

MALAYSIAN NETIZENS' PERCEPTIONS OF 1MDB: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Background and Purpose: This article analyses the 1Malaysia Development Bhd (1MDB) political scandal as a case study to examine how an issue is discursively shaped online by netizens' perceptions of the scandal. The study has two objectives: firstly, to explore netizens' perceptions of 1MDB and how they reacted to the news reported based on the online exposés appearing throughout 2015. Secondly, it aims to examine whether the discourse regarding 1MDB among netizens on an online platform, *The Malaysian Insider* Facebook page, meets the characteristics of a practical discourse in an online context, as proposed by Jurgen Habermas.

Methodology: A total of 1950 Facebook comments related to 210 1MDB articles in 2015 were analysed. The articles were linked and published by *The Malaysia Insider* Facebook page. The analysis was conducted using thematic analysis via NVivo software to explore the perceptions of the selected netizens about 1MDB and how the online discourse on 1MDB matched the characteristics proposed by Jurgen Habermas for practical online discourse.

Findings: Four themes emerged, namely Najib as the Prime Minister, the 1MDB Debate Controversy, the Opposition position on 1MDB and the investigation of the 1MDB scandal. Based on the online discourse, it was evident that consumption of 1MDB news on Facebook

led Malaysian netizens to form their own perceptions of the scandal. The emergent themes also illustrate that the online discourse met the characteristics of practical discourse suggested by Jurgen Habermas.

Contributions: This empirical contribution fills a gap in the current knowledge as few studies have been conducted on the online discourse of the 1MDB political scandal among Malaysian netizens. Currently, no research is documented on the 1MDB political scandal from the netizens' perspective other than the first author's PhD thesis. This research is, therefore, beneficial to new media studies as researchers normally investigate or explore a specific issue when it has a conclusion; here, a risk was taken to conduct the study while 1MDB was still under investigation.

Keywords: 1MDB, 2015, Najib Razak, netizens, Malaysia.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The infamous scandal that brought the world's attention to Malaysia's political scene involved 1Malaysia Development Bhd (1MDB), a Malaysian state investment fund that came under investigation for alleged impropriety in July 2015. This study has two objectives: firstly, to explore netizens' perceptions of 1MDB in 2015 and how Malaysian netizens reacted to the news reported in online exposés throughout 2015. Secondly, it examines whether the discourse regarding 1MDB among netizens on the online platform, *The Malaysian Insider* Facebook page, meets the characteristics of a practical discourse in an online context, as proposed by Jurgen Habermas.

The scandal caught the public's attention after an online exposé in *Sarawak Report*, an online investigative blog founded by Clare Rewcastle Brown, which published details of impropriety based on a series of leaked emails from a company that dealt with 1MDB. The scandal reached its peak when *The Wall Street Journal* reported that investigators had traced around 2.6 billion Malaysian Ringgit (MYR) wired into the bank accounts of Malaysia's then Prime Minister, Najib Razak. The money was believed to be a form of kickback from deals made by 1MDB. The company had been under heavy scrutiny since 2015 for suspicious

financial transactions, with evidence pointing to a complex money-laundering network, fraud and theft. In 2020, the Malaysian courts sentenced the former Prime Minister, Najib Razak, to 12 years in jail and fined him MYR 210 million (US\$49.3 million) in the first of five criminal trials linking him to the multibillion-dollar 1MDB corruption scandal (Sukumaran, 2020).

It was believed that the stolen monies were laundered in over 10 different countries, including the US (Mohd Nor, 2019), through investments in properties, companies, purchases of luxury goods and the funding of exorbitant parties for its beneficiaries. A central figure in all of these questionable transactions and financial transgressions is Taek Jho Low, allegedly the ‘Mastermind of 1MDB’. A close associate of the then Prime Minister, Najib Razak, Jho Low used his relationship with the Prime Minister as leverage in orchestrating the alleged improper dealings with regard to 1MDB. Although Jho Low never held an official position in the investment fund, investigations and witness statements in court revealed that he had a substantial influence on the company’s operations, to the extent of deciding appointments to key managerial positions (Mohd Nor, 2019).

The embezzlement reached a global scale due to the involvement of financial institutions in various countries, prompting an international investigation. In the US, the Justice Department, alongside the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), launched a probe into the properties, purchases, investments, and shell companies owned by Jho Low and Riza Aziz, Najib Razak’s stepson. As these funds flowed through US financial institutions, any breaches would fall within US jurisdiction. The scandal attracted still greater global attention after the FBI issued a subpoena to several individuals connected to Red Granite Pictures, a film production company co-founded by Riza Aziz. It is believed that Red Granite received over US\$155 million originating from 1MDB to help finance the 2013 box office hit film, *The Wolf of Wall Street*, ironically a film about a substantial financial fraud in the 1990s (Mohd Nor, 2019).

