



The impact of social media and the desire of fame towards Malaysian influencers

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the impact of social media and the pursuit of fame among Malaysian social media influencers through the lens of Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and Agenda Setting Theory (AST). With the rising dominance of platforms like TikTok and Instagram, influencers have become key drivers in shaping online discourse and driving consumer behaviour. The study employed a qualitative approach by interviewing six Malaysian micro-influencers to uncover their motivations, strategies, and the emotional realities behind their public personas. Findings reveal that influencers use social media primarily for self-expression, emotional gratification, and meaningful audience connection—aligning with UGT's emphasis on personal satisfaction. Many influencers create lifestyle and wellness content rooted in authenticity, which strengthens follower loyalty and personal brand identity. Additionally, platform algorithms play a significant role in shaping content strategies and fame aspirations, reflecting AST's proposition that media structures influence what is seen and valued. Influencers also serve as micro-agenda setters, guiding conversations and brand perceptions within niche communities. While fame offers opportunities, it also brings emotional labour, pressure to remain visible, and concerns over mental well-being. Influencers navigate these challenges by maintaining authenticity and selectively engaging in brand partnerships that align with their values. The study concludes that Malaysian influencers are not merely content producers, but dynamic participants in shaping digital culture. This research underscores the need for deeper analysis of the influencer experience beyond brand metrics and calls for future studies on nano-influencers and evolving trends in digital influence.

Keywords: **Social media, influencer, fame, uses and gratifications theory, agenda setting theory**

INTRODUCTION

Social media has become the main platform for people around the world to communicate with others. It has grown so much in the recent years (Kemp, 2020), that most of the users come from a young age group who spend their time on social networking sites such as Instagram, Twitter and many more (Twenge & Campbell, 2019). Ostic et al. (2021) highlighted that social media has a major impact on a user's psychological well-being. This ultimately effects how a user uses the social media platform, either for communication purposes or to build their own brand image. Additionally, Roslan et al. (2025) stated that social media users have their own preference of social media platform for their day-to-day interaction with other users, as they compare the number of followers they have or the main audience for the chosen social media platform.

With the increase in the use of social media (Joshi et al., 2023), ultimately major companies and brands have started using social media influencers to be key opinion leaders as they have a strong influence on their followers (Bastrygina & Lim, 2023). However, Joshi et al. (2023) and Abidin (2016) argue influencers have taken the influencer marketing strategy as an opportunity to build their popularity and visibility on popular social media platforms. Nevertheless, there is a lack of research on influencer's perception as social influencers themselves, rather than the use of influencer marketing for brands and companies.

Therefore, this study aims to analyse, identify and understand the impact of social media and the desire of fame or to be famous on Malaysian influencers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media has become the most important communication platform among adults, teens and even children (Arora et al., 2019). This communication platform has become a game changer that offers unlimited social interactions to its users (Mackson, 2019). While social media offers enjoyment and opportunities for creative expression, there are concerns regarding its influence on the behaviour of the young (Yusoff et al., 2025). For instance, Karim et al. (2019) highlighted that the use of social media can have a significant effect on mental health whereby excessive use of social media can lead to anxiety and depression. Similarly, Ostic et al. (2021) stressed that increased social media usage can lead to an increase in smartphone addiction. Essentially, these studies show that social media can be both a positive medium for communication among users when controlled; however, excessive use of social media can have a big impact on mental and psychological health, especially in regard to smartphone addiction.

Social media influencer and influencer marketing

Some social media users have built a strong network online that has enabled them to sway other users with their engaging material. These people are known as social media influencers. According to Interactive Advertising Bureau (2018), social media influencers are social media users who "have the potential to create engagement, drive conversation, and/or sell products/services with the intended target audience". These individuals can be celebrities or professionals/non-professionals with more narrowly

focused niches. According to Brown and Hayes (2008), their impact attracts new consumers, creates word-of-mouth effect, and establishes engagement with a brand or product.

Over the past five years, influencer marketing has emerged as a popular marketing tactic for successfully communicating brand messaging. According to recent industry data, the global influencer marketing industry is projected to be worth around \$32.55 billion by 2025, and about 63.8% of brands plan to work with influencers in their marketing strategies, with 86% of marketers reporting use of influencer campaigns in 2025, showing a continued rise in investment and adoption compared to 2022 (Go Viral Global, 2025; Influencer Marketing Hub, 2025). Influencers incorporate brand marketing messaging into their own editorial material, which accounts for their widespread appeal. Influencers can wear down social media users' defences and foster an emotional attachment to a brand by promoting it organically through their own life (Kim & Kim, 2023). Essentially, understanding people's emotions and perceptions is essential for a successful marketing communication strategy.

