

University Students' Civic Engagement: The Influencing Factors

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ABSTRACT

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This study investigates the state of civic engagement amongst university students and factors influencing their participation. The study employs a quantitative method using a questionnaire distributed online as the primary method of data collection and analyses. A total of 549 Universiti Utara Malaysia undergraduate students from various academic programmes had participated as respondents to the online survey. The findings of this study suggest that the level of civic engagement amongst the university students are considerably high. Based on scoring obtained through the use of the standardised measures developed for this study, their level of participation of civic activities ranges from medium to high. Pertaining to the factors responsible for their level of participation in the civic milieu, the study concludes that national- or societal-level sentiments and influences constitute the major driving force as compared to the more individualistic motives. In this regard, it is reasonable to assume that, for this part of the population, civic engagement stays at a healthy level, with the primary caveat being that the source of inspiration for their civic health resides in macrosocial processes rather than the individual's psyche.

Contribution/Originality: This study has identified local norms that affect how Malaysian university students define civic engagement. The most recent version of the civic engagement assessment, which served as the study's main contribution, was subsequently developed using the norms to assess students' levels of civic engagement. Additionally, this study contributes to the body of knowledge concerning how Malaysian university students conceptualize civic participation and civic activities.

1. Introduction

The act of materializing civic attitudes and behaviors constitutes what is often referred to as civic engagement or civic participation, civic responsibility, and social responsibility (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Koos, 2011). Often, civic engagement is preceded by a healthy dose of knowledge regarding what constitutes civility and its benefits. Active and meaningful civic engagement involves individual having the appropriate civic knowledge and dispositions, which include elements of cognitions, beliefs and motivations (Jacoby, 2009). For this reason, understanding civic engagement and their accompanying behaviors requires a deeper understanding of motives and social-cognitive processes. More empirical attention is needed to understand the ways individuals conceptualize civic engagement and how they understand the idea of community and their roles in it.

Universities, or more broadly, institutions of higher education, have traditionally served as the platform for individuals to pursue knowledge and acquire academic skills in numerous disciplines of study. Thus, the mainstay of any institution of higher education is the offering of various academic programmes that have been tailored and accredited to meet the requirements of the profession and the job market. Lately however, higher learning institutions including in Malaysia are expected to incorporate more value-added skills to their students in addition to the academic scholarship (Malaysian Education Blueprint, 2013). This is to ensure that higher learning institutions are able to produce civic minded workforce whose personal interests and values coincide with those of the community and society.

Often disguised under more generic terms such as soft skills and value-added skills, the necessity to instil a set of humanistic talents alongside academic ones in the minds of graduates has been heavily emphasised in recent years. According to Hatcher (2011), there are four domains which constitute broad essential learning outcomes for the twenty-first century world; namely (i) knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world, (ii) intellectual and practical skills, (iii) personal and social responsibility, and (iv) integrative and applied learning. Three of these are academic in nature, and they are well catered for by the formal curriculum, except for one which is personal and social responsibility.

Civic knowledge and engagement constitute the greater part of the aforementioned “personal and social responsibility” domain which is one of the oft-quoted skills deemed necessary not only for the benefit of the individuals, but more importantly constitute “the currency of a healthy community” (Roulier, 1998: 188). According to Ehrlich (2000): “Civic engagement is working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes.” Bearing this definition in mind, it is clear that civic engagement is a crucial skill to be had by youth, which will add a tremendous value to their academic and practical knowledge. In addition, civic engagement is also found to increase youth’s emotional intelligence and motivates them towards conscientious community actions (Cress, 2012; Manring, 2012). Even though integrating civic engagement into curriculum may take more time and effort than the traditional form of teaching, civic engagement has been found to be a reliable pedagogical and epistemological strategy for developing students’ knowledge and skills, while fostering individual development (Cress, 2012). Further, it is also imperative that

any effort aimed at instilling such qualities is capable of manifesting the intended outcomes in a measurable fashion.

The Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) has specified a set of clearly defined soft skills to be incorporated into the curriculum by every academic programme offered by Malaysian higher learning institutions. Yet in themselves these skills do not reflect the attainment of civic knowledge per se nor do they measure civic engagement specifically. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to:

- i. explore the level of civic engagement among undergraduate students.
- ii. identify the various factors influencing civic engagement amongst undergraduate students.

2. Literature Review

[Ehrlich \(2000\)](#) in [Hatcher \(2011\)](#) stated that civic engagement works to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and to build the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make that difference. It means fostering, by both political and non-political processes, the quality of life in a community. In part, the form of expertise that is considered within the "civic knowledge" domain depends on disciplinary perspectives. Awareness of political action, how a bill becomes a law or the role of organizations to lobby and influence public policy can be emphasized by political science. Another feature of civic awareness is the idea that "knowledge is actionable and that people come together to provide concrete knowledge to empower them to make positive changes in the world around them" ([Longo & Shaffer, 2009:169](#)).

The terms "civic engagement" and "participation" are used interchangeably for simplicity in discussions here, with both terms largely concurrent with the concept that participation is a mechanism by which stakeholders influence and share authority over development projects and the decisions and resources that affect them ([World Bank, 1996](#); [Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton, 2009](#)). It is also worth remembering, however, that civic engagement, with a focus on civic priorities and issues, is a more descriptive concept than participation. In similar terms, [United Nations Development Programme's \(UNDP\) \(1993\)](#) Human Development Report 1993 defines participation as "as a process, not an event, which closely involves people in the economic, social, cultural and political processes that affect their lives." The report places the problem within a large developmental framework, and in some ways even metaphysical, seeing it as both a means and an end. Since the human development paradigm emphasizes investment in human capacities and the subsequent practical use of those capacities to allow individuals to lead the type of life they want, participation is seen as promoting the use of human capacities, thereby serving as a means of socio-economic development. In this sense, engagement is often seen as an end in itself by helping people to realize their full potential and increase personal fulfillment ([United Nations Development Programme's \(UNDP\), 1993](#), in [Malik & Wager, 2002](#)).

Civic engagement goes beyond involvement in a civic act. The incorporation of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive elements involves being substantively active ([Zaff, Boyed, Li, Lerner, & Lerner, 2010](#)), so those civic behaviors, civic abilities, civic relations, and civic participation are all considered part of the framework of civic engagement. In other words, civic engagement is more than civic conduct, while civic conduct is an integral component of civic engagement. This multidimensional idea of the construction of public participation is rooted in the theory of Erikson's ego identity (involving a quest

for a sense of self that represents a position that meets individual and social needs) (Erikson, 1963; Marcia, 1980) and in the theories of German 'action' (Baltes, 1987; Baltes, Lindenberger & Staudinger, 2006; Freund & Baltes, 2002). These latter conceptions note that adaptive development requires mutually beneficial relationships between the individual's contextual actions (e.g., participation with or contributions to civil society institutions) and contextual actions (such as involving restricting or encouraging individual behavior) on the individual (Brandtstädter, 1998, 2006 in Zaff et al. (2010). Based on the aforementioned discussion, it is clear that civic engagement contains several components, which include the component of civic knowledge (Hatcher, 2011; Longo & Shaffer, 2009; Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton, 2009), civic attitude (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004; Zaff et al., 2010; Cohen & Chaffee, 2012), civic behavior and civic participation (World Bank, 1996; United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP), 1993; Malik & Wager, 2002; Jurs; 2016) that have being emphasized in civic education.

3. Methodology

This study employs quantitative research method utilising questionnaire as a research instrument.

3.1. Research Instrument

The questionnaire was designed with the intentions to achieve the objectives of this research where particular care was observed in formulating the questions, especially in the choice of words used to appeal for the most accurate response. This questionnaire was developed and presented into three sections.

