Exploring the Usage of *#Kerajaan Gagal* by Twitter Users During COVID-19

Nurul Ayuni Mohd Nuzulrudin[1], Ireena Nasiha Ibnu[2]*, Yasmin Yaccob[3]

[1] Infusion Sdn. Bhd. A-3A-12, Merchant Square, Jalan Tropicana Selatan 1, Tropicana, 47410 Petaling Jaya, Selangor
[2] Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor Darul Ehsan
[3] Faculty of Humanities, Management and Science, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Bintulu Sarawak Campus, Nyabau Road, 97008 Bintulu, Sarawak, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author's email: ireena@uitm.edu.my

ABSTRACT

Social media has become the preferred political communication tool whereby it has been used to influence public political perception and act as a platform for political discourse. During the COVID-19 pandemic, people expressed their opinions on the ruling government through trending hashtags. This study explores the role of the political hashtag *#KerajaanGagal* in affecting public perception of the government and how public debate on social media is influenced by the political conflict in Malaysia. The study aims to examine how the usage of the political hashtag *#KerajaanGagal* on social media influences the public perception and opinion towards the then Prime Minister, Tan Sri Muhyiddin's government. Qualitative research methodology was adopted in this study by conducting in-depth interviews with ten informants among Twitter users who are opinion leaders, activists, social media and political analysts, all of whom are between millennial age groups. Key outcomes of the trending political hashtag *#KerajaanGagal* were found to defy the 'Spiral of Silence Theory' that individuals tend to self-censor their opinions to fit in with the perceived majority. The catchy *#KerajaanGagal* hashtag reflects a relatable current situation, gaining public attention. The usage and further trending of *#KerajaanGagal* is found to be due to public dissatisfaction and frustrations during the COVID-19 pandemic and Movement Control Order (MCO) coupled with the lack of engagement or response from the targeted party. Social media is able to transform the political scene as it enables the public to practice freedom of speech and 'find' like-minded people to align themselves in support of a cause.

Keywords: COVID-19, *#Kerajaan Gagal,* political communication, political hashtags, Twitter users

INTRODUCTION

Social media plays a prominent role in the political arena. A recent study by Charron and Annoni (2020) revealed that people who consume the latest news from social media would perceive the government differently from those who read news on traditional media. In Malaysia, social media plays a huge role in disseminating up-to-date information linked to the government and this is proven based on social media's impact on Malaysia's election landscape during the 14th General Election (Hamid & Rahman, 2018). This shows the importance of social media as a public main source of information, including political and governmental updates.

According to Chinnasamy and Abdul Manaf (2018), Twitter has become a platform for political communication and discourse as people express their opinions and use the platform for political battles with people who have different political standings. This later influences people's political perception towards the government especially

during political crises. Topics go trending on social media as more people are discussing the matter and one of the ways to check on the trending topics is through hashtags.

#Kerajaan Gagal started trending on Twitter in April 2021 when people were frustrated with the then Prime Minister, Tan Sri Muhyiddin's government which seemed to be incompetent in handling COVID-19 issues and the national economy (Malaysia Kini, 2021). Moreover, the public was sharing opinions on the issue of rising prices of goods, low wages, and compliance with standard operating procedures. Data from ISEAS has shown that a total of 242,000 Twitter users used the hashtag *#KerajaanGagal* 1.42 million times and garnered a total reach of 54.7 million viewers (Leong & Rosli, 2021).

In March 2020 during the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin was appointed as Malaysia's eighth Prime Minister after political turmoil due to the sudden resignation of Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad (Lee, 2021). However, his tenure lasted until August 2021 after losing majority support in the parliament (Lee, 2021), and the ongoing negative comments on social media through various political hashtags such as *#KerajaanGagal* are considered to have contributed to this outcome.

