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# Likes, Shares, and Influence: The Impact of Social Media Celebrities on Secondary Students in Gombak

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### ABSTRACT

In today's digital age, social media influencers increasingly shape young people's career aspirations and educational perspectives. This study examines how influencers impact the career and education choices of upper secondary students in Gombak, Malaysia. While prior research has focused on influencer marketing, few studies have explored their effects on students' perceptions of education and careers. Using a survey of 439 students, this study distinguishes between influencers' influence on lifestyle and on educational and career aspirations. Findings indicate that influencers inspire students with alternative success stories and non-traditional career paths, yet formal education remains highly valued. These results highlight the nuanced role of influencers in shaping students' attitudes, suggesting that their impact is stronger on aspirations than on concrete educational decisions. The study underscores the need for educators and policymakers to integrate media literacy, career guidance, and youth-focused digital policies to help students critically navigate influencer content and align aspirations with realistic educational pathways.

## 1. Introduction

In today's hyper-connected world, social media celebrities — often called “influencers” — are playing an increasingly powerful role in shaping young people's perceptions of success, careers, and education. For many teenagers, especially those in upper-secondary school, scrolling through Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube is no longer just about entertainment, but has become a source of inspiration, guidance, and aspiration. This shift has significant implications, particularly when students start to view non-traditional career paths, like becoming an influencer, as viable alternatives to traditional educational and employment trajectories. A study conducted by Nandini and Sundaravalli [1] explores how influencers influence students' decision-making in various contexts, providing evidence that exposure to influencer content significantly affects youth attitudes towards success and career choices.

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The growing influence of social media on youth decision-making has been widely documented in several studies. For instance, Leila Khalid *et al.*, [2] found that social media influencers play a substantial role in shaping the consumption culture and social behaviors of Malaysian youth. Influencers not only affect the materialistic tendencies of students but also contribute to shaping their broader aspirations. A cross-cultural study by Bhandari *et al.*, [3] on adolescents highlighted how social networks, particularly Instagram and YouTube, serve as platforms where youth access career guidance, educational information, and career inspiration, influencing their professional goals.

However, while social media platforms facilitate career exploration, learning, and identity formation, this influence is not without its challenges. Scholars, such as Engel *et al.*, [4], argue that while influencers provide diverse role models, they may also promote unrealistic standards and distort young people's perceptions of success, leading to the glamorization of non-traditional careers over more structured educational paths. A similar study by Mcbjay *et al.*, [5] noted that influencers sometimes portray an idealized version of success that might not align with the realities of hard work or formal education, which may be concerning for students who are still at a formative stage in their career development.

The intersection of social media and youth career aspirations, particularly in Malaysia, has also been a subject of research. A recent paper by Nurudeen *et al.*, [6] found that, while Malaysian students are increasingly drawn to the aspirational lives presented by social media influencers, they still regard traditional higher education as an essential pathway for career advancement. This is reflected in a study by Nandini and Sundaravalli [1], which shows that students, despite their admiration for social media personalities, continue to place significant importance on formal education as the foundation for long-term career success.

Given the rapid rise of influencer culture, it is important to investigate how this growing influence affects students' career aspirations and educational decisions. This study aims to explore how social media celebrities are shaping the career and educational aspirations of upper-secondary students in Gombak, Malaysia. By examining how influencers act as role models and inspire students' non-traditional career goals, this research seeks to understand the complex relationship between social media influence and students' perceptions of success.

Although research on social media influencers and young people's career aspirations has grown in recent years, existing studies tend to focus on university students, Western contexts, or broad youth populations, leaving upper secondary students in localized Malaysian settings underexplored. Moreover, prior research often examines influencer impact in general terms, without distinguishing between influence on lifestyle preferences and influence on educational or career decision-making. Addressing these gaps, this study focuses on upper secondary students in Gombak, Malaysia, and differentiates between influencers' effects on lifestyle choices and their influence on educational and career aspirations. This distinction offers a more nuanced understanding of how students may admire non-traditional success narratives promoted by influencers while still prioritizing formal education, an area that has received limited empirical attention in existing literature.

