Exploring Gen Z's Career Decision-Making:
A Case Study of Higher Education Institutions in Malaysia

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Abstract

The rise of new forms of employment has significantly contributed to the growth of the gig economy, where workers, often freelancers, engage in brief, temporary tasks or agreements independently or with multiple employers. This case study aims to explore Higher Education Institution (HEI) students' perceptions of social media influencing a career choice within the gig economy using a qualitative approach. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 30 participants from three Malaysian HEIs and analysed using thematic analysis. The analysis revealed a complex landscape of opinions, highlighting the allure and challenges of this career path. Key themes identified from the thematic analysis include career viability, social perception, sustainability, excitement factors, advantages, and disadvantages. While the potential for fame and financial reward is acknowledged, concerns about job security and online harassment are also prominent. This duality underscores the need for a balanced and strategic approach to pursuing a career in social media influencing.

Introduction

The exponential rise of the digital economy due to the utilisation and existence of myriads of social media platforms has been altering trends in business and marketing worldwide. This phenomenon has positively impacted Malaysia as it permeates the nation's growth in economic productivity. These businesses and marketing transactions have created opportunities and jobs for individuals nationwide through social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, WhatsApp, and Telegram. As the Department of Statistics Malaysia reported in 2022, the Malaysian digital economy made up 22.6% of the country's GDP, experiencing a growth of 10.4% and reaching RM320 billion. This signals that the digital economy plays a gigantic role in providing individuals with career opportunities and assisting in generating the country's economic growth.

As a result of the booming economy due to these social media platforms, companies and organisations have been actively recruiting highly influential individuals known as social media influencers to pro-

mote, market and advertise their businesses and products to the masses (Susanto et al., 2021). The employment of social influencers has been identified to enhance business companies' sales while reducing costs substantially, given that it is a more cost-effective approach than other marketing methods. Who are these social media influencers? According to (Ki et al., 2020), a Social Media Influencer (SMI) is characterised as an individual on social media platforms who has cultivated a substantial following by sharing their daily experiences and crafting online content that motivates their followers, thereby granting them the ability to exert influence over their audience. SMIs can also denote individuals who can impact or modify people and their actions via social media platforms. This emergence of SMIs is a part of the gig economy context, the 'do-it-yourself trend' that has experienced significant growth in the past few decades.

The gig economy is a labour market marked by the dominance of short-term, freelance, temporary, or on-call work setups, frequently enabled by digital platforms and technology. In this economic model, individuals, commonly known as "gig workers" or "freelancers," participate in a variety of assignments, projects, or jobs with flexibility, and they typically receive payment for each specific "gig" or task they undertake (Snider, 2018). The gig economy attracts Gen Z as the flexibility in doing freelance work does not bind them to have long-term contracts with their employers (Seemiller & Grace, 2017). It offers them flexibility, embracing digital technology, aligning with their entrepreneurial spirit, providing economic opportunities, leveraging their skills and interests, and accommodating their desire for independent work arrangements. However, despite its positive economic growth, this gigantic shift in career decision-making by Gen Z could result in devastating financial consequences for the nation as there will be a shortage of skilled labour and cause brain drain in Malaysia. Therefore, this study attempts to examine the perceptions of students from higher education institutions of being a social media influencer as a sustainable career choice in Malaysia's currently evolving gig economy. By analysing their responses, we seek to uncover the factors influencing their views and the potential advantages and disadvantages they associate with this career path.

