



Social media personal branding: Analysing social media influencers' branding efforts on Instagram

Tan Poh Ling

Sunway University Malaysia, Malaysia

*Chew Yuin-Y

Taylor's University, Malaysia

YuinY.Chew@taylors.edu.my

Judith Nesamalar Tharumaraj

Taylor's University, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The notion of self-branding has drawn myriad academic responses over the last decade. A personal brand allows you to control your own narrative and can help you stand out from competition. Today, the new digital media environment has empowered women to market themselves as brands. Although there is a growing interest from both academic and practical perspectives in exploring the impact of social media on individuals' self-branding, there remains a lack of empirical research that systematically investigates the methodologies on how an individual employs or constructs and reinforces their branded identity through social media platforms, especially on Instagram. Through content analysis, this study analysed posts from the top 10 female Malaysian social media influencers' Instagram accounts according to a systematic coding scheme. The selected influencers articulate a form of entrepreneurial femininity that draws upon post-feminist sensibilities and the contemporary logic of self-branding. The findings suggest a significant proportion of the social media influencers' followers are susceptible to the influence exerted by their strategic utilization of technological features in conjunction with their distinctive modes of self-presentation. Drawing upon these insights, the current study contributes to both the theoretical understanding and practical applications within the domain of self-branding via social media.

Keywords: *Self-branding, social media, postfeminism, Instagram, self-presentation, social media influencer*

INTRODUCTION

Advancements in technology have revolutionised consumer engagement, enabling diverse activities on social media platforms. The advent of Internet-based social media has empowered individuals to communicate with hundreds, even thousands of people about their products and businesses (Ajina, 2019; Masuda et al., 2022; Sukiman et al., 2023). Instagram stands out for its emphasis on visual aesthetics, making it suited to promoting beauty products, body ideals, and luxury lifestyles (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Instagram also facilitates user engagement through follower accumulation and brand connectivity, as well as fosters social interactions among consumers (Blight et al., 2017; Kacar, 2023).

Fashion enthusiasts have effectively utilised Instagram's aesthetic appeal and extensive reach to achieve popularity and success. For instance, the emergence of social media influencers (SMIs)—individuals who share fashion tips and promote products through social media accounts and blog posts—has captivated fashion brands (Casalo et al., 2020). These SMIs are recognised as powerful channels for spreading information about new products, sparking trends, and driving sales. Known as “Instafamous” (Jin et al., 2019; Piehler et al., 2022), these Instagram personalities have thrived on the platform due to its capacity for social interaction and visual storytelling. This environment allows users to craft personal narratives and identities that attract audiences (Abidin, 2016; Yoo, 2023). As SMIs gain prominence among businesses, they have become an increasingly effective marketing strategy, particularly in the fashion industry, where Instagram is a dominant platform for promotional activities (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021).

SMIs have evolved into marketable commodities via social media platforms that enable the creation of public personas. According to Sethi et al. (2024), these platforms empower SMIs to challenge conventional standards of beauty and identity through autonomy, creativity, and self-expression, especially in the fashion and beauty sectors. Social media allows SMIs, particularly women who develop self-brands, to break free from traditional moulds, promoting a sense of empowerment and independence (Fan & Chan, 2023; Miguel et al., 2024). However, despite this perceived empowerment, self-branding practices are deeply rooted in a neoliberal capitalist framework, which often reinforces existing hierarchies related to class, gender, and aesthetics (Chidgey, 2021; Marwick, 2013). This paradox highlights the tension between the apparent freedom of self-expression within the context of social media and the underlying social norms that shape these practices, particularly in the context of Asia.

Given this context, it is crucial to examine how female SMIs on Instagram navigate and negotiate the ideological demands of neoliberalism while constructing their personal brand identities. This study also addresses literature gaps on gender issues in Asia—an area underexplored within cultural and communication studies, anthropology, and history (Chintrakarn, 2024), and echoes calls for further investigation into female empowerment (Gomez-Borquez et al., 2024; Grau & Zotos, 2016; Mager & Helgeson, 2011), particularly in the Asian context (Klose & Jebin, 2024). Specifically, this study investigated the self-

branding practices of Instagram SMIs from the lens of postfeminism in addressing the following questions:

1. What are the predominant types of content in these social media influencers' posts?
2. What can the way in which Malaysian female social media influencers portray themselves through images tell us about their personal brands?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Self-branding on social media

Self-branding on social media has become a pivotal aspect of digital identity management, with individuals increasingly curating their online personas to align with both personal and professional goals. Conceptualised as a strategic and self-instrumentalizing practice from its emergence in the 1990s, self-branding has evolved into a valuable, intangible form of social capital, particularly for aspiring workers (Blyth et al., 2024; Gandini, 2016). This form of social capital enables individuals to access new work opportunities, making self-branding an essential tool for career advancement in the digital age.

