WWW.IJRPR.COM

International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Journal Homepage: www.ijrpr.com ISSN 2582-7421

The Ethics of Undisclosed Political Influencer Content on TikTok: A Case Study of Malaysia's 15th General Election (GE15)

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ABSTRACT

TikTok has become a major site of political influence during the 15th Malaysian General Election (GE15) in November 2022 as the platform was used by political parties to influence the newly enfranchised six million voters under the Undi18 constitutional change. Although TikTok's Global Policy for Government and Political Party Accounts banned political paid promotion, observed organic influencer content on TikTok could be coordinated with political parties without being revealed. Based on deontological, utilitarian, and virtue ethics, this paper contends that the undisclosed influencer political content on TikTok is a media-ethical issue as a system since it conceals the commercial or political party relationship under the guise of organic and genuine opinion. Findings of the study reveal that this kind of content breaches Kant's obligation to tell the truth, causes net negative consequences to voters' freedom and democratic conversation, and lacks the virtues of honesty and accountability for communicators in public. Lastly, the paper recommends the use of disclosure tag, platform review, and media literacy.

Keyword: media ethics; political influencers; TikTok; GE15; disclosure; deontology; utilitarianism; Malaysia

1. Introduction

Social media has changed the landscape of political influence. Instead of relying on mass media, party manifestos, and rallies as during the 20th century election campaigns, today's election campaigns tend to outsource the influence to social media influencers (i.e. regular users with a large number of followers due to their personality, humour and casual style). The 15th General Election (GE15) in Malaysia, which took place on 19 November 2022, is a clear example of this change. Undi18 and automatic registration changes lowered the voting age to 18 and increased the number of voters in the register by over six million (i.e., more than 30%) (Ooi, 2022). These new voters were mostly inexperienced and did not have party affiliation, thus parties focused on spending their time on TikTok (Ooi, 2022).

In turn, TikTok revealed that prior to GE15, it had introduced its Global Policy Changes for Government and Political Party Accounts (GPPPA) which banned political paid advertising, gifts or donations to politicians via the platform, and fundraising (The Rakyat Post, 2022). However, as described by Ooi (2022), undisclosed political influencer content is still present on TikTok but rather hidden. Specifically, Perikatan Nasional (PN) uses third-party "organic" accounts (e.g., @Friendsofmuhyddinyassin with 242,000 followers and @abekitemuhyddin with 224,400 followers) to disseminate pro-coalition messages without indicating any form of sponsorship or coordination (Ooi, 2022). Creator Jason Yew of TikTok gained 36 million views, 1.5 million likes and over 246,000 comments on edited videos of Pakatan Harapan leaders during the campaign (Ooi, 2022). Whether these TikTok creators are independently convinced or are covertly sponsored or coordinated by the campaign is the ethical issue that this paper will address.

The paper will address the question of whether undisclosed political influencer content on TikTok is ethically permissible or not and if not, what obligations apply to it. The paper will be divided into five sections. Section 2 will provide a literature review of influencer marketing ethics and present three normative approaches, namely deontology, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics, and discuss the case of Malaysian GE15. Section 3 will present how these approaches can be used to discuss undisclosed political influencer content. Section 4 will cover platform regulation. Section 5 will provide recommendations.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Political Influencer Marketing and the Disclosure Problem

Influencer marketing is a popular form of promotion, and ethical issues related to influencer marketing have been studied more and more. According to Borchers and Enke (2022) reviewed in recent literature, the ethical dimensions of influencer marketing can be grouped into three dimensions that are interconnected: transparency, authenticity, and responsibility (i.e., disclosing to the audience that they are being targeted as consumers/supporters, that the endorsement is based on belief and not on compensation, and considering the social impact of the influencer's message, respectively, Borchers &

Enke, 2022). Evans, Phua, Lim & Junudo (2017) showed that consumers do not always detect hidden advertisements despite the hashtags such as #ad or #sponsored, which means that lack of disclosure is functionally the same as no disclosure.

This situation becomes even more challenging if the 'product' to be advertised is a political candidate or party instead of a consumer product. While in the case of influencer marketing for products, the viewer does not have to buy, in the case of political messaging, all viewers are potential voters influencing the government of a whole polity. Moody and Reese (2021) stated that political influencers are situated in a liminal space between citizen-journalist and paid surrogate, and the lack of disclosure norms makes it difficult for the audience to differentiate between spontaneous political conviction and campaign message. Moreover, Lou, Tan & Chen (2023) in European Journal of Marketing also revealed that social media influencers constantly face moral dilemmas of non-disclosure, hiding negative experiences, and promoting without having experienced the content, and they deal with these dilemmas via ad hoc role.

