

Instagram and Political Storytelling among Malaysian Politicians during the 14th General Election

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ABSTRACT

The popularity of Instagram as a political tool has world leaders adopting it as an integral part of their communications. Over the recent years, governments and world leaders have flocked to the mobile photo and video sharing social network to share their official as well as personal pictures with a worldwide audience. Malaysian politicians are jumping on the Instagram bandwagon as well. Almost all the prominent politicians have an Instagram account and a significant number of followers. As such, this study explores Instagram's affordance for visual imageries and political storytelling and its subsequent impact on political communication during election campaign. Methodologically, image analysis was conducted for two months on three Prime Ministerial candidates' Instagram accounts running up to the historic Malaysian 14th General Election that happened on May 9th, 2018. The result showed that the candidates were actively using Instagram and were uniquely authoring their own stories by switching between narratives that were personal and political. These narratives were presented through six image types that included 1) fieldwork, 2) professionally-produced campaign materials, 3) politician-at-work, 4) family, 5) personal activities and 6) throwbacks. In addition, this analysis offers a crucial look into the mediatization and personalization of politics and contributes to the academic literature on social media, election campaign, as well as political communication in Malaysia.

Keywords: *Instagram, elections, personalization, political storytelling, visual imageries.*

THE 14TH MALAYSIAN GENERAL ELECTION

The 14th Malaysian General Election was historic. It was the first time Malaysians voted for a new federal government. It was a change that took 61 years. Since claiming independence in 1957, Malaysia has had only one government coalition that was *Barisan Nasional*. There were many factors that enabled *Barisan Nasional* to stay in power for such a long time. Among others are its dependence on ethnic politics, its ability to provide economic stability, and stronghold over the freedom of speech and expression (Mohamed, 2017). *Barisan Nasional* is a political coalition consisting of many several parties that represented the different ethnic groups that live in Malaysia. The United Malay National Organization or UMNO leads the coalition. Other prominent parties include the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malay Indian Congress (MIC). The coalition practices a paradox of political inclusion that maintains Malay supremacy. What this means is that while all the other ethnic groups are welcomed in the government, the Malays will be given the privilege to head the government. This agreement worked well in a country where the Malay Muslims are the majority ethnic group. While there were contestations against this biased racial agreement, there was never strong enough opposition by the non-Malays. The economic prosperity and stability that *Barisan Nasional* has been able to offer was considered by some (Putucheary & Othman, 2005)

(Sani & Azizuddin, 2014) as one of the main reasons to why the non-Malays were willing to accommodate the bias political system.

The *Barisan Nasional* government's strict control over the freedom of speech and expression also helped it maintain its political power. Opposition and dissenting voices are usually silenced through laws, media ownerships and political intimidations (Wok & Mohamed, 2017). Only the government or entities that are close to the government are given media licenses. As such, Malaysians were primarily exposed to views that supported and maintained the status quo. Opposition parties were either negatively reported or totally absent from the mainstream media. As such, opposition parties often had to resort to small media such as cassettes and flyers and were not able to reach the general public. All this gradually changed with the introduction and the advancement of the Internet (Salman et al., 2018). The inability to censor and control the information that was coming from the Internet proved to be detrimental to the ruling coalition. Since the Internet became prominent in Malaysia in the late 1990s, the *Barisan Nasional* had seen a gradual drop in popular votes (Gomez, 2014). On the other hand, the opposition parties were benefitting from the Internet. They were no longer silenced and eventually able to reach the electorate. In the 12th general election held in 2008, the opposition won 47.79% of the popular votes and this was followed by an increase to 50.87% in the 13th general election (Khuo, 2013). The trend has shown that the opposition had a major potential to take over the government and this made the 14th general election highly anticipated. Although the oppositions still did not have access to the traditional mainstream media, they had all the Internet apparatus at their disposal (Salman, Mustafa & Salleh, 2016).

By 2018, Malaysians were already very much connected to the Internet and social media became part of everyday life. In fact, a study conducted by the Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) in 2017 showed that 84.3% of Malaysians participated in social networking sites and 86.9% of these users identified social media as one of their main source of information. The politicians and their respective parties were well aware of the importance of a strong and positive Internet presence. In the previous elections, it was the opposition parties that were truly maximizing and exploiting the Internet (Mohamed, 2017). However, the 14th general election saw *Barisan Nasional* focusing their campaigns online. It appeared that the real battle for votes was happening on the social media.