The main issue of this research is to investigate the role of social media hashtags in affecting public perception of the government and how public debate on social media can influence political conflict in Malaysia. The various use of hashtags on Twitter and the spread of hatred towards the ruling party seem to have created more conversations amongst the public to bring down the government. Therefore, this research aims to examine how the usage of *#KerajaanGagal* on social media influenced the public perception and opinion towards Tan Sri Muhyiddin's (TSM) government. The specific objectives of the research are as follows:

1) to identify some of the key factors that drive the public to use the hashtag *#KerajaanGagal*; and
2) to explore how the usage of *#KerajaanGagal* on social media influenced the public perception towards the downfall of Tan Sri Muhyiddin's government.

BACKGROUND OF STUDY
The Evolution of Social Media as a Medium for Political Communication
The news environment has evolved tremendously in the past decade, the existence of social media brings out a new platform for people to access the latest news and information. According to Andi (2021), Facebook and Twitter have been the most visited social media sites for people to get the latest news and pick up new information, while social media such as Instagram and TikTok are platforms for entertainment. Twitter is noted to be the prominent social media platform used by journalists and politicians to update news and gather updated news through trending items (Andi, 2021). This shows that social media, in particular Twitter, is now a platform used by political activists, parties and politicians to reach their target audience conduct their propaganda and communicate information.

Social media users are more exposed to different kinds of information, and they have the space to express their opinions and contribute their ideas in a political discourse. According to Holt et al. (2013), political communication is influenced by the political motivation and political participation of individuals. Especially in a democratic country, the society finds the need to follow news outlets and become interested and involved in the political processes. The social network serves its functions to help people be connected to politicians and political activist groups (Masías et al., 2018). People find it easier to communicate with politicians via social media as there are no barriers to expressing their opinions The same goes for politicians who use social media as a platform to gather comments from the public regarding their new initiatives and campaigns and communicate their responses.

In Malaysia, it was found that 22 percent of Facebook users use the platform to get the latest news, and a smaller percentage of social media users use Twitter to read the latest news as Twitter is mostly used for sharing opinions and debates on a particular topic (Andi, 2021). This shows that Twitter acts as one of the main platforms for political communication and discourse as the public finds it easier to express their opinions on the platform.

Social Media Trending Hashtags and Public Perception
In the realm of Twitter, Geboers & Van De Wiele (2020) argue that hashtags enhance the discoverability of tweets, fostering connections between users without established follower/followee connections. In addition, the trending

topics featured on Twitter promote the utilisation of hashtags for events, cultural expression, and participation in existing discussions (Leavitt, 2014).

People tend to search more on the trending hashtags and topics, leading them to make perceptions and assumptions based on their keyboard search. These trending hashtags later influence the public's perception to believe and perceive matters within a certain scope. According to LaPoe et al. (2021), during the COVID-19 pandemic that started in early 2020, an infodemic occurred whereby there was lots of misinformation related to the disease spread across online platforms. Hashtags such as # COVID19 and #Coronavirus went trending between early to mid-March 2020 which brought uncertainty among the citizens, creating a public perception of the severity of the outbreak.

Social Media for Expressing Public Opinion
Social media platforms are truly different from traditional media as it motivates people to interact and communicate with other users, as well as contribute their points of view on particular matters (Kim, 2022). In this context, we see how social media plays an important role in providing a platform for its users to express their opinions and views regarding the political state of a country. The study by Kim (2022) implemented the Uses and Gratifications Theory, whereby it examines the gratifications of social media usage such as informational, relational, for entertainment purposes, to express opinions or generic usage. This later promotes political engagement and encourages political participation among the users, while reinforcing people's political partisan views.

The existence of social media encourages online participatory behaviors as it drives someone to share their opinions and discuss a matter with other users, and this same goes for making political expressions online (Knoll et al, 2020). As stated by Cicchini et al. (2022) the sharing of information on social media influences the process of opinion formation on ideological and political matters. For instance, the connection between users is created based on their intellectual or ideological beliefs, and their trust in the same opinion leaders or politicians. This connection later brings out their confidence in expressing their opinions as they realise the presence of supporters.

