



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Unveiling the Factors: Exploring Success Drivers For Social Media Influencers in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

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The digital marketing ecosystem, especially in countries with a high pervasiveness of social media usage such as that of Malaysia, is crucially driven by social media influencers. In this study, the key factors influencing the success of Malaysian social media influencer-entrepreneurs are investigated. Based on the literature review conducted, the factors identified include social media, knowledge sharing, business strategy, and government support. Specifically, social media enables audience reach via the provided tools; knowledge sharing allows for credibility and community building; a solid business strategy guarantees professionalism and sustainability, whilst government support ensures industry legitimization and resource provision. The combination of these factors allows influencers to prosper and remain successful, on top of augmenting their marketing impact which brands can benefit from. Additionally, this study paves the way for future studies seeking to investigate the long-term impacts of the various market strategies applied by influencers.

INTRODUCTION

In today's digital era, social media has become the primary channel for global communication and connection. Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter have billions of users worldwide, making them powerful tools for communicating and yielding influence. These platforms transcend borders, fostering the exchange of ideas, trends, and culture on a global scale. For example, the worldwide movement restriction order during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 had prompted social media users, marketers, and brands to communicate and market their products or services online. This shift led to a global phenomenon where social media users, marketers, and brands from one region can go viral and impact global audiences. Through social media, they can engage their communities and work with influencers who share the same sustainability outlook via strategic campaigns, bringing to light their business values. Consumers are also more drawn to brands that advocate for issues they find important.

Brands leverage on influencers to reach targeted audiences globally. Brands need to keep a close watch on audience preferences and influencer operations, to make the most out of their influencer marketing campaigns (Nafisa, 2021). They collaborate with social media influencers to promote

products and services, through sponsored posts, giveaways, and brand ambassadorships. The ability of these influencers to engage their audiences and shape consumer behavior makes them valuable for brands. They are particularly effective in shaping consumption culture among Malaysian youth, especially in areas like dining out and "cafe hopping" (Khalid et al., 2018). Hence, influencers have become key players in marketing strategies, driving brand awareness and sales through authentic connections with their followers. They are also able to generate money through a combination of advertisements, company-sponsored posts, and sometimes their own brand of products. The influencer culture has undergone a dynamic shift, i.e., from technology driven to lifestyle-oriented, leading to distinct audiences and fan bases. In the context of Malaysia's diverse and culturally rich audience, their influence is highly significant.

With the increasingly diverse demography, consumer interests and content styles characterizing social media usage in Malaysia, one question arises: what are factors or indicators that sustain an influencer's success? Most existing studies on this topic focus on short-term metrics like follower count and engagement rates, with very few delving into the drives of their long-term success and sustainability. Therefore, this study aims to explore the critical factors that drive the success of social media influencers in Malaysia, and how these factors interact to maintain their relevance over time. The findings will offer insights into the dynamics of social media influencers and their effectiveness in driving the Malaysian economy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theory of Success Drivers

In the context of social media influencers success, the Social Influence Theory (SIT) is adopted to understand how social media influencer-entrepreneurs share their followers' thoughts, behaviours, and decisions. This theory was developed by Helbert Kelman in the early 1950s to explore how an individual's thoughts, feelings and behavior are influenced by others, particularly those perceived as authority figures or role models. According to this theory, individuals affect others through three stages namely compliance, identification and internationalization (see Figure 1). By marketing themselves as the doyen or trendsetter in their field, influencers are able to wield their social impact (Davlembayeva and Papagiannidis, 2024). Their followers would be influenced to purchase certain goods or behave in certain ways based on their views and recommendations.

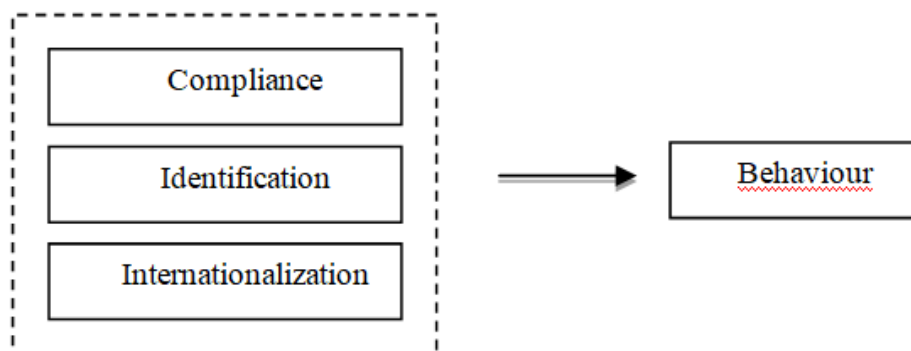


Figure 1: Kelman's Social Influence Theory (SIT)