## 1.1 Literature Review

### 1.1.1 The rise of influencer culture and its penetration among youth

In the last decade, social media influencers (SMIs) have moved from being niche content creators to mainstream digital celebrities whose reach and impact extend far beyond entertainment. As highlighted Tuhina Choubey [7], social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok have evolved into influential venues for self-expression, identity formation, and even professional advancement — fundamentally changing how young people perceive opportunity and success.

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Similarly, Grover, Kar, and Dwivedi note [8] that social media influence isn't merely about product endorsements or trends, but about reshaping users' values, self-perceptions, and life aspirations. Given this shift, adolescents and youth — who are often among the most active users of social media — are particularly susceptible to influencer messages. As shown by Zozaya-Durazo, Feijoo & Sádaba-Chalezquer in *Social Media Influencers Defined by Adolescents* [9], adolescents often view influencers as role models, attributing to them traits such as relatability, aspiration, and authenticity, which makes their content especially influential in shaping identity and expectations.

### *1.1.2 Influencers and impact on behaviour, attitudes, and values among adolescents*

The influence of SMIs on adolescents is not limited to entertainment — it extends into attitudes, values, and even educational and career outlooks. In a recent empirical study among teenagers, Lajnef [10] demonstrated that influencer characteristics (e.g. content style, perceived authenticity, communication style) are strongly linked to changes in adolescents' behaviors, attitudes, and decision-making processes. Echoing this, a broader analysis by Tengku Ahmad Shahrol Nizam Tengku Mohammad and Azima Abdul Manaf [11], revealed that the presence of SMIs in youths' social media experience tends to yield more positive than negative effects — especially in areas of knowledge acquisition, lifestyle choices, and educational attitudes.

On the other hand, there are also concerns. As reviewed in *Social media influencers and adolescents' health: A scoping review of the research field* [4], SMIs can transmit unrealistic ideals — particularly around body image, lifestyle, and success — which may lead to distorted self-conceptions, mental health strain, and unhealthy behavior among adolescents.

### *1.1.3 Social media's role in shaping career aspirations and educational perceptions*

Moving beyond behavioural impacts, several studies have started to consider how SMIs may influence youths' educational and career-related decisions. For instance, a theoretical investigation into youth empowerment through social media argued that digital platforms can play a constructive role in career building: by offering exposure to non-traditional career paths, increasing awareness of varied career opportunities, and potentially enhancing digital literacy and career-relevant skills. In a similar vein, a study focusing on Asian American students by Nguyen [12] found that social media can broaden awareness of diverse career possibilities, especially non-STEM or non-traditional careers. The authors describe social media's role as offering “exposure to diverse career possibilities, fostering community connections and support, and providing role models and inspirational content.”

Moreover, empirical research titled *Social Network Influence on Educational Continuation and Career Choice* [13] highlighted how students who regularly engage with career-oriented content on social media report greater interest in alternative career paths (e.g. freelancing, entrepreneurship). Nevertheless, the same research cautioned about the spread of idealized or misleading portrayals of success, which may inflate expectations and lead to disillusionment. In the Malaysian context, evidence suggests that SMIs are not just influencing lifestyle and consumer behaviour, but also values related to confidence, personal development, aspiration, and well-being — all of which can shape how youth perceive success and what career options they consider. A qualitative study with Malaysian youth showed that many follow influencers who they see as motivational, relatable, and inspiring — seeking trust, positivity, personal growth, and knowledge through their online presence.

#### ***1.1.4 Double-edged impact: Opportunities and risks***

While social media and SMIs offer new avenues for inspiration, learning, and exposure to varied career paths, the literature also warns about inherent risks. As per the systematic review *Pengaruh Media Sosial Terhadap Perilaku Remaja* [14], excessive or unguided social media use is linked with negative outcomes among adolescents, such as decreased academic focus, mental health issues, social isolation, and exposure to inappropriate content. Furthermore, the “highlight reel” phenomenon — where influencers selectively present successes and omit struggles — can distort perceptions of what it takes to achieve success. Such idealized presentation may lead youth to underestimate the effort required for traditional education or stable career paths, while overvaluing glamorous but potentially unstable careers. This concern is echoed in the 2022 career-choice study [15], which reported that some students influenced by career-oriented content on social media ended up disappointed or dissatisfied when reality did not meet the portrayed expectations.