- i. Section A comprises of items regarding respondents' demographic which includes age, sex, ethnicity, study enrollment status and area of residence.
- ii. Section B contains items on civic engagement based on previous studies such as Student Civic Engagement (SCEQ) by Olorunda (2019) and Jurs (2016). This instrument employed 5-point Likert Scale; (1) never, (2) rarely, (3) sometimes, (4) often, and (5) always.
- iii. Section C contains statements on the various factors influencing civic engagement. This instrument requires respondent to prioritize factors which contribute to their involvement in civic activities. In an effort to elicit more subjective responses from the respondents regarding their perception toward the idea of civic engagement, a series of factors were identified from literatures which are often associated with the concept of civicness (such as Moely et al. (2002), Holz and Pinnow (2015), Jurs (2016) and Olorunda (2019).

To evaluate the questionnaire's reliability, a pilot research involving 30 undergraduates was done. Alpha Cronbach value for section B is 0.938. In order to ensure the validity of the questionnaire's questions, researchers have rigorously reviewed questions from a variety of sources. The opinions of two professors with a PhD in this discipline were also solicited.

3.2. Sampling

Undergraduate students from three colleges in Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM); namely College of Arts and Sciences (CAS), College of Business (COB) and College of Law,

Government and International Studies (COLGIS) was selected as the population of the study. The sample in this study was determined based on [Krejcie and Morgan's \(1970\)](#); whereby for a given population of 15,000, a sample size of 375 would be needed to represent a cross-section of the population.

3.3. Data Collection

Due to the pandemic of Coronavirus 2019 (Covid-19) and Movement Control Order (MCO), the delivery of questionnaires in person was replaced with the use of Google forms. To ensure that students from three distinct colleges (i.e; CAS, COB, and COLGIS) engage in this survey, we solicited the aid of instructors from these colleges in distributing the link to the questionnaire to their students. In addition to lecturers' assistance, we increased participation by asking students to share the survey link with their peers.

3.4. Data Analysis

Data were analysed using basic computation of frequencies, percentages and mean. Whereas for the data collected using Likert-scale method (Section B), a scoring scheme was developed based on the computation of the mean score (average of the total score for each item within the section). [Table 1](#) present the scoring scheme which consists of three levels of competencies (from low, medium and high). This scoring scheme was utilised as a method of interpretation of the respondents' engagement in civic activities.

Table 1: Measuring level of civic engagement

Mean Score	Interpretation
1.00 – 2.33	Low Respondent possessing low level of civic engagement if their mean score is within this range
2.34 – 3.66	Medium Respondent possessing average level of civic engagement if their mean score is within this range
3.67 – 5.00	High Respondent possessing high level of civic engagement if their mean is within this range

In section C, the study incorporates a rank order procedure to gauge factors influencing the engagement of respondents' in civic activities. Logically, a rank order procedure could indicate the relative significance of certain factors based on the respondents' perceived importance of them in the particular context of the investigation ([Klein, Dülmer, Ohr, Quandt, & Rosar 2004](#)). Hence, the same logic is applied in this instance. By giving the opportunity for the respondents to delineate based on a set of options, they could indicate which factors are perceived to be of importance in instilling the sense of civic engagement.

4. Result

4.1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

[Table 2](#) presents demographical profile of respondents. A total of 549 respondents participates in this study, whereby 421 (76.7%) of them reported their sex as female, and 128 (23.3%) as male. In regard of respondents' age, those in category of 21-23 years

old represent the highest number at 327 respondents (59.6%), followed by 18-20 years old (186 respondents or 33.9%) and the lowest at four respondents (0.7%) among the age of 27-29 years old. Majority of them are Malays (76%), and 17.5% are Chinese, whereas Indian and other races totaled only at 3.3% respectively. Accordingly, Islam is the most common religious (77.6%), followed by Buddhist (17.1%), and Hindu (3.1%). The highest numbers of respondents originated from CAS with a percentage of 41.7 compared to COB at 39.3%, and COLGIS at only 18.9%. In term of semester of study, semester one students scored the highest percentage of respondents (36.7%), as opposed to the second highest only at 15.8% from second semester students, and semester four students at 13.6%.

