MALAYSIAN YOUTH EXPECTATIONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS (SMI)

[1]Mohd. Noor Abdul Hamid, [2]Chow Khey Pooi & [3]Oh Shuet Reng
School of Creative Industry Management & Performing Arts,
Universiti Utara Malaysia

[1]Corresponding author: mohdnoor@uum.edu.my

ABSTRACT

The use of social medias has become more common now than before. Attachment to social medias has led to the rise of a new kind of 'celebrity' known as Social Media Influencer (SMI). The study aims to gain a better understanding of what the Malaysian youth expects from the SMIs. In particular, it explores the attributes of SMIs that attract followers and the underlying benefits sought after by them. Data for the study is collected using semi-structured interviews with 31 participants. Soft laddering technique was used to increase depth into the data which is then analyzed using means-end approach and presented in the form of Hierarchical Value Map (HVM). The findings suggest that the consumption experiences of following and interacting with SMIs are mainly intrinsic and hedonic. Malaysian youth generally follow social media influencers who are genuine, knowledgeable, motivational, relatable, and creative. The values gained from following social media influencers are mainly positive

values such as trust, personal development, positivity, confidence, inspiration, knowledge, and personal well-being.

Keywords: Social media influencer, means-end, hierarchical value map, soft laddering.

INTRODUCTION

The number of social media users in Malaysia has risen steadily over the past few years. According to recent statistics, there are a total of 31.76 million social media users in Malaysia as of 2021 and the number is expected to grow to 33.46 million by 2025 (Statistica, 2021). It is also reported that, Malaysian users aged between 16 to 34 years old have an average of 9 social media accounts each. Essentially, social media is a platform that enables its users to communicate with one another, exchange knowledge, and entertain themselves. Amongst the social media platforms that majority would have an account on or even just heard about are Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, considered as the holy trinity of social media.

Users' attachment to social media has led to the rise of a new kind of 'celebrity' known as Social Media Influencers (SMI). SMIs refers to social media users who have built a large network of followers by carefully curating and posting textual and visual contents, especially narrations of their daily lives (De Veirman et al., 2017). These SMIs are actively posting contents that has helped themselves rise up to fame and gain attention from many users and in return, have a platform to act as taste makers, opinion leaders and brand ambassadors in a wide category of topics such as food and beverages, technology, travel, fashion, arts, make-up, films, and lifestyle (Halvorsen et al. 2013; Magno, 2017; Magno & Cassia, 2018; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Various terms have been used to describe this new type of 'celebrity' based on the platform of engagement such as "Instafamous" and "Twitfamous". As of 2021, among the top Malaysian SMIs in Instagram based on the number of quality and engaged followers are Ebit Lew, Hanis Zalikha, Khairul Aming, Mira Filzah and Neelofa (HypeAuditor, 2021). Their network has proven to become a very important tool for brand managers to market their products. It is a win-win relationship where both parties gain something from the lucrative deal. For instance, a

marketer can expect to gain $4.87 of earned media value for each $1 they spent on Instagram influencers promotion. In addition, it is estimated global capitalization of influencer market in 2021 to grow 15% which is equivalent to $5869.46M (HypeAuditor, 2021). Hence it is not surprising that high number of social media users aspire to choose SMI as their career and many have been approached to promote products and services in the lifestyle, sports, and beauty categories (A Malek, 2018).

Numerous studies have examined the attributes of celebrity and their ability to transfer meaning through endorsement. These attributes include appeal, aspiration, awareness, breakthrough, endorsement, influence, trendsetter and trust (The Marketing Arm, 2021). However, most research into celebrity endorsement to date have been conducted in Western countries. It is widely accepted in marketing literature that consumers' behaviour and attitude tie closely to the culture. Given the unique culture, norms and values of the country, it is arguable that some of the attributes found in existing studies may not fit well or share the same meaning for the Malaysian consumers. As an example, the attribute 'appeal' is closely related to hedonistic values such as sexual appeal and distinctive or revealing image in the Western countries.

