>

Note: One dissertation may use more than one theory, thus, the frequency of theories will be different from the frequency of PhD dissertation.

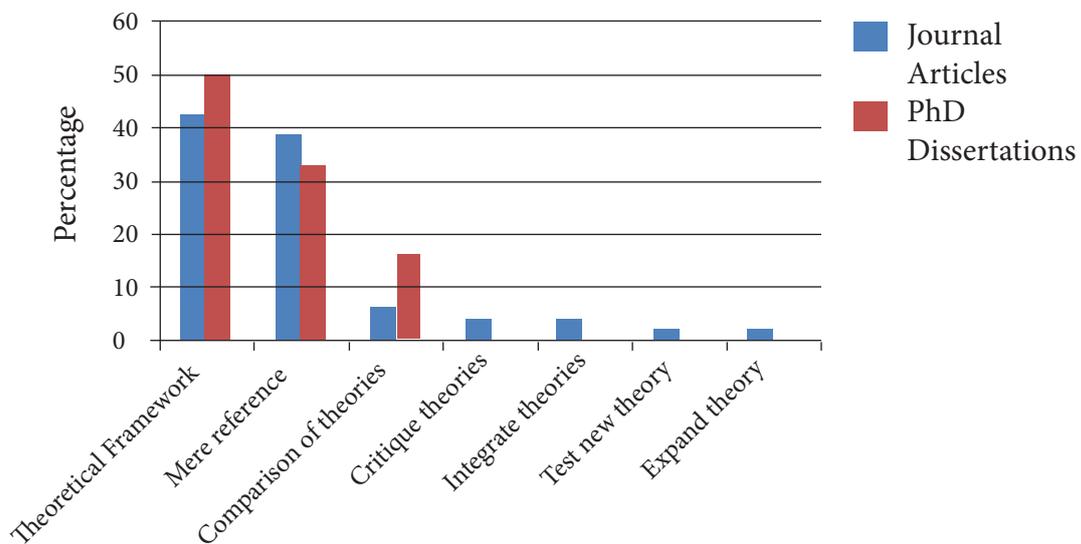
For the communication theories, Malaysian scholars prefer theories in mass media, communication and information technology, interpersonal communication and relations as well as organizational communication. In particular, among the theories that were named include *uses and gratifications*, *media systems dependency theory*, *diffusion of innovations*, *technology acceptance model (TAM)*, *unified theory of acceptance and use of technology theory (UTAUT)*, *theory of reasoned action*, *theory of planned behavior*, *social learning theory and organizational theory*. In addition, scholars also revealed that non-communication theories were also utilized in social media research, namely from the fields of marketing, sociology, psychology, technology and Islamic studies. Distinctively, the theories include *theory of consumption value*, *social ties*, *model of goal directed behavior*, *model of motivation process*, *behavioral reasoning theory*, *tri-component attitude model*, *push and pull theory*, *Bordieu theory of practice*, *actor network theory*, *social capital theory*, *Delleze and Guattari's concepts of rhizomatic assemblages*, *self-determination theory*, *technology readiness levels (TRL)*, *Assabad and Murunah*.

It is certainly evident that with the results of both analyses, the current trends in the most commonly types of theories in social media research were *uses and gratifications theory*, *constructivist theory of learning*, *diffusions of innovations theory*, *agenda-setting theory*, *media systems dependency theory*, *social penetration theory*, *media richness theory*, *social presence theory*, *technology acceptance model (TAM)* and *dialogic communication theory*. From the results, we can see that communication related theories were most commonly employed in social media research on Malaysian users. In fact, the findings concurred with those of past theoretical trends analyses in social media and mass communication research. Hassan and Salleh (1990) and Idid (2014) indicated that past research trends analysis on media communication studies in Malaysia commonly utilized theories were agenda-setting theory, diffusions of innovations

theory and uses and gratifications. In the West, scholars also emphasized on the usage of uses and gratifications, diffusions of innovations, dependency theory and agenda-setting theories in new media and social media related studies (Kim & Weaver, 2002; Cho & Khang, 2006; Khang, Ki & Ye, 2012). Nevertheless, this study also acknowledged that other theories that were applied in prior social media or new media related studies *such as information processing, personal relations, media use patterns, McLuhan’s media centred theory, social information processing theory and relationship management theory* were not mentioned in this study (Kim & Weaver, 2002; Wei, 2009; Khang, Ki & Ye, 2012).