Table 2: Respondents' demographic

Demographic Elements	Frequency (n=549)	Percentage (%)
Sex		
Male	128	23.3
Female	421	76.7
Race		
Malay	417	75.9
Chinese	96	17.5
Indian	18	3.3
Others	18	3.3
Age		
18-20	186	33.9
21-23	327	59.6
24-26	32	5.8
27-29	4	0.7
College of Study		
CAS	229	41.7
COB	216	39.3
COLGIS	104	19.0
Semester of Study		
1	185	33.7
2	87	15.8
3	31	5.6
4	75	13.7
5	33	6.0
6	74	13.5
7	64	11.7

4.2. Respondents' Level of Civic Engagement

Table 3 shows a rank score of civic engagement calculated based on the mean score. As mentioned in methodology, the calculated score were then aggregated into a three-tier ranking scheme indicating the distribution of respondents reporting high, moderate and low level of civic engagement. The majority of the respondents totaling at 297 or 54.1 percent indicated that they are moderately engaged in civic activities. Whereas, a total of 226 respondents (41.2 percent) identified that they are highly engaged in civic activities. Only 26 respondents (4.7 percent) scored low rank in civic engagement. Aggregating the number of respondents with high and moderate level of involvement, it is encouraging

to see that more than 90 percent of the respondents, although not entirely active, yet are still civically engaged.

Table 3: Respondents' level of civic engagement

Rank of civic engagement	Scoring for composite scale	
	n	%
Low	26	4.7
Medium	297	54.1
High	226	41.2
Total	549	100.0

4.3. Factors Influencing Respondents' Civic Engagement

A total of six factors was listed in the questionnaire to determine their influence on respondents' civic engagement. Respondents were given a ranking scheme of one to five to indicate which of those items or 'factors' that they consider to be of importance. As the scheme was designed to indicate preference, the smaller number in the rank would indicate greater importance. Hence the most important factor would be designated as "1" and the least important would be "5". Since the purpose of this particular section of the questionnaire was to delineate the most prominent factors affecting the idea of civicness as perceived by the respondents, the analysis was carried out by counting the most cited factors based on the five-tier ranking scheme.

Table 4 demonstrates the findings about this topic. National factors have the greatest impact on respondents' decision to participate in civic activities (44.7 percent). National history, national culture, national philosophy, national policy, and government-sponsored campaigns are included in this factor. Among these items, national history contributes to the highest percentage (26.3 percent), followed by national policy (4.5 percent) and the least influential item is government sponsored campaigns which contributed at 2.9 percent. Every religious command their followers to abide by its beliefs and perform good deed. Thus, it is not surprising that religious came in second (17.5 percent) as the most influential factor to encourage respondents' engagement in civic activities. Personal and society value factor cited as the third choice among respondents at 14.1 percent, followed by family and peer factor at 11.9 percent. Taken together, the analysis suggests that as far as civic involvement is concerned, respondents are more inclined to find an inspiration from national-or societal-level sentiment as compared to other more personal or individual motives.

Table 4: Influential factors towards respondents' engagement in civic activities

Factors	Frequency	Percentage
National factor	232	44.7
Religious factor	91	17.5
Personal and society value factor	73	14.1
Family and peer factor	62	11.9
University factor	34	6.6
Media factor	27	5.2

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Civic engagement is typically correlated with various activities such as community service, collective action, political participation, discussion and participation in social issues. Based on this diverse classification, civic engagement encompasses both individual or informal activities and collective or formal activities (Akin, Caliskan & Engin-Demir, 2016). According to Adler and Grogin (2005), civic engagement also includes the participation in community services as well as the participation in political activities. Findings from this study likewise revealed respondents' definition of civic engagement are based on their involvement in non-political activities and political activities. In term of non-political activities, majority of them are mostly exposed to community service and volunteering activities organised by various bodies; such as departments, colleges, students' residential halls as well as governments and non-governmental organisations. Students are greatly encouraged to involves in civic activities throughout their years in the university for the purpose of developing their soft skills as well as promoting and nourishing attitudes and behaviors towards the common good. As a recognition, the University not only afforded merit to each activity but also presented a distinguishing award to students actively engage in civic activities.