Whereas in Malaysia, a celebrity's appeal may have to do more with modesty, decent behaviour and conforming to norms and moral standards. A number of studies have shown that Malaysian consumers adopt a different lens when it comes to the popular culture (e.g. Shamshudeen & Morris, 2014; Moschis & Ong, 2011; Shah Alam et al., 2011). Despite their interest in celebrity, most Malaysian still try to stay true to their faith, belief and cultural norms. Evidently, most of well-known and popular celebrities in the country such as Dato' Seri Siti Nurhaliza, Neelofa and most recently Wani Hasrita and Mira Filzah are those who possess these attributes. In addition, most of these studies have focused on the celebrity in the context of real entertainment business. Very few studies have explored the attributes of this new type 'celebrity' who gain their fame in the social media platforms (Hudders et al., 2021; Borchers, 2019; Freberg et al., 2011). This study is conducted to address this gap. In particular, the study aims to answer questions of; What do Malaysian youth expect from the SMIs? and How and what types of influences do SMIs exert on them?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Background

The concept of perceived value is widely accepted as the fundamental principle of marketing. In his seminal work, Kotler (1972) defines marketing as a process of exchange in which each party gives up something of value in return for something of greater value. Understanding the concept of perceived value is believed to be the key for advancing marketing as a discipline of study and research (Gallarza, Gil-Saura, & Holbrook, 2011; Ledden, Kalafatis, & Samouel, 2007). Hence scholars have put forward various conceptualization of value. From a uni-dimensional perspective, Monroe (1990) conceptualized perceived value as trade-off between price and quality. Similarly, Zeithaml (1988) view it on a broader perspective and conceptualized perceived value based on the trade-off between benefits and sacrifices related to consumption experience. Specifically, the benefits encompass four elements which are quality, extrinsic attributes, intrinsic attributes and personal preferences and values. Whereas the sacrifices are broken down into two components which are monetary (e.g. price) and non-monetary (e.g. time, effort and convenience).

The uni-dimensional conceptualizations of perceived value have been criticized for being too simplistic and unable to fully explain the complexity of the concept which give rise to the multi-dimensional conceptualization of perceived value. One of the most widely accepted multi-dimensional conceptualizations of perceived value is the Theory of Consumption Values by Sheth et al. (1991). According to this theory, consumers' choice, purchase and consumption decision are influenced by five factors. First, functional value refers to a product's capacity to deliver its functional, utilitarian and physical performance which are measured against pertinent attributes. Second, social value is derived from a product's association with one or more social groups which gives it symbolic or conspicuous meaning. Within the social factors, it is postulated that social status, family as well as reference groups will affect one's buying behaviour. A reference group can be understood as a group of people who are influenced by the leader who is assumed to possess greater knowledge and expertise than the rest of the group. In today's context, these leaders include SMIs, who are considered as experts by a group of followers. Third, emotional value refers to a product's capability to stimulate consumers' feelings or affective states. From the emotional perspective, Lazarus (1982) Cognitive Appraisal Theory (CAT) postulates that one's reaction to a

stimulus is a function of their cognitive evaluation of a phenomenon or event. These reactions can either be positive or negative based on multiple dimensions of evaluation. Within the marketing literature, the CAT has been adopted to describe consumers' affective states and forecast their actual behaviors. In addition, it is also argued that human beings are capable of having different responses to the same stimulus depending on its significance. This relates to the fourth factor named conditional value which refers to physical or social contingencies which add or reduce the value of a product in a specific situation or context. Finally, epistemic value relates to the ability of an alternative to offer novelty, stimulate curiosity and fulfil desire for knowledge. SMI has been found to posses the ability to arouse consumers' curiosity for novel products in fashion industry (Shin & Lee, 2021). This in turns increase their intention to purchase or consume the product.

Another notable multi-dimensional conceptualization of perceived value is the Typology of Value by Holbrook (1999). The typology suggests there are eight types of value which can be examined from three continuum. The first continuum is based on the means-end theory which classify value according to how consumers consume an alternative, that is, either as a mean to achieve a purpose (i.e. extrinsic) or to be enjoyed as it is (i.e. intrinsic). The second continuum examine perceived value based on how it is transcended, that is, either it is determine from consumers' own point of view (i.e. self-oriented) or from the lens of others (i.e. other-oriented). Finally, the third continuum look at how value is manifested, that is, whether there need to be some sort of physical or mental manipulation (i.e. active) or simply by the act of apprehension, admiration or appreciation (i.e. passive) which Holbrook described as 'self-justifying', 'ludic' or 'autotelic'. The three continuums are translated into eight types of value which are efficiency (extrinsic – active - self-oriented), play (intrinsic – active - self-oriented), excellence (extrinsic – reactive - self-oriented), aesthetic (intrinsic – reactive - self-oriented), status (extrinsic – active - other-oriented), ethics (intrinsic – active - other-oriented), esteem (extrinsic – reactive - other-oriented), and spirituality (intrinsic – reactive - other-oriented).

