

The Power of Followers: Redefining Actor Marketability in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

This pilot study examined the impact of social media followers on the marketability of actors in Malaysia in the digital age. The study also used the theories of Impression Management and Symbolic Interactionism to examine how actors and directors view personal branding and follower metrics in influencing professional opportunities. Two comprehensive interviews were conducted, one with a film director and the other with actors to document their experiences in managing digital visibility and authenticity. Using NVivo 25 for thematic analysis, three main themes were identified: follower metrics as symbolic capital, authenticity versus performance persona, and the cultural lens of marketability. Findings suggest that having a large following makes actors more visible, but this does not mean that actors will be hired or remain in the business for long periods of time without real skills and credibility. The research highlights the precarious balance between digital branding and artistic merit. There are implications for actors, directors, and policymakers in understanding the socio-digital factors that influence modern entertainment careers in Malaysia.

Keywords: Personal branding strategies, social media, followers, marketability, digital age

INTRODUCTION

Over the past ten years, social media sites like Instagram, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter) have completely changed the Malaysian entertainment industry. These platforms have changed the way actors talk to producers, casting directors, and fans. The number of followers has become a clear sign of fame, and producers often connect large follower counts with a wider market reach (Phaninee et al., 2023; Fatima, 2023). This change makes us think about the connection between followers and how marketable a person is. Social media makes it easier for everyone to see things, but it can also make talent less visible by focussing on digital metrics (Ameh et al., 2024). Directors and producers are relying more and more on analytics and engagement rates to make casting decisions, which promotes a culture of visibility over artistry.

This study fills an important gap by looking at how personal branding based on self-presentation and symbolic communication affects actors' chances of getting hired. The study seeks to: (1) ascertain the impact of followers on actors' perceived marketability, (2) investigate directors' interpretations of follower-based branding, and (3) assess the equilibrium between digital persona and authenticity.

Social Media and How Actors Can Be Marketed

Social media has transformed the way celebrities market themselves, giving actors the power to create, promote and control their own stories. Previous studies have shown that an online presence not only maintains fan engagement but also translates into social capital (Siva et al., 2024; Jisu, 2024). In Malaysia, actors are increasingly using TikTok and Instagram to create relatable and aspirational personas (Anggieta, 2024).

However, using follower counts as a support for credibility creates structural inequalities, and actors with real talent but little online presence are often overlooked (Madeline, 2024). In other parts of the world, fame is based more on the visibility of artists through algorithms than on the extent of their work (Marwick, 2023; Khamis & Munt, 2024).

Impression Management Theory

Erving Goffman's Impression Management Theory (1959) offers a valuable framework for explaining how individuals enact "frontstage" and "backstage" roles. In digital environments, individuals consistently control their visibility, orchestrating content to uphold a chosen public persona while obscuring their private identity (Emanuela et al., 2024). This balancing act demonstrates the conflict between being real and meeting market expectations.

Actors who are adept at crossing these performance boundaries often maintain long-lasting digital relevance (Rahul et al., 2023). However, excessive performance can compromise authenticity, reducing credibility among audiences (Sumiko, 2014; Sturchio et al., 2015).

Symbolic interactionism

Symbolic interactionism asserts that identity is formed through collective meaning and symbolic action (Blumer, 1969). Social media uses symbols, including images, captions, clothing, and tone, to communicate an actor's identity to an audience (Christina et al., 2023; Erwan et al., 2024). These symbols are a way for actors and audiences to negotiate their identities.

Recent research (Nichanan et al., 2024; Riyan et al., 2024) suggests that cultural context influences perceptions of authenticity. For Malaysian actors, symbolic representation is associated with cultural politeness, collectivism, and national identity—elements that are still under-researched in Western literature.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative pilot study used comprehensive interviews to investigate the impact of social media followers on actor marketability. Two participants, a film director and an actor, were purposively selected to ensure a diversity of perspectives in the Malaysian entertainment industry.

Data Collection: Semi-structured interviews were conducted from November 2024, each lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Questions explored participants' views on social media analysis, branding strategies, and authenticity. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and reviewed by the participants.

Data Analysis: Thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo 25, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase methodology: familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. Three main themes emerged from open and axial coding. The institutional research committee granted ethical approval, and the study was kept confidential.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**Theme 1: Follower Metrics as Symbolic Capital**

The actor and director both stressed that follower counts are more like symbolic capital than real measures of talent. The director said, "Analytics can get people's attention, but they aren't the only thing that decides who gets cast." This perspective corresponds with the idea that digital prominence enhances visibility without guaranteeing employability (Ameh et al., 2024).

Theme 2: Authenticity versus Performance Persona

The actor said that it is important to find a balance between engagement and honesty: "High engagement shows that the audience is interested, but what really matters is whether they believe in your work." This aligns with Goffman's notion of front stage performance, wherein actors cultivate authenticity to maintain relevance. But being visible all the time can make you tired or make you see yourself as an object (Madeline, 2024; Marwick, 2023).

Theme 3: Cultural Lens on Marketability

The director said that Malaysian audiences value humility and being down to earth, which fits with collectivist cultural norms. This theme backs up Symbolic Interactionism by saying that symbols, dress codes, tone, and ways of interacting all have cultural significance. In contrast to Western markets that value self-promotion, the Malaysian context values modest branding strategies (Riyan et al., 2024; Huey, 2023).

Integration with Theory

Management assists individuals in balancing personal expression with market expectations, whereas Symbolic Interactionism elucidates how symbols on social media create relational meanings. These theories elucidate the hybrid character of celebrity branding, encompassing both performance and social negotiation.

CONCLUSION

This pilot study shows that follower metrics have a limited but important effect on how marketable actors are in Malaysia. The empirical evidence obtained from interviews with one actor and one director suggests that digital popularity serves as supplementary capital rather than a primary determinant of employability. The actor's thoughts made it clear that engagement rates and follower growth are closely related to short-term project visibility. The director, on the other hand, stressed that long-term career success still depends on acting quality, professionalism, and audience trust.

The findings substantiate three principal themes: firstly, follower metrics function as symbolic capital that enhances online visibility; secondly, actors perpetually navigate the tension between genuine self-representation and performative branding; and thirdly, Malaysian cultural norms regarding humility influence audience perceptions of authenticity. These insights bolster both Impression Management and Symbolic Interactionism theories by illustrating how personal branding functions as both a strategic performance and a culturally mediated interaction.

In conclusion, social media is an important way to get noticed, but it can't replace skill and credibility. Subsequent research ought to broaden the sample to encompass a variety of actors, directors, and casting professionals to corroborate these findings and investigate the interplay between digital capital and cultural expectations within Southeast Asian entertainment markets.

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