CHOOSING FAME OVER ACADEMIA: EXPLORING THE APPEAL OF BECOMING A SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCER

Norshamsiah Ibrahim[1]*,
Nur Shazweena Hani Mohd Adam Khan[2]

[1]Faculty of Business Management, Universiti Teknologi Mara Cawangan Kelantan (UiTM) (Kampus Machang), 18500 Machang, Kelantan, Malaysia (E-mail: norshamsiah@uitm.edu.my)
[2]Faculty of Education and General Studies, UCYP University, Tanjung Lumpur, 26060 Kuantan, Pahang, Malaysia (E-mail: shazweenahani@ucyp.edu.my)
*Corresponding author: norshamsiah@uitm.edu.my

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Abstract*: This study explores the motivations of young people, in particular Generation Z, to choose career paths as social media influencers instead of pursuing in higher educational institutions. It analyses how the rapid rise of social media platforms has changed the career aspirations, offering an attractive alternative to formal education. This study proposes a conceptual framework to help elucidate the appeal of becoming an influencer, consisting of financial incentives, desire for fame and recognition, and flexibility and engagement of work. This conceptual paper provides the key insight for educators, policymakers and stakeholders, to adjust their pedagogical strategies in line with the developing digital career marketplaces. By encouraging digital learning and adhering to the current trends, educational institutions will be better able to equip students for success in a technology-driven world.*

Keywords*: career choice, social media influencer, educational trend, Generation Z*
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Introduction

The rapid growth of social media has significantly influence young people's, especially Generation Z, life goals, particularly in terms of career choices. The rise of Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube has given them unprecedented opportunity to gain fame, wealth, and power without any official education or qualifications (Fauziah et al., 2024; Shabahang, 2022). This opportunity has led to significant trend, whereby an increasing number of adolescents and young adults (Generation Z) inspire to become social media influencers rather than pursuing higher education. This phenomenon raises an important issue about the changing mindset of today's youth and give impact to the society at large.

Historically, higher education has been considered as the most secure and conventional path to financial and professional success. However, the growing appeal of influencer culture is undermining this longstanding belief. Many individuals perceived content creation as a more immediate and appealing route to financial autonomy and self-fame. As this trend has emerge, it is crucial for a more comprehensive examination of the factors that influence these career decisions.

This study explores the economic, social, and psychological factors that influence the decision in prioritizing social media career rather than academic achievement. This study aims to examine these changes in order to offer insightful information to parents, educators, and policymakers. It also promotes and encourages educational institutions to modify their methods in education. Therefore, it will facilitate for establishing a better relationship with students in a rapidly changing digital and professional environment.

Literature Review

Social Learning Theory Albert Bandura (1966)

Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1966) states that we learn through what we see and imitate from others. This theory is relevant in explaining how social media shapes the career aspiration of the Generation Z cohort. This idea highlights that people learn about human behavior, including career choice, from watching what others do, how they act, and what happens to them (Barhate & Dirani, 2022). In the context of this study, the aspiration to become a social media influencer is related to the phenomena in which young people are impacted by the role models they observe on social media. Influencers are often seen as role models for success, with their rise to fame motivating others to follow suit (Fuente et al., 2023).

Social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok offer unrestricted access to successful role models in a variety of fields, including content creation, digital marketing, and influencers. Generation Z observes successful influencers closely and try to follow their strategies in order to achieve similar success. This learning process consists of three main areas: retention, motivation, and attention (Hadi et al., 2023). For example, likes, followers, and professional recognition are also important incentives for young people to mimic the career paths of others on this digital platform (Mann et al., 2020). This theory suggests that social media is more than an entertainment medium. This is because social media also provides an active learning environment that shapes the career and life goals of Generation Z in the digital environment.

Achievement Motivation Theory McClelland (1998)

Achievement Motivation Theory by McClelland (1998) asserts that the desire to reach higher standard and fulfil the individuals need will motivates people to seek out influence (McClelland, 2015). This theory explains why many young individuals aspire to become influencers, as they often view influencer status as a socially and economically significant achievement. Influencers can emphasize their accomplishments by leveraging their influence in the virtual community, interactions with brands, and the number of followers.