Within the marketing literature, it is widely accepted that for value to manifest, there need to be some interaction between consumers and the product. In other words, perceived value is an active concept, even if it is minimal. Based on this argument, Troilo (2015) suggests that value of creative industries product comes from the consumption

experience which should only be examined from two continuums of the Holbrook's typology which are the extrinsic-intrinsic and self- and other-oriented. This resulted into four types of value for creative industries' product which are utilitarian (extrinsic – self-oriented), hedonic (intrinsic – self-oriented), communicative (extrinsic – other-oriented) and ethical (intrinsic – other-oriented). He defines creative industries as those which products or services are value for its creative content, in which creativity being the main assessment criteria for the output of production. Troilo further describes five other features that distinguish creative industries from the others. First, he argues that creative industries' products are mainly valued for its non-utilitarian benefits or intrinsic attributes. These products are consumed for its aesthetic, hedonic, symbolic, and experiential values. Apart from giving a sense of pleasure, Troilo added that hedonic values of creative industries products also contribute to consumers' sense of identity by allowing them to reach their 'extended self'. Furthermore, these products also capable of connecting consumers to their most sacred and intimate parts such as faith and spiritual belief. Secondly, consumers choice for creative products are often based on non-objective preferences which cannot be measured against quantifiable parameters. Thirdly, the creative industries are characterized by infinite varieties that resulted in hyper fragmented demand and supply. Fourthly, these industries are also prone to structural failure where the success of few means the failure of the rest. This is the rationale behind the 'blockbuster strategy' where more money is being invested on few products or talents that have higher propensity to generate more profit. The fifth characteristic of the creative industries is that most of the products have multiple lifecycles. Consequently, the products are systematically design with a short life span to ensure systematic flow of new product since consumers seldom consume the same product repeatedly to satisfy their hedonistic needs. Based on these six characteristics, Troilo identified four broad categories of creative industries which are i) arts, ii) entertainment and leisure, iii) fashion, design and architecture and iv) media, information and communication. The SMI fits all characteristics of creative industries and often intertwine between all four broad categories.

Social Media Influencers' Attributes and Their Impacts on Consumers

Social media influencers (SMIs) are individuals who attracted numerous followers on social media due to their online presence,

persona and expertise in niche areas (Cotter, 2019). As such, they are sometimes referred to as micro-celebrities (Gaenssle & Budzinski, 2020). They are different than the celebrities who gain popularity in the mainstream medias. They also have a closer connection with their audiences by sharing their private life to the masses. Due to the increase reliance on social medias in recent year, their popularity can be at par with those traditional celebrities. This is especially among the millennials who make up the largest market for creative products such as fashion, cosmetics leisure and entertainment. Due to this fact, most marketer often opt to capitalize on the SMIs popularity in hope of tapping into their target market (Abidin, 2018). Social media influencer marketing has emerged as a dynamic third-party endorser that is rising together with the development of social media because it is a more affordable and contemporary form of celebrity endorsement (Freberg et al., 2011; Hall, 2015). These influencers are usually on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter and YouTube, where they will use their substantial network to exert influence on consumers. This has forced many marketers to switch their marketing strategies from traditional broadcasting and print media such as television, newspapers and radio stations to SMI as their new marketing and public relation tool (Borchers, 2019).

Within the marketing literature, numerous studies have examined the attributes of celebrity and their ability to transfer meaning through endorsement. These attributes include appeal, aspiration, awareness, breakthrough, endorsement, influence, trendsetter and trust (The Marketing Arm, 2021). Nevertheless, most of these studies have focused on the celebrity in the context of real entertainment business. Very few studies have explored the attributes of this new type 'celebrity' who gain their fame in the social media platforms (Hudders et al., 2021; Borchers, 2019; Freberg et al., 2011). Only recently, research have focused on attributes of SMIs deemed as important to the consumers and their impacts on them.