**How The Cited Theories Are Used in Social Media Research?**

It is also worth noting that this study also raises the question on how the cited theories are being utilised in social media studies on Malaysian users. In exploring this objective, the current research examined the frequency of the usage of the cited theories by adopting the variables from Bryant and Miron’s (2004) study on theoretical trends in mass communication research. The results of the content analysis of journal articles and doctoral theses depicted that most extensive array of cited theories were employed as *theoretical frameworks* for the social media related studies (42.9% vs. 50%) (See Figure 1). This is then followed by merely referencing to certain theories or models (38.8% vs. 33.3%), *comparison of theories* (6.1% vs. 16.7%) and *critique of theories* (4.1% vs. 0%). What is certainly clear is the lack of theoretical development or construction among Malaysian scholars was apparent. The findings revealed that only the publication articles explored on theoretical developments such as *integration of theories* (4.1%), *testing new theory* (2%) and *expansion of a theory* (2%). However, there was still no paper on the proposal of new theory to understand the social media phenomenon in Malaysia. Thus, this could mean that theory building or development were still inadequate among scholars.



**Figure 2:** Uses of theories in social media journal articles and PhD dissertations

Additionally, the findings from the interview also discussed on the uses of theories by Malaysian social media scholars. Scholars mentioned that they utilized the cited theories by *expanding those theories* with the addition of new concepts or variables to existing theories with elements that were more relevant to the Malaysian culture, religion and values as well as based on the social media body of knowledge. Moreover, scholars *integrated theories* by combining two or more theories from either the communication field or with theories of other disciplines to further understand and address the social media issues. Findings also exude that scholars *compared one theory with another* to see the differences of those theories in explaining the social media phenomena. Other than that, scholars also used the cited theories as *theoretical framework* or as a structure to support or challenge the critical assumption of the research study. Not only that, *mere reference* was also apparent where scholars expressed that their students' research use theory to lip service, which is to support the social media issue but did not further explain in their study's framework, process or solution.

Thus, based on the findings of both content analysis and thematic analysis, this present study portrayed that theories were mostly employed as theoretical framework, mere reference, compare one or more theories, extend theories or integrate existing theories. Consistent with the results of previous studies, Byrant and Miron (2004) also remarked that 26.13% of their findings showed the uses of theories in mass communication studies from 1956 to 2000 were as theoretical framework. This current research painted a rosy picture of theoretical progression with a gradual increase of using the cited theories as theoretical framework. Unfortunately, this paper also implied that the theoretical foundations in Malaysia remain shaky, as scholars still lacked in theoretical construction of testing, integrating, expanding or in proposing new concepts or ideas for this phenomenon. There was no new theory that was developed specifically to understand and explain the social media issue in this nation. This is well expected as theoretical development is a global issue, however, the absence of theoretical development is considered alarming as when a study is atheoretical, the study is considered directionless (Wei, 2009).

Even though the social media phenomenon is considered new in our country, but we still need more efforts and developments to take place by considering new, improved or more robust concepts that may not be explained by the existing theories. Weaver (2000, p. 14) suggested that there is a dire need "to develop new concepts or theories to build on those that presently exist. Existing theories can still be useful approaches in social media environment, but in order for these theories to remain useful, the concepts or theories must be refined with other new concepts or theories". Scolari (2009) also agreed with the notion by proposing that although the existing concepts and theories are still useful for the new media, they still need to be remodeled to suit with the new approaches of the new media technology (Landow, 2003; Bolter, 2003). Therefore, it has been consistently proposed that theories should be refined and tested with the addition of new communication technology concepts in future social media research.

Aside from that, with the high frequency of existing communication and non-communication theories for social media research, another question arises on whether these established theories from the Western perspectives were appropriate for the Malaysian social media and communication landscape. Based on the findings, there were only a few studies that integrated and expanded theories with new concepts pertaining to social media as well as Malaysian cultural settings. Culture means "(1) the relatively specialized lifestyle of a group of

people, (2) that is passed on from one generation to the next through communication” (DeVito, 2016, p. 52). In spite of theories’ function should be applicable for all culture, but, theories should also be extended to suit with the respective cultural values, patterns or experience of a certain society or fractions of people. In 1988, Dissanayake stated that communication concepts or formulations from the Western idealogies were seen as not suitable for the Eastern societies like Asian countries. For example, Lasswell’s model was more focused on the communication approach of an individualist, ignoring the society, social structure and culture (Dissanayake, 2009). Meanwhile, Asians practice high-context communication that is more to collectivism in preserving good relationships with others (Hofstede, 2001; Hall & Hall, 1990). Thus, the theoretical trends showed that Malaysian scholars lack in offering robust theoretical approach suitable to the different cultural situations of this country. It seems that we lack in ‘local’ theories that are more relevant to our culture, norms, values, beliefs, attitude and behavior. Similarly, Hassan and Salleh (1990) and Merican (2005) also confronted the issue in their assessment on mass communication research in Malaysia. They mentioned that Malaysian scholars lacked in communication identity as we adopt Western idealogies in research, program syllabus and courses. With the globalised world of high social media adoption, cross-cultural communications among social media users are increasing. Because Malaysia has multiple ethnicities, vibrant cultural traditions and Asian norms and etiquette, social media research in this country should also focused on intercultural interactions, sensitivity and understanding. Thus, we suggest for more theoretical expansions and ‘localised’ theories to better understand social media usage and its effect on the Malaysian society.