#### ***1.1.5 Gaps in existing literature and need for localized context***

Although prior studies have established that social media influencers shape youths’ aspirations and perceptions of success, several gaps remain. First, empirical research focusing specifically on upper secondary school students — particularly within the Malaysian context — is scarce, with most studies concentrating on university-level or Western samples. Second, existing research often treats influencer impact as a single construct, without clearly distinguishing between lifestyle influence and influence on educational and career decision-making.

This study addresses these gaps by providing localized, quantitative evidence from upper secondary students in Gombak, Malaysia, and by analytically separating lifestyle influence from academic and career-related influence. In doing so, the study extends current literature by demonstrating how students may admire influencers’ non-traditional success while still maintaining strong commitment to formal education, offering a more context-sensitive and differentiated understanding of influencer impact.

## **2. Methodology**

This study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional survey research design to examine how social media influencers affect career aspirations among upper secondary students in Gombak. A cross-sectional design was employed as data were collected from participants at a single point in time, allowing for the examination of patterns and relationships between social media influencer exposure and students’ educational and career perceptions. Quantitative methods are appropriate because they support the collection of numerical data that can be statistically analyzed to uncover trends and associations, following guidance from Creswell [16]. Surveys are especially effective in educational research for obtaining standardized responses from a large population, which enhances objectivity and comparability, as emphasized by Muijs [17].

### ***2.1 Research Design and Participants***

We conducted a survey with 437 upper secondary students from various schools in Gombak. We applied stratified random sampling to ensure proportional representation across school types (public, private, religious) and academic streams (science, arts, technical), a technique that reduces selection bias and improves generalizability of findings. Sample size estimation followed established

criteria widely accepted in social science research, ensuring sufficient power for reliable statistical analysis as shared by Strunk [18].

## *2.2 Data Collection Instrument*

A structured questionnaire was developed to assess students' exposure to social media influencers, career aspirations, and perceived credibility of influencers. The instrument was adapted from prior studies on digital influence and career choice, such as research on social media's role in career development among youth by Tioluwanimi Ojoyeyi [19]. The questionnaire included three sections:

The key variables measured in this study include:

- I. students' social media exposure, operationalized through frequency of use, duration, preferred platforms, and level of engagement with social media influencers;
- II. perceived influence of social media influencers, measured through items assessing lifestyle adoption, academic attitudes, and perceived credibility of influencers; and
- III. career and educational aspirations, assessed through students' attitudes toward traditional education, non-traditional career paths, and the extent to which influencer content shapes their future goals.

All variables were measured using Likert-scale items adapted from validated instruments in prior studies on social media influence and career development.

## *2.3 Data Analysis*

Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, minimum and maximum values) were used to summarize students' responses and identify overall trends. Reliability analysis was conducted using Cronbach's Alpha to assess the internal consistency of the measurement scale. All statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS, ensuring systematic and replicable analysis of the data.

## **3. Results**

This section presents the results of the descriptive statistical and reliability analyses conducted using SPSS, beginning with the assessment of internal consistency followed by an examination of students' responses to each construct.

### *3.1 Reliability Statistics*

The reliability of the 20-item scale was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, which yielded a value of 0.899, indicating good reliability. This suggests high internal consistency among the items and that respondents interpreted the questions similarly. The strong Cronbach's Alpha ensures the credibility and consistency of the findings, which is crucial for studies on attitudinal and perceptual variables.