Research on SMIs spurred in the last four years and they can be divided into two branches that symbolize the two important characteristics of SMIs which are; reach and impact (Hudders et al., 2021). The first branch of research focuses on how SMIs construct their identity and image and how they are being perceived by the followers. Various attributes have been found to be important for SMIs to attract followers. These attributes can be divided into three main categories. The first category is social attractiveness which refers to how the SMIs is

being perceived as conforming to social norms or expectations of the society. This shares some similarity with Sheth et al. (1991) definition of social value and Holbrook (1999) continuum of other-oriented. It refers to the attributes of being likable, and perceived as genuine, expert, trustable, credible and respected which can be linked to SMI's intellectual and/or social capital (e.g. Lee & Watkin, 2016; Audrezet et al., 2020; Argyris et al., 2021; AlFarraj et al., 2021; Aw & Chuah, 2021; Belanche et al., 2021; Kim & Kim, 2021a; van Driel, L. and D. Dumitrica, 2021; Ryu & Han, 2021 and Tan, 2021). The second category is physical attractiveness which refers to the possession of physical features that conform to conventional beauty or personality standards (e.g. Kim, 2022; AlFarraj et al., 2021; Aw & Chuah, 2021; Kim & Kim, 2021a; Su et al., 2021b). These include being perceived to be 'verbal', 'ambitious', 'smart', 'productive', 'poised', 'beauty', 'unique' and 'humourous' (Djafarako and Trofimenko, 2019; Freberg et al., 2011). The third category is attitude homophily which refers to being perceived as sharing similar personality, characteristics, belief, status or interest (e.g. Argyris et al., 2021; Kim & Kim, 2021a; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020 and Tan, 2021). Attitude homophily is believed to encourage parasocial interation between SMIs and their followers thus lead to intimacy (Shan et al., 2019). From cultural perspective, Bentley et al. (2021) found that engagement between SMIs and their followers increases and gets deeper as the cultural gap is closer.

The second strand of research examine the impact SMIs have on their followers. Numerous research have found that SMIs have the ability to influence consumers' behaviours and attitude such as brand awareness and loyalty, engagement and participation, intention to purchase and purchase, willingness to pay more, spread positive word-of mouth and continuous consumption (e.g. Kim, 2022; AlFarraj et al., 2021; Argyris et al., 2021; Aw & Chuah, 2021; Belanche, et al., 2021; Chopra et al., 2021; Farivar et al., 2021; Jaitly & Gautam, 2021; Kim & Kim, 2021b; Sánchez-Fernández & Jiménez-Castillo, 2021; Shin & Lee, 2021; Su et al., 2021a; Su et al., 2021b; Wang & Lee, 2021; Zhang et al., 2021 and Zhou et al., 2021). In addition to that, Kim (2022) also found that SMIs have the ability to affect consumers' satisfaction and provide them with flow experience. Most research found that all of these consequences have direct relationship to the source (i.e. SMIs) attributes discussed previously. For instance, SMIs trustworthiness, attractiveness, credibility and similarity significantly predicts consumers' brand awareness and intention to purchase (Lou and Yuan, 2019; Lou and Kim, 2019). However, these attributes

and consequences are not universal. It is important for marketers to carefully choose a SMI to be their brand endorser by mapping these favorable attributes to their product, brand and strategic aims to ensure they are coherent and thus produce desired impacts to the target consumers (Chopra et al. 2021). Despite the spike on published studies in recent years, Hudders et al. (2020) postulate that research on SMI is still at infancy stage. This call for more studies to explore the meaning and context of the value of SMI.

METHODOLOGY

The present study adopted qualitative approach to provide detail description and deeper insight into the chosen research questions. Rather than providing predictions or causal explanations, the qualitative method offers the contextualization and interpretation of the data gathered. Data for the study is collected using semi-structured interview. Soft laddering technique was adopted in the interview process. This approach allows researchers to elicit meanings that consumers associate with products, services and behaviour (Gutman, 1982; Olson and Reynolds, 1983). It assumes that consumers abstraction of knowledge is arrange in hierarchical structure. Within marketing research, this technique is used to understand the link between three level of abstraction, i.e. attributes–consequences–values that affect consumers' preferences towards a particular product or service (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2009; Reynolds & Gutman, 1988). Soft laddering is the most appropriate approach for this research since its goal is to uncover and evaluate representations, thoughts, and beliefs in the most thorough way feasible. An interview protocol was developed that outlines some key areas to be explored together with a number of potential probes to increase depth in discussion. The probing process also aims to uncover the linkage between different level of consumers' abstraction, i.e. attribute-consequence-value by asking series of questions that allow discussion to be move up or down the ladder (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988).