More importantly, influencers do not necessarily need to be well-known celebrities or respected authorities. Rather, common individuals have become social media influencers, gaining hundreds, thousands, or even millions of followers because of their relatable personas (O'Leary, 2019) and interviewee-matter knowledge that can change attitudes and brand awareness (Lou & Yuan, 2019). As they lead similar lifestyles to their fans, these everyday influencers are perceived as the lady or guy next door that fans can relate to.

Influencer marketing has grown drastically over the years, which ultimately increased the number of social media influencers as well (Kim & Kim, 2022). A recent study highlighted the relationship between an influencer's attributes, friendship, psychological factors of their well-being, loyalty and responsibility as an influencer towards the community from the perspective of social media users (Kim & Kim, 2022). Marketing strategies have been greatly impacted by the increase in social media usage and growth, which highlights the importance of social media influencers (San et al., 2025). According to marketing research, the perceived credibility of influencers is correlated with the efficacy of the message conveyed, mainly depending on the influencer's acknowledged levels of expertise and trustworthiness (AlFarraj et al., 2021), whereas trustworthiness is dependent on the communication's message. Studies show that social media users relate well with influencers who use a similar language, have similar interests and interact often with their followers, which in turn results in loyalty and the user continues following the social media influencer.

Hudders and Lou (2022) focused on the positive and negative aspects of influencer marketing on both the influencer and the followers. Their study highlighted that an influencer can have a negative impact on their followers when the latter idolize and emulate the lavish lifestyle and unhealthy food choices that the influencer promotes through social media (Valkenburg, 2022). When a follower attempts to emulate their favourite influencer but without any financial means, this can lead to unhealthy psychological effects that can undermine their well-being. In addition, it is essential to examine how influencers handle the demands of continuous performance and audience participation given the psychological toll of their line of work (Lou & Zhou, 2024).

From a social psychology standpoint, some issues such as how influencers create their digital identities, control how they present themselves, and deal with the psychological effects of continual public scrutiny have been understudied (Tewatia & Majumdar, 2022). One study looked at how the demands of producing content on a regular basis and upholding a carefully manicured persona affects influencers' general psychological health (Sukmayadi et al., 2024). This highlights the importance of comprehending how online impression management impacts influencers' life and how they manage the demands of their digital existence (Sukmayadi et al., 2024). Given the substantial psychological impacts of social media influencers' fame and involvement, this study intends to methodically examine their emotional states and interpersonal relationships, a field that is frequently overlooked in mental health research (Azayem et al., 2024).

According to Hudders and Lou (2022), influencers are not only attracted to the fancy and lavish lifestyle of being an influencer, but for more recognition through likes, comments and followers and in return, they are willing to sacrifice their own privacy, in order to attain these goals (Lou, 2022). Most influencers are famous because they share their daily lifestyle and vlog their daily routine which revolves around their activities at home, school or work with their family, friends and even colleagues. "Real-world vlogging" attracts social media users to continue watching and following an influencer and since they relate well with the influencer, this increases their loyalty towards the influencer (Jin et al., 2019).

Besides, social media influencers has a significant impact on consumer purchasing decision. According to Khan and Siew (2021), social media influencers play a vital role in a consumer's purchasing decision and reliability towards a product or service. The study further highlighted that the more intense the following, the higher the tendency for the follower to purchase a product or service that is used by the influencer being followed. Similarly, Gbadeyan (2021) highlighted that consumers rely on reviews from social media influencers before purchasing a product or service. As followers look for quality reviews from their chosen social media influencers, the types of products and services that these influencers review plays a vital role in their followers' purchase decision (Khan & Siew, 2021). However, social media influencers cannot merely review goods or services since their followers will also evaluate these reviews, and the influencers can lose followers if their reviews are critical of a particular brand or specialty.

Social media platforms and trends have increasingly evolved over the past 20 years. On social media, influencer marketing has significantly increased its market share and customer awareness. Some social media influencers (SMIs) give their opinions on social issues such as body positivity, gender equality, and mental health, but the majority of influencers talk about their daily lives by sharing their experiences in fashion, sports, health, and fitness. Their social issue-related postings, discussions, and interactions give SMIs a distinct identity, foster a high level of trust, and ultimately boost followers' devotion. It is common for SMIs to share their personal lives and brand experiences with their followers in order to voice their opinions.