While there have been many studies on the impact of Internet and social media on Malaysian politics (Idid, 2017; Manaf, Taibi & Manan, 2017) much of the focus has been on Facebook (Zanuddin et al., 2017; Lee, 2017). This is expected, as Facebook is the most popular and dominant social networking site in the world. Similarly, Facebook is the number one social networking site in Malaysia where 96.5% of Internet users owned at least a Facebook account and 53.8% percent of them accessed Facebook on a daily basis (MCMC, 2017). However, the 14th general election saw a more diverse social media landscape for political communication. This time around, relatively newer social networking sites such as Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and WhatsApp are gaining prominence. Malaysians are actively participating in many; if not all of these sites.

INSTAGRAM AND POLITICAL STORYTELLING

Instagram is a photo and video sharing social media platform created by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger in October 2010. Since then, Instagram has become very popular, gaining up to almost 800 million users as of September 2017 (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2018). Facebook acquired the service in 2012 for approximately 1 billion USD in cash and stock. Today, Instagram is the 6th most popular social media platform with over a billion users worldwide. It is also very popular in Malaysia. Instagram is the second most popular social networking site in Malaysia. Currently there are 13.74 million Instagram users in Malaysia, an increase from 46.7% of the Internet users 2016 to 56.1% in 2017 (MCMC, 2017).

Instagram is a platform dedicated to highly visual communication. Users can upload up to 10 pictures or videos in a single post, and can apply a range of different filters to their visuals as well as limited amount of text. The platform is primarily associated with more artistic shots, which allows followers to like and comment on posts. Unlike other platforms, the image tells the story while the text is secondary. Since 2016, users have been able to post Instagram Stories that disappear after 24 hours and live videos that disappear immediately after the broadcast unless the user saves them to his or her mobile device and recently the introduction of new face filters.

The use of Instagram for political communication is on the rise. According to Twiplomacy (2017) 140 heads of state and government, as well as foreign ministers, currently have personal and institutional accounts on Instagram, representing 72.5 percent of all 193 United Nations (UN) member states. Instagram, which claims 600 million active monthly users, has an ever-increasing following – something world leaders and their advisors have not been slow to recognize. Malaysian politicians are jumping on the Instagram bandwagon as well. Almost all the prominent politicians have an Instagram account and a significant number of followers (Lee, 2017).

In relation, this study is interested to discover how politicians tell their personal story as a form of political communication. Political rhetoric relies upon telling stories. Stories help potential voters to relate to rather abstract political ideas as well as political candidates. It also helps politician build a specific image to appeal to the voters. Thus, storytelling in politics depends on strategic ways of combining personal and political narratives that can include insights into the politicians' private lives and histories designed to fit into the context of the political campaign. Instagram is undeniably a convenient tool for politicians to tell their stories. By focusing specifically on Malaysian politicians, this study is mainly interested to understand how Instagram links the personal to the political by looking at how visual imageries are strategically used to highlight a politician's image during election campaign.

METHODOLOGY

Currently, the study on the use of Instagram in politics and election campaigns is mostly limited to understanding political communication, and that most research focuses on the strategic context of Instagram usage rather than on the specific meanings made by visual imagery (Ekman & Widholm, 2017). The use of Instagram in political communication as both a means of staging a political personality and a form of image management has not been sufficiently

studied yet. The production, selection, and distribution of visual imagery in terms of image management by politicians may thus help to shape the image of persons or groups of persons, their behavior and lifestyle as well as their character traits (Filimonov, Russmann & Svensson, 2016). Political storytelling on Instagram has much to do with how politicians and their media team designs and manages the images they share and the sentiments built upon those images. In this sense, when using Instagram for campaigning and political communication, politicians do not simply post based on intuition, instead; like an author that is writing a story, these politicians are arranging a narrative and purposefully sending out specific messages through each of the image or video they post. Therefore, to understand the messages and stories behind these postings required careful analysis that looked into the literal and lateral aspects of each Instagram posts.

Methodologically, this study was inspired by Liebhart and Bernhardt (2017) who also used image type analysis when they studied how the Austrian President, Alexander Van Der Bellen used Instagram in the 2016 Austrian presidential election campaign. Image type analysis allowed the authors to not only describe about Van Der Bellen's Instagram posts but also explain the contexts and sentiments of his posts and how they were used to tell a story about Van Der Bellen's potential and credibility as a Prime Minister. Therefore it is an effective method when investigating politicians' strategic use of visual imagery for political communication.

Like content analysis, Image type analysis examines media content by systematically operationalising specific image into measurable categories. Therefore, this study also used a content sheet to record the politicians' basic use of Instagram such as the types of post whether it is a single photo or multiple photos or even a video. It also looked at the number of posts and the photo captions. Other areas that were looked at included the characteristics of each post and the issues that the politicians highlighted. The unit of analysis was each Instagram post available in the selected politicians' account. Each post was screen-captured, archived, and manually recorded and analyzed by a trained coder. However, in addition to measuring and operationalizing content, Image type analysis adopts a two-step approach by first; classifying visual contents into specific image types according to their context and motif and second; qualitatively analyzing the identified image types. This two-steps approach was applied on the data gathered from the content sheets. Data was collected 2 months prior to the election up to the night after the election; starting from March 15th to May 10th, 2018.