**Table 1**  
Reliability using Cronbach's Alpha

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items	Interpretation
0.899	20	Good Reability

### 3.2 The Impact of Social Media Influencers on Student Performance and Lifestyle Choices

The results reveal that social media influencers have a moderate influence on students' lifestyle and academic decisions, with variation in their impact across different aspects. For example, respondents generally show a moderate tendency to adopt lifestyle habits and consider making lifestyle changes based on influencer advice, with means of 2.82 and 2.73, respectively. However, the influence on academic performance is less pronounced, as reflected by the lower mean of 2.4 for the statement regarding considering influencer recommendations to improve academic performance. In contrast, participants exhibit a more positive attitude toward the lifestyle choices promoted by influencers (mean = 2.86), with consistent agreement among respondents. The results also show that students compare advice from various influencers before making decisions (mean = 2.71), although there is some variability in how often this happens, indicated by the higher standard deviation. Regarding the impact on schoolwork and lifestyle, respondents showed moderate agreement (mean = 2.44), with a wide range of opinions on the extent of this influence. Influencers are also seen as playing a role in shaping students' attitudes toward school and lifestyle (mean = 2.72), but the influence on academic performance is still less significant. Students generally agree that influencers offer valuable advice (mean = 2.75), and there is notable curiosity about the strategies influencers use to promote behaviours that could affect academic performance (mean = 2.93), reflecting strong interest in the subject. Overall, while the data indicates that social media influencers have a moderate impact on students' decisions, the influence on academic choices is less significant than that on lifestyle decisions, and the variability in responses underscores the diversity in how students perceive this impact.

**Table 2**  
Influence of social media influencers on students

		N		Mean	Std Dev	Min	Max
		Valid	Missing				
1.	I am likely to adopt lifestyle habits suggested by the social media influencers I follow.	439	0	2.82	0.72	1	4
2.	I would consider making lifestyle changes based on the advice of social media influencers I follow.	439	0	2.73	0.68	1	4
3.	If I had to choose between different approaches to improving my academic performance, I would consider those recommended by social media influencers.	439	0	2.4	0.75	1	4
4.	I have a positive attitude toward the lifestyle choices promoted by social media influencers I follow.	439	0	2.86	0.63	1	4
5.	Before making decisions related to my studies or lifestyle, I compare advice from various social media influencers.	439	0	2.71	0.81	1	4

6.	The social media influencers I follow have a significant impact on my approach to schoolwork and overall lifestyle.	439	0	2.44	0.83	1	4
7.	I believe that social media influencers play a strong role in shaping students' attitudes towards school performance and lifestyle.	439	0	2.72	0.76	1	4
8.	I think that social media influencers can offer valuable advice that helps students improve their academic performance and lifestyle choices.	439	0	2.75	0.75	1	4
9.	I am interested in learning more about how social media influencers influence students' academic behaviors and lifestyle decisions.	439	0	2.87	0.77	1	4
10.	I am curious about the strategies that social media influencers use to promote certain behaviors or lifestyle changes that could impact students' school performance.	439	0	2.93	0.77		4

### *3.3 Role Models in Social Media: Influence on Students' Academic and Career Aspirations*

The results indicate a range of moderate to low influence of social media influencers on students' academic and career choices. For instance, participants moderately agree (mean = 2.71) with following influencers' school-related activities and lifestyle choices, while their engagement with content related to academic performance and lifestyle is slightly lower (mean = 2.32), reflecting a more passive engagement. Respondents also moderately admire multiple influencers for their approach to school and personal lifestyle (mean = 2.72), but the overall view of influencers as role models for balancing academics and lifestyle is somewhat weaker (mean = 2.51). A more positive response is observed in relation to influencers who are successful despite non-traditional academic paths (mean = 3.2), suggesting that students admire those who deviate from conventional educational trajectories. When it comes to pursuing a similar career path as influencers, the responses are more mixed, with a mean of 1.97 indicating a reluctance to prioritize career choices based on influencers over formal education. Similarly, interest in living the lifestyle promoted by influencers, particularly in balancing school and personal life, received a lower mean score (2.41), reflecting moderate curiosity. The influence of influencers on personal reflection regarding academic performance and future goals is moderate (mean = 2.63), but when it comes to prioritizing career or lifestyle over education, the response is more hesitant (mean = 2.06). Lastly, the belief that success is possible without formal education, especially by following influencers, received the lowest mean (1.77), indicating a general disagreement with this notion. Overall, the data suggests that while influencers have some impact on students' perspectives on career and lifestyle, their influence on prioritizing these over formal education is relatively low, and the varying mean scores reflect a nuanced and diverse view among respondents.