The effect of sponsorship disclosure on brand views and purchase intentions has been the focus of a sizable portion of early research on SMIs (Stubb & Colliander, 2019). In this regard, no sponsored posts has increased the trustworthiness of the source

and the message, according to Stubb and Colliander (2019). Evans et al. (2019) noted that influencer trustworthiness is adversely impacted when adverts are disclosed during content distribution. Lou and Yuan (2019) investigated how attitude and purchase intention are impacted by the credibility of communications. Similarly, Lee and Eastin (2020) explored how influencers' postings and photos shape how others see them. Previous studies have also assessed SMIs from the viewpoints of sponsorship disclosure (Van Reijmersdal et al., 2020) and parasocial interactions (Reinikainen et al., 2020). Additionally, studies have assessed SMI attributes such as originality, uniqueness, quality, quantity, authenticity, trust, competence, prestige, information, and instructiveness (Casalo et al., 2020).

Previous studies have addressed SMI content elements, including informativeness, entertainment value, and visual appeal (Ki & Kim, 2019). Some studies focused on sponsorship disclosure and its effect on ad recognition and purchase intention (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019) and whether the quantity of followers and the frequency of post shares affect the advertising efficacy of SMIs' branded content (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

Uses and gratifications theory (UGT)

According to Katz et al. (1973), the uses and gratifications theory (UGT) explains why people use particular types of media. Dhir et al. (2017) claimed that scholars have effectively applied the theory to comprehend the many types of satisfaction individuals obtain from using social media to complete certain objectives. Online users are active, goal-oriented media consumers who select information and messages to meet their needs, according to the uses and gratifications theory. They select certain types of media and pleasure because they are aware of their motives and interests, as well as their expectations (Katz, 1959).

The rapid growth of computers and networks, which has greatly aided in the development of mass media, has underlined the importance of the uses and gratifications theory in recent years. It has been frequently stressed that any analysis of the future direction of mass communication must consider the uses and gratifications theory (Ruggiero, 2000). In tandem with the growth of smartphones, a growing number of researchers who study the uses and gratifications theory have shifted their attention to reasons why individuals use mobile phones (Leung & Wei, 2000).

In the same period of time, several social media platforms that are associated with smartphones, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WeChat, TikTok, have also grown in popularity as a research topic. Given the ongoing digital evolution, contemporary UGT models often extend beyond the original 1974 framework by incorporating additional psychological, social, and contextual variables to better explain modern media behaviour. Thus, this study adopted an adapted UGT framework (Figure 1), integrating contemporary constructs such as attitude, community involvement, social support, demographic factors, locus of control, and news credibility—variables commonly used in recent digital media UGT research (LaRose & Eastin, 2004; Smock et al., 2011; Sundar & Limperos, 2013). These additions allow the framework to more accurately capture the complexities of media use and gratification seeking in today's digital and social media environment.