Literature Review

Gig economy, Millennials, and Gen Z

A gig economy is characterised by a workforce predominantly composed of independent individuals and freelancers who hold temporary and part-time roles, as opposed to being composed mainly of permanent, full-time employees. According to (Montgomery & Baglioni, 2021), for some individuals, the gig economy represents a chance to enjoy flexibility, generate extra earnings through short-term gigs, and reap concrete advantages. This indicates that the gig economy has a major impact on increasing the economic quality of those actively participating. As addressed in a systematic study conducted by Ghazali and Muhammad (2021), even though the gig economy is not a new concept in Malaysia itself, its rapid evolution and growth

were observed to be booming primarily due to the job losses caused by the pandemic. The gig economy significantly impacts Millennials and Gen Z, two generations known for their tech-savvy nature and desire for flexibility in work. Given the Movement Control Order (MCO) imposed, Malaysians increasingly turned to digital social media platforms to make money and support their families. Many gig workers from younger generations are well-versed in modern technology, including mobile apps, and are socially active on various social media platforms. This led the Malaysian government to identify the gig economy as a new potential source of economic growth. As addressed earlier, according to the 2022 report from the Department of Statistics Malaysia, the digital economy of Malaysia accounted for 22.6% of the nation's GDP, marking a 10.4% increase and reaching RM320 billion, which significantly indicates the major impact that the gig economy brings to this country. However, Nursilah Ahmad et al. (2020) addressed that in discussing the gig economy in the context of students or recent graduates in Malaysia, the conversation tends to revolve around the job prospects for graduates and how the younger generation is grappling with the prevailing economic difficulties. A recent survey conducted by UCSI University Poll Research Centre in March 2023 indicates a worrying trend among a large population of Malaysian SPM school leavers. It was identified that these school leavers were perceived to be lured into becoming social media influencers instead of pursuing their education to higher levels due to the selected success of the SMIs that they see on social media platforms. The survey found that only 51 percent of the 1,000 school leavers opt to continue their education. In contrast, 49 percent intend to become social media affiliates or influencers, join the gig economy, start businesses, and have no plans. The remaining 49 percent, however, have different plans. This group is divided among several alternative paths. Some of these individuals plan to build careers on social media platforms by promoting products, creating content, and engaging with audiences to earn revenue. Others intend to participate in the gig economy, taking on freelance or short-term jobs such as ride-sharing, delivery services, or freelance work in various fields.

Gen Z's phenomena and career choices differ from previous generations pursuing higher education to secure sustainable career choices where they strongly associate their identity with their careers, fostering a sense of uniqueness and loyalty to the (Wey Smola & Sutton, 2002). This could be explained by examining how Gen Z individuals perceive their career choices and reasons for choosing them. In a study conducted by (Mahapatra et al., 2022), the researchers identified that young individuals today prefer careers characterised by flexibility and minimal stress, such as engaging in influencer roles or participating in the gig economy. This inclination is driven by a desire for substantial returns commensurate with their efforts. There is also a discernible weariness among them regarding the traditional approach of memorising information and a reluctance to endure additional academic pressures. To add, according to Barhate and Dirani (2022), Gen Z, born between 1995 and 2012, values both intrinsic and extrinsic factors in their career aspirations. They are motivated by personal fulfilment, entrepreneurial attitudes, and self-confidence. Key expectations include

work-life balance, meaningful work, and continuous learning, with less emphasis on salary compared to older generations.

Gen Z, as digital natives, expects workplaces to be tech-driven and offer flexible environments that encourage collaboration, yet they are also comfortable working independently. They prefer lateral career growth and emphasize the importance of mentoring and career development. Organizations must adapt their strategies to attract and retain this generation by focusing on flexibility, meaningful work, and growth opportunities. Furthermore, some perceive a limited prospect in pursuing higher education. In addition, in examining Gen Z's perspective on their career choices and preferences, several studies have obtained similar findings related to this generation of young individuals. These individuals share similar traits in terms of their career choices and preferences, such as the need to have flexible work settings that allow them to work at any time and from any location, create and decide their career paths rather than having them predetermined (Sidorcuka & Chesnovicka, 2017). Millennials and Gen Z have been significant contributors to the gig economy's growth, leveraging its flexibility and technology-driven opportunities to navigate the modern work landscape. Despite these benefits, they also face unique challenges within this evolving employment model, which calls for a deeper understanding of how they navigate the balance between flexibility and sustainability in their careers. In conclusion, the rise of the gig economy, particularly among Gen Z and Millennials, reflects a shift in career preferences towards flexibility, autonomy, and a technology-driven work environment. While this model offers many benefits, such as independence and adaptability, it also presents challenges regarding job security and long-term career sustainability, highlighting the need for a balanced approach to career planning and development in this evolving landscape.