**Table 3**  
Social media influencers as role models

		N Valid	Missing	Mean	Std Dev	Min	Max
11.	I follow and often view my favourite social media influencers' school-related activities and lifestyle choices.	439	0	2.71	0.81	1	4
12.	I often engage with content related to the academic performance and lifestyle of social media influencers.	439	0	2.32	0.72	1	4
13.	I admire more than one social media influencer for their approach to school life and personal lifestyle.	439	0	2.72	0.85	1	4
14.	I consider social media influencers as role models for school performance or balancing academics and lifestyle.	439	0	2.51	0.86	1	4
15.	I admire social media influencers who are successful despite having a non-traditional academic path.	439	0	3.2	0.76	1	4
16.	I would prefer to pursue the same academic or career path as the social media influencers, even if it means not continuing my formal education.	439	0	1.97	0.8	1	4
17.	I am interested in living the lifestyle or career that social media influencers promote, especially in relation to balancing school and personal life.	439	0	2.41	0.8	1	4
18.	The career and lifestyle guidance provided by social media influencers makes me reflect on my own academic performance and future goals.	439	0	2.63	0.77	1	4
19.	Inspired by social media influencers, I would prefer to focus on my career or lifestyle rather than continue my education.	439	0	2.06	0.9	1	4
20.	I believe that it is possible to be successful without completing formal education, especially if I follow the lifestyle promoted by social media influencers.	439	0	1.77	0.91		4

#### 4. Conclusions

The findings suggest that social media influencers exert a moderate but selective influence on students, affecting both educational and career-related attitudes alongside lifestyle choices. While students are more likely to adopt lifestyle behaviours promoted by influencers, consistent with prior research on their role in shaping personal behaviours among younger populations [20], the influence on academic performance and career decisions remains evident, though more nuanced. This aligns with theories of observational learning and aspirational identification, where students model behaviours perceived as attainable and socially rewarding. Survey results indicate a moderate impact on academic engagement (mean = 2.4) and career aspirations (mean = 1.97), highlighting that formal education continues to be prioritised despite admiration for influencers' non-traditional success [6,10].



Interestingly, students show curiosity about influencers' strategies (mean = 2.93) and admiration for those who succeeded without traditional academic paths (mean = 3.2), yet they largely reject the idea of achieving success entirely outside formal education (mean = 1.77), reflecting a tension also noted by Nguyen [12]. This contradiction underscores a critical implication for career guidance and educational policy: students' simultaneous admiration for non-traditional success and commitment to formal education suggests that guidance programmes should acknowledge alternative career narratives while reinforcing realistic pathways. Policies can support educators in facilitating discussions that help students critically evaluate influencer content, align aspirations with achievable goals, and navigate the gap between inspiration and practical educational planning. This suggests that influencers function as symbolic role models whose impact shapes aspirations and decision-making attitudes, while actual educational choices remain moderated by institutional and cultural norms. These insights have practical implications: educators can integrate media literacy and career awareness into the curriculum to help students critically evaluate influencer content, and career guidance programmes can address non-traditional career paths without undermining formal education. At the policy level, guidelines on responsible influencer engagement, teacher training, and collaboration with credible content creators can ensure that social media influence supports students' educational and career development. By linking empirical findings to theories of social learning and moderated media effects, this study demonstrates that influencer impact is selective, influencing both aspirational thinking and educational decisions, thereby extending conceptual models of youth social media influence in secondary school and non-Western contexts.

## 5. Limitations

This study has a few important limitations to consider. First, it relies on self-reported data, which may be influenced by students' perceptions or the desire to give socially acceptable responses. Second, its cross-sectional design means we cannot draw firm conclusions about cause-and-effect relationships between social media influencer exposure and students' lifestyle, educational, or career choices. Finally, the study focuses solely on upper secondary students in Gombak, Malaysia, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other regions or cultural contexts. Future research could build on this work by using longitudinal designs, incorporating multiple perspectives such as teachers or parents, and including more diverse populations to provide a fuller understanding of how social media influences young people's lives.

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