



An Active and Popular Facebook Page Equals Better Chances of Winning an Election? The 2013 Malaysian General Election Case

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Abstract

Social media is becoming a significant platform for election campaigning allowing for both communication and interaction between candidates and the public. However, most research points to social media being used mainly for broadcasting of information, and there is a need to test whether the interactive features are being used and are influencing election results. With the ability of researchers to download and collect masses of raw data from various social media such as Twitter and Facebook, the research into social media is now becoming more quantitative. With traditional media completely owned and controlled by the government, while the internet is free and uncensored, the use of social media in Malaysia has exploded over the past few years, with a corresponding use of this medium in campaigning, leading to researches attributing this to the rise of a viable opposition. In this paper we study passive interaction using data captured directly from the 2013 Malaysian General Election candidates' Facebook Pages (FP), and show that the success of a candidate who is active and popular on Facebook rises to 77% when compared to the 38% general success rate of all candidates.

Keywords: election campaigning; 2013 Malaysian General Election; social media; Facebook Page; interactions

1. Introduction

A significant platform for communication and interaction especially with regards to election campaigning [1], social media provides better information to voters, allowing them to engage with candidates and ultimately becomes a mechanism for voters to exercise their political rights [2]. While most research indicates widespread use of the Internet and social media for broadcasting [3] similar to traditional media, some political candidates are starting to make use of social media's interactive features [4]. This paper looks at social media campaigning using Facebook in Malaysia, a country where the rise of the opposition (from less than 10% before 2008 to the current 40% of the Malaysian parliament) is attributed to social media [5]. We explore passive interaction using data collected by us from the Facebook Pages (FP) of candidates that has been selected from the 13th Malaysian general elections in 2013 (MGE13). In particular, analyzing the number of posts along with the number of 'likes' collected by each of these posts, our data shows that the success rate of a candidate who is active and popular on Facebook rises to 77% from the 38% general success rate of all candidates.

Malaysia is an interesting case study, especially when the government put full control on traditional media [6]. However, with the governments' guarantee that the Internet remains uncensored [7] and without the need to apply for a special publication license [6], the internet started to be the preferred broadcast ground for media companies and citizens [8]. Furthermore, research, using questionnaires, surveys and observations from past literature, shows that Malaysian in general welcome the openness of the Internet (see, for example, [9]) [53]. Many researchers (including [10], [11]) attribute the success of the opposition to this online accessibility. The opposition increased its seats in the Malaysian Parliament from

less than 10% pre 2008, to 37% after the 2008 general elections, and currently holds 40% of seats [12]. Thus a quantitative study of the social media uses, in particular use of FP as in this paper, in the previous 2013 Malaysian general elections would give insights into the relative success of opposition candidates in circumventing traditional media embargos.

With the increasing number of candidates active on social media and the possibility of collection of this online campaigning data, researchers start conducting the quantitative analyses the campaign that are using the social media. Tumasjan et al. [13], analyzing the content of the Twitter data during the 2009 German national election to detect political deliberation among the tweets, argue that the count of tweets could be used to predict the votes. As a way to exhibit the correlation between Twitter's activities with the 2011 Spain's Presidential Elections, Borondo et al. [14] use temporal series and complex network analysis. Other researchers have used Facebook Pages (FP) data to measure popularity, with Giglietto [15] uses the bare count of the 'likes' as an indicator of popularity thus can be treated to forecast the result of the elections. Barclay [16] states that there exist a correlation between the 'likes' on FP with the number of popular votes from the elections. The FP data used in this paper is a compilation of all FP information that is publicly available and permissible to download, of 51 selected candidates from MGE13, making up 8.8% of the 579 candidates contesting the 222 parliamentary seats. Even though our captured data comes from a specific group of candidates (less than 10% of the total number of MGE13 candidates) nevertheless the data illustrates the extent of usage and the effect of campaigning through social media on the candidates' odds in winning seats.

Facebook is known to be more matured [15] and favored social media platform [16] compared to Twitter and other social media applications. Facebook Pages (FP), being one of the functions

available on Facebook was chosen for this study because it allows organisations, businesses, celebrities and brands to interact widely with users who 'like' them [17]. FP interactions are usually administered by candidates (presumably candidates) who post content, and the public (Facebook users) responding by either passively liking or actively commenting on these posts [18] [53].

We next take a brief look at research tracing the role of social media in election campaigning in general and in particular in campaigning during Malaysia's general elections. We then present our analysis of the captured data including a description of the usage of FP by the candidates in MGE13, the extent of the usage and the acceptance by the public of the candidates' postings. We end with a conclusion and suggestions for future work.