Moreover, activist groups and influencers often express strong opinions on various matters and tend to criticise whatever is showcased on media platforms through their social media sites (Andi, 2021). At times, these people will be posting accurate information with a fact background check, however, there are activist groups and influencers who use these social media platforms wrongly by spreading false information without fact-checking.

The Role of Social Media Hashtags in Politics
Topics go trending on social media as more people are discussing the matter and one of the ways to check on the trending topics is through hashtags. In a study by Jamil et al. (2019), it was noted that the rise of social media hashtags usage regarding political matters will have a positive influence on the rise of political communication in a society, which will increase political promotion. According to them, the trend of using hashtags for political discourse is spreading worldwide as the public uses it as a way to show their support and give comments and arguments on political matters. In short, social media hashtags play a huge role as a promotional tool, not only for marketing products and services but also to enhance one's political agenda.

The trending hashtags on social media are used for political discourse more by political activists, supporters and the public as the public find it more convenient to express their opinion through hashtags that can go trending and viral in less than 24 hours. Besides that, hashtags are also used to bring together supporters of a particular political party as a word or a phrase is usually used as a hashtag to express a concern, protest and raise awareness on a specific issue (Jamil et al., 2019). Among politicians, hashtags are also used by them to convey messages that relate to their campaigns and to reach a wider target audience. Van Vliet et al. (2020) conducted research on the Twitter Parliamentarian Database (TPD) which contains all the tweets of members of 26 national parliaments and 1 European parliament, and it was found that politicians often use hashtags for issue positioning. This is usually practiced by countries that practice majoritarian systems, which have two major political opposing parties.

Spiral of Silence Theory
In this study, the Spiral of Silence Theory (SST) is used as a basis for understanding how trending political hashtags can influence public opinion. A theory founded by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann in 1974, this theory suggests that people tend to protect and hold their viewpoint on a certain issue when they discover that they belong to a minority group, as they are later affected by having to face the fear of isolation, which is the fear of missing out from the majority viewpoint. According to the theory, people in the minority group tend to conform to the thoughts and opinions of the majority group (West & Turner, 2017).

Platforms like social media serve as prominent arenas for individuals to express themselves and shape their public image. Social media's perceived anonymity encourages users to share diverse opinions. This means that social media platforms offer a space for users to share unpopular perspectives online. Previous scholars argue that that the decision to share opinions on social media is influenced by observing public opinion (Hampton, Rainie, Lu, Dwyer, Shin, & Purcell, 2014; (Dubois & Szwarc, 2018). Interestingly, this observation can impact willingness to express opinions, while fear of isolation may not be as significant a factor (Xiaodong & Li, 2016). Lia, Raymond, & Xi (2017) added that self-presentational concern is a significant factor influencing the willingness to share opinions on social media.

While previous research has explored disparities between face-to-face and computer-mediated communication, there has been limited investigation into how individuals' perceptions of the capabilities of different communication channels can affect their decision to express opinions or engage in self-censorship when using communication channels such as social media.
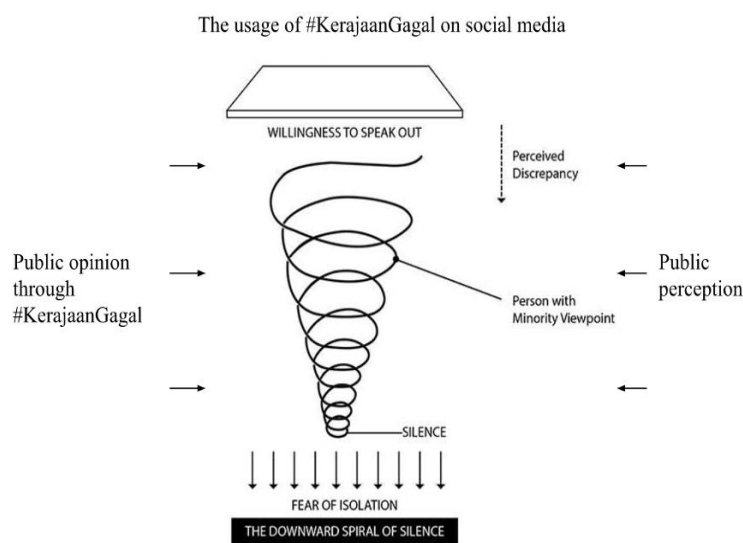

Figure 1: Spiral of Silence Model (Apuke, 2018).