Generally, self-branding is described as a fusion of self-presentation and personal branding, emphasising the portrayal of one's strengths and uniqueness to a target audience (Adji, 2024; Schau & Gilly, 2003). This aligns with Jacobson (2020) who specifically explained personal branding as referring to "the process an individual uses to develop and market themselves to others. Personal branding is an act of agency as an individual actively—consciously or subconsciously—performs an identity". Parallel to this, is a concept that mirrors Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation. The transition from private to public self-presentation on social media has amplified the importance of personal branding (Belk, 2013; Miguel et al., 2024).

SMIs utilise self-branding to construct and project an authentic self-image through strategic content creation, visual presentation, and audience engagement (Enke & Borchers, 2021; Erz & Christensen, 2018). They are actors who build significant relationships and influence through online content and utilise self-branding to craft and disseminate an authentic digital persona that resonates with their audience (Erz & Christensen, 2018; Heeris Christensen et al., 2024). This process often involves self-presentation strategies, such as depicting the physical body, to construct a digital likeness (Miguel et al., 2024; Schau & Gilly, 2003). Content creation strategies, including media vividness and interactivity, play a crucial role in attracting and retaining followers (Lou & Xie, 2021), underscoring the importance of maintaining a persuasive, engaging online presence.

Goffman's gender framework

Erving Goffman's 1979 framework on gender representation offers a critical lens for understanding how gender roles are depicted in popular media. Rooted in his earlier work on self-presentation, the framework examines how individuals package and edit their public selves to conform to societal expectations and project desired impressions (Goffman, 1959). For Goffman, self-presentation is a strategic, selective process aligning

one's public image with audience expectations, ensuring a positive evaluation of these projected identities (Rui & Stefanone, 2013).

Goffman's gender advertisements framework identifies several elements through which gender is portrayed: relative size, feminine touch, function ranking, ritualization of subordination, and licensed withdrawal. These elements collectively highlight the societal norms that reinforce gender hierarchies, frequently portraying women in subordinate, submissive roles. Goffman (1959) highlighted the pervasive portrayal of women in ways that reinforce their perceived inferiority in popular media.

The framework's relevance endures in contemporary research, particularly in the examination of the sexualization and objectification of women in media. Although Goffman initially avoided direct examination of sexualization—likely due to the concurrent efforts of second-wave feminists who campaigned against such depictions—scholars have since extended his framework to incorporate this critical dimension (Goffman, 1979). Researchers have adapted the framework to better understand sexualization in media representations. For instance, Kang (1997) expanded Goffman's original coding scheme by adding categories such as body display and independence, which have revealed a significant increase in the depiction of women in nude or partially nude states.

These adaptations have enriched the empirical analysis of women's sexualisation and objectification in popular media. Earlier studies utilising Goffman's analytical approach continue to demonstrate that despite feminist activism, the portrayal of women as sexual objects remains a prevalent issue (Bell & Milic, 2002; Blyth et al., 2024; Krämer & Winter, 2008; Uski & Lampinen, 2016). Thus, the current research seeks to explore how female SMIs portray themselves through images in digital environments to further understand the portrayal from the lens of Goffman's framework.

Postfeminism

Celebrity remains an under-theorized concept within the dominant frameworks of postfeminist media cultures. As social media has reshaped the landscape of everyday media engagement among young people in recent decades, scholars have examined youth online cultures as potential spaces for more dynamic democratic participation, particularly in relation to the feminist discourse (Jackson, 2018, 2021; Kanai & Zeng, 2024). Within these digital spaces, postfeminism operates as a key ideological framework, reinforcing notions of individualism, choice, and empowerment while simultaneously embedding these values within the structures of neoliberal consumer culture (Chen & Liebler, 2024; Scharff, 2024).