Elliott and Sommet (2023) contend that individuals who have a strong desire for success are inclined to pursue opportunities that enable them to show off their skills and abilities and receive recognition from others. In the social media era, individuals strive to establish an online presence to attract followers and garner community attention (Rosiana, 2021). The urge to achieve personal success and the necessity to establish a reputation, prove oneself in a particular field, and attain a desired status in the digital age drive this motivation. Achievement motivation fuels the will to succeed and builds psychological resilience in the face of adversity. This theory highlights the necessity of cultivating abilities and methods that enable individuals to overcome challenges in the influence industry while enhancing their presence in a competitive market.

The Traditional Role of Higher Education in Career Success

Historically, higher education plays a pivotal role in shaping career success through the development of essential competencies and alignment with industry needs. Formal education has been regarded as the primary pathway to professional success and societal contribution, shaping the career aspirations of young people for generations. It fosters personal development, enhances employability, and provides networking opportunities crucial for navigating the job market.

Higher education institutions enhance career success by equipping students with knowledge, skills, and networking opportunities, thus meeting employer demands and fostering social benefits in a competitive environment (Kayyali, 2024; Mammadova, 2023). Moreover, higher education equips graduates with universal competencies, such as critical thinking and adaptability, significantly improving their competitiveness and potential salaries in the labour market (Barkova, 2024; Chau, 2023; Mishra et al., 2019). Graduates must develop employability and career management skills to succeed in a global knowledge economy. Engaging students in personal and career development experiences can result in enhanced skills and attributes useful in all areas of life.

With a university degree seen as a symbol of intellectual achievement and employability, young people were encouraged to prioritize academic excellence as the surest way to achieve long-term career goals. Students' perceptions of employability are influenced by their self-representational and life-historical positions, such as field of study and degree phase (Räty et al., 2019). Higher education influences students' career interests, with many refining or changing their career interests during their studies (Quinlan& Corbin, 2023). This belief was reinforced by societal expectations and the promise of economic rewards, with the prospect of a stable job, pension, and professional recognition motivating many to follow the educational route. Moreover, government policies and cultural narratives have long supported this paradigm, with widespread investment in education and messaging that framed higher education as a key to personal success.

However, a growing trend of anti-intellectualism among students is characterized by a low interest in theoretical content and critical thinking, which negatively impacts their satisfaction with college education and employability. Frunzaru et al. (2018) posit that students' low regard for college-supplied soft skills raises questions about their integration into work and employability. About 44.1% of students consider that higher education does not guarantee success, but rather other conditions are necessary, such as income and professional self-realization (Vasilenko et al., 2022).

In this context, higher education plays a vital role in developing the academic and professional skills needed for job placement. Through structured programs, higher education institutions provide students with theoretical to practical knowledge in certain disciplines, professional application knowledge, and the ability to solve professional problems (Suryaningsih, 2020). An academic degree received from a university or college also affords recognition and credibility from potential employers, showing that students have achieved the necessary skills. In addition, students are also developed with soft skills such as communication, collaboration, and leadership, which are essential in a dynamic and competitive career environment (Mohammed et al., 2020). Higher education also serves to broaden professional networks through industry training and associated initiatives that enable access to challenging career paths and personal advancement opportunities. Overall, higher education is a strong foundation for students to build a successful future in their professional field.

The Rise of Social Media on Career Aspirations

The emergence of digital technologies and social media changes the traditional perspective that career success can be achieved through higher education. This shift is being propelled by the rapid evolution of technology and the increasing role of social media in our lives as well as the growing distance between formal education and what is expected from Generation Z in the current job market (Drăghici, 2023). The initiation of online platforms and new forms of employment has introduced alternative career paths for them. The opportunities given has challenging the assumption that higher education is the only or best way to achieve professional success. With the rise of new digital careers such as social media influencers, content creators, digital marketing specialists, and e-commerce entrepreneurs, many young people (especially Generation Z) are reconsidering the relevance of traditional education in their career paths.