By focusing on the usage of hashtag *#KerajaanGagal* during COVID-19 by Twitter users, this study aims to investigate the decision-making process of sharing opinions on social media by applying the Spiral of Silence Theory. The study seeks to determine whether individuals holding negative views of the current government (the vocal minority) are influenced by observing public opinion and whether they are not affected by the fear of isolation effect as suggested by the Spiral of Silence Theory. Thus, this study is a pioneering exploration of public perceptions among Twitter users in Malaysia during the pandemic, specifically focusing on political hashtags. Additionally, it represents the initial application of the Spiral of Silence theory to Malaysian society.

METHOD
This study employs a qualitative research methodology that gathers and analyses non-numerical data, usually used in the humanities and social sciences studies to further understand ideas, opinions and individual experiences (Bhandari, 2022). Phenomenology design was adopted as it highlights one's life experiences that are associated with the phenomena (Neuman, 2013). This is to discover the usage of *#KerajaanGagal* in-depth and the influence on public perception and opinion through the hashtag.

To collect the data, the researchers decided to conduct in-depth interviews to ensure a detailed explanation of the research questions and the scenario of the matter (Neuman, 2013). Ten informants were interviewed on a one-to-one basis until saturation was met; whereby when opinions were repeated by a few informants, the researcher then stopped at that specific number of informants (Cober & Adams, 2020). Additionally, there is no specific sample size for qualitative methods as compared to quantitative methods that have a sample size (N size) (Cober & Adams, 2020). Therefore, the study stopped gathering data after the tenth informant. The researcher conducted the interviews for around one hour via face-to-face in the Klang Valley area and video call for respondents among political journalists and analysts who were actively engaged during the pre-event period and post-Malaysian 15th General Election happenings of November 2022. Online interviews such as video calls are a practical choice during the pandemic, as it was effective in tackling issues of access, inclusivity, and fairness that can arise due to

uneven digital tool access (Ahmad Azhari et al., 2022). Besides, during the interview, the researcher remained neutral by not sharing personal views and feelings so that the participants could openly share their thoughts and perspectives (Chong, 2022).

In selecting the informants, the researcher selected Twitter users as the study population with the application of non-probability sampling, which is purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is when the informants are selected through researchers' judgments based on specific characteristics (Neuman, 2013). The characteristics are Twitter users who are in the millennial age, consisting of 38.5 percent within the 25-34 years old age bracket and 20.7 percent within the 35-49 years old age bracket respectively, totaling 59.2 percent of the total Twitter population (Statista, 2022). The informants are political journalists and analysts, social media analysts, opinion leaders and activists, who have a minimum of 1,000 followers, acknowledge and use the hashtag *#KerajaanGagal* (see Table 1).

Table 1: List of Informants

No.	Name	Age	Occupation	No. of Twitter Followers
1	Firdaus	38	Political journalist and opinion leader	51,900
2	Ibrahim	34	Political secretary and analyst	35,000
3	Shamellya	26	Political Activist	5,500
4	Hadi	35	Political journalist and analyst	30,000
5	Syaza	37	Political scientist	1,000
6	Iqbal	30	Political content creator and opinion leader	48,400
7	Ushar	34	Political journalist and opinion leader	18,000
8	Endie	38	Political strategist and secretary	7,000
9	Daniel	32	Political communication scholar and analyst	1,000
10	Amirul	33	Political journalist and analyst	9,000