2.2 Media Ethics Lenses: Deontology, Utilitarianism, and Virtue Ethics

Media ethics offers many normative principles to choose from. Christian G. Christians and the Potter Box (Christians, Fackler, & McKinnon, 2019) suggest that communicators should consider facts, values, principles, and loyalties in sequence before engaging in an action. The present paper applies three philosophical principles to the assessment of undisclosed political influencer messages

According to deontology, the categorical imperative as proposed by Kant, an action is judged on its ability to be willed as a universal law and on its treatment of persons as ends in themselves and not as a means (Bok, 1978). Bok's (1978) seminal work on lying suggests that withholding of pertinent information amounts to lying as it takes advantage of the listener's expectation of openness. In the context of influencer marketing, deontology would suggest that undisclosed campaign of an influencer is treating the audience as a tool to be used instead of as an autonomous moral being.

Utilitarianism, as proposed by Bentham and Mill, judges an action on its overall consequences to the well-being of those impacted (Mill, 1863). Utilitarian judgement considers the positive consequences of persuasive communication, such as increasing voter turnout, raising awareness of an issue, and encouraging youth voter turnout, versus negative consequences, such as spreading misinformation, misrepresenting the salience of an issue, loss of trust, and possibly disenfranchising voters who are unable to trace the origin of the message they are receiving

Virtue ethics, as proposed in Nicomachean Ethics by Aristotle, not only judges the action itself as being right or wrong but also what kind of person (or communicator) it develops. Virtue ethics considers traits of character such as integrity, honesty, bravery, and publicness (Aristotle, trans. 2000). In the context of political influencers, virtue ethics will consider whether undisclosed campaign develops the traits required for a good public sphere or whether it instead develops cynicism, opportunism, and double-dealing.

2.3 The Malaysian Context: GE15 and TikTok's Political Ecology

In this regard, Malaysia provides a good case to study these questions as Ooi (2022) reports that in GE15, PH's communication strategy was relatively less centralised as candidates used their own videographers (sent from the party HQ) to post short and low-quality videos between different campaign locations. PN, on the other hand, used mostly anonymous third-party accounts that, although nominally independent, contained very similar pro-PN messages. BN also used mainly pro-BN news websites and was relatively poor in using TikTok. Importantly, it is difficult to determine whether a post is 'sponsored content' or truly reflects the account holder's political views (Ooi, 2022), and TikTok Malaysia did not ask influencers to mark sponsored or political content during the election.

The ethical considerations are further complicated by the provocative content. After the election, Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM) warned about TikTok accounts using edited content of the 13 May 1969 riots to promote anti-PH and anti-Chinese messages, where some of the videos were reportedly posted as paid partnership content (SAYS, 2022). Thus, the example of undisclosed influencer content involves hate speech and ethnic division, which complicates the ethical considerations from commercial to civic level.

3. Ethical Analysis of Undisclosed Political Influencer Content

3.1 Deontological Analysis: The Duty of Truth and Disclosure

From a deontological perspective, undeclared content of political influencers violates the categorical imperative in two aspects. Firstly, it is not universalisable: if all political content creators hide their political affiliations, then the concept of "citizen opinion" upon which the influence of the content relies will disappear as the audience will expect all the expressions of opinion to be disguised as campaigning. Effectiveness of undeclared content lies in its hypocrisy of a few as it only works when most of the content is expected to be real. Secondly, voters are used as means. According to the second formulation of Kant's principle, rational beings should never be used as means to an end. A voter who expects to see a normal young Malaysian expressing her political opinion spontaneously but instead sees content that is orchestrated and possibly paid for by a political party is manipulated by hiding this information (Bok, 1978).

According to Bok's (1978) concept of truthfulness, hiding information that is relevant is morally equivalent to false statement when it is done to take advantage of the listener's reasonable expectation of honesty. The voter on TikTok expects the content of a personal video blog supporting a candidate to be the opinion of the creator; hence, when it is orchestrated by a campaign, hiding this information counts as deception. The policy of TikTok banning

paid political ads renders the undeclared orchestration of content morally worse rather than better as the creators are not only hiding the label but also pretending to be independent against the stated policy of the platform.

3.2 Utilitarian Analysis: Consequences for Voters and Democratic Discourse

Utilitarian assessment of undisclosed political influencer content considers the overall effects of the content. The positive effects include the possibility that undisclosed political influencer content can lead to higher levels of political involvement in young Malaysians who have stopped participating in electoral politics. The informal nature of TikTok reduces the barriers to political attention, and thus influencers like Jason Yew were able to access audiences that ceramah (rallies) and news websites were unable to (Ooi, 2022). Overall, it is a good to have six million more voters mobilised.