Labour Shortage and Brain Drain

Whether becoming a social media influencer is a suitable career choice depends on individual circumstances, goals, and risk tolerance. For those passionate about content creation, willing to navigate the uncertainties, and capable of building a strong personal brand, it can be a rewarding and lucrative career. However, it's essential to approach this path with a clear understanding of the challenges and to have backup plans or diversified income streams to ensure long-term sustainability and security. However, if this phenomenon persists, it could lead to a major issue of shortage of experts in our country. As addressed by Dr V. Subramaniam, a senior lecturer from the Faculty of Business Management, UCSI University, in an interview with Bernama as a part of a survey on this matter, it was stated that the technology-driven environment allows and promotes Gen Z to participate and join careers that do not require them to be tied to any structured working environment. Other than that, as addressed, other lucrative factors that attract these youngsters to join the gig economy include escape from the pressure of studies, financial constraints due to the high cost of education, and high cost of living. Many high school students flocking into the gig economy and escaping

from enrolling in higher education will cause the nation to experience a shortage of local experts, especially in Malaysia's science and technology field. According to the Statistics Department, 97.71% of individuals engaged in p-hailing services are young adults aged 15 to 30, with the remaining being senior citizens aged 60 and above. Among these young adults, approximately 40% are high school graduates holding either Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) or Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia Vokasional (SPMV).

Additionally, 23.24% possess a diploma or equivalent, while the remaining 11.79% hold a bachelor's degree. The gig economy's employment structures provide a swift entry point into the job market, which appeals to students with limited formal education qualifications. A study conducted by N Ahmad et al. (2020) to gather preliminary data concerning the level of awareness among the younger generation on the usage as well as future expectations of the platform economy revealed that most of the respondents were found to be unaware of the jobs market changing patterns and the effects of the gig economy on the labour market in future time. Although gigs provide a means to cover expenses and earn extra money, they are transient and lack the stability and security in permanent jobs. The unpredictable nature of the gig economy can lead to irregular incomes, presenting challenges for young people with minimal savings to prepare for the future or address growing financial responsibilities. Thus, If the current trend of young people opting for gig economy roles over higher education continues, then it could exacerbate labour shortages and contribute to a brain drain, particularly in critical fields like science and technology, and consequently hinder the nation's long-term economic and developmental growth.

Social Media Influencers

Many students today are drawn to the idea of becoming social media influencers. The allure of working as a social media influencer appeals to students for its flexibility, creative expression, income potential, networking opportunities, and learning experiences. Social media influencers have gained trust, expertise, and a substantial following on platforms like Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Twitter. They typically focus on specific topics such as fashion, beauty, fitness, travel, lifestyle, gaming, or technology, creating content relevant to their chosen niche. Using their social media presence, influencers interact with their followers, sharing content like photos, videos, blogs, and live streams. They also leverage their platforms to promote products or services to their audience. According to a study by Duffy (2020), to earn income, they hype branded goods and services to their communities of followers; such promotional communication takes the form of information, advice, and inspiration. Often, influencers collaborate with brands, businesses, and advertisers to develop sponsored content, endorse products, and run marketing campaigns, all aimed at connecting with their followers authentically and compellingly. For example, a study by Hermawan (2023) underscores the potential of influencer marketing, especially on YouTube, as an effective strategy for engaging Generation Z consumers. Brands can harness this trend by utilising social media influencers on YouTube to promote

products and deliver marketing messages to their audience. The study's findings reveal that Gen Z viewers on YouTube are active users who favour certain types of content and are inclined to share and comment. This suggests that influencer marketing on YouTube could be a successful approach for companies to attract and engage young consumers. By partnering with social media influencers on YouTube, brands can leverage the influencers' credibility and reach to promote their products or services effectively to a large audience.