2. The Role of Social Media in Election Campaigning

The Howard-Dean presidential campaigning in the early 2004 introduced the world to the use of the Internet as another platform for election campaigning [19]. However, the use of the Internet is more prevalent during the 2008 Barack Obama campaign [19]. Using exploratory qualitative methods on various data sources such as the Obama '08 website, the Obama Twitter feed and the Obama Facebook site, Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez [20] conclude that the use of social media is indeed critical to making campaigning more effective. Similarly, based on their observations of political marketing in the United States especially during the 2008 Obama presidential campaign, Towner and Dulio [21] conclude that new media (social media) is altering the process of campaigning for political office as well as changing the relationships between journalists, political candidates and citizens. This phenomenon is also obvious in some other countries like UK [22], India [16] and Spain [14]. In Malaysia, the use of the Internet (including social media) as a campaigning tool is most obvious before and during the 2008 general elections [53]. Researchers such as Willnat et al. [9] and Tang [23] believe that this extensive use of the Internet has probably contributed to the changes in the government [53]. This is particularly interesting as prior to the 2008 Malaysian general elections (MGE08) almost 90% of the Malaysian parliament was controlled by the ruling party [53].

Thejll-Moller [24] argues that social media becomes a powerful campaign tool when applied correctly, becoming then a medium for intimate communication and not merely a mechanism for broadcasting information. However, research on both Twitter and Facebook indicates both being used mainly for broadcasting campaign messages and propaganda. Aragón et al. [25] examining Twitter data from the 2011 Spanish Presidential elections, found that usage was extensive, but most candidates used it as a one-way communication tool. Enli and Skogerbø [3] found the same with their analysis of Facebook data – that it was used mainly for political marketing and making the candidates visible to the voters. Larsson [26] studying the existence of permanent campaigning on Facebook in Norway and Sweden also comes to the same conclusion.

Some research, on Twitter data, does indicate that candidates are starting to make use of the interactive features more. According to Tumasjan et al. [13], their Twitter data shows evidence of interactions between the users and the politicians, with the conversation dominated by a small group (4%) of users. On examining the content of tweets from all twittering candidates during the 2010 UK general elections, Graham et al. [4] found that while Twitter was used mainly for unidirectional communication, a group of candidates did use it to interact and foster closer relationships with voters.

The social media tool may itself dictate the more or less interactive usage. Hong and Nadler [27] argue that Twitter's 'asymmetric model' of communication makes it more of a broadcast tool. A difference between Twitter and Facebook is that tweets by users on Twitter are public and visible to both subscriber and non-subscriber

of the user [27]. On Facebook however, only an approved friend of a Facebook Timeline (private account) or fan of a Facebook Page (public account) is allowed to view, like and comment on a post, allowing for some measure of control, and thus, possibly allowing a more interactive use.

Considering the usage of online campaigning in Malaysia, we find researchers indicating a more interactive use, with Willnat et al. [9] suggesting that the use of new media in MGE08 allowed voters to be active participants in the political process. Pepinsky [28] feels that while technological change (the rise of new media in Malaysia) was not adequate by itself in bringing about political change in Malaysia, new media (blogs and news sites) did allow the opposition parties and sympathizers to share and spread ideas, as well as organize themselves for political action in ways that were impossible only two decades earlier. The ownership and heavy regulation of traditional media by the government is held responsible for the previous inability of the opposition to connect with the public [6], [29]. Knirsch and Kratzenstein, [30] state that with the Internet not being censored, reports that are not in line with the government's stand are only available online, leading to its popularity as a news source, something also evident from a report prepared by Eng et al. [31], showing that, by 2008, 94.4% of Malaysian internet users had access to numerous websites for political information, a jump from merely 40.5% earlier [53]. The increased number of hits on alternative media websites on the Internet also indicate that by 2008 [11], Malaysians were exploring alternative sources of political news, making social media a fertile ground for the propagation of election news by the opposition [32]. In MGE13, Facebook and Twitter were both used extensively by the incumbent government as well as the opposition parties [33]. By 2013 not only the opposition, but also the ruling coalition (BN) was using social media. The act of BN creating its own division of 'cybertroopers' [34] can be seen as BN acknowledging the importance of having a stronger online presence. The opposition (PR) treats social media as more of a broadcast pseudo-media platform [35] for mass distributing information such as campaign photos, speeches and rally invitations [53]. Moreover, the opposition was also making more use of the interactive properties of this medium than the ruling party [36]. As many researchers point out, the use of social media (including blogs and new media) in Malaysia provides not only clear benefits to opposition candidates, in particular to disseminate alternative information, but it also influences the values and attitudes of the voters [37], giving them an opportunity to express views, suggestions and opinions [38]. The importance of this interactive use of social media is borne out by the statistics: prior to MGE13, 13.5 million Malaysians were signed up as Facebook users [39] with majority of them are potential voters in the 2013 elections [39]. These Malaysians, as part of their daily routine, spent a quarter of their day on social media [40] mainly for online interaction and discussion [41]. In addition, research shows that this group of Malaysian were active participants in online political discussion through exchange of ideas, videos and news [42].