Thematic analysis was adopted in the study, to analyse data to understand the experiences, opinions, and behaviours of the data set (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Thematic analysis is a method for analyzing qualitative data that involves searching across a data set to identify, analyze, and report repeated patterns (Braun and Clarke, 2006). To identify some of the key factors that drive the public to use the hashtag *#KerajaanGagal* the interview data was analysed using thematic analysis based on identifying three themes, namely: 'Covid-19 and Movement Control Order (MCO)', 'to seek attention and recognition', and 'attraction and curiosity'. For the second objective that the trending hashtag *#KerajaanGagal* influenced public opinion in the downfall of TSM's government, the following themes were generated: 'government Covid-19 response', 'the rise of Covid-19 cases', 'negative vs positive reputation'. Below are the findings from the data set of responses from the list of interview questions.

FINDINGS
Factors that drive the public to use the hashtag *#KerajaanGagal*
Three themes were generated from the data set of the responses to questions for the first objective, namely: 'Covid-19 and Movement Control Order (MCO)', 'to seek attention and recognition', and 'attraction and curiosity'. It was found that the main reason for resorting to the use of *#KerajaanGagal* was due to anger and stress that happened during the pandemic as people were not able to go out personally and air their views within the traditional avenues. Social media was one of the best options for people to express anger and frustration towards the government. The hashtag has also become an advantage to the opposition parties to comment about the government and gain support from the public to perceive the same. When the hashtag suits the situation, this also encourages people to use it to gain higher engagement for their postings.

a)   COVID-19 and Movement Control Order (MCO)
Trending hashtags on social media are often used by the public, news media outlets and politicians to share and disseminate messages online (LaPoe et al.,2021), and *#KerajaanGagal* is one of the trending hashtags that created awareness on the topic of a failed government. Most informants believe that the usage of *#KerajaanGagal* was high due to the anger and stress that came along with the COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO). Moreover, people were only equipped with social media as a platform to express themselves and share their thoughts and opinions, as illustrated by the following excerpts;

> *If we look at Kerajaan Gagal, we can relate it to MCO, when cases increased, and people had*
> *to stay at home. People who are stressed because of quarantine can go into depression if it involves*
> *death. That's how the hashtag started. People are mad because they cannot go out, so social media is*

the only option, to relate every problem to the government. (Informant 1; 8th November 2022)

It happened because people didn't get enough help and it was the time of MCO so a lot of people complained on Twitter about the government not doing anything and the government imposed double standards, some were fined but not the ministers. (Informant 8; 2nd December 2022)

The economy was bad, people could not go out for work, so people were stressed. So, people cannot think rationally because they were trapped at home at that time. Unfortunately, Muhyiddin was the Prime Minister, so he looked bad because there were lots of different emotions among the people. (Informant 3; 15th November 2022)

b)   Seek attention and recognition

The Informants also believe that the usage of *#KerajaanGagal* is also due to seeking attention and recognition among followers and social media audiences, gaining higher traction and later taking advantage of the situation with the purpose of joining the bandwagon. There were also Twitter users who used anonymous accounts to express their frustrations towards the government using hashtags as they find it easier to be vocal without people knowing who they are. The following excerpt illustrates this:

There are some who use a second account or anonymous account to make controversial statements. Some people just want attention. Sometimes people tweet something else but still use the hashtag #KerajaanGagal, which amplifies the hashtag. Some people take advantage of using the hashtag just for the sake of joining the bandwagon. (Informant 1; 8th November 2022)

Sometimes most of the tweets are not relevant but people still mention Kerajaan Gagal, so it became trending. So people took advantage, people who were initially not aware of the hashtag now know and use the hashtag. Sometimes the issue is not that big, but they want to join the bandwagon. (Informant 3; 15th November 2022)

c)   Attraction and Curiosity

When it comes to trending hashtags, the most important thing is how they grab people's attention to look over and use them in their postings. Trending hashtags are used as a search tool for what is happening online, and they grab public attention to a particular topic. For example;