A defining feature of postfeminism is its emphasis on autonomy, self-expression, and self-governance, particularly in young women's engagement with media and consumer culture. This perspective has expanded understanding on women's self-branding, which sees femininity tied to the body while reframing female subjectivity as shifting from external objectification to internalized self-surveillance and self-discipline (Chen & Liebler, 2024). The resurgence of feminist discourse within digital spaces is evident in mainstream media's renewed interest in feminist narratives, celebrity endorsements of feminism, and the proliferation of online activism (Mendes et al., 2019; Steele, 2021). As

Baer (2016) asserted, “digital activism constitutes a paradigm shift within feminist protest culture” (p. 18) and a sizable body of feminist media studies research now highlights the benefits and pitfalls of such activism (for example, Jackson et al., 2020; Mendes et al., 2019; Steele, 2021).

Postfeminism’s entanglement with neoliberalism further complicates this discourse. As Chidgey (2021) argues, postfeminist subjectivity aligns with neoliberal capitalism, wherein individuals continuously work on and improve themselves, relying on personal effort rather than collective action. Within this framework, the self becomes a branded entity, strategically curated through narratives of autonomy, choice, and empowerment (Chen & Liebler, 2024; Miguel et al., 2024). This is particularly evident in digital spaces, where young women, influencers, and celebrities construct and monetize their identities through self-presentation strategies.

An emergent phenomenon within this context is the celebrity-activism nexus, in which digital self-branding intersects with social justice discourses. While often positioned as progressive, these forms of activism remain embedded within consumer capitalism, challenging the assumption that postfeminist cultures are inherently depoliticized (Chidgey, 2021; Walters, 2025). From this perspective, digital content studies increasingly situate influencer identity as shaped by both individual agency and broader socio-political frameworks (Miguel et al., 2024). This highlights the tension between self-branding as an act of empowerment and its complicity in reinforcing neoliberal postfeminist ideals.

METHODOLOGY

The selection of 10 female influencers for analysis was based on a systematic approach that considered their presence and recognition in Malaysian media articles listing influential female social media personalities, alongside their follower counts. The articles referenced were “Top 24 Instagram Influencers in Malaysia – A Diverse List” (Ai, 2022), “The Best Malaysian Fashion Influencers to Follow in 2024” (Salehaldin, 2024), “8 Top Social Media Influencers Who Go Beyond the Web” (Ashraf, 2023), “Top 10 Female Influencers in Malaysia in 2024” (Taslaud, 2024), “The Top 30 Instagram Influencers in Malaysia” (Howe, 2023), and “Top Moms to Follow on Instagram in Kuala Lumpur” (Little Step Asia, n.d.).

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify Malaysian female social media influencers who had substantial public visibility on Instagram and whose content was relevant to visual self-presentation and personal branding. The final sample was determined using four criteria. First, the individual had to be a Malaysian female social media influencer with a publicly accessible Instagram account. Second, she had to be included in at least one of the selected Malaysian media lists. Third, her Instagram content had to demonstrate a substantial emphasis on visual self-presentation, lifestyle, fashion or personal branding. Fourth, follower count as of 7 March 2024 was used as an indicator of platform visibility. Individuals whose public presence was unrelated to influencer-style content or whose accounts did not provide sufficient analysable material were excluded.

Based on these criteria, 10 social media influencers were retained for analysis. Table 1 presents their Instagram handles, follower counts and frequency of inclusion in the selected media articles.

Table 1. Top ten SMIs

Name	Instagram Handle	Follower Count as of 7 March 2024	Number of Mentions in Selected Articles
Neelofa	neelofa	8,700,000	2
Atita Haris	atitaharis	843,000	1
Christinna Kuan	ms_kuan	814,000	1
Bella Khann	bellakhan	805,000	1
Jenn Chia	soimjenn	595,000	1
Jane Chuck	janechuck	593,000	2
Athirah Kamaruzzaman	tyrakmrzmn	518,000	1
Iza Hamid	thepinkstilettos	455,000	1
Teoh Ju Wei	juweiteoh	413,000	2
Tara Choi	tara_choi_	376,000	1

Sampling and data collection

In this study, content analysis was employed to empirically analyse user profiles on Instagram. A total of 3,856 Instagram posts were gathered from the identified social media influencer accounts using the 4K Stogram software from Jan 2023 to Dec 2024. The unit of analysis was each individual image; for carousel posts, all images were included to ensure a comprehensive and well-rounded representation of the influencers' visual content.

