



Article

# Utilising Social Media for Sustainable Educational Engagement in Malaysia: A Communication Infrastructure Theory Perspective

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**Abstract:** Social media platforms have emerged as crucial tools for enhancing educational engagement among youth in Malaysia. This paper investigates the application of Communication Infrastructure Theory (CIT) to explore how social media fosters educational engagement among Malaysian youth. It examines platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, illustrating their role as communication infrastructures that shape interactions among students, educators, and administrators. Through mixed-methods analysis combining surveys (n=300) and focus group discussions across five Malaysian universities, the research identifies opportunities and challenges of employing social media for educational purposes, emphasizing issues such as the digital divide, varying levels of digital literacy, and the necessity for inclusive digital policies. Findings reveal that while 80% of students use social media daily, only 40% engage with it for academic purposes, highlighting gaps in educational integration. This study provides actionable insights for educators and policymakers seeking to harness social media platforms to enhance student learning experiences.

**Keywords:** Social Media Engagement, Educational Technology, Communication Infrastructure Theory, Malaysia, Digital Literacy.

## INTRODUCTION

Malaysia's multicultural society, comprising diverse ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups, significantly influences its education system. Recent reforms have focused on integrating digital tools and promoting 21st-century learning skills as the country transitions toward a knowledge-based economy (Kabilan et al., 2025). Social media has become integral to daily life, particularly among youth. According to Van Ameringen (2016), internet usage among college-aged populations has increased dramatically, with social media platforms being among the most popular online activities.

Educational institutions increasingly explore how platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp can enhance engagement and learning outcomes

(Greenhow & Lewin, 2016). However, integration into formal education has met mixed reactions. While some educators view social media as fostering collaboration, others worry about distractions and misinformation (Selwyn, 2016). This study examines social media's role in educational engagement through the lens of Communication Infrastructure Theory (CIT), analysing how these platforms function as educational infrastructures.

Globally, social media has increased civic engagement among younger populations, enabling organization of protests, political discussions, and awareness campaigns (Tufekci, 2017). In education, it provides informal learning opportunities, offering new ways to engage with content and interact with peers (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016). However, challenges

including the digital divide, varying digital literacy levels, and the need for digital skills training must be addressed to fully realize social media's educational potential in Malaysia (Devisakti et al., 2023).

### **Theoretical Framework Communication Infrastructure Theory in Educational Contexts**

Communication Infrastructure Theory (CIT) provides a framework for understanding how communication technologies function as infrastructures within societal systems (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001). CIT suggests that communication technologies are not merely message transmission tools but foundational structures shaping social interactions, behaviours, and knowledge exchange. In educational contexts, social media platforms serve as vital infrastructures for learning, communication, and engagement, enabling real-time discussions, resource sharing, and project collaboration (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006). CIT emphasizes two key components: access and use. Access refers to availability of communication infrastructure; internet connectivity, devices, and platforms while use pertains to how individuals leverage these technologies to achieve specific goals (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001). In education, access includes students' ability to connect to the internet and use social media platforms, while use pertains to how students, educators, and administrators incorporate social media into learning, teaching, and management practices.

### **Limitations of CIT in Malaysian Context**

While CIT provides a robust framework, several limitations exist when applied to Malaysia's educational system. The digital divide between urban and rural areas remains significant, particularly among B40 (bottom 40% income group) students in higher education institutions who face barriers to high-speed internet and digital devices (Devisakti et al., 2023). Additionally, varying levels of digital literacy among students and educators limit effective use of social media for educational purposes (Hashim, 2018). Cultural factors, including language diversity and differing views on social media, impact engagement with digital platforms. Malaysia's multi-ethnic and multi-lingual nature requires platforms to be adaptable to various languages and cultural contexts to ensure inclusivity.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Social Media and Educational Engagement**

Research demonstrates social media's significant role in education globally. Greenhow and Lewin (2016) argue that social media reconceptualizes boundaries between formal and informal learning, providing students with collaborative spaces and diverse resources. In the United States, platforms like Twitter and LinkedIn facilitate academic content sharing and

professional networking (Junco et al., 2011). Similarly, European countries have integrated social media to complement traditional learning, fostering greater student participation and collaboration (Asterhan & Rosenberg, 2015).