The selection of participants for the study is done using purposive sampling technique from a homogeneous group as recommended by Grunert and Grunert (1995). Thirty-one interviewees aged between 20 to 24 who identify themselves as active SMI followers participated in the study. Profile of the participants is listed in Table 1. Due to

the inductive approach of reasoning adopted, the sample size for the study is driven by the concept of theoretical saturation. Theoretical saturation is assumed to have been achieved once a clear linkage between the categories has manifested and additional data may not bring any incremental benefits to the theory generated (Strauss and Corbin, 1988). Using this approach, the process of data collection and analysis is done almost simultaneously and intertwined with reflection of the findings.

Table 1

Profile of Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Social Medias Used						
			Facebook	Instagram	Twitter	Tiktok	Youtube	Snapchat	Others
P01	20	Male	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
P02	20	Female	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
P03	21	Female	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
P04	20	Male	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
P05	20	Male	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
P06	21	Male	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
P07	21	Female	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
P08	21	Female	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
P09	23	Female	✓	✓			✓		
P10	20	Male	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
P11	21	Female	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
P12	21	Female	✓	✓			✓		
P13	21	Male	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
P14	20	Male	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
P15	22	Female	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
P16	23	Male	✓	✓			✓		
P17	20	Female	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
P18	21	Female	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
P19	24	Female	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
P20	24	Female	✓	✓			✓	✓	
P21	20	Male	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
P22	21	Female	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
P23	22	Male	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
P24	21	Female	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
P25	20	Female	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
P26	24	Female	✓		✓		✓		
P27	24	Female	✓	✓			✓		
P28	22	Female	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
P29	22	Male	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
P30	21	Male	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
P31	24	Female	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		

The analysis process follows procedures described by Reynold & Gutman (1988). First, each interview was transcribed using conventions prescribed by Jefferson (2004). Apart from transforming the data into an easier format to work with, this process also allows researcher to develop knowledge about the data. The transcript is then coded using the NVivo® software based on procedure described by Gibbs (2011). In particular, this process requires researcher to identify important points related to the study within the data and attach meaningful code to the passage. Since the coding process is done in team, a codebook is developed to ensure consistency. Each transcript was coded by at least two members of the research team and the codes were compared to ensure inter-coder reliability. The codes were then organized into relevant categories, using the attribute-consequence-value structure. The linkages between these codes were explored using the query tool in NVivo®. This theorizing process is repeated until all data have been analyzed and the coding structure has stabilized. Finally, a Hierarchical Value Map (HVM) was developed to depict the final theory generated from the data (Gengler et al., 1995).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Figure 1

Hierarchical Value Map of Malaysian Youth Expectations of SMIs. White Circles Represent Attributes, Grey Circles Represent Consequences, and Black Circles Represent Values
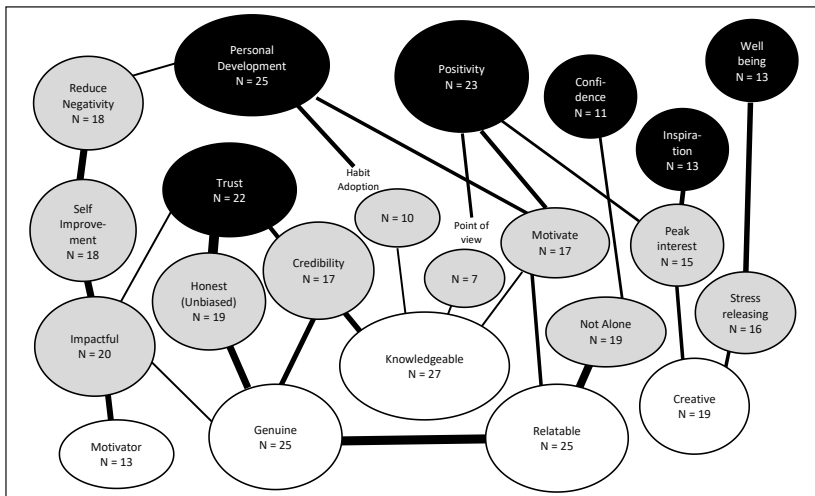
Figure 1 summarizes findings for the study in the form of hierarchical value maps. It maps the linkages between attributes-consequences- and values sought by Malaysian youth from the SMIs. The five main attributes of SMIs are identified as genuine, knowledgeable, motivator, relatable and creative.