To assess intercoder reliability, three coders independently coded 40 units, representing 10% of the complete dataset. Inter-coder agreement was systematically evaluated using Holsti's (1969) percent agreement index, with a standard threshold of 0.7. Coders engaged in regular reviews of unit classifications and collaboratively resolved any discrepancies to uphold consistency throughout the data analysis process. This approach not only safeguarded the reliability of the study but also strengthened the rigor of the findings, offering a robust understanding of SMIs' self-branding practices within the social media context. The overall reliability coefficient was 0.90, which exceeded the minimum acceptable threshold of 0.70. In regard to category-specific scores, the coefficients ranged from 0.84 to 0.95. Disagreements were reviewed and resolved through discussions before the remaining units were coded.

Development of coding categories

The image content category was mainly used to evaluate the feminist presentation, utilizing the gender advertisements framework proposed by Goffman (1979). The framework includes five sub-concepts: relative size, feminine touch, function ranking, ritualization of subordinates, and licensed withdrawal. Seven subgroups—stance, pose, touch, withdrawal, body display, breasts area, and braless—were designed to study gender display. In addition, for the image content category, items were adapted from Liu and Suh

(2017) and the coding schemes from Kang (1997), Hatton and Trautner (2011), as well as Hu et al. (2014). Table 2 highlights the coding system employed for analysis purposes.

Table 2. Coding scheme of content analysis

Category	Subcategories	Coding Scheme
Image Content		
(Goffman, 1979; Hatton & Trautner, 2011; Hu et al., 2014, Kang, 1997; Liu & Suh, 2017)	Theme	selfie: 1, portraits: 2, friends/family: 3, food: 4, gadgets: 5, pets: 6, activity: 7, captioned photos: 8, landscape: 9, fashion: 10
	Number of People in the Photograph	solo:1, two to three: 2, group: 3, none: 4
	Stance	posed leg bent:1, sitting: 2, walking: 3, standing: 4, squatting down: 5, lying: 6, other: 7
	Pose	normal:1, suggestive: 2, overly sexual: 3
	Touch	no touch:1, casual touch: 2, provocative touch: 3
	Withdrawal	gazing the viewer: 1, averting gaze: 2, covering face: 3, back to the camera: 4
	Body Display	unrevealing: 1, slightly revealing: 2, revealing: 3, naked: 4
	Breast Area	not a focal point: 1, somewhat emphasized: 2, major focus: 3
	Braless	yes: 1, no: 2, unknown: 3
Composition Elements		
(Liu & Suh, 2017; Ramos-Serrano & Martnez-Garca, 2016)	Type of Shot	close shot: 1, medium shot: 2, wide shot: 3, cut-in shot: 4
	Camera Angle	high: 1, low: 2, eye angle: 3
	Visual Composition	the rule of thirds: 1, highlighted: 2

Ethical considerations

This study analysed publicly accessible Instagram posts from identifiable social media influencers. Although the content was public, ethical safeguards were applied to minimise privacy and reputational risks. Only data relevant to the research questions were collected, and findings were reported in aggregate form without reproducing individual posts or making claims about personal intentions. No private or restricted content was accessed, and the dataset was stored securely and used solely for research purposes.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Data were collected from Jan 2023 to Dec 2024. The data collection yielded 3,856 posts on Instagram from the aforementioned 10 social media influencers. These data were analysed according to the coding categories developed.

Table 3. Results of image content analysis relating to theme and number of people in the photograph

Category – Subcategory	Coding Item	Coding Number	Frequency (N=3,856)	Percentage (%)
Image Content – Theme	Selfie	1	407	11
	Portrait	2	2,104	55
	Friends/Family	3	901	23
	Food	4	79	2
	Gadgets	5	31	1
	Pets	6	7	0
	Activity	7	146	4
	Captioned Photos	8	0	0
	Landscape	9	29	1
	Fashion	10	152	4
Image Content – Number of People in the Photograph	Solo	1	2,553	66
	Two to Three	2	937	24
	Group	3	366	9
	None	4	0	0

Table 3 shows that the Portrait theme was the most prevalent, accounting for 55% of occurrences. This was followed by the Friends/Family category at 23% and the Selfie category at 11%. These were followed by Activity and Fashion (both 4%). The majority of the posts analysed contained only one person in the image (66%), with the remaining images largely containing two to three people (24%). This coincides with results seen in Liu and Suh's work (2017), with portrait being the highest chosen theme. Only 9% of the analysed images depicted group photos, and none of the images contained an absence of people.