However, challenges persist. Students' information seeking behaviours vary considerably, with secondary school students requiring frameworks to effectively navigate digital resources (Kavitha & Chandrashekara, 2022). Students with high media literacy use social media productively for educational purposes, while those with lower literacy struggle to discern credible sources, leading to disengagement or misinformation (Livingstone et al., 2017).

### **Youth Civic Engagement and Social Media**

Social media serves as a powerful tool for youth civic engagement, enabling mobilization around social movements and political participation. Recent research emphasizes the importance of understanding adolescents' civic engagement in relation to their macrosocial worries and civic knowledge (Karkdijk et al., 2025). Young citizens increasingly face complex future challenges, and their civic participation is shaped by both their knowledge base and concerns about societal issues. In Malaysia, platforms have played significant roles in movements such as Bersih rallies and the #Undi18 campaign, demonstrating potential to mobilize youth and influence political discourse. Educational institutions can harness this energy by incorporating social media into curricula in ways encouraging active participation and critical thinking about social issues.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study employs a mixed-methods approach integrating quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The research design involves two phases: first, a survey gathering quantitative data on social media usage patterns; second, focus group discussions (FGDs) exploring deeper motivations, experiences, and attitudes regarding social media use in educational and civic activities.

### **Participants and Data Collection**

The survey was distributed across five major Malaysian universities selected for geographical diversity (urban and rural), institutional size, and academic focus. A total of 300 students participated, comprising balanced representation across gender and academic disciplines. The purposive sampling method focused on active social media users engaged in educational or civic activities.

Survey questions examined: (1) demographic information; (2) social media usage patterns and platforms; (3) educational engagement through social media; (4) civic engagement and online activism; and (5) media literacy self-assessments. Six

FGDs with 6-8 participants each were conducted via video conferencing, lasting 60-90 minutes. Discussions focused on perceptions of social media's educational role, civic engagement influence, challenges in academic use, and media literacy impacts.

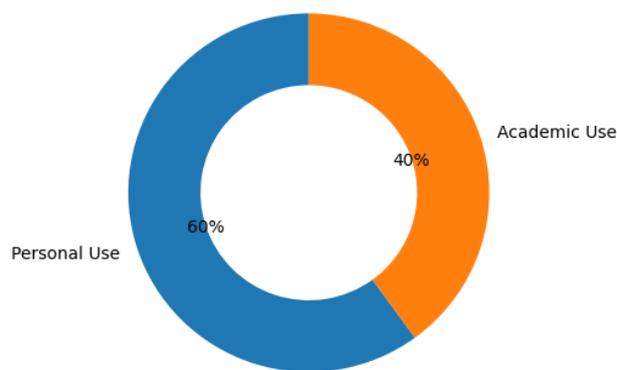
Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were informed about research purposes, voluntary participation, and withdrawal rights. Personal information was anonymized and stored securely. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant university ethics committee. Questions were framed respectfully, particularly those addressing political views and social activism.

### Ethical Considerations

## RESULTS

### 5.1 Survey Findings

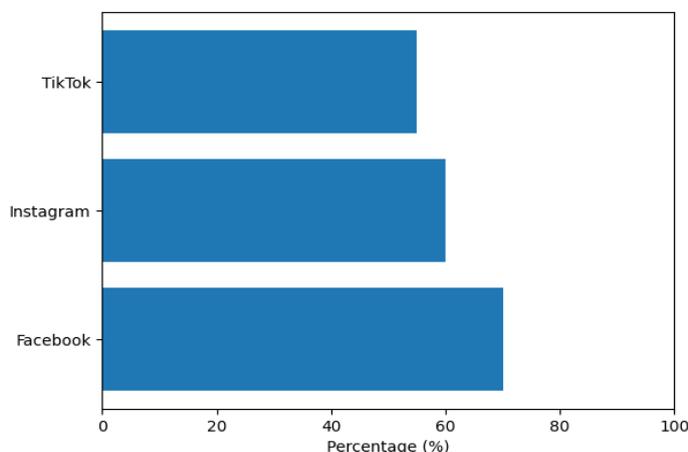
Survey results revealed significant patterns in social media usage among Malaysian university students, particularly in terms of frequency of use, preferred platforms, and purposes of engagement. Overall, social media use was highly prevalent, with the majority of respondents reporting daily engagement across multiple platforms.