Additionally, Pratama (2023) emphasises the significance of micro-influencer characteristics in meeting the information needs of Gen Z audiences on social media platforms such as TikTok. The study's results indicate that Gen Z followers are influenced by micro-influencers who reflect their preferences and values, highlighting the critical role of relatability and trust in shaping information-seeking behaviours within this demographic. However, according to Bareth (2023), the content that influencers promote is not always positive or healthy. They also promote materialism and consumerism, encouraging their followers to buy products they do not necessarily need or cannot afford, eventually leading to minimal savings. Duffy and Pooley (2019) asserted that modern-day influencers engage in narratives of self-branding tailored to resonate with consumers' economic uncertainties within the gig economy context. Singh and Bushan (2023) emphasises the importance of addressing challenges related to fair wages, employment rights, and social security in the digital era to ensure a balanced future of work. It discusses the evolution of digital labour platforms globally and in India, emphasising the effects of digitalization on the work world and the paper finally concludes that recognition of digital labour is crucial as it can lead to the provision of rights-related benefits for gig workers, highlighting the significance of legal frameworks in protecting workers in the evolving work landscape. The Influencer Industry (2022) chronicles the journey of early digital creators facing economic uncertainty during the Great Recession. They began focusing on building and monetizing their personal brands to take control of their professional destinies. Ultimately, the study reveals how the influencer industry has shifted how authenticity is constructed and perceived in a profit-driven communications environment, blurring the lines between reality and the curated personas presented on social media platforms. The line between personal life and work can become blurred, leading to difficulty maintaining a healthy work-life balance. The expectation to be constantly online and available can lead to burnout and a lack of downtime.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews to gain in-depth insights into the factors influencing students' views on a career as a social media influencer. The research was conducted at a higher education institution (HEI) in Perak, Malaysia, involving a sample of 30 students. The

semi-structured interview format allowed for flexibility in exploring various aspects of the respondents' perceptions while maintaining a consistent framework for comparison.

Participants

The study involved 30 students from a higher education institution (HEI) in Perak, Malaysia. The selection criteria were intentionally designed to ensure diversity, encompassing students from various academic disciplines and backgrounds. This purposive sampling approach aimed to gather a wide range of perspectives on the career of a social media influencer. The decision to involve 30 participants aligns with Creswell and Creswell (2017) guidance on qualitative research, where it is suggested that a sample size of 20 to 30 respondents is appropriate for semi-structured interviews. This range is typically sufficient to reach data saturation, the point at which no new themes or information emerge. By selecting 30 students, the study ensures a balance between depth and diversity of responses, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of the topic while maintaining manageability. Creswell emphasises the importance of focusing on quality over quantity in qualitative research, and this sample size supports the goal of obtaining rich, detailed insights from the participants.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-person interviews, each lasting between 30 and 45 minutes. The interview guide featured open-ended questions designed to explore the factors shaping students' perceptions of a career as a social media influencer, as well as the potential advantages and disadvantages of this career path. The semi-structured format encouraged participants to share their thoughts and experiences openly, generating rich qualitative data for analysis.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process involved using thematic analysis to systematically examine the semi-structured interview transcripts. Initially, the audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were read multiple times for familiarisation. This step was followed by importing the transcripts into ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software designed to facilitate systematic coding and thematic exploration. In ATLAS.ti, the data analysis began with highlighting significant text sections that captured key ideas. Using the software's coding feature, these segments were assigned initial codes that reflected the core content. ATLAS.ti allowed for efficient organization and retrieval of these codes, facilitating the next step in the process: grouping related codes together to form potential themes. Once the initial themes were identified, they were reviewed and refined within the software. ATLAS.ti's tools for creating networks and visual representations of codes were used to examine relationships between codes, ensuring that the themes were co-

herent and accurately represented the data. Each theme was then defined and named within the software, and detailed analyses were written to describe their significance, supported by memos and notes.