Table 4. Results of image content analysis relating to gender display

Category – Subcategory	Coding Item	Coding Number	Frequency (N=3,856)	Percentage (%)
Image Content–Stance	Posed leg bent	1	18	0.5
	Sitting	2	1,053	27.3
	Walking	3	149	3.9
	Standing	4	2,404	62.3
	Squatting down	5	83	2.2
	Lying	6	93	2.4
	Other	7	56	1.5
Image Content – Pose	Normal	1	3,817	99.0
	Suggestive	2	39	1.0
	Overly sexual	3	0	0.0
Image Content – Touch	No touch	1	2,000	52
	Casual touch	2	1,855	48
	Provocative touch	3	1	0

Table 4. (con't)

Category – Subcategory	Coding Item	Coding Number	Frequency (N=3,856)	Percentage (%)
Image Content–Withdrawal	Gazing the viewer	1	2,184	57
	Averting gaze	2	1,396	36
	Covering face	3	136	4
	Back to the camera	4	140	4

For the Stance subcategory, the most popular were Standing (62.3%) and Sitting (27.3%), corresponding to Liu and Suh's (2017) study. The Posed Leg Bent stance was the least popular (0.5%). Similarly, out of the 3,856 posts, none contained depictions of provocative touch. The majority of the images (52%) contained no touching at all, while 48% depicted casual touches. In the Withdrawal subcategory of Image Content, most of the analysed posts featured the SMI looking directly at the camera/viewer (57%). Another 36% showed the SMI averting her gaze from the camera. Only 4% of the posts had the SMI covering her face and 4% showed the SMI with her back to the camera.

Table 5. Results of image content analysis relating to body aesthetics

Category – Subcategory	Coding Item	Coding Number	Frequency (N=3,856)	Percentage (%)
Image Content – Body Display	Unrevealing	1	1,505	39
	Slightly revealing	2	2,271	59
	Revealing	3	80	2
	Naked	4	0	0
Image Content – Breast Area	Not a focal point	1	3,466	89.89
	Somewhat emphasized	2	385	9.98
	Major focus	3	5	0.13
Image Content – Braless	Yes	1	12	0.31
	No	2	3,843	99.66
	Unknown	3	1	0.03

The results in Table 5 for Body Display, Breasts Area, and Braless subcategories show that these 10 Malaysian female SMIs opted for modesty in most of their Instagram posts. Nearly all the analysed posts from these SMIs were found to be “Normal” in pose (99%), that is, the poses within the image were largely neutral with no suggestive or sexual overtones. None were overtly sexual, and only 1% was categorised as “Suggestive.” Up to 59% of the posts showed the SMI only slightly revealing her body, while 39% had an unrevealing body display. The breast area was not a focal point for most of these 10 SMIs with 89.89% of the posts not featuring the breast as a focal point, and the SMIs were wearing bras in 99.66% of the posts that were analysed.

Table 6. Results of composition element

Category – Subcategory	Coding Item	Coding Number	Frequency (N=3,856)	Percentage (%)
Composition Element – Type of Shot	Close shot	1	271	7.0
	Medium shot	2	2,202	57.1
	Wide shot	3	1,364	35.4
	Cut-in shot	4	19	0.5
Composition Element – Camera Angle	High	1	436	11
	Low	2	340	9
	Eye level	3	3,080	80
Composition Element – Visual Composition	The rule of thirds	1	3,813	99
	Highlighted	2	43	1

Table 6 shows the results of photography composition elements following subcategories adapted from Ramos-Serrano and Martinez-Garca (2016). Medium shot (57.1%) and wide shot (35.4%) were the most popular shots. Relating to camera angle, the majority of photos were captured at eye level (80%), followed by high level (11%) and low level (9%). From a visual perspective, 99% of photos featured SMIs adhering to the rule of thirds, whereas 1% applied centre positioning. This finding is in contrast to Liu and Suh's (2017) study.