The study drew on the Instagram posts of the three heads of coalitions who were running for the Prime Ministerial post. These candidates were selected because of their prominence in Malaysian politics and the level of power they have within their respective parties. These candidates were also active on Instagram and have a significant number of followers. The three candidates were the then incumbent Prime Minister Najib Razak from *Barisan Nasional* (BN); Mahathir Mohamad, chairman of the the main opposition coalition, *Pakatan Harapan* (PH) which composed of four main parties that included *Parti Keadilan* (PKR), *Parti Pribumi* (PBM), *Parti Amanah Malaysia* (AMANAH) and Democratic Action Party (DAP); and Hadi Awang, leader of the smaller Islamist coalition, *Gagasan Sejahtera* led by the *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (PAS).

Table 1: Prime Ministerial candidates observed in the study

| Name/party | Prominence | Followers |
|-----------------------|---|-----------|
| Najib Razak (BN) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BN President • Ex-PM | 165k |
| Mahathir Mohamad (PH) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PH Candidate for PM • President Party Pribumi • Ex PM | 106K |
| Hadi Awang (PAS) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pas President • Ex chief minister of Terengganu | 21.5K |

(The number of Instagram followers was recorded on March 2018 and does not represent the number of followers these politicians currently have).

RESULTS AND ANALYSES

Overall, 138 Instagram posts from three Prime Ministerial candidates were analyzed. Hadi Awang of PAS posted the most with 91 posts followed by Najib Razak of BN with 32 posts. Mahathir Mohamad, chairman of *Pakatan Harapan* posted the least with only 15 posts. However, it should be noted that Mahathir only started having an Instagram account this year, with his first posted on March 15th 2018. The discrepancy in the number of Instagram posts between the three candidates was not an issue as this research study was more concerned to look at the quality of the posts rather than the number of posts. Each of the candidates' post was analyzed in relation to specific image types as well as how it fits into the candidates' political stories.

Table 2: Frequency of postings and image types

| Image type | Mahathir Mohamad | Najib Razak | Hadi Awang | Total |
|--|------------------|------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Campaign fieldwork | 3 (20%) | 8 (25%) | 37 (41%) | 48 (35%) |
| Professionally produced campaign materials | 2 (13%) | 3 (9%) | 14 (15%) | 19 (14%) |
| Politician at work | 5 (33%) | 5 (16%) | 28 (31%) | 38 (27%) |
| Personal activities/interests | 2 (13%) | 11 (34%) | 10 (11%) | 23 (17%) |
| Family | 2 (13%) | 4 (13%) | 2 (2%) | 8 (6%) |
| Throwback | 1 (8%) | 1 (3%) | 0 | 2 (1%) |
| Total | 15 (100%) | 32 (100%) | 91 (100%) | 138 (100%) |

The study found that the candidates posted six types of images that could be grouped into two categories. Images that tell formal and political stories revolving around the candidates' work as a politicians are categorized as 1) Public and political while image types that tell more personal stories such as the candidate's family, lifestyle and hobbies are grouped into 2) Personal and Private. The diagram below summarizes the categories of stories told by the candidates based on the image types.