First, the participants favor SMIs whom they perceived as being genuine. This attribute covers a range of sub-attributes including honesty, realistic and unbiased, manifested through their posts which is deems as being done with true and pure intentions. For instance, two of the participants stated that a SMI that she follows often shares honest reviews about products and provides useful information and recommendations for his followers. This include giving neutral reviews, that is both positive and negative aspects of a product and let the follower to decide for themselves without trying too hard to influence their choice. For another two participants, genuine SMIs is those who portray themselves consistently in and outside the social media.

> *"I always use my own judgement when reading posts on social media. I prefer those SMIs who don't have a hidden motives and not trying too hard to sell sponsored products. I will unfollow SMIs who constantly promoting sponsored products… I know they are not really honest but simply doing it for money!"* P02.

> *"Well I can tell it's bogus if the product endorsed is too good to be true…that it don't have any downsides! I bet the SMI is not even using the product either!"* P07.

> *"I have come across a SMI in real life who don't look as flawless as their pictures in social media!! She must have used a lot of filters to make her look good. I was so frustrated and feel cheated because all these while I have followed all her tips and product recommendations…I was too naïve…but now I know that not all you see in social media are real! Some people are fake!"* P24.

> *"I used to follow an influencer who is also my high school friend. She used to post about her (ordinary) life before […] But after she gets famous, her posts are mostly about her 'posh' life… eating at fancy restaurant,*

branded clothes, luxury vacations…which I think most are sponsored. It's like she's trying too hard to prove something! I feel like I don't know her anymore! That's when I decided to stop following her" P20.

According to Borchers (2019), a SMI who is perceived as authentic has the capability to transfer brand's image and meaning to their followers, hence acts as an effective marketing medium in long term basis. In addition, genuine SMIs also means they never involve in 'hard-selling' practice or projecting themselves as a 'paid' spokeperson for a brand. Majority of participants agree that SMIs should only collaborate with brands they have used and experienced before. They should not be biased and say something untruthful just because they were paid to do so. Followers of SMIs often pay a lot of attention to SMI's intrinsic motives through the way they present their contents. SMIs with less commercial tone or orientation as well as those who did not display sponsorship affiliation are more favorable (Audrezet et al., 2020; van Driel, L. & D. Dumitrica, 2021; Kim & Kim, 2021b; Wang & Lee, 2021; Zhou et al. 2021). Most consumers have higher tendency to purchase when SMIs disclose conditions about the product that they endorsed (Kay et al., 2020). For sponsored contents to be successful, Horan (2021) argue that must be executed convincingly and consistently. This is particularly effective for among smaller out-degree networks. Awareness of paid endorsement has also been found to affect follower-SMI relationship, intention to spread word-of-mouth (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). It is also important to note that any form of self-promotion can sometimes be considered inauthentic, especially when it is too apparent (Marwick and Boyd 2011). For our participants being genuine is crucial for SMIs to increase their credibility and build their reputation as an expert. This in turn made the SMI being acknowledged as reliable and trusted source of information. The finding is in line with Belanche et al. (2021) who found the commercial motives of SMIs have negative impact on their credibility and attitudes toward them.

The second important attribute of SMI for the participants is being perceived as motivator. A motivator is defined as someone who share their stories, specifically on how they build their success and they overcome obstacles in life. These SMIs are seen as a role model by inspiring their followers in different aspects of life such as personality, wisdom attitude, achievement, and appearance. This attribute influences their followers to improve themselves, always be positive

as well as challenging them to step outside of their comfort zone and achieve their true potential. This is especially important consequence for SMIs that belongs to the fitness and entrepreneurial industries.

> "*I really admire XXX…He always seem to be motivated and positive… I follow his journey since he was nobody… I know he is not from a rich family but had worked really hard to be at his level and this really inspiring. I wish I could be successful like him one day*" P16.

> "*Whenever I feel down, I always go to his account and read all his posts…it really motivates me and encourage me to not give up!*" P30.