It's an easy way to advertise an issue. It's an easy way to get messages across. Doesn't always work well, but when it works. If you have a catchy enough hashtag, you will entice people to want to know more about it. (Informant 4; 15th November 2022)

The idea of hashtags is they want something catchy and grab people's attention. So, when you have this kind of attention, it will then reach the government. Sometimes it can be spontaneous, this phrase somehow catches on, and everyone else wants to do it as well. I guess, a strong word, catches their attention. (Informant 5; 15th November 2022)

I think Kerajaan Gagal is a brilliant hashtag that highlights the failures of the previous government in tackling societal issues. (Informant 7; 2nd December 2022)

The phrase Kerajaan Gagal is easy to understand, so of course you need someone like an influencer who can disseminate to a high volume of followers. We can create a lot of hashtags but if they are not attractive enough it won't gain traction. (Informant 8; 2nd December 2022)

When a certain hashtag is catchy enough in just a few words or letters it captures the mood, it can influence how people are affected by the policies. I used Kerajaan Gagal quite often at that time, even after his tenure has passed, I still use the hashtag to describe the government at that time. (Informant 10; 4th December 2022)

How the Usage of *#KerajaanGagal* on Social Media Influenced the Public Perception Towards the Downfall of Tan Sri Muhyiddin's Government.

Three themes were identified from the data collected. The first one is the 'government COVID-19 response' that represents a poor administration with slow feedback and response to issues happening during the pandemic. This has created a negative perception among the public towards the ruling government. Next, the 'rise of COVID-19

cases' that resulted in ongoing MCO and the Emergency Proclamation 2021 does not support the checks and balances in a parliamentary sitting. However, there was a rather 'negative vs positive reputation' towards Muhyiddin's government as there were different perceptions between urban, suburban, and rural areas. This was proved in the recent 15th General Election whereby *Perikatan Nasional,* a new coalition party gained high votes, especially from the Malays and Muslims.

a)   Government COVID-19 response
The perception that comes along with the hashtag is also related to how the government responded to the COVID-19 situation. Due to their slow feedback and response, this created a rather negative perception among the people towards the government. This is illustrated by the following excerpt;

> *When there's an attack from the people, the government does not respond and runs from the problem so people make a point that it is a failed government. If there is proper management, it could be avoided. When there is #KerajaanGagal, we need to take a step back on why it creates anger, there needs to be replies, feedback and response from the government.*
> (Informant 1; 8th November 2022)

> *The power distance between the public and the government increased even more than the administration before that, the more we started to feel like there's one set of rules for normal people, and one set of rules for Kayangan. That feeling gave voice to a lot of unhappiness.*
> (Informant 10; 4th December 2022)

> *People want a quick response, the government acted slow which caused third parties or the opposition to take advantage of pointing out the government's failures. The hashtag shows that the government was not doing enough, so people see tweets from the opposition parties about it and think of it as suara rakyat (people's voice). Plus incompetencies of some ministers with viral postings also encourage more people to use the hashtag Kerajaan Gagal.*
> (Informant 3; 15th November 2022)

b)   The rise of COVID-19 cases
The perception towards the government was also highly influenced by how they managed the COVID-19 crisis, the ongoing MCO and the introduction of Emergency Proclamation 2021 that provided a bigger authority to the government. *#KerajaanGagal* also reflects the issue of rising prices of goods, low wages and compliance with Standard Operating Procedures or SOPs (Malaysia Kini, 2021).

> *At that time Tan Sri Muhyiddin showed his commitment that this is not the government that you want but this is the government that you have. At first, his rating was high and the majority of people understand that MCO needs to be implemented as a precaution and if we compare it to other countries. Then the delta variant came in, we had so many kinds of MCO, so people gave up because they could not go out to work. So, all the transitions made people angry. Then we have an emergency proclamation where the government can decide things without parliament seating, so there's no check and balance. So, people were more angry.*
> (Informant 1; 8th November 2022)

c)   Negative vs positive reputation
Even with the negative perception shown on Twitter through the hashtag *#KerajaanGagal,* the Informants somehow believe that Tan Sri Muhyiddin and his government still have a positive reputation among the people, especially looking at the result of General Election 15 at the end of 2022.