**Figure 1 Purpose of Social Media Use among Malaysian Students**

As illustrated in Figure 1, social media use among students was predominantly oriented toward personal purposes, with 60% of respondents indicating that their primary use of social media was non-academic in nature. In contrast, 40% reported using social media for academic engagement, suggesting that while educational use was present, it remained secondary to personal and recreational activities. This pattern indicates that social media functioned more as a supplementary rather than a central educational tool for most students.

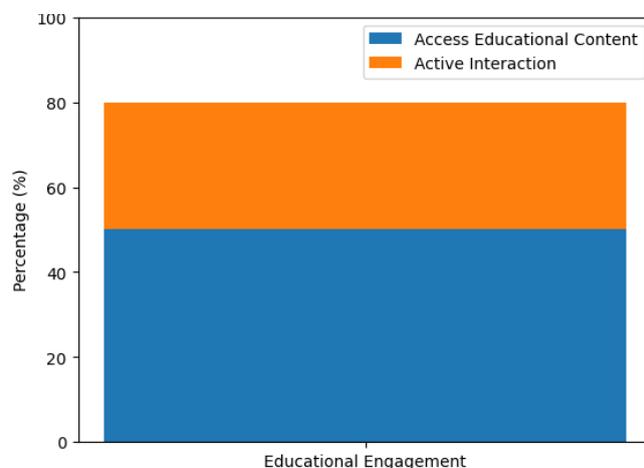
In terms of platform preference, Facebook emerged as the most widely used platform, reported by 70% of respondents, followed by Instagram (60%) and TikTok (55%). These findings reflect students' reliance on mainstream social media platforms that combine social interaction with content sharing, reinforcing their relevance as potential educational communication infrastructures.



**Figure 2 Most Popular Social Media Platforms Used by Students**

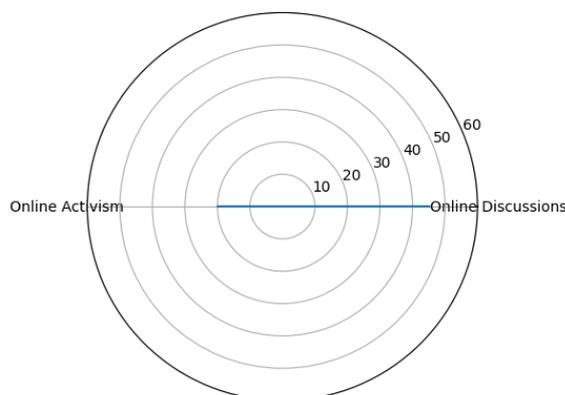
With regard to educational engagement, half of the respondents (50%) reported using social media to access

educational content such as online lectures, instructional videos, and academic articles. However, fewer students (30%) engaged in more interactive academic activities, including participation in online study groups or communication with lecturers through social media platforms. This disparity suggests that students were more inclined toward passive consumption of educational materials rather than active academic collaboration.



**Figure 3** Levels of Educational Engagement via Social Media

Social media also served as a platform for civic engagement among students, although the nature of participation varied. Approximately 45% of respondents indicated that they engaged in online discussions related to political or social issues. In contrast, only 20% reported active participation in online advocacy campaigns or social movements. This gap highlights a tendency toward discursive rather than action-oriented civic engagement within social media environments.