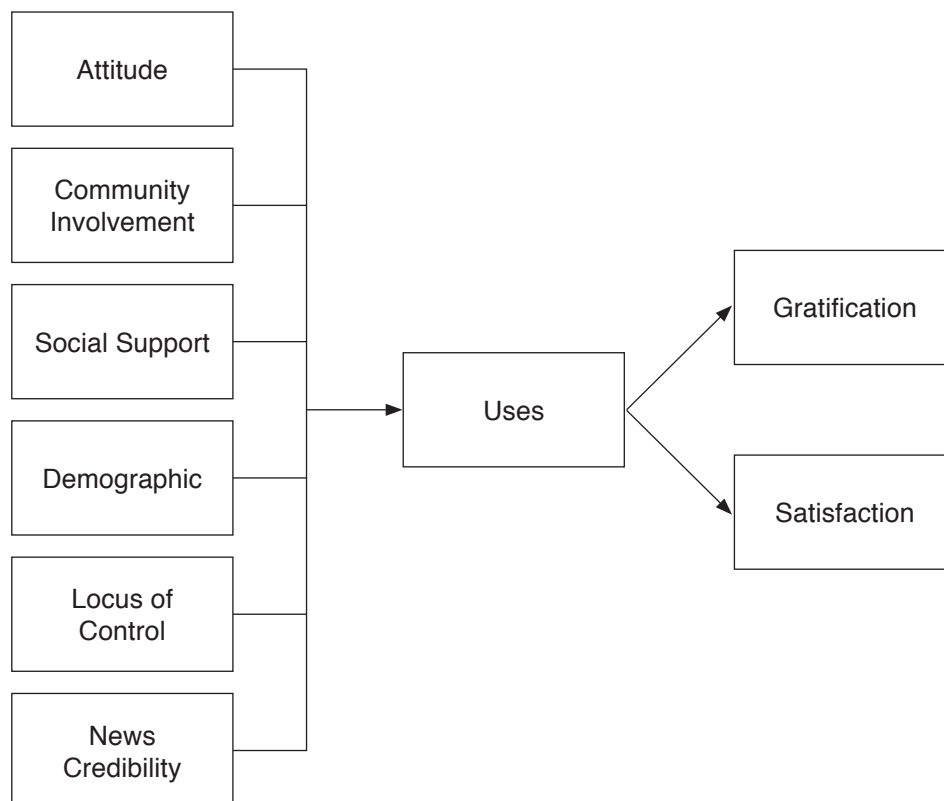


Figure 1. The adapted Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) framework based on Blumler and Katz (1974) and extended with variables from contemporary Uses and Gratifications Theory digital media research (LaRose & Eastin, 2004; Smock et al., 2011; Sundar & Limperos, 2013).

Numerous motivations for media consumption have been identified via uses and gratifications research. These include information, escape, relaxation, companionship, and time passing. Additionally, a rising body of research examines how people use media to meet higher-order needs like value consideration and meaning. Studies on uses and gratifications have covered a wide spectrum of media, from social media to radio.

This approach is predicated on the idea that choosing and using media is an intentional and driven process (Katz & Blumler, 1974). In other words, users actively employ a variety of apps to try to satisfy their own wants and aspirations. The uses and gratification theory is frequently employed to address “how and why” questions regarding media consumption from the user’s perspective (Chua et al., 2012; Ku et al., 2013). Stafford et al. (2004) stated that the term “gratification” is frequently used to refer to a part of pleasure that users experience and that is connected to their active usage of a medium. Generally speaking, the uses and gratifications hypothesis explains why people use media, the factors that influence these motivations, and the outcomes of media consumption (Valentine, 2013).

According to Ku et al. (2013), individual users will remain active on social networking sites (SNSs) as long as these tools satisfy their needs and desires. The ongoing usage of media services can also be explained by the uses and gratifications theory. Ku et al. (2013) stated that the uses and gratifications theory is very important to the current study. In this study, pleasure is defined as the individual needs that microblogs fulfil.

METHODOLOGY

This study used the uses and gratification theory (UGT) to analyse social media influencers' main reason for using social media. The study aims to (a) analyse what influencers do in their social media accounts, (b) identify the reason(s) influencer choose a social media platform to be influencers and (c) understand the positive and negative impacts on the social media influencer.

According to Lasswell (1947), the uses and gratifications theory was developed in order to analyse audiences' active participation in media exchanges and the use of media to satisfy audiences' needs. Blumler and Katz (1974) further elaborated the theory and mentioned that people use media platforms for their own uses and gratification. The theory also expanded the motives behind users' motives and self-perceived needs of using a media. The same person using the same type of media can have two different purposes of communicating, which shows that the same content can gratify the different needs of different media users (Blumler & Katz, 1974). Furthermore, the uses and gratifications theory also suggests that it is not the media which exerts power on the audience, but it is the users who are actively using the media to fulfil their own personal needs.

The agenda setting theory, on the other hand, was employed in this study to identify the media's agenda in using social media to promote the platform. According to McCombs and Shaw (1972), a media platform can set the "agenda" of any campaign by understanding the current trend. Given the transition from traditional media organizations to algorithm-driven social media platforms in creating prominent public debates and concerns, this trend is especially noticeable (Sichach, 2023). In particular, algorithms function as modern gatekeepers in the context of social media, selecting content feeds and affecting which influencers become visible and, thus, salient among users (Van Dalen, 2023). Taking this into context, social media platforms can engage social media influencers to encourage their followers to use the same platform, ultimately increasing the use of the media. Hence, social media platforms such as Tiktok have their own award show to show appreciation to the famous social influencers that have used their platform to create content.