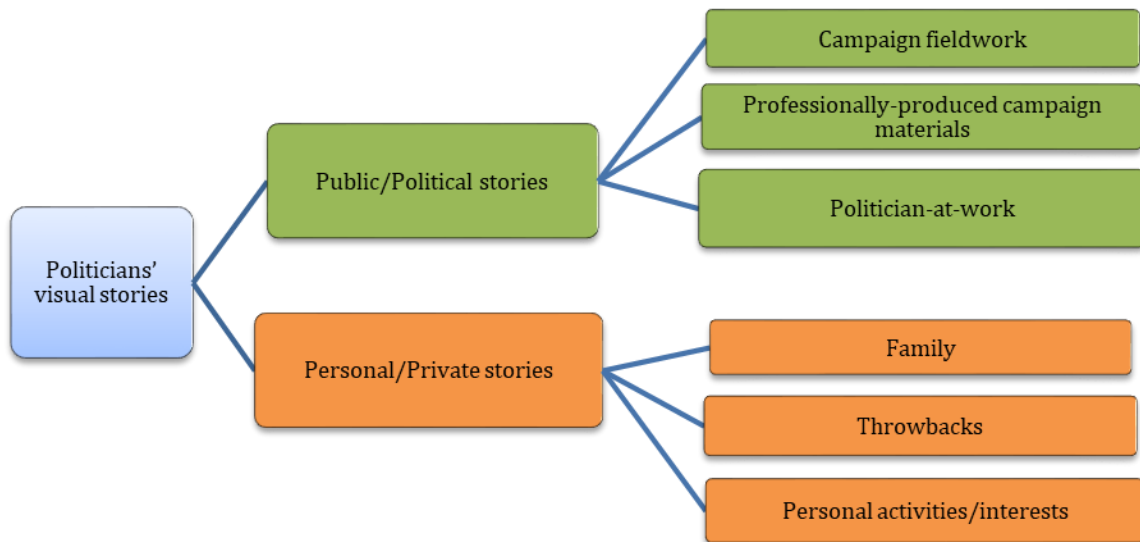


Diagram 1: Politicians' stories and images types

1. *Public/Political stories*

In sum, the candidates posted more about Professional/political stories that accounted to 76% of all postings (refer table 1) compared to personal/background stories. This clearly indicated that the candidates were using Instagram as a tool for political communication. By sharing photos of themselves working and campaigning, the candidates were able to bring the public together with them as they perform daily duties. The politicians' work then appeared to be tangible and real and less abstract to the people. Politicians are often portrayed as distant personalities; public figures that are elitist and distant from the public. Traditional media usually capture the politicians in certain situations that are mostly unique, newsworthy and sometimes controversial. As such it does not provide an insight into how politicians are also everyday workers and may have working habits and regiments that are similar to the public. Therefore, Instagram allowed the politicians to bridge this gap by showing the public that politics is an everyday job and what politicians do are relevant to the public. Public/political stories were mainly told via campaign fieldwork image types.

a. *Campaign fieldwork*

Since the research was specifically conducted near the election, it was obvious that the candidates were utilizing Instagram for their election campaign. 41% of Hadi Awang's postings showed him on the ground meeting people and giving speeches during his campaign trails. Najib (25%) and Mahathir (20%) also dedicated most of their postings on campaign fieldwork. The candidates prioritized Campaign fieldwork image types because it was important for them to indicate that they were running in the upcoming election and that they were actively engaging the voters. Sharing photos that showed them on the ground, being concerned about the peoples' issues and problems were powerful in telling that they were effective politicians. Instagram became an important campaign media running up to the election as it allowed

campaign trails to go beyond the limitation of space and time. When the candidates shared photos and videos of them giving speeches and meeting voters in specific districts or constituencies, they were also inviting their Instagram followers to these campaign activities. Their followers on Instagram as well as others who come across their posts were given details about the campaign and were able to be part of the event. This allowed the candidates to reach voters that were probably out of their campaign locations. Image 1 showed Hadi Awang addressing a crowd in Kedah. Although he didn't detail out the content of his speech, the image of him campaigning and addressing the crowd was strong enough to indicate that he was engaging the voters and this sentiment is felt by those who follow his account.

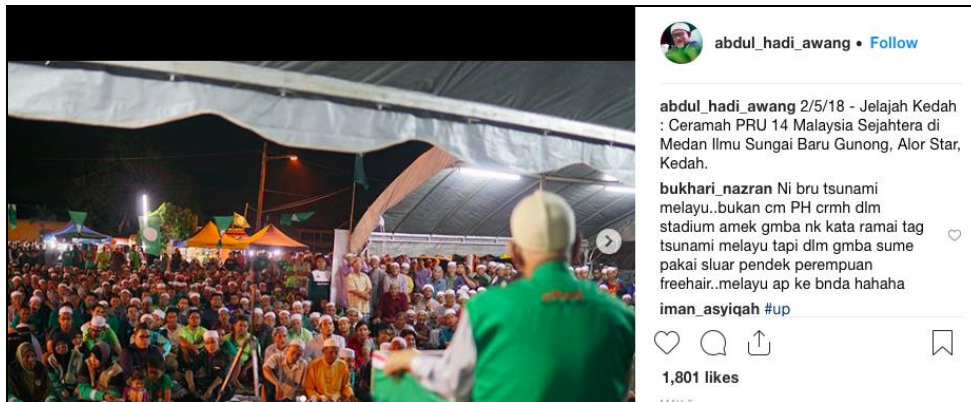


Image 1: Hadi Awang campaigning in Alor Setar, Kedah

b. Politician-at-work

The second most popular image type was the politician-at-work. This image type consists of posts that showed the candidates doing their jobs as a politician or an elected representative. These images include the candidates working in their office, meeting officials, giving interviews or simply discussing with their teams. These images showed that the candidates were real statesmen that gave service to the people because it is their job and not because the election was nearing. Mahathir Mohamad posted 5 of such images. This accounted to 33% of his total Instagram posts making it Mahathir's most prominent story.