At the same time, the 1MDB fiasco also impacted the Malaysian political scene and became a focal rallying point for the Malaysian opposition, with Najib challenged and questioned on the scandal by his detractors. Using his overreaching executive power and influence, Najib restrained any investigations, actions or probes into 1MDB from 2015 to 2018, ousting his then Deputy Prime Minister, the attorney general and several key civil servants involved in the investigations (“Muhyiddin breaks silence on 1MDB”, 2015). However, 1MDB proved to have far-reaching consequences, driving the fall of Najib Razak’s coalition in the 14th Malaysian General election, causing long-term dissatisfaction in the Malaysian public and creating a determined opposition that rallied around the 4th Prime Minister, and former

mentor of Najib Razak, Tun Dr Mahathir. It also led to the fall of the 60-year rule of Barisan Nasional, which Najib's father, Tun Abdul Razak, the second Malaysian Prime Minister, helped to found.

The fallout resulted in a series of charges being brought against Najib, involving 1MDB and its subsidiaries. In July 2020, as mentioned earlier, Najib was found guilty on all seven charges of misappropriating MYR 42 million in the case of SRC International (a subsidiary of 1MDB). Currently, Najib's defence, led by lawyer Tan Sri Muhammad Shafee Abdullah, has asked for a deferment in the mitigation proceedings after the guilty verdict (Tee, 2020).

In 2015, when the scandal was at its peak, the online discourse of Malaysians on the 1MDB scandal was unquestionably significant because there was no avenue to seek explanations of the revelations while Najib was still in power. Locally, traditional media sources were silent on the 1MDB issue; therefore, Malaysian netizens sought news from the Internet. Online platforms became a public sphere on which they had the freedom to express their thoughts and queries on the scandal without restrictions.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

This research will examine the discourse captured throughout 2015 and how Malaysian netizens reacted to the news reported, based on online exposés. Secondly, it will examine whether the online discourse on 1MDB meets the characteristics of a practical discourse proposed by Jurgen Habermas.

The 1MDB scandal itself dates back much earlier; while most of the alleged transgressions happened before 2012, 2015 was chosen as the period for data collection because it was in this year that revelations began to hit the news headlines, resulting in 1MDB dominating much of the online discourse that year.

Facebook was chosen as the platform from which to collect these data as it was the most widely used social media platform in Malaysia during the data collection period. According to Statista.com, Facebook had almost 20 million Malaysian users in 2015. It was also the platform where the majority of the discourse took place, as other platforms such as Twitter – which had a word limit of 140 characters at the time – did not allow for lengthy debate or opinions expressed. This research scrutinised the comments left by readers of *The Malaysian Insider (TMI)* on articles published about 1MDB. *TMI* was chosen for its critical and thorough reporting on 1MDB during the period when this research was conducted. Indeed, its owner, Jahabar Sadiq, shut down the news portal after it was blocked by the Malaysian

government as a result of its critical coverage of the troubled state investment fund (Ngui, 2016)

It should be noted that the whistle-blower portal, *Sarawak Report*, which was the source of much of the 1MDB news, was also blocked by MCMC (Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission) in 2015, making it inaccessible to the majority of Malaysians during the height of the revelations. *TMI* had a following of over 403,000 on its Facebook page before it was blocked and was so influential in its coverage of 1MDB that it, too, was banned the following year.

The consistency of reporting by *TMI* on the news regarding 1MDB, coupled with its large number of followers and the amount of conversation it generates online (based on link shares), make it an excellent source of data which can be sampled to analyse the thoughts and narratives playing out throughout the coverage of the scandal. Some may argue that internationally renowned news outlets such as *The Wall Street Journal* may provide a more detailed and accurate assessment of the scandal but it is a financial news outlet and this research is more interested in investigating how 1MDB shaped the online opinions of Malaysians. Thus, *TMI* proved to be a more suitable choice in this context.

1.2 Various Interpretations of the 1MDB Political Scandal

The 1MDB saga has been written about by writers who conducted investigations and thorough research to establish the truth about the embezzlement and adopted differing perspectives depending on their research, background and profession. Tom Wright and Bradley Hope, journalists from *The Wall Street Journal*, wrote the best-selling non-fiction book *The Billion Dollar Whale* which focuses primarily on how Jho Low, a close associate of Najib Razak, masterminded the embezzlement by influencing foreign governments, key corporate figures and bankers. He portrayed himself as a prominent socialite, throwing opulent parties while mingling with the Hollywood elite in a lifestyle funded by funds embezzled from 1MDB. *The Billion Dollar Whale* gives us a better perspective on the financial and international angles of this scandal; while it touches on some events in Malaysia, it concentrates on Jho Low's global activities by following the money trail.

Sarawak Report, in contrast, communicated the 1MDB story from a more local perspective. Though founded and managed by Claire Rewcastle Brown, an investigative journalist based in London, *Sarawak Report* has always written about local issues, focusing mostly on the state of Sarawak and the wealth surrounding the Taib Mahmud clan.