> *In areas where Pakatan Harapan won, it influenced the voters to continuously decide that this is indeed a failed government. However, for suburban areas as well as rural areas, it's also entrenching them to believe that the government is not failing, and therefore there are a lot of defenders and ability for them to defend the kind of actions that were done by the previous administration. Those who believe that Tan Sri Muhyiddin did a good job continuously are further confident and convinced that Tan Sri Muhyiddin is doing a good job.*
> (Informant 2; 8th November 2022)

> *Some people try to tell me that, oh, people hate that period. And as you may discover, I see it more as 50-50. You know, of course, some people were not happy with his government, saying what he did more, like, short-term measures. But some people feel that it's not enough and that his*

short-term measures will lead to further structural damages, especially to the economy down the road. But we can't deny that the other parts of Malaysia who were happy and grateful for what he did, yes, they are shocked, but that's exactly what they want. Some people are still happy with him, with his performance. (Informant 5; 15th November 2022)

Maybe we see it negatively on Twitter but then we have all these surveys being done by Merdeka Centre saying that most people are still positive about Muhyiddin Yassin. His popularity rate for the first time becoming the Prime Minister was around 67-69 percent, after one year it went down to around 50%. Even though on Twitter most people hate him, the survey shows that he is still if up there compared to other Prime Minister candidates. So, Twitter is just a people living in a bubble, we see those who live in suburban and rural areas, there are more Perikatan Nasional supporters. So, it's like 50-50. (Informant 8; 2nd December 2022)

I think in the particular case of the Perikatan Nasional government, my analysis detected a shift in opinion. I think something quite interesting is that as the conservative Malay support has shifted, away from the end, we are starting to see a lot of the failures of the Muhyiddin administration become forgotten. Many people are happier to associate those mistakes Malay with Barisan Nasional. So I think in the recent election, that is all of a shift, where the conservative voter base is starting to see itself as more of a united force. (Informant 10; 4th December 2022)

We saw this really strange phenomenon during the early days of the leading government. Up till the time he got kicked out. People were referring to him as Abah. I think the perception of Muhyiddin's government, one thing was, I think it was a PR strategy. I think it was a real move, where someone realised, okay, if we can just portray them as these elders who need to be respected. I think public perception of Abah or Muhyiddin's government was, I think unprecedented, one and two manufactured. (Informant 6; 3rd December 2022)

I said that Muhyiddin managed to just very quickly jump over anyway, I say something like he managed to get in touch with the emotions of his base. I think that he was being quite a statesman and delivered a good first speech. You know, it was quite good. Fast forward to today.
(Informant 9; 4th December 2022)

DISCUSSION

Previous scholars argue that factors such as interest in politics, level of trust, participation, and persistence of political views play significant roles in online political activism (Chinnasamy & Abdul Manaf, 2018; Hayes, Smock, & Carr, 2015). Besides, the growth of online social platforms such as Twitter where people express a wide range of viewpoints, with the option to use anonymous identity has made it an ideal platform, especially for those who might be part of the vocal minority. This has challenged the effect of the Spiral of Silence Theory which presumes that the vocal minority would presumably fear this isolation effect (Chaudhry & Gruzd, 2019), revealing that there are mitigating circumstances such as disengagement or lack of counter-response by the targeted party.

According to Leong & Rosli (2021), hashtags are indicators that further amplify the user's statement and empower the online community to showcase their opinion around issues and matters. Our research findings on Twitter reveal that the vocal minority feels at ease expressing their views and enjoys using the trending hashtag *#KerajaanGagal* in the online environment. The usage of hashtags during the pandemic increased and was high due to the anger and stress that came along with the COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO). There were a lot of issues happening around that period, causing people to be stressed about staying at home and needing to adhere to the implementation of MCO.