Image 2: Mahathir working at his desk

Image 2 showed Mahathir working at his desk. He captioned the photo with a simple statement denoting that working is a form of worship. The image and the statement told a lot about Mahathir and his work ethics. Signifying that working is also a religious practice showed how much he takes his work seriously and responsibly. Hadi Awang posted almost as much as Mahathir. 31% of his postings were images of him at work, mostly together with his team. Najib Razak posted the least with only 16% of his posts were dedicated to images of him formally at work.

c. Professionally produced campaign materials

The candidates also posted a significant number of professionally produced campaign materials. This image type included campaign materials such as posters, videos and brochures that were probably produced by their respective party's machinery specifically for the election. This image type accounted for 14% of all postings with Hadi Awang (15%) and Mahathir (13%) posting more of this image type than Najib Razak (9%). The candidates started posting this image type a few weeks before the election. The election commission formal announcement about the nomination and election date was made on April 10th but Najib Razak had already uploaded a poster announcing the launch *Barisan Nasional's* manifesto on April 5th (see Image 3) followed by Hadi Awang's poster announcement on his address to PAS election machineries on April 6th. This showed that by April 2018, the candidates and their respective machineries were already ready for the election even before formal announcements were made. Mahathir Mohamad made the official announcement about his candidacy for the election via a poster on April 16th. The candidates often accompany professionally produced campaign materials with a certain call for the public to respond and act such as coming to campaign trails, sharing the manifesto and voting for change.



Image 3: A professionally produced poster announcing the launch of *Barisan Nasional's* election manifesto shared by Najib Razak

The ability to share political activities enabled direct contact between politicians and members of the public. Politics is no longer an abstraction rather a performance that can be viewed and shared (Ekman & Widholm, 2017). Simultaneously, when politicians appear as hard working, taking their duties seriously, it produces a form of imaginary accountability. Politicians' visual political communication certainly inherits a democratic potential, for example by reducing the communicative gap between politicians and citizens.

2. *Personal/ Private stories*

Politicians are increasingly sharing their personal lives and are revealing private details to the media (Van Aelst, Sheaffer & Stanyer, 2012). Such presentation of the “human” persona is even considered necessary to achieve political and electoral success. An emphasis on the politicians’ “human” side may positively improve the voters’ judgment of these politicians by bringing the politicians closer to voters, making them appear real and personable (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2017). According to Jung et al. (2017), due to its functional aesthetic that allows for the politicians to upload their own content, the level of personalization is definitely higher on Instagram than on traditional media.

The data analyzed concurred with this personalization bias. It was found that Personal and private stories made up 27% of all the candidates’ Instagram postings. Najib Razak posted the most about his personal life compared to his opponents. 50% or half of all his postings revolved around stories that were not literally political. 34 % of Mahathir’s postings were categorized as personal while Hadi Awang’s personal postings only accounted for 24% of his postings. It is interesting to observe that while Hadi Awang was the most active on Instagram in terms of the number of posts, he was the least personal and this may have made him to appear less approachable compared to Mahathir and Najib. Three image types were categorized as telling the candidates’ personal and private stories.

a. Personal activities and interests

The most prominent image type from this category is the personal activities and interests. In fact, most or 34% of all Najib Razak’s posts were images of him doing personal activities and interests. For example, from his postings, one can conclude that he loves food and animal because he has posted about his cat named Kiki and cheekily wrote about Kiki’s habits. Najib also posted a lot about food. Image 4 is a photo of a local delicacy called ‘choq jawa’ shared by Najib. While the photo appeared to be very personal, casual and almost insignificant, it actually contributed a lot to Najib’s political story. Najib captioned the photo with a jovial sharing of his experience eating ‘choq jawa’ in Kedah. He talked about appreciating the delicate process of making the dessert and even asking his followers if they had tasted it before. Sharing and talking about a local delicacy humanized Najib Razak. He was not just the incumbent Prime Minister, he was also a food-loving Malaysian. He was able to share about an experience that was actually relevant in the life of everyday people. Najib brought politics to the personal level. He did so by portraying himself as a grassroots leader who was in tuned with the life of the locals.



Image 4: Najib Razak posted a photo of 'choq jawa', a local delicacy

Hadi Awang did share some images that showed him in his personal space. Most the 23 (17%) images were of him engaging in religious activities such as giving a morning sermons and walking to the mosque. There were also photos of him meeting friends and acquaintances. However, Hadi's personal images often lack sentimental values as they were often captioned by the page administrator through a third-person narrative. Image 5 showed Hadi with his grandsons. The image could have been more powerful if it was made to appear as if it was personally narrated by Hadi. Instead, the photo was captioned with a straightforward description of Hadi going to the mosque.