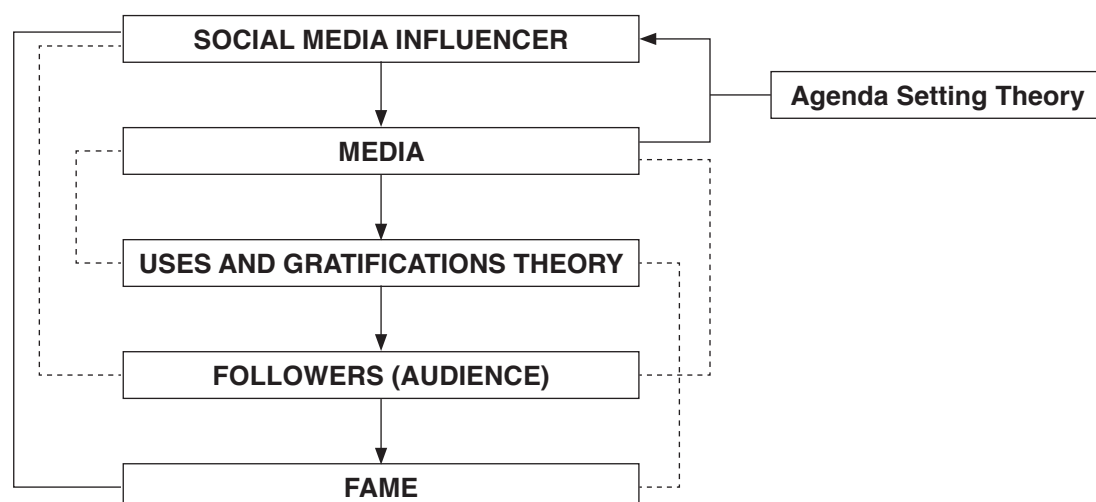


Figure 2. Theoretical framework using the Uses and Gratifications Theory (Blumler & Katz, 1974) and the Agenda Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972)

Based on the theoretical framework in Figure 2, as social media influencers choose their desired social media platform to fulfil their uses and gratification, they will also influence their followers to do the same. By giving particular stories or items priority, social media’s algorithmic curation successfully creates an agenda that mimics the power of traditional media through a customized, computational lens, hence shaping the collective attention of an influencer’s audience (Kalpokas et al., 2020). This changes people’s perceptions of the significance of issues, moving away from a consensus shaped by the mass media, towards a more fragmented, algorithmically-curated salience affected by influencer-driven content and personalized feeds (Bantimaroudis et al., 2023). The agenda setting theory, on the other hand, helps expose the use of influencers by social media platforms to promote their platforms.

Adopting a qualitative approach, six Malaysian social media influencers on Tiktok (S1 to S6) were interviewed. The data from the in-depth interviews formed the qualitative dataset for analysis, to provide a deeper contextual understanding of uses and gratification towards becoming social media influencers. According to Conde and Casais (2023), influencers can be divided into three categories: micro-influencers (1,000 – 100,000 followers), macro-influencers (100,000 – 1,000,000 followers) and mega-influencers (more than 1,000,000 followers). However, macro-influencers and mega-influencers have already established themselves within the influencer landscape.

Therefore, for this study, we will focus only on micro-influencers to understand their purpose of becoming an influencer. The interviewees were selected using purposive sampling. Saunders et al. (2012) stated that purposive sampling is used when researcher knows which interviewee is best suited to answer the research objective. Since this research focuses on Malaysian influencers, therefore only Malaysian influencers were chosen. Other than that, as it is a qualitative research, any number of sample size is sufficient as long as it reaches the purpose of the study, hence, six interviewees ultimately helped meet the research objectives.