1.3 Media Coverage of the 1MDB Political Scandal

The Malaysian mainstream media, whether print or online, failed to report the 1MDB political scandal thoroughly. The majority of reports merely repeat the government's statements or scrape the surface without investigating further. It was the alternative and opposition-friendly media that took Najib to task by reporting the details of the scandal and taking a position critical of the government. Given the long-standing structure of ownership and political control over Malaysia's mainstream media, and the resulting political parallelism, it is to be expected that the mainstream media would be relatively tame in its reporting of the 1MDB scandal implicating the then Prime Minister.

Yet, a senior local journalist and the group editor of *The News Straits Times*, Mustapha Kamil, resigned from his job (Wright, 2016), claiming that the ruling government had restricted the newspapers under its control from covering the 1MDB story. These restrictions affected the circulation and readership of *The New Straits Times* and the more extensive circulation of the Malay-language *Berita Harian* and *Utusan Malaysia* newspapers.

Moving to the alternative media coverage on 1MDB, *TMI*, which was an independent news portal that published in-depth critical coverage of 1MDB, was barred by the Malaysian government after several explosive reports that gained significant traction amongst members of the public (Naidu, 2016). The trigger was a controversial article that directly linked Najib, the then Prime Minister, to the scandal. *TMI*, founded in 2008, is among a crop of alternative media sites that have gained a considerable following in Malaysia as people sought an alternative to the government-controlled media. In 2016, it was accused by the government of publishing false content ("Malaysiakini credibility questioned", 2016), which led to its ban. It is worth noting that the local mainstream press in Malaysia was either tightly controlled or owned by *Barisan Nasional*, the ruling coalition before May 2018.

After the 1MDB exposé and the series of events in the Malaysian political scene resulting from the revelations, netizens' comments escalated significantly in news coverage online. Numerous and sometimes conflicting opinions were expressed on key personalities in the scandal, making it a high-profile, online public discourse worth investigating.

TMI was among the most prolific independent media, offering both critical reporting and an online platform on which netizens could discuss and debate the 1MDB scandal openly.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Public Sphere as a Platform for Discourse

The Internet, as a platform of discourse, offers widespread accessibility, allowing public discussions to take place on a variety of platforms and, thus, offering wider insights into particular issues. Ferree, Gamson, Gerhads, and Rucht (2002) defined public discussion as public communication about topics and actors related either to a particular policy domain or to its related broader interests and values. As such, it is a foundation of democracy and citizenship, especially in a multi-racial society (Witschge, 2008). In other words, public discussion could be termed as public discourse. Tollefsen (2009) regarded discourse as an exchange of reasoning; it must have the character of a public argument.

In the context of the online discourse of the 1MDB political scandal, the portrayal of news on 1MDB could affect netizens' perceptions of the issue in an online public discussion. Perception can be defined as 'the process by which an individual selects, organizes and interprets stimuli into a meaningful and coherent picture of the world' (Schiffman, Bednall, Watson, & Kanuk, 1997), or 'the particular interpretation one gives to objects or ideas observed or otherwise brought to the individual's attention through the senses' (Walters & Bergiel, 1989). Both these definitions suggest that perception is a mental stimulus which influences an individual's senses. A simplified definition of perception could, therefore, be expressed as 'how we interpret or give meaning to the world around us [...] depend[ing] on the object and experiences that we [have] encountered in our lives' (Schiffman et al., 1997).

In this particular study, perception and opinion are interrelated: an individual's perception of 1MDB is formed based on their opinion. Opinions are feelings or thoughts, rather than facts. Thus, to understand a person's perception on a particular issue is to know their opinion on the topic. Based on netizens' perceptions of 1MDB expressed online in this study, it is believed that this online discourse on 1MDB meets the characteristics of a practical discourse as laid down by Jurgen Habermas (1989), yet in an online sphere.

Habermas (1989) states that a practical discourse must adhere to a number of specific conditions. Firstly, it must be based on the concerns of citizens. Secondly, a rational critical discourse requires reciprocal critique between one user and another so that an exchange of viewpoints can take place. Thirdly, participants must critically examine their cultural values, assumptions and interests as well as the broader social context and, fourthly, an attempt must be made to understand the argument from the perspectives of others. Fifthly, participants in the discourse should make a sincere effort to make public all information, including their true views, as relevant to a particular problem and question under discussion and, finally,

participants in the discourse should critically question the issues discussed in the discourse. The six elements mentioned above will be explored in the findings section, as regards the objective of the study.

2.2 Netizens' Comments in the Online Sphere

As online and mobile information technologies continue to become more common, Malaysians are increasingly turning to these sources for news. At the same time, the emergence and creation of these new communication modalities have raised questions about how their use affects users (Yzer & Southwell, 2008).