Thus, existing literature shows the rise of the use and importance of social media for campaigning in Malaysia, as well as underlining the factors contributing to its impact on elections. Since interactions on social media are naturally raw and open and it is currently feasible to directly capture and collect the raw data that includes numbers and figures from social media applications such as Facebook Pages (FP), it may be possible to verify the interactive aspect of social media, and not merely another broadcasting tool. With this aim in mind, we now move on to the analysis of our data.

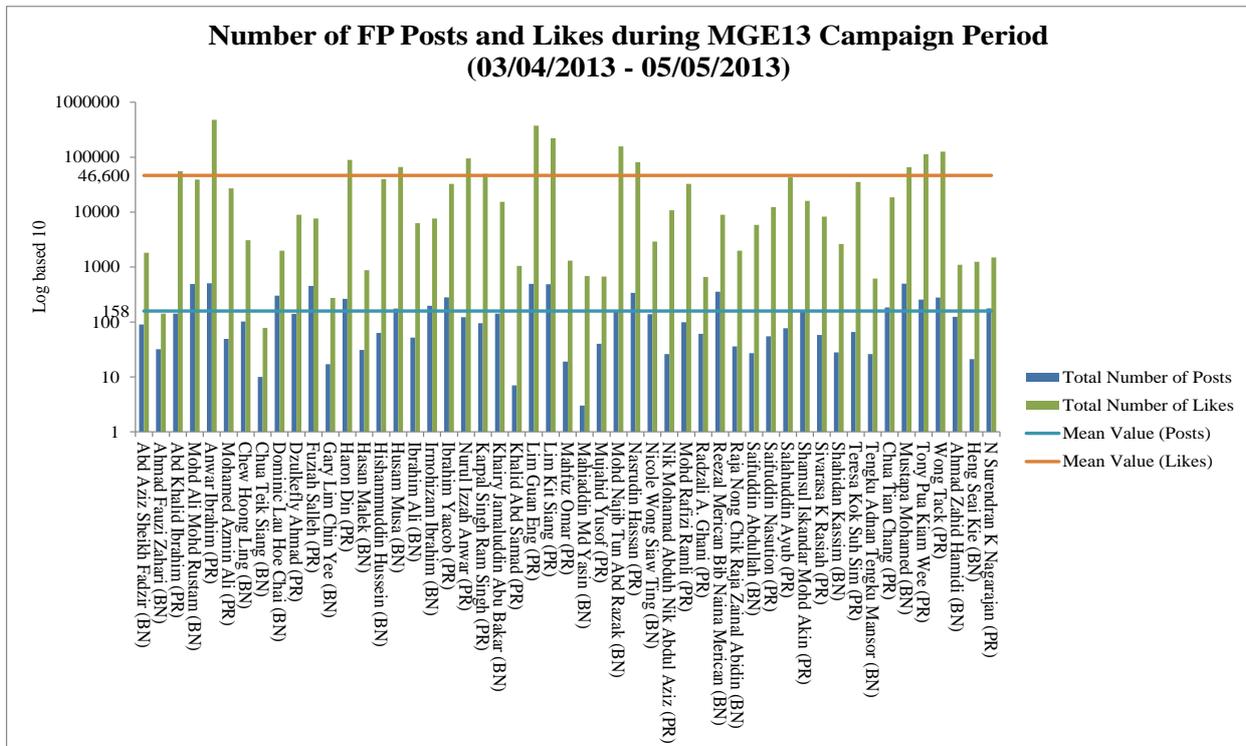


Fig. 1: Overview of numbers of posts and accumulated likes during the MGE13 campaigning period. The two horizontal lines indicate the mean values for posts and likes.

3. The use of Facebook Pages (FP) in the MGE13 campaign

We start with a description of the political geography of Malaysia during MGE13, moving on to the description of the captured data and then detailing the popularity of the candidates as well as highlighting the commitment of the candidates to using FP as a campaigning channel.