Limitations

While the semi-structured interview method provided valuable insights, it also posed certain limitations. One limitation is the potential for interviewer bias, where the interviewer's questions or demeanour could influence the respondents' answers. Additionally, the semi-structured format, while flexible, may result in varying depths of information across different interviews. The relatively small sample size of 30 respondents from a single HEI may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts or populations.

Another area for improvement is the time-consuming nature of conducting and analysing qualitative interviews. Each interview requires significant time for transcription and coding, which can be resource intensive. Furthermore, the subjective interpretation of qualitative data can introduce bias, and efforts were made to mitigate this through rigorous coding and theme validation processes.

Results

The analysis of the perceptions of Malaysian Higher Education Institution GenZ students regarding a career as a social media influencer revealed several emerging themes. These themes are derived from the participants' responses and provide insight into their attitudes, beliefs, and concerns about this career path. The identified themes include *perceived viability and sustainability, advantages and disadvantages, societal perceptions* and *peer views,* and *motivating elements for becoming influencers*.

Perceived Viability and Sustainability

Career Viability

Many respondents consider social media influencers as a viable career option. They highlight the potential to gain followers, engage in business opportunities, and utilize their social networks. For example, one participant noted, *"Because we can gain more followers by doing business activities,"* emphasising the entrepreneurial opportunities linked to social media influencing. Another respondent shared, *"Because it is easy to start our career and we can positively influence people,"* underscoring the accessibility and potential for positive impact within the field. Others emphasized the advantages of networking, stating, *"Networking, the influencer industry offers opportunities to connect with different brands and people,"* reflecting the industry's capacity to build valuable relationships. However, some were more cautious, such as the respondent who remarked, *"I don't think I can become a social media influencer but it has potential for those who are*

consistent and creative," suggesting that while it may not be for everyone, those with the right traits can succeed.

Additionally, a participant highlighted the influence of social media in gaining popularity and creating business opportunities, saying, *"Because the influence of social media can cause someone to gain popularity and business opportunities."* Another respondent noted, *"I think Social Media Influencer can become a career because it allows one to share content and attract a large audience,"* pointing out the career's potential to reach and engage with a broad audience. This perception is fueled by the visible success of well-known influencers who have turned their online presence into profitable careers. The ability to leverage personal branding and digital marketing skills makes this an attractive career choice for many digitally savvy and entrepreneurial-minded students.

Sustainability Concerns

There is a significant concern about the long-term sustainability of a career as an influencer. Some respondents believe the career is not sustainable due to lack of job security, market saturation, and the transient nature of online popularity. As one interviewee mentioned, *"Certainly not, I don't see a career as a Social Media Influencer as a sustainable one."* These concerns are valid given the fast-paced nature of social media platforms, where trends and audience interests can shift rapidly. Additionally, the reliance on algorithms and the unpredictability of platform policies can add to the instability of this career path. Fame and income generated from social media can be fleeting, making it a risky long-term career option. The sustainability of a career as a social media influencer encompasses several aspects: economic, social, environmental, ethical, and personal development.

Students are aware that despite the potential for financial rewards and creative freedom, it is crucial to address the challenges of income instability, mental health issues, environmental impact, ethical concerns, and limited career longevity. To enhance the sustainability of this career path, influencers should diversify their income sources, establish clear work-life boundaries, promote responsible consumption, and continuously expand their skill set. While many see potential, the concern about sustainability is echoed in various responses. For instance, one respondent noted, *"Because we can gain more followers by doing business activities,"* highlighting the entrepreneurial aspect of influencing. Others emphasized the accessibility and impact, such as, *"Because it is easy to start our career, and we can positively influence people."* The potential for networking and business collaborations was also mentioned: *"Networking, the influencer industry offers opportunities to connect with different brands and people"* and *"For me, becoming a social media influencer also means getting opportunities for business collaborations and sponsorships."* Despite the concerns, some respondents recognize the opportunities for financial gain, creative expression, and audience engagement. Comments like, *"I think Social Media Influencer can become a career because it allows one to share con-*

tent and attract a large audience," and *"Because the influence of social media can cause someone to gain popularity and business opportunities,"* reflect the positive aspects of this career. Moreover, the potential to earn money quickly was noted by one participant who said, *"Because you get a chance to get more money in less time compared to traditional jobs."* These mixed sentiments illustrate that while the allure of a career as a social media influencer is strong, there is also a recognition of the inherent risks and the need for careful consideration of long-term sustainability.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Advantage: Flexibility and Freedom