Although online and mobile communication modalities are potentially more accessible, dynamic and interactive than traditional media, they differ from traditional forms of communication media in providing an electronic space in which interpersonal and traditional media sources converge (Walther, DeAndrea, Kim, & Anthony, 2010).

Therefore, when accessing an online version of a traditional medium, such as a website, the user may encounter not only news content created by professional journalists but also other users' comments about that content, since online news sites often allow readers to post comments about news stories. This feature provides an opportunity for users to engage with a news source as well as with other readers of the site (Glaser, 2008). The users' comments might be 'astute, reasonable, and well written; they might be crass, radical, and informal; or they might be some combination of both' (Walther et al., 2010).

2.3 Networked Public Sphere

This study is based on the foundation of the Networked Public Sphere Theory, which refers to the shift from a mass-media public sphere controlled by a small number of commercial markets to a forum that is accessible to and generated by individuals.

This shift gives individuals the freedom to enjoy the act of creating information and knowledge (Benkler, 2006). By employing the theory of the networked public sphere in this study, the researcher acknowledges that Malaysians had no opportunity for such deliberation through the traditional media, which was controlled by the government. This limitation has shifted their preference to more open forums, such as Facebook, where they could freely deliberate and connect in discussing an issue. Based on the conceptual framework model below, it is posited that *TMI* Facebook page serves as a public sphere and a space for democratic deliberation. Through that space, deliberation regarding the 1MDB political scandal is developed through the public sphere. Online deliberation on the political scandal allows the

netizens to articulate their perception and representation of these issues through their Facebook comments, which shape the 1MDB political scandal discourse. The above model indicates a dialectical relationship between netizens' perceptions and representations. The researcher strongly believes that the netizens' perceptions of the issue have shaped the public discourse on the 1MDB political scandal. At the same time, public discourse has also shaped and reinforced the netizens' perception of the scandal. All of these elements contribute towards the online manifestation of a Habermasian public sphere. As mentioned in the initial section of the literature review, the online discourse on 1MDB fits the characteristics of a practical discourse as laid down by Habermas (1989). Hence, the above-mentioned elements are included in the conceptual framework of the online discourse, as shown in Figure 1 below.

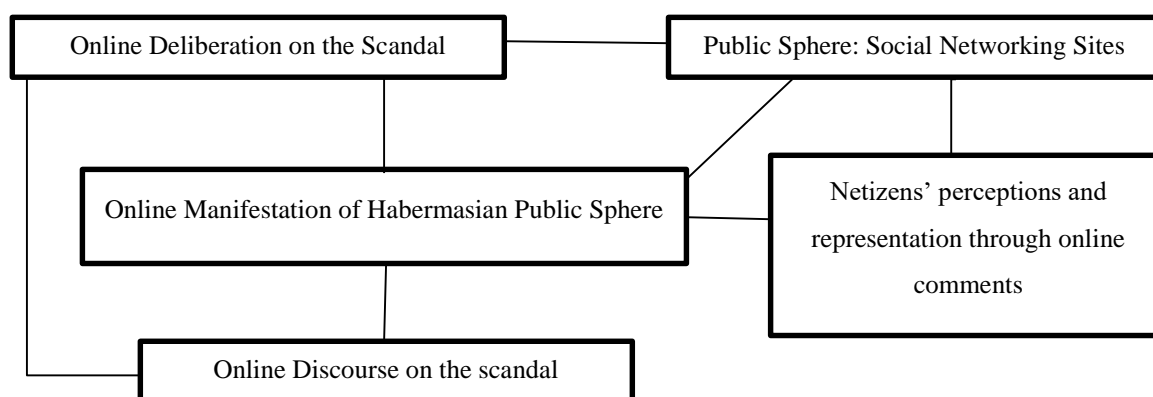


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a qualitative approach, applying thematic analysis to 1,950 netizens' comments attached to 210 1MDB articles relating to the 1MDB political scandal posted on the *TMI* Facebook page.

The majority of the comments on the *TMI* Facebook page were written in English but included Malay slang words, such as 'lah'. Hence, the data could be considered as fully fledged English with Malaysian slang. The study examines the emergent themes from the online discourse between the netizens and the interpretation behind every comment.

The comments were extracted between September 2015 and December 2015 with the aim of establishing whether publicity about the 1MDB issue persisted even months after the *Sarawak Report* ("Sensational findings", 2015) and *The Wall Street Journal* (Wright & Clark, 2015) initially exposed the scandal.

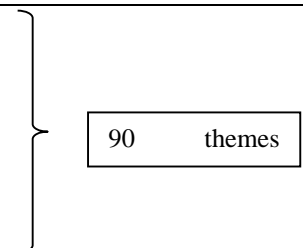
Seventeen comments were highlighted as demonstrating the way in which each particular theme emerged in the online discourse among Malaysian netizens on the *TMI* Facebook page. All comments highlighted in this case study were principal comments that had a huge number of thread replies from other netizens on the subject of 1MDB and could be identified as the emergent themes of this case study.