Image 5: Hadi Awang about to leave his house to go to the mosque. Also seen in the photo are his two grandsons

13% of Mahathir's posts indicated his personal interests. One was a photo he took of the sunset in Langkawi and another was a video of him congratulating famous Malaysian singer Siti Nurhaliza for having a baby. Although it cannot be made for certain if Mahathir personally wrote and posted these captions, it seemed as he did and this made his personal photos more meaningful compared to Hadi Awang.

b. Family

The candidates also shared photos of their family. Najib posted a photo of him with his family 4 times (13%). Mahathir posted 2 photos of him with his wife and Hadi Awang posted several photos of him with his grandchildren. Hadi also posted 2 photos of him with his wife. In these photos, Najib and Mahathir were seen to be very passionate about their family. There was physical contact in their photos indicating that they were very close and 'mesra' with their family members. These photos were captioned with loving and appreciative messages. Family photos of Hadi Awang on the other hand tend to be more formal in the sense that they showed him with his family but they did not show his attachment towards them. While Najib's and Mahathir's family photos were accompanied by captions that express their love for their family, Hadi Awang's photos of his family were always written from a third-person.

The captions are always explaining about the photo rather than expressing the emotions captured by the photo. For example, in a photo of him with his family on Chinese New Year (Image 6), the caption described about the photo in a very official manner and did not convey the feelings he had about his family. The photo could have sent a powerful political message especially when Hadi is often considered a religious and ethnocentric conservative who has a rather contested political base with the non-Malays. Hadi's son had married a Chinese and this could have created a more positive image if he had given a personal account of this relationship, indicating his appreciation and acceptance of non-Malay cultures, specifically the Chinese who made up 30% of the number of national voters.



Image 6: Hadi Awang and his family on Chinese New Year



Image 7: Mahathir and his wife Dr. Siti Hasmah

Compare this with Mahathir whose photo of his wife and him was accompanied by a very literal expression of love (Image 7) in which he acknowledged her support for him through the years. While both images and the accompanying captions may have been posted by the candidates' officer or social media administrator, hence explaining Hadi Awang's third-person captions, it is vital for the candidate to assert emotions in their images as Instagram is also a considered a personal platform. Researchers have identified that the users and followers on Instagram are interested to have a more personal look at their politicians lives as social media is supposed to bring politicians and politics closer to the people (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2017; Jung et al., 2017).

c. *Throwbacks*

Throwback is another image type that can be identified from the candidates' Instagram feed. Although the number of throwback posts was very little (2%), it provided a significant insight into the candidates' political storytelling. Throwbacks are images from the past that represented a certain memory or experience that is relevant in the candidates' current life. Najib and Mahathir posted a throwback photo each while Hadi Awang did not share any throwback photos. Najib shared an old photo of him and several officers when he was the Chief Minister of Pahang (Image 8). The photo gave context to Najib's political storytelling. Najib was the Chief Minister of Pahang from 1982 to 1986. He was the youngest Chief Minister in Malaysian history, holding the post at the age of 29. Politics and holding office is something Najib Razak has experienced since young. The photo reminded those who access his Instagram posts that he is a veteran politician and has clock the political years that can rival his older competitors. In 2018, Najib was 65, Mahathir was 93 and Hadi Awang was 71.



Image 8: A throwback photo of Najib Razak in the 1980s when he was the Chief Minister of Pahang

Mahathir's throwback photo also told a powerful political story. On April 9th, 2018, Mahathir shared a photo of his younger bearded self at his desk, working, in 1970 (Image 9). The photo was accompanied by a funny yet moving caption in Malay that explained how he used (and still do) write a lot until he forgot to shave and grew a beard. In the same caption he advised and challenged the younger generation to write as he believed that 'the pen is mightier than sword'. In a single photo, Mahathir managed to remind the public about his years in

political office. The photo explained his work ethics and dedication to preserve and execute strong ideas. He portrayed himself as a politician, a thinker, a wise and hardworking man all at the same time. His message was universal but also specific towards the young. The young are the most important group as they were the majority voters whose electoral decisions were more susceptible to political change; a sentiment used by Mahathir-led *Pakatan Harapan*.



Image 9: A throwback photo of a young and bearded Mahathir in 1970.