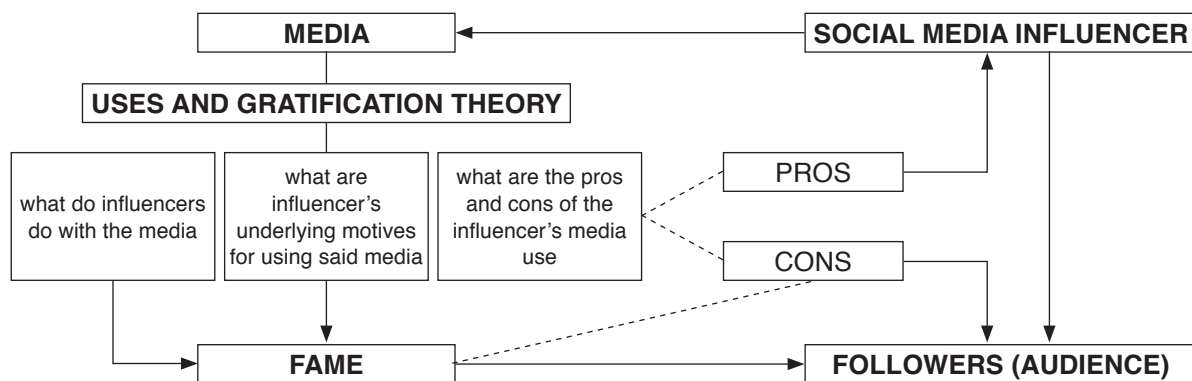


Figure 3. Conceptual framework on social media influencers and the desire of fame using the Uses and Gratifications theory (Blumler & Katz, 1974) and the Agenda Setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972)

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study demonstrate that an influencer’s primary motivation for using social media is self-expression and personal fulfilment; the platform algorithm aids in

their rise to fame using the power of social influence and good self-image that is presented to others.

Self-expression and personal gratification

According to UGT, individuals use media to satisfy specific psychological and social needs. For this study, the interviewees explained that social media offers a platform for self-expression, creativity, and emotional connection. S1 mentioned that *“I post when I genuinely feel like it’ll help or entertain people.”* S3 and S6 expressed similar thoughts on the matter, as they highlighted that most of their posts are based on trending videos or the current trending hype across the platform. The interviewees additionally added that they felt it was compulsory for them to post as fast as possible before another trend becomes popular. By doing this, the interviewees get high engagement and become a part of the current trend and this keeps their follower base entertained.

However, some interviewees create content that presents a deep connection to themselves, and can create a significant impact. S2 mentioned, that when creating content, *“What matters a lot to me is the impact that I make”*. This shows that, not all influencers use social media for fame, but also strive to contribute to their community. This finding is in line with Priya and Annapoorni (2022) who highlighted the importance of user-generated content and how one uses certain platforms for self-gratification.

Other than that, most of the influencer’s content revolves around lifestyle, wellness, and personal experiences, providing both personal satisfaction and a sense of purpose. S5 stated, *“Mostly wellness, travel, personal growth... because those are things I enjoy and naturally talk about”*. This also presents another side of the influencer where they share their personal lives on social media to inspire their followers. This reflects a strong alignment with the gratification of personal identity and meaningful interaction, highlighting how influencers derive internal fulfilment from connecting with their audiences. In line with Rahman and Chua’s (2025), this study demonstrated how lifestyle influencers use personal content such as wellness journeys, travel experiences, and daily routines as a means of digital self-expression and identity-building. Rahman and Chua (2025) found that sharing personal narratives helps influencers form deeper emotional bonds with their audiences, while simultaneously fulfilling their own need for validation, purpose, and self-actualization.

Platform accessibility and fame aspirations

Platform accessibility in this context means that interviewees mostly chose TikTok and YouTube as their preferred choice of platform because of the algorithmic openness and creative features, which lower the barrier to fame. S1 shared that *“You don’t need to be a celebrity to be famous on TikTok”*. Similarly, S2, S3, S4 and S6 echoed the same opinion. They mentioned that the algorithm on TikTok enabled any or most of their content to become viral if it was trending material or has impactful content that made it viral worthy. Additionally, the strategic use of algorithms in certain social media platforms is still driven by personal and professional gratifications, such as community building, exposure, and relevance, as S6 highlighted: *“TikTok and YouTube make the most sense because they favour storytelling, authenticity, and visuals, which fits my style a lot.”*

The platform’s design plays a major role in influencing content strategies. This supports the agenda setting theory, where media platforms set the terms for what is

seen, valued, and promoted. The influencer acknowledged adapting to this environment. A3 explained, *“At first, I was just posting randomly but now, I pay attention to what time I post, how long the video is, and whether it hooks people.”* Ultimately, the interviewees wanted to create more content for their chosen platform so that they can get noticed by brands and become ambassadors. Brands, on the other hand, also utilise influencers that have high value because they can reach a wider audience. This aligns with the agenda setting theory of brands using influencers as their medium to reach out to the influencer’s followers.