The *TMI* Facebook page has a total of 432,229 ‘likes’ to date, and all its followers can retrieve its posts through their newsfeed, including comments made on any posts on the Malaysian Insider page. In today’s digital age, it is common for news organisations to have a Facebook account, and specifically a Facebook page, because most of their audience access social networking sites daily. The *TMI* Facebook page is a public page where anybody can become a ‘fan’ or a ‘follower’ and gain access to the public comments posted openly by other ‘fans’ or ‘follower’ and, therefore, the researcher strongly argues that the extraction of comments is ethical, with no guidelines breached.

This study chose the *TMI* Facebook page due to its status as a critical structural component in the public sphere, which allowed access for the forum to take place. Malaysiakini and Malaymail are Malaysian online independent news portals that conducted a thorough investigation on 1MDB, and their reporting was critical of the authorities, but the researchers felt it was best to choose *TMI* as it was more neutral.

The comments collected from the articles were recorded on Microsoft Excel, and organised and analysed using automatic coding by NVivo 11 Plus. Comments from social media were treated as a dataset by NVivo; its latest feature allowed the researcher to auto-code the dataset to retrieve themes found within the data. This feature also facilitated thematic analysis through the use of the six phases identified by Braun and Clarke (2006), who developed this method of identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data, using six stages. In Phase 1, we familiarised with the depth and breadth of the content and, in Phase 2, generated the initial codes after reading and familiarising with the data. In Phase 3, different codes were allocated to potential themes. In Phase 4, the researcher reviewed the created themes for refinement and, in Phase 5, further defined and named the themes for analysis. In Phase 6, the researcher produced the report based on a set of fully worked-out themes. Table 1 is a summary of the auto-coded themes:

Table 1: Number of Emergent Themes

Month	1MDB articles	Total themes emerged
September 2015	62 articles	
October 2015	50 articles	
November 2015	69 articles	
December 2015	29 articles	

**There are overlaps in themes for each month*

Table 1 shows that 90 themes emerged from the auto-coding of 210 1MDB articles from the *TMI* Facebook page. The netizens’ perceptions of the 1MDB political scandal were combined in the auto code with the online representation of the 1MDB social actors by the netizens. Later, the themes were refined and structured based on the comments collected. Among the auto-coded themes (comments) were ‘Najib’, ‘1MDB’, ‘opposition’, ‘Tony Pua’ and ‘investigation’. The 90 emergent themes generated by NVivo’s auto-code function were reviewed and further reduced based on similarities between the comments in the clustered themes so that salient themes could be derived from the data. The researchers explored all six steps of thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Through the phase of familiarisation with and immersion in the data, the researcher was able to gain a deep comprehension of the Facebook comments to construct the themes between the keywords. Understanding the issues was essential to connecting the keywords and identifying the themes that emerged from the online discourse by the netizens.

The themes that emerged from the data were analysed in correlation with the political events and developments that happened in the same period as 1MDB. At the same time, the themes discussed are based on the issues discussed by the netizens, further interpreted and elaborated by the researchers.

4.0 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

As shown in Table 2, four main themes emerged from the conversations among netizens on the *TMI* Facebook page.

Table 2: An overview of emergent themes

Themes	Keywords
Najib ‘The Prime Minister’	2.6 billion donations Account Steal UMNO Malaysia Credibility
The 1MDB Controversy	Tony Pua Arul Kanda Speaker Rafizi Ramli PAC Chief Rakyat
Opposition’s position on 1MDB	Mahathir Muhyiddin Lim Kit Siang Nazir Razak
Investigation into 1MDB	AG1 AG closed case PAC Najib

4.1 An Overview of Emerging Themes

The first theme is ‘Najib The Prime Minister’. This theme primarily questioned Najib Razak’s credibility as Prime Minister. The immediate perceptions of the scandal centred on the allegations that Najib had siphoned RM2.6 billion from the 1MDB and Najib’s claim that the Saudi Arabian government had donated RM2.6 billion to Najib for the Malaysian general election (“1MDB scandal taking toll”, 2016). The second theme was the ‘The 1MDB Controversy’, in which Tony Pua challenged the Chief Executive Officer of the 1MDB Corporation, Arul Kanda, to join him in a public debate to address the *rakyat’s* (nation’s) questions on 1MDB. Arul, however, was reluctant to take part in the debate; he even ignored Pua’s official statement made via the press. Pua, in his capacity as a committee member of Public Accounts Committee (PAC), was advised by the PAC chief to refrain from being ‘vocal’ about the 1MDB debate or risk losing his position. This prompted Rafizi Ramli, a member of

the opposition party (Parti Keadilan Rakyat), to challenge Arul instead. The discussion about who should debate with whom in November 2015 continued for a month, yet no debate took place. The third theme was the position of the Opposition on 1MDB. The opposition parties played a strong check-and-balance role in the 1MDB political scandal in questioning government officials on the actions they were taking to resolve the 1MDB political scandal. 'Investigation of 1MDB' was the final theme to emerge from the corpus of the comments. The netizens appeared furious when the attorney general closed the 1MDB investigation and confirmed that the fund was indeed a donation. They firmly believed this claim to be entirely untrue.