Social media platforms have become essential tools for career exploration, employability, and job applications, particularly for Generation Z. These platforms have played a crucial role in the rise of Generation Z as social media influencers by providing opportunities for personal branding, community engagement, and effective marketing. Generation Z recognizes the power of personal branding and uses social media to show their identity and uniqueness for both career advancement and self-expression (Viţelar, 2019). Social media enables Generation Z to easily become influencers by creating attractive content, fostering engagement with their audience, and develop brand collaborations that enhance their reach and credibility (Fitria et al., 2024; Hidayat et al., 2023). Their digital fluency, especially on platforms like TikTok, is particularly influential in shaping marketing strategies (Lu, 2023). Moreover, the difference in their consumption preferences with past generations has made them one of the most appealing characteristics of marketers. As generation Z continues to be empowered by social media platforms to practice influence, it is essential to recognize the elements of generation Z's success.

Young people especially Generation Z's career expectations are fundamentally different from previous generations. They prioritize flexibility, autonomy, purpose, and mental well-being over the traditional markers of career success, such as stability and long-term commitment to a single employer (Fleeton, 2024; Savić et al., 2023; Aldjic & Farrell, 2022). Their comfort with technology, entrepreneurial mindset, and focus on meaningful work reflect a changing professional landscape where non-traditional paths, like social media influencing, have become increasingly appealing (Hidayat, 2024; Popaitoon, 2022; Bulut, 2021). As this generation enters the workforce, their expectations will continue to shape industries and redefine what it means to have a successful career in the 21st century. Therefore, they are more appealing to become a social media influencer (SMI).

Studies from Western countries (e.g., the US and UK) highlight that fame and financial independence are primary motivators among Gen Z, with youth viewing influencer careers as offering quicker and more flexible returns compared to traditional academic routes (Fetter et al., 2023; Zhu & Szekely, 2022). In contrast, research in Asian contexts (e.g., Malaysia, Indonesia, and South Korea) reveals that cultural and familial expectations still play a strong role, yet young people are increasingly swayed by social media role models who promote modern, independent lifestyles (Fauziah et al., 2024; Fitria et al., 2024).

Critically, while many studies support the appeal of financial and social capital in influencing career choices, there remains a gap in understanding how these motivations differ across regions and cultures. For example, Vițelar (2019) emphasizes the importance of personal branding in European contexts, while Lu (2023) identifies TikTok-driven entrepreneurship as a dominant factor in East Asian digital career motivations. Despite agreement on the rise of influencer careers, there is limited research that integrates cultural, socioeconomic, and educational contexts to fully explain these shifts. Moreover, many existing studies are fragmented and focused on singular motivations, lacking an integrated framework. This conceptual paper addresses this gap by synthesizing multi-dimensional factors into a comprehensive model.

Factors Driving the Appeal of Becoming an Influencer

The allure of becoming a social media influencer (SMI) over pursuing traditional academic paths is increasingly evident among young adults especially among Generation Z. This trend has been driven by various factors, including financial incentives, the desire for fame and recognition, and the flexibility and engagement of work.

Financial Incentives

The rise of social media influencers, particularly in the financial sector, has significantly influenced young people's career choices, often leading them to pursue influencer roles over traditional education. Fetter et al., 2023 found that 75% of young adults aspire to become social media influencers. The COVID-19 pandemic heightened economic uncertainties, prompting youth to seek financial guidance from influencers, known as 'Finfluencers', who provide accessible advice on managing finances through engaging content on platforms like Instagram and TikTok (Subramanian, 2024; Wu, 2023).

Financial rewards are one of the most appealing reasons that attract many individuals towards a social media influencer career, particularly for the youth. In traditional academic and professional settings, financial rewards are often delayed until after several years of study and

progressive career advancement. This extended timeline discouraging young people who eager to achieve early financial independence. Young adults express a desire to become career influencers, mainly for profit (Fetter et. al., 2023; Wu, 2023; Shabahang et. al., 2022). Influencer economy provides alternative income sources such as sponsorships or product placements, which can be more profitable than traditional employments (Solak, 2024; Kiatkawsin & Lee, 2022). Unlike traditional careers that take years of education and experience before receiving a good pay-off, social media offers a faster path to monetization.