According to the findings, the majority of respondents never participate in political parties. This finding contrasts with a previous study conducted abroad, specifically at the University of Ottawa in the United States (Stockemer, 2012), which discovered that the majority of their university students are very interested in and involved in politics. This is mostly due to the Universities and Universities College Act (1971) which forbid Malaysian university students from participating in political party activities on and off campus. In comparison to university students in the United States, this Act directly reduces Malaysian students' opportunities to actively participate in political parties at the tertiary level. However, the situation might change when the Parliament endorsed changes in Malaysia voting rights from 21 years old to 18 years old as of December 2021.

Even though the majority of the study's respondents have no experience with national voting, they are exposed to political activities through the university voting system, where they are required to vote for their students' council representative. This opportunity helps to explain the study's finding that the majority of respondents possessed medium level of civic engagement. Furthermore, previous scholars have stated that having some kind of political experience, whether through voting, engaging in political conversation, or gathering information about political parties and policy, can increase an individual's level of civic engagement (Johnson & Ferguson, 2018).

Previous studies into the civic realm seem to suggest that the more sustainable form of civicness as it pertains to individuals rests on the combined strengths of inner as well as the outer forces of influence. This is especially true in the case of the younger generation since the behavioral display of civic behavior can be due to superficial influence rather than deep belief in the values and wisdom that such behaviour should represent. The results of this study seem to indicate such trend. On one hand, a high level of civic engagement was evident from the data. On the other hand, when it comes to the forces of influence that underlie such positive display of engagement, the data seem to suggest that much of the inspiration comes from outside of the individuals rather than within. In other words, the idea of civicness are sourced mainly from generalised sentiment rather than from individual needs. This can be interpreted as a caveat in terms of the

development of true and deeply ingrained sense of civic engagement and responsibilities amongst the youth. However, taking a more positive outlook, it is conceivable that being young and immature, it is only natural that the youths are more impressionable by the larger forces in life rather than having an ingrown awareness.

Driven by the findings, this study proposes the following. Firstly, it is evident that being in academic setting, the youths are already exposed to adequate amount of knowledge as well as opportunities to engage in socially desirable activities. This is clearly reflected by the high degree of involvement in civic endeavours. This healthy trend should therefore be maintained. Clearly a more in-depth approach is needed in order to gauge the nature of engagement in civic activities. By virtue of being a part of higher learning institution, the students are naturally driven to take part in activities that are characteristically civic in nature. It is less clear however how this will play out when the youths eventually exit such an environment or if they were never exposed to such environment in the first place.

Secondly, the caveat mentioned earlier should be the focus of an effort to maintain or increase the level of civic engagement. While a healthy dose of reality can be beneficial to many, it is the internalization of the meanings and wisdom that will eventually leave a lasting impression, especially given the fact that the youth, given their tender age are quite impressionable. On top of the casual involvement, any civic-oriented activities involving the youth should be made to comprise awareness raising component capable of instilling a deep sense of realization within their psyche. A more in-depth investigative effort should precede any programmes oriented towards increasing such awareness. The energetic spirit of the youth, coupled with the strong vibes of activism can be harnessed to encourage involvement in civic engagement. Combining this with a more inspiring approach will add value to any programmes aimed at strengthening their deep sense of civic understanding and eventually civic engagement.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The researchers used the research ethics provided by the Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Utara Malaysia. All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants according to the Declaration of Helsinki.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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