Our findings also show that the usage of hashtag *#KerajaanGagal* was used to gain higher engagement on social media while using the ongoing pandemic situation to get supporters. The hashtag appeared continuously for a longer period as compared to other political hashtags during the pandemic due to the government's handling of the COVID-19 crisis (Leong & Rosli, 2021). Due to the slow response over an especially long period, the government's reputation worsened as people were also having a hard time during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is supported in an article by Malaysia Kini (2021) whereby the hashtag *#KerajaanGagal* was reported to be due to the government's incompetencies in handling COVID-19 matters and the national economy as a whole. This was affirmed by the findings of this research. Furthermore, Leong and Rosli (2021) in their book

stated that the decision to post a Twitter posting that relates to political matters happens when the issue triggers the user's interest and awareness about the topic.

The *#KerajaanGagal* is a catchy hashtag and shows that when the hashtag is catchy enough, it suits the current situation and is relatable to the public, then it will surely grab people's attention and they will tend to use it. From the Spiral of silence Theory's context, the online environment such as Twitter and the usage of *#KerajaanGagal* had empowered and encouraged the informants to express their opinions even with the non-anonymous identity. Our research findings support the work of previous scholars where the decision to share opinions on social media is strongly influenced by observing public opinion, as through the *#KerajaanGagal* (Hampton, Rainie, Lu, Dwyer, Shin, & Purcell, 2014; Dubois & Szwarc, 2018).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic that began in early 2020 and the subsequent political turmoil experienced in Malaysia were the main factors in the creation of the trending hashtag *#KerajaanGagal* on Twitter. The public faced a lot of challenges in terms of physical, psychological, and financial aspects, and #*KerajaanGagal* was used to express their opinions towards the government online. This hashtag shaped political perception, created opinions and public sentiments on Tan Sri Muhyiddin government's initiatives, especially during the pandemic.

The hashtag has also become an advantage to the opposition to gain support from the public and encourage them to use the same hashtag and get high engagement. It is apparent that the Government's poor administration and slow response to social media postings contributed to a significant increase in negative perception and reputation resulting in the downfall of the government.

Limitation and Significance of Study

The study relates to the limited conditions for communication during the pandemic period in Malaysia. It focuses on the specific political climate in Malaysia during the period of government ruled by Tan Sri Muhyiddin from 2020 until 2021. However, in a broader sense, it could be still used as a benchmark for other governments to apply this study through the importance and influence of political hashtags towards public perception and opinion towards the ruling government. This study is aimed to assist social media, Public Relations and political strategists in understanding the aspects that drive someone to express their political opinions via hashtags online, advising the importance of online political communications that drive one's reputation, and lastly to contribute to the body of knowledge in the communication industry.

RECOMMENDATION

Realising the importance of political hashtags for influencing opinion towards the government, this paper suggests that the government should be aware of trending topics that could create political discourse, which can also jeopardise public harmony such as the hashtag *#KerajaanPembunuh*. Hence, more varied content analysis of different hashtags on the Twitter approach will be useful for future research. As the public, it is important to understand that there is great potential of using hashtags on social media to influence opinion, and to equip ourselves with media and digital literacy, so we can differentiate the true and false news spread through trending social media hashtags before spreading it online.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Nurul Ayuni Mohd Nuzulrudin led the study's conceptualization, conducted primary data collection, and played a key role in data analysis and interpretation. Ireena Nasiha Ibnu contributed to refining the research design, enhancing the depth of qualitative findings, and contributed to editing the manuscript, while Yasmin Yaccob contributed to the validation of the research findings, participated in the review process and helped synthesize results for manuscript preparation.

DECLARATION OF STATEMENT

We declare that the article is an original contribution, and that all the statements presented as facts are from the authors' research.

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CONFLICT of INTEREST STATEMENT

We wish to confirm that there are no known conflicts of interest associated with this publication and there has been no significant financial support for this work that could have influenced its outcome.

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