The financial allure of becoming an influencer can be broken down into several key points, such as having a variety of ways to monetize their content, quick financial return, and control over income. Influencers can achieve financial success relatively quickly, even with a smaller audience. For example, micro-influencers (those with smaller but highly engaged followings) can earn significant income through targeted niche markets. This factor contrasts sharply with the long-term financial investment required for higher education, particularly when student debt is factored into the equation. By becoming an influencer, they can earn multiple income through sponsorship, ad revenue, affiliate marketing and create their product lines or branded merchandise. As such, influencers like fitness trainers or beauty experts can offer online courses, create branded merchandise, and collaborate with fitness and beauty brands to generate multiple income streams (Kiatkawsin & Lee, 2022). Besides, influencers have more control over their financial growth than many traditional career paths offer. The scalability of social media allows them to adjust their content, enter new markets, and expand their brand's reach without relying on external promotions or company hierarchies. Thus, without the need for formal qualifications or years of career progression, the influencer path become more attractive.

Desire for Fame and Recognition

The desire for fame and recognition significantly influences the younger generation's inclination to become social media influencers rather than pursue higher education. Past research found that many young individuals prioritize immediate fulfilment and materialism, perceived the influencer lifestyle as more attractive compared to traditional educational paths (Shabahang et al., 2022; Zhu & Szekely, 2022). The desire for fame and recognition plays an important role in influencing the intention to become social media influencers (Shabahang et al., 2022). Many young people valuing public recognition over academic achievements. This shift in values often leads to a devaluation of education as the pursuit of immediate gratification becomes more appealing (Fetter et al., 2023; Shabahang et al., 2022).

Social media provides a platform for ordinary individuals to gain extraordinary visibility, often within a short time frame. Fame has long been a desirable kind of success, but since the advent of social media, it has become more accessible than before. Social media has flexible fame, making it possible for anyone with a smartphone and internet access to become famous. Viral videos, trending hashtags, or popular content can easily thrust one into the spotlight, creating a pathway to fame that does not require formal education or industry connections. The constant feedback loop on social media, such as likes, comments, and followers serve as immediate forms of validation, fuels the desire for recognition. Such recognition may be more immediate and concrete than academic or professional validation of a traditional sort, which often take years to achieve.

The cultural significance of social media influencers and content creators has made digital careers particularly attractive. Social media influencers are seen as modern-day celebrities,

shaping trends, opinions, and social norms. Influencer culture has redefined success for many young people, positioning fame and social validation as attainable and desirable goals. Platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok showcase success stories of individuals who have amassed millions of followers and lucrative brand deals, inspiring others to follow in their footsteps (Kiatkawsin & Lee, 2022). This fame can translate into real-world opportunities, including media appearances, brand sponsorships, and influence in cultural and political conversations. Pursuing this kind of recognition has shifted the focus of many young individuals from long-term career development through education to short-term fame through digital platforms.

The desire for fame and recognition, especially among young people, is often influenced by various psychological and social factors, including the need for appreciation and social validation, as described in Maslow's Theory of Needs. Social media plays a vital role in shaping these aspirations, where popularity is measured by the number of followers and interactions, making fame an easily accessible goal. In addition, some pursue fame to gain professional recognition, especially in art, entertainment, and sports, which can open up more career opportunities and increase social status (Noltemeyer, 2021). However, fame also brings adverse effects, such as psychological stress and loss of privacy. Zhao and Zhou (2021) explain, in the context of education, the education system can play an essential role in fostering or addressing this desire by teaching the actual value of recognition that goes beyond popularity, emphasizing the importance of intellectual, social, or professional contributions that are more meaningful in life.

Flexibility and Engagement of Work

The flexibility and engagement of work significantly influence individuals to become social media influencers by giving them the autonomy to create content on their terms. Work flexibility gives individuals the opportunity to adjust their work hours and locations to suit personal responsibilities (Khateeb, 2021). This flexibility allows users to balance their personal and professional lives, making social media an attractive avenue for income generation. Influencers are perceived as more relatable and credible than traditional media figures, enhancing their appeal (Kiatkawsin & Lee, 2022; Lee et al., 2022). Their ability to connect with audiences personally fosters a sense of community, further encouraging the desire to emulate their success (Fauziah et al., 2024; Atiq et al., 2023). Social media influencer careers are highly appealing because they often allow individuals to turn their passions into full-time work. The flexibility and creativity in content creation give influencers more control over their work lives than traditional careers, which can feel more rigid and less personally fulfilling.