**Figure 4** Civic Engagement Profile on Social Media

### Focus Group Discussion Insights

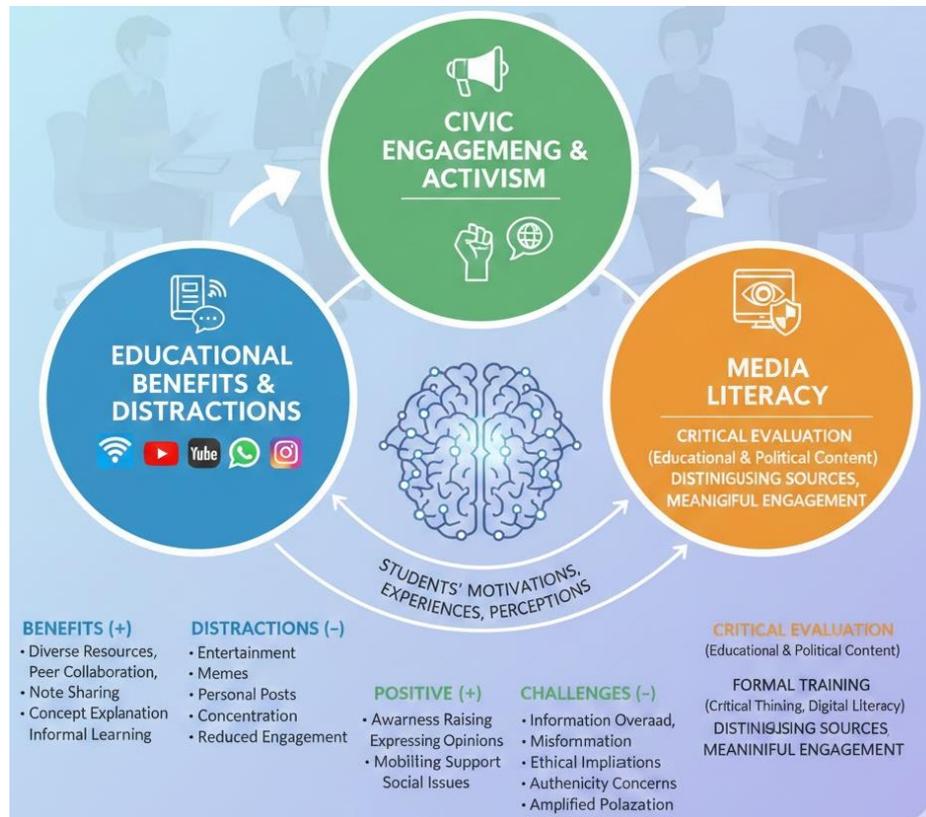
The focus group discussions (FGDs) provided deeper insights into students' motivations, experiences, and perceptions regarding the use of social media for educational and civic purposes. Three dominant themes emerged from the qualitative analysis: educational benefits and distractions, civic engagement and activism, and media literacy.

Participants consistently acknowledged that social media enhanced their learning experiences by providing access to diverse educational resources and facilitating peer collaboration beyond formal classroom settings. Platforms such as YouTube, WhatsApp, and Instagram were perceived as useful for sharing notes, explaining concepts, and supporting informal learning. However, participants also emphasized that these benefits were frequently undermined by distractions arising from entertainment content, memes, and personal posts, which often disrupted concentration and reduced sustained academic engagement.

In relation to civic engagement and activism, students expressed strong interest in using social media to engage with social and political issues. Social media was viewed as a powerful tool for raising awareness, expressing opinions, and mobilizing support for causes. Nevertheless, concerns were raised regarding information overload, the spread of misinformation, and the ethical implications of online activism. Some participants questioned the authenticity of certain online movements and highlighted the risk of social media amplifying polarized viewpoints

rather than fostering constructive dialogue.

Media literacy emerged as a central theme across all focus group discussions. Participants repeatedly emphasized the importance of critically evaluating information encountered on social media, particularly in relation to educational and political content. Many stressed the need for formal training in critical thinking and digital literacy to help students navigate the complexities of online environments, distinguish credible sources from unreliable information, and engage meaningfully in both academic and civic contexts.



