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# EXPLORING DRIVERS BEHIND UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' ASPIRATION TO BECOME SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS

Sarah Sabir Ahmad

Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Kedah  
[sarah342@uitm.edu.my](mailto:sarah342@uitm.edu.my)

Azfahane Zakaria

Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Kedah  
[azfa292@uitm.edu.my](mailto:azfa292@uitm.edu.my)

Nurdiyana Nazihah Zainal

Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Kedah  
[nurdiyana20@uitm.edu.my](mailto:nurdiyana20@uitm.edu.my)

## INTRODUCTION

Social media has become a significant part of daily life. Statista (2021) reports that YouTube has 1.86 billion global users, while Facebook videos attract over 500 million viewers. As social media usage grows, individuals increasingly encounter social media influencers (SMIs). According to Shabahang et al. (2022), SMIs are particularly admired by younger generations, who often aspire to become influencers themselves. An SMI is someone with a large following on social media platforms who can influence their audience's beliefs, actions, and purchasing decisions. In the realm of influencer marketing, Lou and Yuan (2019) found that SMIs, by producing content in their areas of expertise and targeting a large audience, serve as valuable marketing tools for brands. These influencers often specialize in fashion, beauty, fitness, travel, technology, or lifestyle, leveraging platforms like YouTube and Facebook to reach billions of users.

A study by Fetter et al. (2023) reveals that the most common reason for wanting to become an SMI is financial stability. Many people are drawn to social media careers as they seem more lucrative than traditional ones. Becoming an SMI can provide financial motivation through opportunities like paid endorsements, career advancement, and job opportunities (An & Haryanto, 2021). Another common reason is personal branding. In today's digital environment, social media is the fastest platform to achieve fame and influence, with success often based on establishing a brand identity consumable by audiences and commercial brands. Additionally, the entertainment factor drives young adults to become SMIs, as social media platforms offer intrinsic motivation and amusement (Audrezet et al., 2020).

This study investigates the factors driving students' desire to become SMIs at UiTM Kedah. Previous research suggests financial gain is a strong motivator (Bradley, 2022), potentially linked to materialistic values (Shabahang et al., 2022). However, the impact of financial stability on this aspiration remains underexplored. This study aims to bridge this gap. Beyond financial incentives, the strategic use of platforms for personal branding and crafting public personas also attracts potential SMIs (Croes & Bartels, 2021). Concerns about influencers relying on media and advertising for self-promotion and shifting audience relationships highlight the need for further research. Therefore, this study's primary objective is to identify the most significant factors contributing to students' desire to become SMIs, thus

shedding light on why this career path is attractive to the younger generation.

## **FINANCIAL STABILITY, PERSONAL BRANDING, AND ENTERTAINMENT**

Financial motivation is a significant factor for aspiring SMIs. A professional portfolio on Instagram can lead to opportunities like paid endorsements, career advancement, and job opportunities (An & Haryanto, 2021). Bradley (2022) emphasizes that financial gain is a primary motivator for aspiring social influencers. Some influencers have earned substantial incomes, with examples of individuals earning over \$700,000 in six months through affiliate links, brand sponsorships, and pay-per-view income from YouTube (Droz-dit-Busset, 2022).

In the quest for social media fame, users seek validation through "likes," contributing to their quest for recognition and status (Sheldon & Newman, 2019). Creating a social media brand persona involves maintaining a distinct appearance and style aligned with the content topic to establish credibility for marketing purposes. Social influencers strategically promote themselves, developing unique public personas that resonate with specific demographics (Croes & Bartels, 2021). This strategic self-presentation helps influencers build brands by spreading positive word of mouth online, proving more effective than traditional forms of brand marketing (Kircaburun et al., 2020).

## **DATA COLLECTION, RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

This study examined students from UiTM Kedah, selected through convenience sampling. A total of 208 students participated, with individual responses analyzed across six faculties on campus. Employing a descriptive research design and a quantitative approach, the study conducted a cross-sectional survey to evaluate the influence of financial stability, personal branding, and entertainment on the desirability of pursuing a career as a social media influencer (SMI). The questionnaire consisted of three sections: demographic information, questions regarding the independent variables, and questions related to the dependent variables.

Data were processed using SPSS statistical software, version 26.0. Reliability analysis, frequency analysis, and multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine relationships and gauge the impact of each independent variable on the desirability of becoming an SMI.

A total of 208 respondents participated in the study, with a sample predominantly composed of women (79.6%) compared to men (20.4%). The majority of respondents were 22 years old, representing 27.8% of the sample. Additionally, most participants (68.5%) were non-residents. The Faculty of Business and Management had the highest representation, accounting for 84.3% of respondents, while the Faculty of Computer and Mathematical Sciences had the lowest representation at 0.9%. Reliability analysis using Cronbach's Alpha indicated that all values exceeded 0.7, suggesting that the overall measure was acceptable.

For the Multiple Regression Analysis, the  $R^2$  score of 35% indicated that independent variables moderately explained dependent variables. Financial stability and entertainment were the most significant independent variables influencing the desirability of becoming an SMI among UiTM Kedah students.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The primary motivation for aspiring SMIs is financial gain, aligning with Bradley (2022). Financial stability showed the strongest influence on the desirability of becoming an SMI among students in UiTM Kedah. Students are inclined to become SMIs due to the ability to generate income through social media activities. The hypothesis related to personal branding demonstrated an insignificant influence, possibly due to varied perceptions of personal branding among students. Some may view it as gaining fame, while others may prioritize authenticity or relatable content. On the other hand, entertainment was found to have a significant influence on the desirability of becoming SMIs. Students agreed that social media serves as a stress-relief mechanism and a means of distraction from academic pressures, aligning with Kircaburun et al. (2020).

In conclusion, two out of three hypotheses were identified to have a significant influence on the desirability of becoming SMIs among UiTM Kedah students. Universities and educators should offer courses or workshops on responsible content creation and collaborate with industry professionals to provide mentorship for students seeking to enter the influencer space. To sustain successful careers as social media influencers (SMIs), individuals must prioritize consistency in producing valuable content, building trust, and networking with key industry players. This research underscores the importance of responsible content creation and the cultivation of positive influencer communities, contributing to a deeper understanding of students' interests in pursuing careers as SMIs in the digital era.

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