### **Reasons to Using a Certain Theory in Social Media Research**

This study has also shed light on the reasons for theoretical usage in social media related studies on Malaysian users from the scholars’ point of views. The findings suggest that scholars applied certain theories in their research because of the background, interest and relevancy of the theories in understanding, exploring and explaining social media related issues and problems.

### **Background**

In the interview, scholars strongly believed that background was one of the main reasons to the utilisation of theories. Background means something that is prepared before hand to explain a particular situation or information on a person’s education, social or work experience (Background, 2017). According to the scholars, theoretical usage was based on two reasons, research background and education background. Particularly, the findings indicated that scholars employed theories based on the research background to fulfil their research objective and problem of their studies. A theory is also employed as a framework to test the research assumptions or hypothesis in the social media study. Meanwhile, scholars also emphasized that theories were used to answer the research questions of the study. In addition, scholars also chose certain theories as they perceived the cited theories were accurate and appropriate to understand the social media issue at hand.

Additionally, scholars mentioned that education background was one of the reasons to theoretical application. One of the informants mentioned that he utilised the Bordieu theory of practice and actor network theory because anthropology is his educational background and he wanted to explore on both the communication and anthropologist aspects of the social media

issue. Moreover, scholars usually use the same type of theories because of their limited training and experience on theoretical application and construction. Thus, Malaysia needs more local experts in communication that are strong in theory development. Students and scholars should constantly upgrade themselves and get trained with more theoretical knowledge and understanding for better cultivation of theories.

### **Interest**

The results of the thematic analysis also showed that scholars' interest played a part in using certain theories. They preferred a certain theory because it was perceived meaningful, where they feel connected and happy using the theory. In particular, scholars remarked that the theory is suitable because they trust and have personal connection to the theory. Scholars also felt content when seeing that their students also applied the same set of theories in their respective research

### **Relevancy**

Findings also painted a picture that relevancy of theories led to the usage of theory. According to the informants, the theories are relevant in terms of commonly utilised theories for social media phenomena. This could be because the theories are considered the best or most appropriate theory to understand and solve social media related problems or in looking into the communication and cultural elements of social media research. However, the usage of certain theories based on only education training or background and interest could lead to bias usage of certain theories, thus restricting oneself from further improving in their theoretical capabilities. Thus, this facilitate that future studies should incorporate more diversified perspectives with the utilisation of other theories or models, or better yet by creating noble ones that is suitable for the research at hand.

## **CONCLUSION**

Scanning from the early emergence (2004) to the current literature (2015) on social media, this study represents the most updated research trend study on social media studies in Malaysia. In the previous social media research trend studies by Malaysian scholars, their studies have only focused on research topics, issues category, sampling research method and data analysis (Alias, DeWitt, Siraj, Kamaruddin & Daud, 2013; Alias, Sabdan, Abdul Aziz, Mohammed, Hamidon & Jomhari, 2013; Alias, Razak, elHadad, Mat Noh, Kunjambu & Muniandy, 2013). On the contrary, this study is a more comprehensive analysis by covering more research patterns such as theoretical presence, the most prevalently utilised theory and how the cited theories are utilised as.

As a whole, this study has exhibited continuous growth in the frequency of social media studies in Malaysia. The current research also indicated social media has gained growing interest among scholars in keeping up with the promising adoption and impact of social media usage in the daily lives of Malaysians. The results and discussions of this study have portrayed a greater outlook and elaboration on the encouraging theoretical trends of social media studies on Malaysian users that can subsequently pave the path for future research in this field. With the identification of the theoretical trends in social media research, students and researchers can utilise these research patterns to prepare for the foreseeable future of the field. Scholars may

also use the research trends in garnering more ideas and concepts for the cultivation of theories and social media technological advancement.

We also understand that the 79 Malaysian journal articles and 12 PhD dissertations do not constitute a representative sample of all social media related studies on Malaysian users, however, they do cover a wide spectrum of issues and trends in theoretical application. Even so, this body of literature still needs to be further expanded and explicated by including publications from high impact journals that pertains to social media research on Malaysian users. However, it should be noted that theoretical foundations and rigorousness need to be further solidified for future scholarly endeavours. More fundamental and theoretically motivated research is needed to further explain the social media issues in the country. Theory based research can yield more knowledgeable insights, direction and progression of theoretical application and development in social media research.

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