Social media user behavior has been explicated using the SIT, specifically the impact of influencers in swaying the decisions, behaviors, and identities of their followers. Due to their positioning as a niche expert, the recommendations made by influencers carry as significant weight in persuading their followers. Followers may perceive the influencer's community as a peer group. This is particularly powerful in cultures like Malaysia, where community and social harmony are highly valued. Influencers also create and maintain social norms within their follower base such as by regularly promoting healthy living habits. Followers also look to influencers for guidance, especially in areas where they have less knowledge or expertise, and accept the information as valuable and credible. For example, a social media influencer-entrepreneur who promotes a green living product can shape his/her followers' attitude towards eco-friendly practices and purchase. As these norms are established, the followers may conform to the corresponding behaviors i.e., an indication of the influencer's success. Therefore, this theory underscores the importance of building trust, credibility, and relatability with their audience. The more the followers see the social media influencer-

entrepreneur as an authority figure, peer, or role model, the more likely they are to be influenced by their recommendations and content.

Key Success Drivers for Malaysian Social Media Influencers

As mentioned earlier, social media refers to digital platforms that enable users to create, share, and interact with content and each other. These platforms have transformed communication,

marketing, and social interactions by providing instant, widespread connectivity. Social media has become an integral part of modern marketing strategies, offering businesses new ways to engage with customers and promote products (Anwar and Zhiwei, 2019). Entrepreneurs make use of digital platforms to commercialize their business (Kraus et al., 2019). Therefore, the engagement between social media influencers (SMIs) and their followers plays a vital role for the influencer's success. Social media influencer's success is characterized by high engagement rate via likes, comments and shares on their content. A large and highly engaged follower base on social media enhances an influencer's reach and impact. Norazman et al. (2023) highlighted that the key success factors for SMIs include credibility, authenticity, engagement, and content quality. Content quality, consistency, and engagement are crucial to success (Maulana, 2023; Chiu et al., 2024). Active engagement with followers through comments, likes, and direct messages enhances an influencer's relatability and trustworthiness. This two-way interaction is pivotal for building a loyal follower base (Hussain and Adamu, 2021). A consistent visual and thematic content helps in creating a recognizable brand identity, thus enhancing the influencer's authenticity and relatability which are key factors for gaining and retaining followers. Efficient algorithms in content distribution and trends help influencers distribute content more effectively, increasing visibility and engagement. In purchasing decisions, a survey by Morning Consult found that 61% of Gen Z consumers purchased a product based on influencer recommendations. This indicates that influencers with a strong relationship with their followers can effectively influence the latter's purchasing decisions.

Knowledge sharing is another key factor driving the success of Malaysian influencers, i.e., by enhancing engagement, credibility, and audience loyalty. Information technology and social media usage are identified as enablers of knowledge transfer (Manus, 2016). Malaysian youth are attracted to influencers who are genuine, knowledgeable, motivational, creative, and seeking personal development, positivity, and inspiration. Haque et al. (2023) stated that modern social media platforms have changed how people interact, share information, and talk to each other. Social media is becoming more useful for improving communication and knowledge sharing, not just between people but also between businesses. Sharing insights, tips, and experiences in social media helps influencers build a loyal community of followers who value their expertise. Influencers benefit from sharing knowledge with peers, learning current trends, techniques, and strategies that lead to their success. Providing educational content establishes influencers as thought leaders in their niche. The Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation's (MDEC) 2022 report on digital influencers in Malaysia highlights that influencers who engage in knowledge sharing and educational content creation see a 30% increase in follower engagement and loyalty. This approach helps them establish authority in their niche and build a dedicated audience. Facts sharing enhances credibility and establishes influencers as authorities in their field as followers are more likely to remain loyal and engaged when they receive valuable and informative content. According to the We Are Social 2022 report, Malaysian influencers who prioritize knowledge sharing in their content strategy see a significant boost in credibility and audience trust, leading to greater success in their influencer careers. Meanwhile, authenticity has been highlighted as a significant factor in gaining and retaining followers. Influencers who share personal stories, experiences, and genuine content tend to build stronger connections with their audience (Tan and Mohd Rasdi, 2017).

Business strategy also reflects the success of social media influencers. Business strategy refers to the strategy of a single business firm or a strategic business unit in a diversified corporation (Dagnino, 2018). SMIs use logos, declarative sentences, and strategic language as effective methods to persuade people (Nasaruddin et al., 2023). Robust business strategies are crucial for social media influencers for the purposes of content planning, brand positioning within their niche, and monetization. According to the 2022 MDEC report, SMIs in Malaysia who implement efficient business strategies for brand partnerships and content planning gain 40% more revenue than those without. Strategy hence maintains growth and sustainability. Strategic planning around partnerships, sponsorships,

and product launches ensures sustainable income streams. Collaborations with brands and other influencers amplify reach and enhance credibility. Strategic partnerships are often used to tap into new audiences and add value to the influencer's content (Lee and Low, 2020). Promoting e-commerce and digital entrepreneurship have indirectly benefited social media influencers by creating more opportunities for monetization and brand partnerships (Yusof and Zulkifli, 2021). A solid content strategy ensures consistency, quality, and relevance, which are critical for maintaining and growing the follower base. A clear business strategy ensures long-term sustainability and growth thus demonstrates professionalism and reliability to potential brand partners and collaborators. The Electronic Eloquence Model's five elements are evident in successful SMI content, demonstrating the importance of well-crafted persuasive strategies (NorrabiyahIthnin et al., 2020). By comprehending these determinants, marketers can recognize the right influencers, lessen the potential for fraud, and establish fitting marketing strategies for their desired audience (Norazman et al., 2023; Nasaruddin et al., 2023).