Hadi Awang did not share any throwback photo and this may have made his political storytelling less appealing, as there was no historical context to be put to his political career. His Instagram followers were only able to see his contemporary political movement, but they were not given an insight into his decades-long political career. As such, the story he tells are abrupt and was not able to provide a compelling narrative. As such, there was a lack of appreciation towards his political life that in reality matches those of his opponents.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Out of all the three candidates, it was Najib Razak's Instagram that appeared to be the most interesting to look at. Najib equally combined political postings with private imageries. Through his Instagram, the public was given an insight into the different sides of Najib. He was then the incumbent Prime Minister; he displayed this by sharing images of him at work, meeting people and making decisions. He was also a politician that wanted to be re-elected. He campaigned actively on his Instagram by sharing professionally-produced materials such as posters and videos as well as highlighting his campaign trail where he would share images of him going to the ground and meeting the everyday people and promising them positive and beneficial governance.

In between, he invited people into his private life. Showing them the everyday side of Najib: the one who loved cats, food and spending time with his grandson. Najib was the only candidate studied that offered some connection and interaction with his Instagram followers. In some of his posts, like the one in which he shared an image of a local food he asked whether his followers had any opinions about it. He also linked his followers to the particular food by sharing the location and proposing that they go there too. Whether the private images he

shared were authentic and raw depiction of his personal life or simply a curated show to gain public affection is not the issue here. The concern of this study was to look at how the candidates effectively used Instagram to tell their story and Najib managed to tell a story that is multidimensional. He showed himself to be a political leader that shared a lot of similarity with the people. While he was campaigning, he was still sharing about his cats, his love for local food and his bond with his family. Najib humanized his politician image. Despite the intense criticisms he faced running up to the election, with many already predicting his fall from political office (Lourdes, 2018) (Hunt, 2018), Najib managed to put on somewhat of a show on Instagram. He appeared to not be perturbed at all by the pressures surrounding him at the time.

By intermittently sharing casual images of personal activities and making it a common ground to communicate with his Instagram followers, Najib did manage to divert the peoples' attention away from his political conundrums to focus instead, even for a short time, on the other side of him. The personal side that could have made the public viewed him as a person and not just a troubled politician. Thus through the casual combination of political and personal narratives he shared on Instagram, Najib Razak has depoliticized and highly privatized communication by focusing on his everyday life that showed him to be an approachable and striving politician.

On the other hand, Hadi Awang of PAS seemed to tell a straightforward story of a conservative politician. Despite having the most number of posts, Hadi primarily used Instagram to tell stories that were strictly about his political and public life. 76% of the images he shared were focused on campaigning and showing him formally at work. This may resonate with his public image as the leader of Malaysia's Islamic party. However, this strict adherent to traditional ways of separating the personal from the political may not be exploiting the potential of Instagram as a platform that allows for the visual branding of individual politicians (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2017). Hadi Awang appeared to still be distant from his Instagram followers in the sense that his posts were really just an extension of the conventional top-down communication where politicians inform about their activities but do not really invite the people to be part of those activities. By strategically personalizing his Instagram post, Hadi Awang could have invited his followers as well as others who may see him as an extremely conservative figure into the different sides of him that could humanize Hadi Awang into a democratic figure.

Online networks and social media is fast changing the nature of politics and political communication. Strict separation of the private from the public and the personal from the political is no longer viable. Today, the incorporation of self-produced imagery into political communication strategies is pertinent in the ongoing popularization of the political discourse (Wheeler, 2013). As such, for a politician to have successful presence on the social media, he or she has to adopt some kind of a populist approach that welcomes the interest of the everyday users. As a visual platform, Instagram is especially reliant on attractive imageries. Sharing the same images with the same stories will easily drown a politician's post. This is why a good mixture of professional and private imageries can help maintain the peoples' interest in a politician's Instagram account.

Therefore, it is vital for Hadi Awang and other politicians who are still caught in the traditional dichotomy of the personal and the political to adapt to the changing nature of political communication. They must realize that social media has limitations in providing complex and straightforward political messages. Every political message needs to compete with thousands other social media contents that are more attractive and intriguing to the users. This is why strategic political storytelling is important. A politician's Instagram account must provide a compelling narrative that can engage and continuously maintain the users' interest. There is more to Hadi Awang than just a preacher-politician. Instagram offers a free platform for him to tell his stories and inform others about his background and experiences. For example, Hadi Awang is known to fish in his free time. Sharing about this can provide a background story of a politician whose simple and modest lifestyle is unique compared to his contemporaries who were known to be more extravagant. Providing such background can put into context his 'folksy' and traditional political ideas that may actually relate more to the lives of the everyday people who are detached from the lifestyles of the elites.