**Figure 5 Thematic Overview of Focus Group Discussion Findings.**

## DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that Malaysian students are highly engaged with social media, with 80% reporting daily usage. However, this engagement remains predominantly personal rather than educational in nature. Although half of the respondents accessed educational content through social media platforms, only 30% engaged in collaborative academic activities. This suggests that social media currently facilitates passive learning more than active academic interaction. Such patterns are consistent with earlier research indicating that educational use of social media often remains secondary to recreational purposes (Junco et al., 2011).

In terms of civic engagement, the results reveal that while 45% of students participated in online discussions related to social or political issues, only 20% were involved in active online advocacy. This disparity raises important questions regarding the depth of civic engagement and the extent to which online participation translates into sustained or offline action. These findings align with Karkdijk et al. (2025), who highlighted that young citizens' civic

engagement is shaped by a complex interaction between civic knowledge, personal motivations, and broader macrosocial concerns. Understanding these dynamics is essential for designing educational interventions that promote more meaningful forms of civic participation.

Insights from the focus group discussions further illuminate the quantitative findings by revealing social media's dual role as both an educational resource and a source of distraction. Participants acknowledged the benefits of social media in facilitating access to learning materials and peer collaboration, yet they also reported challenges related to self-regulation, time management, and content overload. Concerns surrounding misinformation and the ethical dimensions of online engagement emerged consistently, reinforcing the importance of media literacy in enabling students to navigate digital environments effectively.

As summarised in Figure 5, these experiences collectively reflect the interplay between educational benefits and distractions, civic engagement and activism, and media literacy considerations. Additionally, issues related to the digital divide

particularly among B40 students highlight structural barriers that may further limit equitable access to and effective use of digital resources (Devisakti et al., 2023).

### Implications for Educational Practice

The results underscore several implications for educational administrators in Malaysia. First, there is a clear need to strengthen the integration of social media into formal educational frameworks, particularly in line with the Malaysia Education Blueprint's emphasis on technology integration and continuous professional development (Kabilan et al., 2025). Higher education institutions could leverage students' existing engagement with social media by facilitating academic collaboration, peer learning, and structured access to educational resources through curated platforms, institutional channels, and partnerships with educational content providers. Second, media literacy education emerges as a critical priority. Educational administrators should place greater emphasis on structured media literacy programmes that equip students with the skills to critically evaluate online content, assess credibility, and engage responsibly in both academic and civic contexts. This is particularly important given students' diverse information-seeking behaviours and varying levels of digital competence (Kavitha & Chandrashekar, 2022). Finally, civic engagement through social media can be strengthened through initiatives that encourage connections between online participation and offline action, thereby fostering more meaningful and sustained involvement in social and political causes.

### CONCLUSION

This study highlights social media's dual role in Malaysian youth lives as platform for educational engagement and civic participation. While offering immense potential for enhancing learning and fostering active citizenship, current usage patterns indicate youth often prioritize personal and social content over educational and civic engagement. Educational administrators and policymakers must harness social media's power for educational and social purposes through integration into formal education and emphasis on media literacy.

### Recommendations

For educators, social media should be systematically integrated into curricula to support peer learning, collaboration, and access to diverse resources. Students should be encouraged to use platforms not only for content consumption but also for sharing academic materials and engaging in meaningful discussions. Providing structured guidance can enhance students' ability to navigate digital resources effectively.

Policymakers should prioritise media literacy and

digital citizenship, ensuring students develop critical skills to use social media responsibly. Policies could incentivise higher education institutions to leverage social media for learning and address the digital divide by supporting B40 students with access, connectivity, and digital skills.

Youth organisations should design programmes that channel online advocacy into real-world actions, fostering sustained civic engagement. Engagement strategies should consider young people's social concerns and civic knowledge to encourage authentic participation in community initiatives.

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