



KRYSS Network's Research Methodology

Gendered Disinformation
Phase 1

Background and Context

This research is a collaboration between KRYSS Network and the Australian National University (ANU), led by Dr. Ross Tapsell, aimed to explore the phenomenon of gendered disinformation in Malaysia during its 15th General Election. This research is set against the backdrop of increasing concern over the weaponization of digital media in political discourse, particularly how misinformation and disinformation campaigns target individuals based on gender.

Gendered disinformation refers to the spread of harmful, misleading, or false information specifically designed to discredit or harm individuals, particularly women, based on their gender identity, with a focus on the political sphere.

Malaysia, as a rapidly digitalising Southeast Asian nation, has witnessed a surge in online disinformation, making it an important context for understanding how gendered narratives can shape electoral outcomes. This study not only addresses the specific political climate in Malaysia but also contributes to the broader global conversation about the intersection of digital media, gender, and politics, examining how disinformation campaigns are tailored to exploit societal gender norms and impact political participation and engagement.

Definitions

Gendered disinformation refers to the spread of deceptive or inaccurate information and images aimed at discrediting women political leaders, journalists, and other female public figures. This disinformation often draws on misogyny and societal stereotypes, framing women as untrustworthy, unintelligent, overly emotional, angry, or even "crazy," and at times sexualizing them in harmful ways. As defined by Lucina Di Meco, a gender equality expert, women's rights advocate, and author, gendered disinformation is a targeted tactic that exploits societal gender norms to undermine women in the public and political spheres.

Gendered disinformation is a form of online gender-based violence (OGBV) as it targets women with harmful, misleading narratives that perpetuate stereotypes and dehumanize them. This type of disinformation can incite emotional harm, psychological distress, and even physical threats, contributing to a hostile online environment for women. As part of OGBV, gendered disinformation seeks to undermine women's credibility, autonomy, and safety, reinforcing power imbalances in both digital and physical spaces.

OGBV refers to any acts of gender-based violence against women that are facilitated, assisted, or aggravated through the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT). This includes technologies such as mobile phones, smartphones, the internet, social media platforms, and email. These acts of violence are committed against a woman simply because she is a woman, or disproportionately affect women. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, Dubravka Simonovic, emphasizes that OGBV can take various forms

and represents a significant violation of women's rights, often exacerbated by the anonymity and reach provided by digital platforms.

Research Objectives

The primary objective of this research is to examine the prevalence and impact of gendered disinformation in Malaysia, particularly during the 2022 Election Campaign. Gendered disinformation has become a significant and growing issue, with political figures, especially women, being targeted by misleading and harmful narratives that undermine their credibility and reputation. The study seeks to understand the specific costs of online gender-based violence (OGBV) in the form of gendered disinformation, focusing on how such campaigns disproportionately affect Malaysian female politicians and influence public perception.

Through this research, KRYSS Network aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the intersection of gender, disinformation, and political engagement in Malaysia. A key purpose of this project is to collaborate with Dr. Ross Tapsell and support his work in producing a comprehensive academic journal article that highlights the critical nature of gendered disinformation in the context of Malaysia's democratic processes. The findings of this research will serve to advocate for more serious attention to the consequences of Gendered Disinformation and OGBV and the need for stronger mechanisms to protect women in politics.

Research Timeframe

The research was conducted over a period of two months, from October to November 2022, during which KRYSS Network and Dr. Ross Tapsell closely monitored the political landscape surrounding Malaysia's 15th General Election. This timeframe allowed the research team to capture key moments of the election campaign, particularly focusing on the digital strategies used to target female political candidates.

The data collected during this period provided valuable insights into the prevalence of gendered disinformation and its effects on women in politics, offering a timely and relevant contribution to understanding the challenges women faced during this critical political event.

Interviewees and Profile

The research involved monitoring 52 female political candidates during the 2022 Malaysian Election Campaign across various social media platforms to track the prevalence of gendered disinformation. Out of these, 17 candidates were interviewed to gain deeper insights into their lived experiences. The interviewees represented a diverse range of political parties, races, and age groups, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the issue.

The focus of the interviews was primarily on female candidates themselves, allowing for a direct exploration of their personal encounters with gendered disinformation. Additionally, supporting staff members who worked closely with the candidates were also interviewed, offering further context and perspective on how gendered disinformation affected not only the candidates but their campaigns and strategies. This approach helped to highlight the multifaceted impacts of gendered disinformation within the political sphere.