Although Mahathir Mohamad had only shared 15 Instagram postings at the time of this study, the images that he had shared provided sufficient combination of political and personal narratives to imbued a powerful political story. While there were photos of him campaigning and working, his most significant postings were mostly personal photos that he captioned with strong and solid political messages. For example, the first photo he had shared on Instagram was of his wife Dr. Siti Hasmah and him sharing an intimate laugh. He accompanied the photo with a caption thanking his wife of 62 years and highlighting that they were both doctors and had gone through the ups and downs together. This was followed by a scenic photo of a sunset in Langkawi for which he had simply captioned 'It sets today, it'll rise again...' (see image 10). Both postings subliminally indicated his return to local politics. The 62 years he had shared with his wife were also the years he had spent in politics. The sun setting and rising over Langkawi is also an abstract manifestation of his comeback in which he had later announced that he was running for the parliamentary seat in Langkawi.

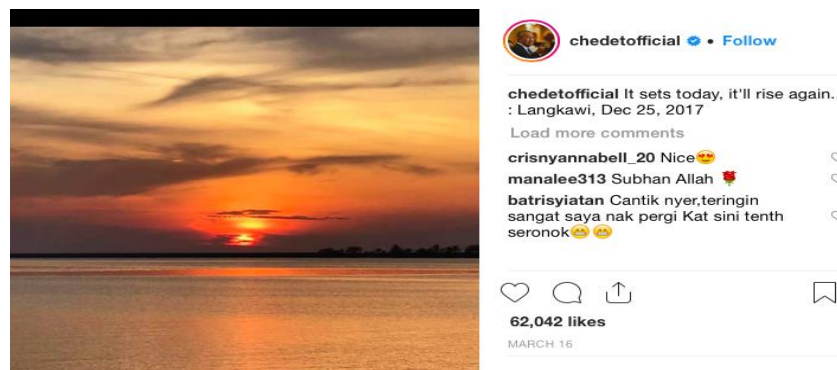


Image 10: An image of the suns setting in Langkawi as shared by Mahathir Mohamad

These photos were personal but had political connotations and they were able to create a sense of history and mystery among his followers. The throwback photo of him working (refer to image 9) was probably the most powerful image in his political story. It brought context as well as substance to his political revival. Instagram allowed Mahathir to inform the people that he is back. At the same time, he is conveying to them that he is no ordinary candidate. For those who has experienced his leadership, they were reminded of his reign and contributions. For the younger generation who has only learned about him, Mahathir is telling them who he is. Mahathir has always been a very strong and prominent figure in Malaysia. He was the Prime Minister for over 20 years before retiring in 2003. Instagram's bias for individualization further enabled Mahathir to capitalize on his own brand name. In this 14th General Election, Mahathir ran on *Pakatan Harapan's* platform. He was the opposition. This was a contested situation as he has always been known as the leader of the then government-coalition *Barisan Nasional*. The public can easily be confused by his political stand and inclinations. However, Instagram has enabled Mahathir to reinforce his prominence as a leader and a politician that stands on his own and is still relevant beyond time and partisan politics.

In conclusion, all the candidates in this study had used Instagram to produce their own political stories. These stories were particularly useful for them to positively highlight their personal and political attributes during election campaign. Strategic storytelling is important when combining and mixing the politicians' personal and political life. Lack of personalization may make a politician's story less appealing while too much personalization may make people question a politician's credibility. These shifts between the public and the personal is a typical feature of celebrity culture, where actors are expected to constantly move between performing their persona by hiding or sharing personal information to build intimacy with their followers (Wheeler, 2013). While such celebrity-culture that celebrates the individual lives of politicians over strict political actions has been criticized for depoliticizing public discourse, contemporary developments have made it a new tradition in political communication.

The focus on the politicians' personal space and lifestyles may take attention away from ideological issues that guide a politician's actions and decisions. Despite this concern, populist politics is the current trend. Leaders all over the world are exploiting the social media to gain public connection (Filiminov et al., 2016). On Instagram, these leaders are not sharing complex ideological sentiments rather they are trying to find a common ground with the public. Even when political issues are manifested, they come to the fore with an emphasis on the persona or on the achievements of the particular individual (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2017; Liebhart & Bernhardt, 2017). Therefore, de-politicization through personalization and celebritization that comes with Instagram should not be taken as the negative characteristic of political communication through social media. Rather it should be acknowledged as an adaptation to the changing times and online media dynamics. Therefore, successful politicians must be able to strategically place their political ideologies and stands within these new demands.

Despite the increased awareness on the importance of visual imageries and strategic political storytelling in a politicians' survival, this area is still under-researched especially in the local context. While many studies have celebrated the impact of social media on Malaysian politics, currently there is a lack of acknowledgement on the rise of populist politics and personalization of political communication. This called for further analyses on how visually

'performed' politics are prevailing and affecting political decisions as well as public opinion. There is also a dire need for interdisciplinary and multi-methodological empirical approaches dealing with the overall medialization in Malaysian politics.

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