4.2 First Theme - Najib The Prime Minister

The theme Najib 'The Prime Minister' was created because Najib's credibility was consistently questioned during the four-month discourse, as indicated in the netizens' comments.

Netizen 1 appeared worried and was critical of Najib's credibility:

It's been almost 1 year since Rafizi and Tony first highlighted about 1MDB. It's been 5 months since WSJ published solid evidence of 2.6billion in your private account. It's been 6 months since Edge published the money trail of 1MDB resulting in them being banned. And yet, you still haven't personally answered anything or sue the WSJ, hiding behind your wall of loyal dogs. So yes, you have lost all credibility. It will hurt your party in the Sarawak Election and GE14.
(Netizen 1)

The comment above reveals concern about how Najib is handling the scandal. The writer does not want to be kept in the dark and needs to hear the truth from him. The way the netizen questioned how the ruling government had been dealing with the 1MDB issue is evident in the comment 'sue the *WSJ*'. The ruling government took no action against *The Wall Street Journal*, and the netizen implies that Najib is at fault in this respect. This particular theme about perception is not particularly negative, but takes a more neutral stand; the netizens felt that if Najib were to sue *The Wall Street Journal*, the credibility of the Prime Minister would have been upheld in the people's eyes.

Only a Minister with no dignity would serve in Najib's cabinet. (Netizen 2)

This particular comment is attached to an article entitled 'Paul Low defending Najib on 1MDB allegations'. Paul Low is a former minister in the Prime Minister's Department. As the

quotation indicates, the netizen feels anger and frustration: Najib is at fault and only ministers with no dignity would serve Najib as their superior.

Let's hope the rakyat are now fully aware that this country has no future with this kind of governing. Let's pray hard that the court will deem the last general election void and therefore return the power to the rakyat, so for us rakyat once and for all make a wise choice for the sake of our children and grandchildren. (Netizen 3)

Netizen 3 has a clear standpoint and hopes that Malaysians are aware that they are governed by untrustworthy leaders, further insinuating that elections are the only hope for endorsing the *rakyat's* (People's) power, representing an opportunity to vote for a change in the ruling government for the good of Malaysia.

These people are simple-minded. They don't care about standards of living, national debts and many more things. What appears on social media like human rights and liberty are too abstract and intangible for them. They want something immediate. Something that they can feel and benefit from right away. (Netizen 4)

Najib is the Member of Parliament in his hometown, Pekan, in Pahang, one of the largest states in Malaysia. A comment on an article entitled '1MDB has little impact on Pekan' prompted Netizen 4 to comment that Malaysians living in Pekan do not care about 1MDB as long as Najib's ruling government can give them all the benefits they need to survive. Pekan is a rural district; thus, 1MDB is not a central issue for the population. Netizen 4 insinuates that his constituents' priority is to obtain benefits and incentives from Najib.

And this surprises you? Why? Najib doesn't want the accounts made public NOW!!! Come on, how ignorant are you Malaysians? (Netizen 5)

This comment was attached to an article entitled '1MDB misses deadline to submit audit accounts'. Netizen 5 feels that all Malaysians have been fooled and are unaware of Najib's degrading actions in keeping the 1MDB matter from being known to the public.

In summary, these comments from netizens illustrate Habermas's (1989) first and second criteria; they plead for Najib to come clean on 1MDB and express frustration that they are being kept out of the loop about what is happening on 1MDB due to Najib's silence on the substantial allegations made by *Sarawak Report* and *The Wall Street Journal*.

4.3 Second Theme -The 1MDB Controversy

You all know Malaysia is a boleh land!! After the debate they can sack Tony! Better don't take this risk. Replace with Rafizi!! (Netizen 6)

As mentioned previously, Tony Pua invited Arul Kanda, then CEO of 1MDB, to debate the fund and its links to the financial scandal with him. The netizens support Tony Pua and Rafizi Ramli, who are both seen as 'heroes' in addressing the *rakyat* (citizens') worries about the political scandal. Tony Pua and Rafizi Ramli were responsible for initiating the 1MDB online discourse on Twitter, long before the online exposé of 1MDB in July 2015. 'Malaysia is a boleh land, this particular netizen observes. The phrase 'Malaysia Boleh!' means that Malaysia could do anything, in a positive context. Given this context, Netizen 6 expresses frustration and anger that the phrase is being used negatively: anything could happen with 1MDB; anyone who opposes 1MDB could lose their job or be imprisoned.

Netizen 7: When is the debate? The CEO has no balls.