Many influencers start by creating content that reflects their interests: fashion, fitness, gaming, cooking, or travel (Kiatkawsin & Lee, 2022). Social media provides an avenue to transform these passions into a source of income. This ability to work on something the individual is genuinely passionate about offers a deep sense of personal fulfilment that traditional jobs may not provide. Unlike most traditional jobs, which often come with constraints or a lack of creative expression, social media influencers can create the type of content they enjoy. They can decide what they want to share, how, and when to engage with their audience. This level of creative control allows influencers to express themselves authentically, fostering greater engagement with their work.

Influencers have the unique ability to connect with their audience in real-time, receiving direct feedback and interacting with their followers through comments, live sessions, and collaborations (Atiq et al., 2022). This personal interaction can be enriching and motivating, as influencers can see their impact on their audience (Kiatkawsin & Lee, 2022). This direct engagement is far more immediate and personal than what traditional careers typically offer, where customer or client feedback may be filtered through various levels of management.

Digital careers provide autonomy and flexibility that traditional careers often do not. Many young people in Generation Z prioritize work-life balance and the ability to work on their terms (Ernanda & Fazlurrahman, 2023; Zhang, 2023). Influencer careers offer high flexibility in scheduling and location (Zhang, 2023). Influencers can work from anywhere, set their hours, and balance work with other commitments. This flexibility is particularly appealing for those seeking a better work-life balance, as it allows them to pursue their passions without the constraints of a typical 9-to-5 job. The flexibility particularly appeals to those driven by creativity and innovation, allowing them to build personal brands or businesses that reflect their unique interests and talents.
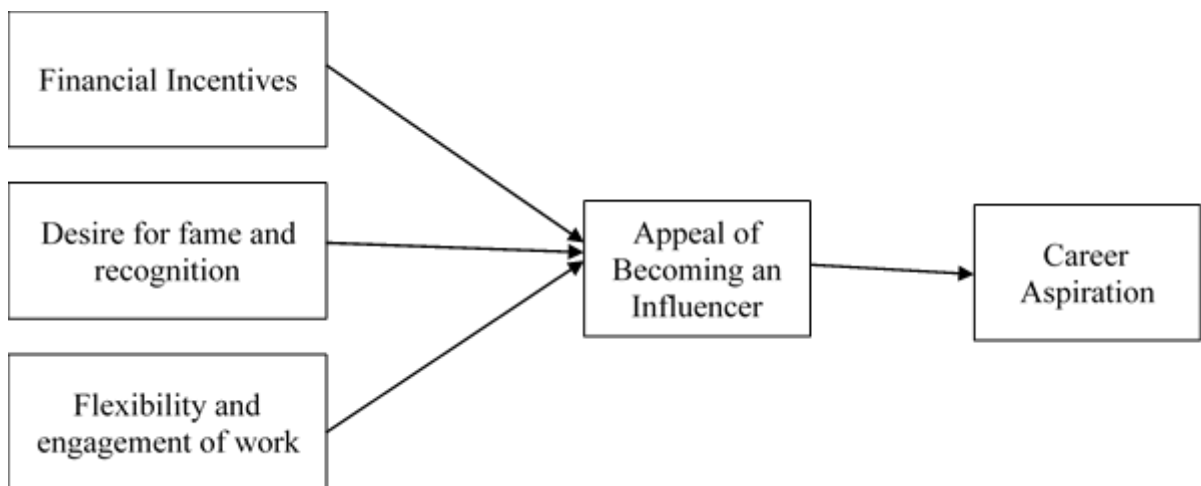
Conceptual Framework

Figure 1: Factors Influencing Appeal of Becoming an Influencer
Source: Authors' own works

This conceptual framework explaining how the factors influence Generation Z to choose a social media influencer (SMI) career rather than following traditional career paths that require formal education. The appeal of becoming an influencer is the central node in the framework, reflecting how the factors of financial incentives, desire for fame and recognition, and flexibility and engagement of work contribute to the attractiveness of becoming an influencer. As influencers gain popularity and financial success, they influence the broader trend among young people (Generation Z) to prioritize becoming influencers over pursuing traditional careers that require higher education. The appeal of influencer careers is seen as reshaping career aspirations, especially among younger generations. As a result, career aspirations are increasingly influenced by the lure of social media platforms, marking a significant shift in the value placed on formal education versus alternative digital careers. The framework offers

insights into how modern career preferences evolve and suggests areas where educational institutions and businesses could adapt to these changes.