DISCUSSION

The following section examines the research questions in relation to the empirical findings. For *RQ1* (*What are the predominant types of the content in these social media influencers' posts?*), results reveal that the Portrait and Selfie themes exhibit considerable similarity (Table 3). The primary distinction lies in the method of image capture: Selfie images were taken by the SMI herself, whereas Portraits were captured by another individual. The combined frequency of these themes (66%) aligns precisely with the “Image Content – Number of People in the Photograph” data in Table 3, which indicates that 66% of posts features a single individual. For SMIs, self-presentation captivates and sustains follower engagement, building a narrative of personality for the audience.

Their individual identity serves as both the focal point and the primary appeal (Bagozzi, 2025; Ki et al., 2020). This accounts for the frequent use of selfies and self-portraits in their content. As forms of self-portraiture, these self-focused images function as visual commodities that contribute to social currency and digital consumption—a strategic tool for constructing specific self-narratives, be it that of an “extremely marketable, wealthy, and famous celebrity self” or an “ordinary” individual seeking social validation through engagement metrics such as “likes” (Berio, 2025; Iqani & Schroeder, 2015; Susilo et al., 2024). From a postfeminist perspective, the predominance of selfies and portraits reflects the centrality of the individual woman as the producer, subject and manager of her own public image.

Postfeminist culture places strong emphasis on autonomy, personal choice and self-expression, while also encouraging women to continuously monitor, improve and present themselves as desirable and marketable subjects. The repeated visual positioning of the influencer as the main subject therefore, reflects both individual agency and the neoliberal expectation that the self should be strategically managed as a personal brand. Following that, the prominence of “Friends/Family” as the next most frequent content theme is consistent with the self-focused content strategy. Social connections are an important part of personal identity, and by incorporating their social circles into their posts, SMIs reinforce and enrich their online brand identity (Davlembayeva et al., 2025; Pan et al., 2025).

In respect to *RQ2 (What can the way in which Malaysian female social media influencers portray themselves through images tell us about their personal brands?)*, the visual self-presentation of Malaysian female SMIs on Instagram reflects a curated personal branding strategy that aligns with both cultural norms and audience expectations (Bagozzi, 2025; Ki et al., 2020; Sidorenko-Bautista et al., 2025). The emphasis in most of these SMIs’ content appears to be on the face rather than on the body, thereby centring attention on the SMI as an individual. This is supported by the data showing that 66% of all posts featured a solo subject, and 55% consisted of portrait images, indicating a strong focus on individual identity and self-representation.

Further analysis reveals that 99% of the poses were coded as “normal,” while only 1% were suggestive and none were overtly sexual. Similarly, in terms of body display, 59% of images were slightly revealing, 39% unrevealing, and none depicted nudity. The breast area was not a focal point in 89.89% of posts, and 99.66% of the influencers were observed to be wearing bras, reaffirming a modest aesthetic. These findings suggest a conscious distancing from hyper-sexualized content, which may be perceived as incongruent with the values of Malaysia’s predominantly conservative population, particularly the 58% Malay-Muslim demographic (Agil et al., 2022). These findings are particularly relevant to the postfeminist theory, where femininity is often constructed through a combination of apparent freedom and continuous bodily self-regulation.

Although women are positioned as autonomous individuals free to choose how they present themselves, their appearance remains subject to expectations concerning attractiveness, respectability, discipline and marketability. The prevalence of neutral poses and restrained bodily display may therefore reflect carefully regulated self-presentation rather than as straightforward evidence of either empowerment or oppression. Within the Malaysian context, this tension may be intensified by cultural expectations surrounding modesty and feminine respectability. The visual branding practices observed in the study suggest that the SMIs negotiate individual visibility without relying heavily on overt sexualisation—a culturally situated form of postfeminist self-branding in which autonomy and self-expression operate alongside social expectations concerning appropriate feminine appearance (Agil et al., 2022).