This finding is in line with Freberg et al. (2020, p.91) who found SMI often perceived as 'smart, ambitious, productive, poised, power-oriented, candid, and dependable' and more prone to act as advisor to their followers (Straley, 2010). This finding also confirms that SMIs does not simply act as a content creator and product endorser. Instead most of the time they play multiple roles including counsellor, multiplicator, protagonist and moderator (Troilo, 2015; Borchers, 2019; Hudders et al., 2020).

The third attribute that the participants deemed as important in choosing a SMI to follow is being informative or knowledgeable. This attribute is identified as possessing adequate amount of knowledge or information to be certified as an expert in the field that they are involved in. Majority of the participants agree that SMIs should be sharing content that are useful and beneficial to their followers. According to one participant, a knowledgeable SMI is someone who created original contents based on own experiences or research without relying too much from other sources. As Elliot et al. (2013), the participants also agree that being knowledgeable also includes providing information that is perceived as being truthful, comprehensive, and up to date.

> "*I know some SMIs only repost contents from Google or other sources… but what makes him special is that his posts were all original! You can never find it anywhere else. It's all his own! He knows his subject well*" P01.

> "*I always rely on his content to know more about what is on trend and current. He's very up to date…some of his*

> *posts were cited by mainstream newspapers and blogs! That's how good he is!"* P13.

> *"For travel tips.. I think he is the one that I rely on the most! He travelled a lot and have been to many countries! What I like the most is, he not only posted pictures but more importantly he shares detailed information about the place he visited. He even took the time to answer questions from his followers. He's like a google map to me"* P29.

Based on our analysis, there are four consequences arise from this attribute. First, being knowledgeable will make a SMI seem more credible and reliable. For instance, a SMI who always include facts, statistics and quotes in their posts are considered more reliable than those who do not. According to Freberg et al. (2011), a credible and positively perceived SMI often have different motives and seek different responses from their followers. They are more concern about making impacts rather than improving their social presence and popularity. This provides reassurance to the followers who then treat their posts as professional guidance rather than personal opinion or attention-grabbing acts (Freberg et al., 2020). In general, SMIs' who are perceived as experts in their niche area are more trusted than those who depend solely on their physical attractiveness (AlFarraj et al., 2021). Secondly, an informative and knowledgeable influencer also lead to habit adoption and provides motivation. Apart from acting as a role model and source of inspiration, the participants feel that the influencer's informative contents also able to instill a positive habit in them such as learning new skills, eat more healthily, and exercises more regularly. In addition to that, an informative or knowledgeable SMIs who speak and share different perspectives on a certain topic or issue can influence their followers to change their point of view. By laying facts and figures, a SMIs indirectly challenge their followers to think differently and look at an issue or topic from a different perspective. This gives a sense of revelation to the followers and allow them to feel great about the good changes that they are making which causes them to radiate positive energy.

The fourth attribute found in our study for the SMIs is relatable which highly related to the first attribute which is genuine. Being relatable for the participants means SMIs should not always try to be perfect.

Instead, they believe that SMI should portray themselves as 'normal' human being just like their followers and that they too have their own issues, flaws and insecurities.

> *"I guess most of us can only dream of a life like that. Constantly travelling to every corner of the world, eating in fancy restaurants, buying expensive things!! I never see her post about her job… I wonder if she needs to work at all and where she got all the money"* P20.

> *"I know social media can be toxic…therefore I choose to only follow those who I think can either inspire me, provide something useful for me or I can relate to without making me feel bad about myself. It's a liberating choice I guess"* P26.

> *"I used to follow those SMIs who seem way too perfect! But I ended up feeling bad for not being able to reach their standards. You can't help to compare yourself with them… and in the end you suffer emotionally"* P09.

According to Sokolova and Kefi (2020), social media users have the tendency to be attracted to SMIs who share a lot of similarities to with them or also known as attitude homophily. These can be in variety of aspects such as social status, faith, image, lifestyle, personality and moral values. For instance, Argyris et al., (2021) suggest that introverted followers are more likely to follow SMIs who share the same personality. Most followers use these similarities as their extended self and build their identity. It also allows them to establish connections with others who share the same view. The choice of SMIs to follow also relate closely to the local culture which value harmonious relationship and conflict avoidance as mentioned by two of the participants.

"He seems so outgoing, adventurous, spontaneous and friendly! I see me in him…and even though I never met him, I know we would be great friends if we meet each other in real life" P10.