Theoretical Implication

This study provides a holistic understanding of career aspirations. By combining the Social Learning Theory (1966) and Achievement Motivation Theory (1998), this study gives a more comprehensive view of why young people aspire to become social media influencers. Social Learning Theory helps us understand how individuals observe and imitate successful role models, while Achievement Motivation Theory explains why they are motivated to achieve success and recognition. These findings suggest that the learning process is not passive but motivated by personal goals (such as fame or financial success). Through the observation and emulation of successful influencers' behaviors, individuals cultivate aspirations for prominence and establish their identity within a wider social framework. These implications highlight the need to study how social influence, learning, and achievement motivation affect young people's life choices in the digital age. Society must consider ways in which education and social support can assist individuals in attaining success, both academically and as influencers, in the context of these dynamic changes.

Practical Implication

The study provides additional information to educational institutions and policymakers. This study highlights the need for educational institutions to integrate digital skills, personal branding, and entrepreneurial training into their programs to better prepare students for a career landscape that includes social media influencing. Educational institutions should explore integrating digital media literacy, content creation skills, and entrepreneurship into their curriculums. Policymakers might consider initiatives that support the mental well-being of influencers and provide career guidance for students considering non-traditional career paths. For marketing and business practitioners, the findings suggest that understanding why individuals choose to influence careers (fame, financial independence, flexibility) will help businesses better tailor their influencer marketing campaigns. Companies can benefit from working with influencers who resonate with target audiences, particularly Generation Z. Companies must adapt to changing work expectations as more individuals prioritize flexible, autonomous careers like social media influencing. To attract younger talent, organizations should consider offering more flexible working arrangements, opportunities for creative work, and roles that allow employees to leverage digital platforms innovatively.

Conclusion and Future Studies

The shift from traditional education to digital careers represents a profound change in how young people approach their professional futures. The financial incentives and opportunities, the desire to be famous, recognition, flexibility, and engagement to work have all contributed to the growing trend of pursuing digital careers over formal education. The appeal of becoming a social media influencer, especially among younger generations, highlights a significant transformation in how career aspirations are shaped in the digital age. Platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok provide unprecedented opportunities for individuals. As Generation Z embraces digital careers, the factors driving this change are redefining what it means to have a successful career. Influencer culture, rooted in personal branding and community engagement, offers young people a sense of autonomy, creativity, and a direct connection with their audience that traditional careers often lack. The ability to turn passions into a profession through content

creation has made the influencer lifestyle an attractive alternative to academic achievement for many.

However, this shift does not necessarily devalue the importance of formal education. As social media influencers rise, educational institutions and society must adapt to these changes by integrating digital skills, personal branding, and entrepreneurial training into their curricula. A more holistic approach to career development, combining traditional education and the digital economy elements, could better prepare students for the diverse range of opportunities available in the modern world. In conclusion, prioritizing a social media career over academia reflects the evolving values and opportunities of the digital age. By understanding the motivations behind this shift, educators, policymakers, and businesses can better engage with and support the next generation in pursuing their career aspirations in a way that aligns with their goals and the rapidly changing professional landscape.

Future research may employ a multi-phase mixed-method approach to validate the proposed conceptual framework. In the qualitative phase, an in-depth interview or focus group discussions with Gen Z social media influencers from diverse regional backgrounds can be conducted. In the quantitative phase, develop a structured survey instrument based on insights from the qualitative phase and use structural equation modeling (SEM) to assess relationships between the identified factors (financial incentives, fame and flexibility of works). This methodological strategy will provide robust validation for the conceptual model and support its application in cross-cultural and educational research.

Besides, the study should be extended by employing cross-cultural studies to investigate whether the appeal of becoming an influencer is consistent across different regions and cultures or varies significantly. This research could also explore how cultural values influence prioritizing social media careers over traditional education. Future research may also investigate how students manage the dual demands of formal education and careers as social media influencers.

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