Politweet.org, a non-partisan research firm specialising in analysing Malaysian political Twitter data, gives the distribution of seats in the 2013 Malaysian General Elections (MGE13) as 125 seats representing rural areas, 54 seats semi-urban and 43 seats urban [43]. In MGE13, the ruling coalition party (BN) secured 133 mainly rural seats while the opposition (PR) led by Anwar Ibrahim managed to snatch 89 mainly urban seats [53]. In terms of registered voters, MGE13 shows an increment about 2.5 million voters, compared to the 10.7 million registered to vote in MGE08 [53], with 85% of the eligible voters turning out to vote [44].

Facebook has a particular feature beneficial to political communication: a public 'wall' where the public can send messages directly to politicians in addition to allowing candidates to reach constituents and voters [45]. Compared to Twitter's limit of 140 characters, Facebook offers users freedom on the type and length of their posts and comments, motivating our focus on Facebook, specifically information collected from the Facebook Pages (FP) of the candidates. However, there appears to be a slight limitation with regards to the number of likes allowed to be captured [53].

For the purpose of our study, we collected all FP information that is publicly available and permissible to download, of 51 selected candidates, forming about 8.8% of the 579 candidates contesting the 222 parliamentary seats. The main criterion for the candidates chosen to be included in our sample was that each of them had an authorised and active Facebook Page account maintained by his/her campaign team during MGE13. The candidates were selected based firstly on reports of hot seats from major media [46]–[48] and secondly through a random search. 32 candidates in the sampled data were found to be contesting at least one other in 15 seats, while the rest were contesting in 19 different seats.

The first conclusions we draw from our data is that in the MGE13 campaign, by looking at the number of likes gained, the opposition party (PR) used FP more extensively in their campaigning, and the effort seems to gain traction (85% of all likes) from the public [53]. On average candidates posted 158 posts with the average accumulated likes is around 46,600 (see Fig. 1).

Next we narrow our observations to FP that were popular (based on likes gained) and those that were active (based on post posted), respectively [53].

3.1. Overview of the popularity of selected FP during the MGE13 campaign

Popularity can be determined by looking at the likes gained [18] [15] [26] [53]. The higher the number of likes, the more popular the FP [53].

Fig. 2(a) charts the percentage of likes accumulated by the 10 most popular FP as well as the percentage of posts posted on each of these. The combined posts on these FP garnered nearly half of all likes, with majority of the popular FP are from PR candidates [53]. In addition, Fig. 2(a) shows most of the candidates in the top 10 most popular FP won their seats [53].

Furthermore, we notice that the top three most popular FP shared similar percentages of posts, but with a sizeable difference in the accumulated likes [53]. This indicates that even with similar number of posts, it will not a guarantee a fix number of likes gained.

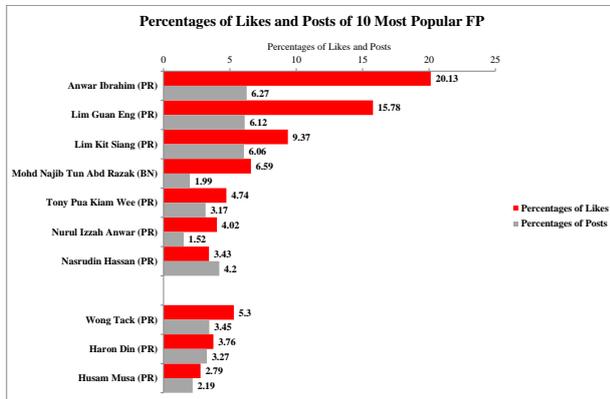
Almost all the FP in Fig. 2(a) obey the simple assumption that by posting more, it will generate more likes, except for the FP of Nasrudin Hassan, which got only 3.43% of the likes even after posting almost 4.2% of all the posts [53].

The FP of Najib Razak, the incumbent Prime Minister accumulated around 6.59% of the total likes making him the only BN candidate in the 10 most popular FP group. However, his posting (Fig. 2(a)) was surprisingly quite minimal; less than 2%. This raise questions on the underlying factors (content or quantity) contributing to his FP popularity. It is also possible that the model of his campaign increase his popularity [32] [34] [49].