> *"As a moderate Muslim, I only follow SMIs who share the same view and belief as me… I know there are so*

> *many SMIs out there who can be really out-spoken or too extreme in voicing their opinions about many sensitive issues. I avoid these SMIs because I don't want to get into unnecessary arguments with them or their followers."* P15.

The social homophily was also found to be strongly related to SMI's credibility and para social interaction. The participants in this study agree that SMIs who share their struggles with the followers seems more 'real', inspiring and empowers them to feel more motivated, less isolated and be more positive about the reality of life. Having SMIs who shares their struggles also instill self-confidence to the participants as it makes them realize that they are not the only one facing an issue. For some participants, this also give them courage to be more open about their problems and seek help, especially in topics that often seems as taboo such as mental health. This empowering effects of SMI is consistent with findings by Freberg et al. (2011) who found SMIs to be helpful in dealing with emotional distress such as anxiety, hopelessness, self-doubt, and fearful.

The fifth important attribute expected from a SMI is creativity which the participants linked to the level of imagination or originality used in creating contents. Creativity of SMIs can involves doing something that is totally unexpected, extra ordinary, funny, mesmerizing which fascinates the audiences. Social media such as Youtube and Instagram are platforms used widely to communicate visual content. Hence, creativity is also being attributed to the SMIs uniqueness and ability to come out with contents that aesthetically pleasing and meaningful to the audience.

> *"All [of] his videos are so funny!!! I wonder where he got the ideas. I always rely on him for a good laugh. It somehow make me forget all my problems"* P21.

> *"I admire his photography skills… the images in his Instagram are all stunning and not overly edited. They looks so professional like those in travel magazines.[…] I visited most of the places he recommended just because of the photos he posted.. and they are just as stunning as in the photos"* P1

According to Khamis et al. (2017) being unique not only allow SMI to attract more followers but it also increasingly becoming one of the important criteria marketers are seeking for collaboration. Thus, SMIs with a strong personal brand and interesting narrative are often seen as more engaging and relevant. A creative SMI also allow their followers to reach the state of escapism or flow experience which is widely acknowledge as one of the main reasons behind social media's usage, behavioural intention and satisfaction (Whiting and Williams, 2013; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). For the participants, a creative SMI have higher chances to retain their followers by maintaining their interest, avoiding boredom, and providing an avenue for stress relief. Consequently, the participants also agree that SMIs can stimulates curiosity, provide emotional stability as well as personal well-being. This alco confirms that SMIs' personas and creativity in curating their content led them to be perceived as human brands who instill positivity and fulfill their needs for inspiration, connectedness, and epistemic values (Ki et al., 2020).

From theoretical perspective, findings from this study reveals that expectations of SMIs revolves around emotional, epistemic, and conditional values as described in the Theory of Consumption Values (Sheth et al., 1991). The consumption experiences of following and interacting with SMIs are mainly intrinsic and hedonic. It also contributes to social values through the formation of identity and subcultures, as well as reinforce existing and creation of new relationship among the followers as well as with the SMIs (Troilo, 2015). However, there are little functional or utilitarian values from the followers' perspective.

CONCLUSION

Findings from this study reveals that most Malaysian youth are driven by positive values in following SMIs. Nevertheless, it is important to note that almost all participants in this study identify themselves as a 'fan' of the SMIs which explains their tendency to search for positive values. Future research should acknowledge the existence of another group of social media users who identify themselves as 'haters' or 'dark-secret' users. This a group of users who mainly use fake account or discreet identity to engage in a more negative activities such as online troll or bullying, thus may have different motives or expectations in following SMIs. The findings should be useful in guiding SMIs on

how to curate their content and conduct themselves in social media to maintain their appeal not only to the masses but more importantly to marketers. It also serves as important tool for marketers in selecting SMIs to be their brand ambassador. The present study was considered as preliminary and exploratory. As with most qualitative studies, extra care should be employed in reading the findings. In particular, the use of convenient and homogeneous sample of university students in this study could limit the transferability of the finding into different contexts nor should it be taken as representative of the population at large. Due to their level of education, age, and social media literacy, their expectations towards SMIs might differ significantly to those who do not share the same characteristics. Therefore, practitioners interested to understand expectations of their selected audiences in different contexts are encouraged to replicate the methods described in this study.

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