On the other hand, the negative effects are significant. Firstly, undisclosed political influencer content distorts the epistemic landscape of the election as voters are unable to assess the authenticity of a message without knowing if it is driven by conviction, peer pressure or money. Secondly, emotional and fragmented content is favoured over policy content; the short video format is more conducive to viral clips than to explaining manifestos in depth. Thirdly, undisclosed influencer content can be used to promote ethnic and religious division after the election as shown by the 13 May content (SAYS, 2022); however, without disclosure, it is more difficult to trace, refute and control such content. Lastly, overall trust is diminished as when voters find out that 'authentic' influencers can be undisclosed proxies, they begin to doubt 'authentic' opinions as well, which is detrimental to the deliberative landscape of democracy.

Overall, the utilitarian assessment is negative. Although there is a positive effect of engagement, this can still be achieved with disclosure as voters can still engage, enjoy and be convinced by influencer content if only they know the partisan nature of the content. Thus, disclosure allows for the positive effect of engagement to be retained while avoiding the distortions and negative effects. Therefore, utilitarian justification for disclosure is justification for disclosure without censorship.

3.3 Virtue Ethics Analysis: Integrity, Authenticity, and Public Responsibility

Virtue ethics focuses on the communicator's character instead of whether the action taken is right or wrong in itself. Political campaigners who engage in undisclosed partisanship develop character traits that are not consistent with the virtues needed in a democratic public. Integrity (i.e., congruence between private belief and public action) is violated by creators when they display paid or coordinated content as organic opinion. Authenticity, which is valued in influencer culture, is what is lost by engaging in undisclosed campaigning. Lack of public-spiritedness is demonstrated when creators prioritise engagement, virality, and party gain over quality of public discourse.

Virtue-ethics approach also highlights the vices gained from undisclosed campaigning, such as cynicism, opportunism, and intimacy manipulation. TikTok influencers create parasocial bonds with their audience using perceived friendliness and honesty; therefore, using this bond to mask undisclosed partisanship is exploiting trust instead of respecting it. The wrongdoing is not just in breaking the rules but in the communicator's character trait that damages the civic culture needed for self-governance (Christians et al., 2019).

4. Discussion: Platform Governance and Regulatory Responses

All three ethical perspectives lead to the same finding that it is unethical to have undisclosed political influencer posts during GE15 and minimum requirement for disclosure is transparency. However, how to implement transparency? Currently, TikTok does not require disclosure of organic or indirectly coordinated partisan content even though it does not allow paid political ads (Ooi, 2022). This is the main area of governance issue.

There are three ways to improve this situation. Firstly, disclosure should be mandatory and unavoidable for any posts that mention identifiable candidates, parties or ballot items during election periods regardless of whether they are paid or not. The label should be displayed clearly on screen (as in broadcast ads) to allow the viewer to consider the source. Secondly, political ads and influencer posts should be archived publicly by the platform together with information on number of views, demographics reached and coordination with official accounts to allow journalists, researchers and election monitors to check the information space. Thirdly, media literacy education for young voters (in schools and in public) should encourage them to question the source of political content and understand that 'organic' does not necessarily imply independent.

Regulators can also play a part in this by amending the Communications and Multimedia Act and Election Commission's regulations on campaign material to acknowledge influencer content as part of regulated political communication and have requirements for disclosure and penalties. However, the focus of the regulation should not be on speech but on transparency as it is unethical for influencers to mask the type of speech they are making rather than the speech itself being unethical. Excessive regulation may deter young people from engaging in political activities which are legitimate; however, appropriate regulation of disclosure does not.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

GE15 in Malaysia reflects the democratic potential and ethical dangers of political communication in the TikTok era. While it allowed a large number of young voters previously disconnected from electoral politics to participate, it also facilitated an unregulated, hidden partisan influencer content that masked the coordination of campaigns in the guise of genuine opinion. From deontological, utilitarian, and virtue ethics perspectives, it is not ethical as

it deceives autonomous actors (voters), causes net harm to the democratic information context, and fosters dispositions of communication that are detrimental to a good public sphere.

Three recommendations are proposed in this paper. Firstly, TikTok and similar platforms need to have compulsory and visible label for political influencer content in campaign time irrespective of whether they are paid or not. Secondly, political content needs to be publicly archived and auditable by regulators and civil society, and the rules for campaign in Malaysia need to be changed to include influencer communication as regulated electoral speech. Thirdly, media literacy should be taught in secondary and tertiary education to allow young Malaysians to critically analyse political content. However, this does not mean that political communication on TikTok should be censored as it is a public good.

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