Lim and Ismail (2025) argued that brands utilize influencers not just for visibility, but as part of an agenda-setting strategy to penetrate specific audience segments. The influencer acts as a conduit through which brands can “implant consumer attention and brand relevance into existing follower networks,” aligning well with the agenda-setting function in new media contexts. Therefore, while platforms shape behaviour based on the agenda setting theory, influencers still use them intentionally to meet personal goals through the uses and gratifications theory.

Emotional labour, authenticity, and mental health

Social media also presents emotional challenges, such as maintaining authenticity and coping with public visibility. The influencers reflected candidly on this pressure, where S2 stated, *“There’s this invisible pressure to always show up... It’s like a never-ending argument in my head”*. S1, S3, S4, S5, and S6 all agreed and mentioned that although being influencers gives them certain gratification to themselves, they feel the pressure of constantly having to be a part of current trends as there is a possibility of losing followers if they go silent or become inactive for too long. Despite striving for connection, most influencers are also cautious about protecting their mental health. S4 mentioned, *“Social media gave me so much but it also made me compare myself to others... I mute accounts that affect my peace, and I remind myself that what we see is just a highlight reel.”* This shows that although most of the influencers’ life is accessible to the public eye, they make sure that they maintain anonymity over a part of their lives to make sure their mental health is not negatively affected by current societal trends and demands.

Other than that, when it comes to creating content, authenticity is a conscious strategy, as it never gets old. S6 expressed that, *“I always try to post things that feel true to me, even if it’s not perfect”*. Based on recent findings, the most viral or consistent video that people find interesting is that the one they find most relatable and makes sense. Tan and Yusof (2025) found that authenticity significantly enhances follower engagement, particularly among Gen Z and millennial audiences in Malaysia. The study concluded that “users tend to interact more with content that reflects real, unfiltered experiences over curated perfection,” and that relatable content was the top predictor of virality across TikTok and Instagram platforms. Similarly, the current findings underscore the uses and gratification theory’s need for emotional stability and authenticity. Fame cannot simply happen overnight, because it needs to be balanced with the influencer’s emotional well-being, boundaries and authentic content.

Social influence and public image

As influencers grow in their reach, their agenda-setting power increases. The interviewees are aware of the responsibility to maintain trust and avoid purely profit-driven choices.

S2 sternly stated that, *“If it’s not something I’d use or support even without a payment, I’ll say no. My followers trust me and I don’t want to break that trust just for quick money.”* S2 sees herself not only as a content creator but as a community-builder and educator, especially when reflecting on her professional impact. She further elaborated that, *“A simple relatable TikTok video about coding struggles brought so many people into our Discord community”*. This shows that as an influencer, they do not simply take on ambassadorship roles just for income; the brands they represent mostly has to be in-line with what they do or endorse in real life. Essentially, this shows how influencers themselves set agendas for niche audiences, guiding conversations, building platforms, and amplifying narratives that matter to their followers.

S5 further added that, *“The goal has always been creating an impact, not just making them laugh and scroll away”*. Here, the agenda setting theory helps explain how the influencer shifts from being influenced by media to becoming an influencer of media discourse, particularly in the Malaysian digital culture. According to Lee and Harun (2025), as influencers gain credibility, they “increasingly function as micro-agenda setters,” curating not only brand associations but also shaping the values and conversations within their niche communities. Malaysian influencers often reject brand deals that compromise authenticity and instead choose partnerships that align with their identity and community values. Their findings highlight that “the influencer’s role extends beyond product promotion; they serve as cultural gatekeepers and community stewards.”

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated that the impact of social media on Malaysian influencers is connected with both the desire for fame and the strategic use of platforms to fulfil personal and professional gratifications. Through the lens of the uses and gratifications theory, influencers actively engage with social media to express authenticity, build emotional connections, and derive self-worth from relatable content that resonates with their audience. Simultaneously, the agenda setting theory helps explain how both influencers and brands shape public discourse, as brands leverage on influencers to reach targeted communities, and influencers by curating narratives that guide audience attention and behaviour.

As stated earlier in the findings and subsequent discussion, authenticity and relatability are key drivers of engagement and virality, underscoring why influencers consciously prioritize genuine content. Ultimately, Malaysian influencers navigate a complex media landscape where personal identity, audience expectations, and platform dynamics, redefine fame as both impactful and purposeful. It is recommended that future studies utilise a wider sample including nano influencers (with smaller number of followers) and examine the extent of the influencer trend and how it has impacted brands promoted by these influencers.

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