From September 2015 until December 2015, *TMI* continued to highlight issues on the mooted debate about 1MDB to clarify the public's questions about the embezzlement. The issue of the debate remained unresolved for four months from September 2015 and the final outcome was that the debate never took place. Hence, Netizen 7 claims that Arul Kanda repeatedly delays the debate as he fears telling the public the truth.

Arul will beat around the bush during the debate, then no conclusion. Then they will use the open debate as a reason to kick Pua out of the PAC. [Netizen 8]

Netizen 8 believes that, if the 1MDB debate is held, Arul Kanda will continue to avoid the questions and manipulate the answers. Hence, there is no point in holding the debate if the 1MDB administrators are not honest about the alleged embezzlement. Tony Pua was an opposition Member of Parliament (now political secretary to Finance Minister, Lim Guan Eng), and holds a position in the Public Accounts Committee of Malaysia, which is responsible for auditing the 1MDB reports. As Pua's concerns about 1MDB have been expressed through the media, Netizen 8 fears that the debate will be used to oust Pua from the Public Accounts Committee.

The second theme illustrates the first and third elements in Habermas's (1989) model. There is evidence of discussion, and consensus over the emergence of Tony Pua as a hero, a member of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) who continuously questions the 1MDB audit reports, and persistently challenged Arul Kanda, the CEO of 1MDB, to a debate to resolve the 1MDB allegations. In the discourse, Tony is hailed as a 'Representative of the Rakyat'; netizens feel that he represents their dissatisfaction.

4.4 Third Theme – The Opposition Position on 1MDB

The assumption that netizens support the opposition political parties may not be true: one even questions Mahathir's claims about 1MDB:

Yes, Tun Mahathir u also hv to show us the rakyat proof too about 1MDB money just vanish in thin air. (Netizen 9)

*Tun Mahathir – the Seventh and the Fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia

The above comment indicates the netizen's demand for proof to support the opposition's allegations that Najib took RM2.6 billion. The netizens also believe in 'check-and-balance' in expressing their thoughts on the political scandal. Other opposition political figures, such as Muhyiddin Yassin and Mukhriz Mahathir, continue to raise issues on the scandal.

Since we want Lim KS to be there in parliament to debate less we have no better rep to do it...? I think it's best that Lim KS apologise ... melayu kata 'tak luak pun' ... so that we 1. Defeat Azalina 2. Move on and debate whatever is on our mind ... he is d best we have. (Netizen 10)

Lim Kit Siang is an opposition Member of Parliament who continues to question the 1MDB issue and has the opportunity to do so during parliamentary sessions, although he was forced by the Speaker to apologise for raising the 1MDB issue during a session. This commenter quotes a Malay phrase 'Tak Luak Pun', meaning that you have nothing to lose. Even if Kit Siang apologises, he will lose nothing, but could gain more by defeating Azalina (a Barisan Nasional Minister who defends Najib and 1MDB). Kit Siang should continue to represent the *rakyat*, voicing his concerns on 1MDB.

Pandikar Amin the Parliament Speaker has no integrity. He is biased n clearly demonstrated to protect Najib n the ruling government. A real shame to the world. (Netizen 11)

Pandikar Amin is the Speaker for the Lower House of the Malaysian Parliament. Netizen 11 feels that even the Speaker is protecting Najib, despite his supposed neutrality as Speaker. This means that Najib has ‘bought’ anyone who could defend him on 1MDB.

Tol hike cannot ask. 1MDB issue can ask. GST issue cannot ask. What’s the point of having Parliament meeting??? All MPs just keep quiet to receive a monthly salary and allowance. Just let PMO run the show, ruin the country ... (Netizen 12)

Netizen 12 expressed dissatisfaction and frustration because the main concerns of Malaysian citizens cannot be raised in Parliament while Najib remains in power. The commenter believes that all members of Parliament are failing to fulfil their function. Instead, they allow the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) to dictate what Parliament should decide on an issue that has the potential to ruin Malaysia.

This theme of perception, in particular, emerges when netizens give more emphasis to the opposition parties than to their denunciations of Najib’s corruption, demonstrating the presence of the first and third conditions of the Habermas public sphere. The majority of the netizens criticise Najib and no one defends him in terms of this particular theme. The netizens continue to argue that the opposition party does not represent the people’s dissatisfaction in Parliament because they suspect that Najib has ‘bought’ all these politicians so they stand behind him and reject allegations made against him.

4.5 Fourth Theme - Investigation of the 1MDB Scandal

The fourth theme of perception identified in this study concerns the netizens’ feelings about the government’s attempts to tamper with the 1MDB investigations.