Moreover, 57% of the influencers’ images show them gazing directly at the viewer, while only 36% averting their gaze. This visual engagement strategy facilitates a parasocial connection with followers, enhancing perceptions of authenticity and accessibility (Kress

& van Leeuwen, 2006; Webb, 2020). Such techniques are consistent with personal branding goals, where trust and relatability are crucial to building long-term audience relationships (Miguel et al., 2024). Findings illustrate that Malaysian female SMIs appear to construct personal brands that balance aesthetic appeal with cultural sensitivity. Their branding is characterized by modesty, direct engagement, and self-focused imagery—strategies that position them as relatable yet aspirational figures. This indicates that personal branding on Instagram is not merely a display of individual agency but a nuanced negotiation with prevailing cultural scripts and audience expectations (Sanchez-Amboage et al., 2024; Zainudin et al., 2019).

CONCLUSION

This study provides empirical insights into how Malaysian female social media influencers (SMIs) construct personal brands through visual self-presentation on Instagram. The findings demonstrate an emphasis on modesty and individual representation, with 66% of the analysed posts featuring solo images and 99% displaying neutral poses. Suggestive poses accounted for only 1% of the dataset, while overtly sexual poses were not observed. These patterns indicate that the influencers' visual content was organised around self-focused imagery, restrained bodily presentation and controlled visual display. The frequent use of direct gaze (57%) and portrait-style imagery further demonstrates direct visual address and individual visibility, although the study does not establish how audiences interpreted these features.

These patterns may reflect the influencers' negotiation of postfeminist ideals of autonomy, self-expression and empowerment within a sociocultural context shaped by traditional values and neoliberal expectations (Jackson, 2018, 2021; Kanai & Zeng, 2024). Instagram therefore functions not only as a platform for self-promotion but also as a space for constructing public identities through strategic visual practices. The influencers' personal brands are communicated through self-focused imagery, bodily presentation, gaze and visual composition, illustrating a culturally-situated visual storytelling (Bagozzi, 2025; Ki et al., 2020; Sidorenko-Bautista et al., 2025). The transition from private to public self-presentation further highlights the importance of personal branding in digital environments (Belk, 2013; Miguel et al., 2024). This study contributes to discussions of digital identity and influencer culture in Southeast Asia without drawing conclusions concerning trust, purchase behaviour, influence or parasocial relationships, which were not directly measured (Adji, 2024; Blyth et al., 2024).

Limitation and recommendations

A notable limitation of this study is its exclusive focus on macro- and mega-influencers, whose branding strategies are shaped by visibility, large follower bases, and commercial partnerships. This focus may not represent all SMIs, particularly micro- and nano-influencers, who maintain more authentic and niche-specific audience relationships. Therefore, the findings may have limited generalisability across influencer tiers. Future research should adopt stratified sampling across tiers to provide an understanding of

branding practices. This recommendation aligns with findings that highlight authenticity in micro-influencer branding (Belanche et al., 2021; Ceylan & Hayran, 2025) and show that parasocial interaction and audience trust vary according to influencer scale and content type (Balaban et al., 2022).

Another limitation is the study's reliance on quantitative content analysis. Although useful for identifying statistical patterns and correlations, this approach provides limited insight into the context-specific motivations and meaning-making processes underlying SMI branding. By reducing consumer-influencer interactions to predefined variables, it may overlook themes involving identity performance, narrative construction, and affective resonance (Ceylan & Hayran, 2025; Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Given the relational and performative nature of influencer personal branding, qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews, digital ethnography, or narrative analysis, could offer insight into how SMIs and followers co-construct brand meaning. Future studies should integrate interpretive methods to examine subjective experiences and symbolic interpretations that quantitative tools may not capture (Liu et al., 2025).

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Tan Poh Ling (Dr)

is a senior lecturer at the School of Communication and Media Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Sunway University, Malaysia. She earned her doctorate from Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), focusing on communication. Her academic background includes both undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications in public relations and environmental communication. Her research interests include strategic communication and public relations, corporate branding and marketing as well as destination branding and communication.

Chew Yuin-Y

received her Bachelor in Multimedia in Film and Animation from Multimedia University (Cyberjaya) in 2002 and later completed her postgraduate degree in film studies at the University of Edinburgh in 2010. She is a senior lecturer in Advertising and Brand Management at Taylor's University, Malaysia, since 2013 and previously taught at Han Chiang College in Penang.

Judith Nesamalar Tharumaraj

is a lecturer at the School of General Studies and Languages, Taylor's University, Malaysia. She has over 14 years of experience in academia and seven years in the corporate sector. Her research interests include the cognitive & affective dimensions of learning, self-regulation, TESL and communication.