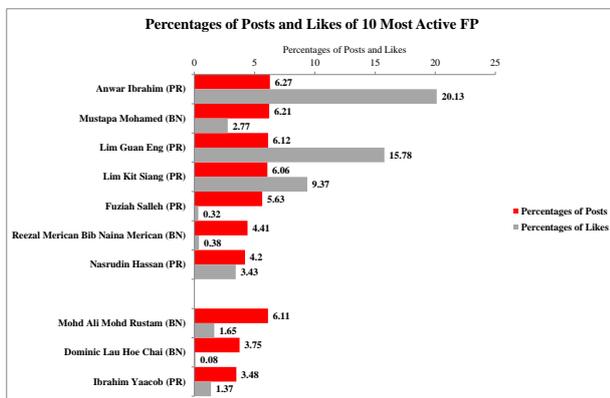
3.2. Overview of the activity of selected FP during the MGE13 campaign

It can be stated that the accumulated likes are in a way dependable on the number of posts posted by the candidates. However, exemptions to this rule exist even within the group of the most popular FP (Fig. 2(a)) [53]. The 10 FP that recorded the highest numbers of postings as per Fig. 2(b), shows that this assumption is obviously inaccurate.

Looking at the number of posts posted on their FP (Fig. 2 (b)), active



(a)



(b)

Fig. 2: Graphs of the percentages of posts and likes of (a) 10 most popular FP ranked based on the number of likes gained (as a percentage of the total likes gathered by the whole captured FP data) and (b) 10 most active FP ranked based on the number of wall-posts posted (as a percentage of the total posts posted by the whole captured FP data) [53]. The FP are grouped based on the result of MGE13; coincidentally for both graphs, 7 of the FP belong to successful candidates and the other 3 to unsuccessful ones. The numbers at the end of the bars indicate the value of the percentages [53].

candidates are the one who posted the most. The red bars in Fig. 2(b) indicate the percentage of posting recorded on the FP, and each is compared to its accumulated percentage of likes represented by the grey bar. Fig. 2(b) reveals that 4 most active FP were also popular (popular as in Fig. 2(a)) [53]; and all are from the opposition (PR). Even though the most active candidates posted way more than the mean number of posts (158), this was not a guarantee to provoke likes. In particular, Fig. 2(b) shows that three most active FP each received less likes compared to others [53].

Our findings indicate that both Najib Razak’s (leader of the incumbent government party, BN) and Anwar Ibrahim’s (leader of the opposition) FP secured enormous amount of likes per post [53]. Najib Razak, the only BN candidate in the 10 most popular FP list, gained on average 979 likes per post [53]. However, Anwar Ibrahim clearly an advocate for online campaigning as not only was his FP popular, he it was also active with postings [53]. Popular candidates

posted on average 577 likes per post whereas active candidates collected on average 278 likes per post [53].

*Some of the findings highlighted in this section is taken directly from the corresponding author’s thesis [53].

Table 1: Spread of MGE13 Social Media Candidates

Seats Won based on Election Year	Party	
	BN	PR
MGE 2004	198	20
MGE 2008	140	82
MGE 2013	133	89
Total MGE13 Candidates	221	223
Winning MGE13 Candidates using Twitter	46	55
Winning MGE13 Candidates using FP	13	20
Winning MGE13 Candidates using both medium	8	20

3.3. Relationship between ‘posts’ and ‘likes’

In addition to investigating the popularity and the activities of each respective FP, the relationship that exist between the posts and their accumulated likes can also be demonstrated as per Fig. 3.

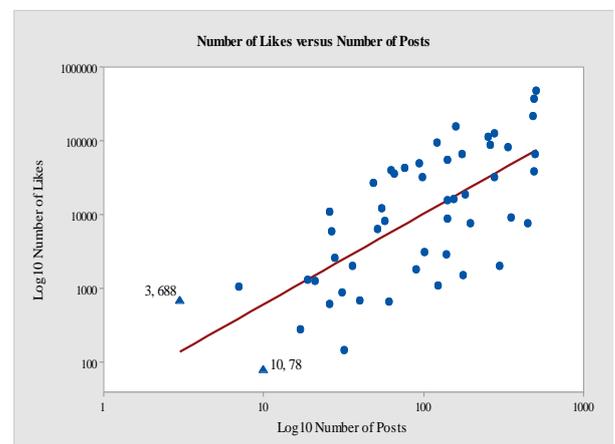


Fig. 3: Log-Log Graph of the Number of Likes versus the Number of Posts that occurred on all 51 candidates’ FP. The solid line ($\log_{10}(\text{likes}) = 1.547 + 1.234 \log_{10}(\text{post})$) represents the best fit line for the data. [53]

Fig. 3 illustrates the relationship between (the log of) the number of posts and (the log of) the number of likes gained by all posts on each of 51 candidates’ FP, and shows that:

- Posting will evoke likes.
- Generally, there is a direct correlation between the number of posts posted and the number of likes gathered. Yet, deviation do occur (as displayed in Fig. 3).