In terms of government support, successful Malaysian SMIs have backings in the form of funding, infrastructure, training, promotion, and collaboration. Various policies and initiatives have been proactively developed by the Malaysian government with the aim of bolstering the digital economy. The Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation (MDEC) program, for instance, is meant for establishing an advantageous milieu for SMIs in particular and digital content creators in general (MDEC, 2019). According to the Ministry of Communications and Multimedia Malaysia (2020), the creative industry is being backed by the government via the provision of funds, grants, and training programs which have been crucial in nurturing talents. Through such efforts, SMIs are provided with the needed skills and resources for improving their content creation proficiency. Grants and subsidies are the forms of financial support given to digital content creators (Razak and Amin, 2019), which help them acquire more advanced equipment, software, and marketing, hence boosting the quality and reach of their contents. On top of that, government-backed digital skills and literacy training programs are provided to Malaysian youths with the aim of empowering them to become successful SMIs. Digital skills improvement is critical in developing appealing content and augmenting online existence (Lim and Rahim, 2018). SMIs would thrive more in a regulatory milieu that is supportive of digital innovation and protective of intellectual property rights. With proper regulations, influencer marketing that is transparent and trustworthy can be maintained (Ismail and Ahmad, 2022).

FINDINGS

Conceptual Framework

Successful Malaysian SMIs engage effectively in social media, share knowledge, have robust business strategies, and acquire the support of the government. Additionally, SMIs with strong brand equity and long-run success adopt effective self-presentation management, social capital leveraging, and value engagement. Using the previously discussed key success factors, a conceptual framework was developed as shown below (see Figure 2).

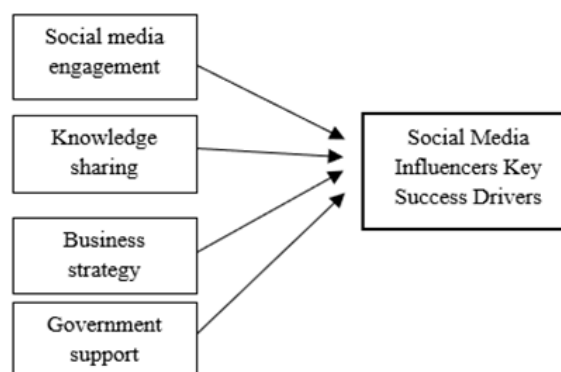


Figure 2: Main factors driving the success of SMIs.

Based on the developed conceptual framework, successful SMIs are indicated to require both personal exertion and external backing. A comprehensive consideration of these factors enables SMIs

to remain relevant and successful whilst braving through novel challenges and prospects in this digitally charged world.

CONCLUSION

The key success factors of Malaysian social media influencers-entrepreneurs have been investigated in this study, enriching understanding of the ever-evolving digital influence world. The factors as revealed from the literature review include social media, knowledge sharing, business strategy, and government support.

Influencers are crucially facilitated by social media which serves as an effective tool for distributing their content as well as for boosting their visibility and engagement. A global observation is that influencers who are deemed as sincere and relatable tend to gain higher engagements from their followers, thus underscoring the significance placed by social media marketing on authenticity. Constant, high-quality updates and contents also tend to draw in and sustain a substantial number of audiences, leading to credibility and community growth. Next, solid business strategies can guarantee the professionalism and sustainability of these influencers. One such strategy is in the form of collaborations and partnerships which not only boost their visibility and reach, but also their credibility and legitimacy. Collaborations such as via cross-promotions and sponsorships have been proven to elevate engagement and follower count. Finally, having government backing is crucial for the purposes of gaining industry legitimization and acquiring the resources needed.

Implications wise, the findings would benefit budding influencers, brands and marketers, as well as researchers. Up-and-coming influencers could apply the identified success factors to boost their reach and growth. Brands and marketers may use these insights to identify suitable influencers who fit their marketing direction towards achieving higher ROIs. Meanwhile, future studies in this field may delve into the contexts of beauty, fashion, or technology towards identifying niche-driven success factors for influencers. Richer insights may be derived by studying the effect of emergent technologies like AI-based content creation and currently leading platforms like TikTok.

To sum up, successful Malaysian SMIs adopt effective social media usage, share knowledge, implement robust business strategies, and have government backing as they navigate the ever-evolving digital landscape and continue to thrive. SMIs that successfully leveraged on these drivers are able to establish loyal followers, elevate their status, and attain lasting accomplishments.

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