Confidentiality and Anonymisation

To ensure the privacy and safety of the interviewees, all participants in the research were anonymized in both the research notes and the final journal article. Identifying information, such as names, political affiliations, and specific campaign details, were removed or altered to protect the participants' identities.

Each interviewee was assigned a unique code to maintain confidentiality while ensuring the integrity of their responses. This process allowed the research to focus on the lived experiences of female political candidates and their supporting staff, without compromising their personal or professional security. The anonymization approach adhered to ethical standards, ensuring that the research respects the rights of the participants while providing valuable insights into the impact of gendered disinformation.

List of Questions

1. Have you been attacked online?
2. A few examples of the attacks focused on gender?/So one of the narratives being used to attack you is gender roles right? Like what is being expected of you as a woman
3. What are the tactics used to attack?
4. What is the pattern of attacks?
5. Did these attacks online turn physical?
6. What is the cost of the attacks to your personal life? (eg well being and mental health)
7. What is the cost to professional life/political career?/Did the online attacks affect your political supporters?
8. Have you had to self-censor online?/ Did you have to self-censor because of the attacks?/Like you avoid posting certain pictures, do you also avoid talking about certain things online?
9. Anything you'd like to add further?

10. How has the social media campaign for you this time around?
11. Zooming out of GE15, focusing on your entire political career, have you felt like you've been attacked for your gender?
12. Other women candidates had been attacked for their appearance. Have you faced something similar?
13. Has there been any comments on who you're married to?
14. How was the time when you were facing these attacks?
15. How was your experience in the online space?
16. What do the attacks look like? What do the attackers usually say to you?
17. But is this something you have been always doing or recently started?
18. What are the narratives attackers are using?
19. Did you take any actions towards those who said these things?
20. Were the attacks always happening or only after you entered politics and contested?/But was this amplified during the time you were contesting? / Did these attacks affect your political participation?
21. Clarification, you faced a lot of attacks online during the campaigning?'
22. Do you think if it was a man contesting in your position, would he have suffered the same attacks?
23. Were your team members attacked online in regards to their support towards you?
24. Could you tell us on which platforms you get attacked a lot?
25. Who were the aggressors?
26. What language do they use?

Outcomes of the Research ■

The research conducted by KRYSS Network, in collaboration with Dr. Ross Tapsell, produced several impactful outcomes that significantly contributed to the understanding of gendered disinformation in Malaysia's political context and beyond. One of the key outcomes was the publication of the academic article "Gendered Disinformation and Election Campaigning: A Malaysian Case Study" by Ross Tapsell and Jananie Chandrarao, which was featured in the Georgetown Journal of International Affairs (Volume 5, Number 1, Summer 2024). This

publication provided a comprehensive analysis of how gendered disinformation specifically targeted female political candidates during Malaysia's 2022 Election Campaign.

The research highlighted the complex dynamics between digital media, gender, and politics, offering critical insights into how misogynistic narratives and disinformation can impact women in political spheres. The article is now a vital reference for academics, policymakers, and activists seeking to address gendered disinformation in Southeast Asia.

In addition to its academic contribution, the research has become an essential resource for KRYSS Network's ongoing and future efforts in combating Online Gender-Based Violence (OGBV). The findings of this study have informed KRYSS Network's approach to OGBV advocacy, providing evidence-based insights into the specific tactics used to target women in politics. This resource will be integral to the organization's future research and advocacy campaigns, helping to shape interventions that address the harmful effects of digital gender-based violence.

Furthermore, the research has contributed to KRYSS Network's ongoing OGBV research projects, ensuring that the organization remains at the forefront of understanding and addressing the challenges posed by gendered disinformation in the digital age. By continuing to build on these findings, KRYSS Network aims to create meaningful change in protecting women's rights in both political and digital spaces.

Join the Conversation on Gendered Disinformation

The work conducted by KRYSS Network in exploring gendered disinformation and its impact on female political candidates is crucial in understanding and addressing the pervasive issue of OGBV. By focusing on the intersection of gender, politics, and digital media, KRYSS Network is shedding light on the harmful effects of gendered disinformation and advocating for stronger protections for women in the political arena. This research not only contributes to the academic conversation but also informs practical advocacy efforts aimed at tackling OGBV.

If you are interested in learning more about our work, collaborating on future research, or contributing to our advocacy efforts, we encourage you to get in touch with us. For inquiries or partnership opportunities, please contact KRYSS Network via email at info@kryss.network

We welcome conversations with individuals, organizations, and policymakers who are passionate about creating safer and more inclusive political and digital spaces for women.