An active FP is not a ticket for becoming popular. In this cases, popularity of the FP depends on the content or the persona of the candidate? Gladwell [50] claims that the ‘stickiness factor’ or the sentiment of the message plays an important role assuring the success of any ‘social epidemic’ incident. To work out what makes a particular post more powerful than another it would definitely be necessary to conduct a thorough investigation on the characteristics of popular posts, something we plan to do in the future.

Our findings suggest that candidates with an active FP will increase his/her chances in winning the seat [53]. Our data indicates an active candidate has about 67% chances of winning an election. This probability will rise to 77% if the candidate is also popular [53].

4. Usage of Social Media Improves the Chances of the MGE13 Candidates

In this section, by combining our FP data with the list of Malaysian politicians using Twitter [51], we highlight the chances of success of candidates campaigning on social media, especially from the opposition coalition (PR).

Looking at the data according to the parties represented by the candidates shows us several details. Researchers including Liow [11] claim that the sudden increase in the number of seats won by the opposition, from just 9% in MGE04, to 37% (MGE08) and finally to 40% (MGE13) is the result of the extensive use of social media in their campaigning and Table I clearly reflects this.

Politweet.org is the only website that contains articles and reports on MGE13 candidates with social media accounts [51]. According to Politweet.org [51], there are 234 Malaysian politicians using Twitter [53]. Comparing the list provided by Politweet.org and our collected FP data with the list of MGE13 candidates contesting for the parliamentary seats [53], we notice that 86 out of the 223 PR candidates used social media [53]. We also detected that 33% of BN candidates were social media users. Additionally, we identified 23 PR candidates who utilized both Twitter and FP in their campaign, compared to only 11 BN candidates.

Table I also shows that 71% (20 out of 28) of the MGE13 opposition candidates detected using FP as their campaigning platform won their seats. At the same time, 59% of the FP candidates contesting under BN (9 out of 22) banner managed to win their seats. Based on the Politweet.org Twitter list, 95% of PR parliamentary candidates using Twitter (55 out of 58) won their seats while 88% of BN parliamentary candidates (46 out of 52) won. From the candidates that we have identified as using both Twitter and FP in their campaigning, 28 out of the 34 candidates won their seats, with 20 of them opposition candidates. These values verify the notion that candidates from the opposition (PR) utilized social media the most in the MGE13 campaign, and almost all of the opposition candidates identified to be either on Twitter, FP or both, won their contested seats.

*Some of the findings highlighted in this section is taken directly from the corresponding author's thesis [53].

5. Conclusion and future works

In this paper, we presented our preliminary analysis on the interactive use of social media as the platform for campaigning in the 2013 Malaysian General Election (MGE13), particularly the use of Facebook Pages (FP) by 51 candidates, using the recorded 'likes' as a way to measure the acceptance by the public. Our data included FP that belonged to candidates contesting in urban, semi-urban and rural seats, either under the incumbent party (BN) or the opposition party (PR).

We found that on average, the number of posts posted by each of the candidates on their FP was 158, and each FP prompted an average of 46,600 likes. Looking at the bare count of the posts and the likes, we concluded that the chances of a candidate with an FP, who is actively posting and popular with the public, in winning an election is around 77%. Our findings support the notion that social media has the potential to attract high participation from the public especially for MGE13 candidates who were both active and popular on FP. In addition, we saw that the opposition did make much more use of social media, lending credence to the claim by researchers that it was this use that led to their success in both of the last two Malaysian general elections.

Nonetheless, several issues need further investigation, and we propose to do this in future research.

- The true meaning of 'likes' and 'followers' and the actual influence of personalization campaigns in elections.

- The possibility of further measuring "interaction" as opposed to broadcasting using social media. For example, were the successful candidates with higher than average posts but less number of likes, broadcasting rather than interacting?
- The relationship between offline and online events during an election campaign.

As a way to address the above issues, in particular concerning the way to assess campaign "interactions" through FP, we have proposed a novel method called Interaction Strength Plot or IntS [52] [53]. Details of the method and the subsequent findings are presented in a paper published last year [52].

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Some of the literature reviews and findings mentioned in this paper are also included in the corresponding author's PhD thesis [53] submitted in September 2016.

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