Unverified? It is ur bullshits that are unverified. WSJ investigated the whole scam and found evidence. So what they wrote and reported are the truth. Najib, you and your fellow monkeys are trying to lie your way out by feeding false information to the Malaysian public. Najib blocked all investigations. If he is as innocent as he claimed, why sack the ex-AG and those involved in the investigation? Why raid the offices and remove evidence of Najib's doing. Based on the comment made by a netizen above, Malaysia's former Attorney-General, Gani Patail, was asked to leave his chambers by the government due to "health issues". Ironically, he was in good health at that point of time. The newly appointed Attorney-General, Apandi Ali, quickly cleared Najib of all charges upon his appointment as the new Attorney-General, causing netizens to suspect that the government was hiding the truth from all Malaysians. The netizens also felt that the government interfered with the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) and Malaysian Anti-Corruption Malaysia's (MACC) investigation on the 1MDB scandal. As a result, the outcome of the investigation was in favor of Najib. (Netizen 13)

The righteous people will sympathize with you. (Netizen 14)

Netizen 13 cites Patail as one of the unfortunate victims of the scandals facing the nation. Addressing Gani Patail's removal as the Attorney General, Netizen 14 sympathizes.

U, Tan Sri Gani, has been an A-G for so long n c what happened to u now. U are fair AG n now u have been stabbed at the back none other than corrupt PM. Anyway don't lose hope n as always the truth will prevail in the end. (Netizen 15)

Netizens 14 and 15 observe that the cabinet ministers will get what they deserve and Gani should be patient in dealing with this situation.

The comments below both respond to an article revealing the appointment of the new Attorney General, Tan Sri Apandi Ali.

Handpicked and recommended to the Agung by the person being accused. How to investigate?....
hmmm ... (Netizen 16)

Shadowed by Najib. How to perform his duty? (Netizen 17)

Netizens 16 and 17 express their exasperation, believing that anyone appointed by Najib's administration will follow Najib's instructions regarding the 1MDB investigation. Hence, it is assumed that there will be no transparency in the 1MDB investigations during Najib's term as Prime Minister.

This illustrates the second, fourth and fifth elements of Habermas's critical discourse. The last theme overlaps with Theme 1, 'Najib The Prime Minister', in criticising the authorities over their cover-up. The netizens emphasise that the former Attorney General, Gani Patail, was removed from his position due to rumours that he was about to charge Najib over his handling of 1MDB. And they acknowledge that this was a bold move by Gani Patail. This theme illustrates the six condition in Habermas's public sphere.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Within the four themes that emerged in 2015 on the 1MDB discourse, it can be seen that the content published by *TMI* on 1MDB had a strong correlation with the critical perceptions of the netizens (followers of the *TMI* Facebook page). Nevertheless through the Facebook comments section, the netizens had formed independent perceptions of 1MDB, which created another context of what they perceived and read through the online news site. Without the Internet, the voices of the netizens would not have been heard, as the traditional mass media in Malaysia in 2015 was firmly controlled by Najib's Barisan Nasional administration. The traditional media offered no coverage of the 1MDB scandal, forcing netizens to turn to alternative media sources to express their concerns about the embezzlement.

Based on the findings from the study, it can be concluded that the netizens in *TMI* had their own interpretation of 1MDB, distinct to that portrayed by the media. Through the comments section, netizens made clear that they saw this as a local issue and demanded that Najib be honest with his opponents in the opposition political party regarding the allegations. In the online discourse itself, netizens felt that the opposition leaders knew what was right and spoke out to represent the people's dissatisfaction with this issue. Using 1MDB as a case study to analyse the online news discourse, it could be interpreted that Habermas's conditions of discourse have been met in the 1MDB discourse, as the online platform conveys the concerns of the Malaysian people. Everyone can own a social media account which offers freedom of expression, with ease of access encouraging netizens to share their opinions and beliefs publicly in response to what they had read on the 1MDB online platform. In the case of the 1MDB political scandal, the Internet became a networked public sphere, connecting people, increasing awareness of the situation, and giving the public the ability to share public concerns online.

This study has shown that the six elements of Habermas's conditions for a public sphere have been fulfilled in the online sphere because the 1MDB political scandal was highly publicised. Citizens were seen to be highly involved because the scandal concerned the nation.

Secondly, the comment sections in the FB page enabled netizens to exchange views on the issue. The sample of data used in the study indicated that netizens tended to oppose or agree with each other throughout the discourse. Thirdly, each comment will undoubtedly differ from the others because netizens come from a range of backgrounds and cultures and hold different beliefs. Fourthly, in this online discourse, netizens indicated that they agreed with the viewpoints of others; they supported the arguments given by others, although some disagreements arose between them. Fifthly, as the data analysis progressed, the netizens' intentions regarding the 1MDB political scandal became more evident; they persistently demanded the truth about Malaysia's role in the case. Sixthly, in interpreting the netizens' comments, it was found that, in the online discourse, the netizens had frequently pressed for more information and demanded the truth. Thus, this study has convincingly shown that the online discourse on the 1MDB political scandal fits the requirements of a Habermasian public sphere.

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