Many respondents appreciate the flexible nature of being an influencer. They value the ability to set their schedules and the potential for work-life balance. One respondent stated, *"We can have a more free schedule because it is our career."* This flexibility particularly appeals to those who value autonomy and the ability to manage their own time. It allows influencers to pursue other interests, travel, or spend time with family, which is often impossible in traditional 9-to-5 jobs. This sentiment is echoed by others who emphasize the freedom and flexibility inherent in this career path. For instance, one respondent highlighted, *"Flexibility, many influencers enjoy the freedom to work on their terms and schedule."* Another respondent stated, *"Extra income, have work-life balance and more freedom in choosing what to do,"* illustrating the appeal of balancing work with personal life while also having the opportunity to earn additional income. This combination of flexibility and potential for financial rewards makes social media influencers attractive for those who prioritize a balanced and self-directed lifestyle. However, while freedom and autonomy are enticing, aspiring influencers must weigh these benefits against the potential challenges of income stability and long-term career sustainability.

Advantage: Financial Benefits

Some participants see the financial advantages, including the possibility of earning extra income and the benefits of business sponsorships. For example, *"Extra income, have work-life balance and more freedom."* A strong motivator is the potential to earn significant income through brand deals, sponsored content, and merchandise sales. Earnings can be highly variable and unpredictable, dependent on engagement rates, algorithm changes, and market demand for sponsored content. This financial independence can appeal to students looking to pay off debts or support their families.

Advantage: Personal Fulfilment

The opportunity to share passions, knowledge, and become well-known are significant motivators. One participant expressed excitement about *"Sharing my knowledge about the thing I passionate about."* This sense

of personal fulfillment and the ability to influence others positively can be highly rewarding. It allows individuals to build a community around their interests and values, creating a sense of accomplishment and purpose. This sentiment is shared by others who find fulfilment in connecting with a larger audience. One respondent noted, *"You can share your interests and passions with a wide audience, which can be very fulfilling."* The ability to turn personal passions into a platform for influence and community-building makes this career path particularly appealing to those seeking meaning and impact in their work.

Disadvantages: Lack of Job Security

A recurring theme is the insecurity associated with a career in social media. The volatile nature of online platforms and the dependency on continuous audience engagement are major drawbacks. *"No job security"* was a concise yet telling response. The fear of losing relevance or having one's account suspended or hacked are real concerns that can abruptly end an influencer's career. This lack of stability makes it difficult to plan for the future or secure traditional benefits like health insurance and retirement savings. Influencing is not a stable career path, and popularity can wane quickly. The career lifespan of an influencer can be short, especially without continuous innovation and adaptation. Other respondents echoed these concerns, highlighting the risks involved. One mentioned, *"Time by time we don't get more views or if we don't post more, it's very insecure,"* reflecting the pressure to maintain constant engagement. Another noted, *"No job security, the fame from social media is not guaranteed to last,"* emphasizing the precarious nature of this career. The risks extend beyond losing followers; as one respondent pointed out, *"We are more exposed to controversy and our location can be tracked easily, leading to insecurity,"* underlining the personal safety concerns influencers might face. The need to constantly maintain fame was also a worry: *"The fame that you obtained from social media needs to be maintained constantly, which is very risky."* The challenges of online harassment and the lack of security were further highlighted: *"Online harassment, vulnerable to online harassment and no job security,"* and *"Being a social media influencer has no job security, and it is unstable."* These perspectives illustrate the significant risks and uncertainties of pursuing a career as a social media influencer. As another respondent succinctly put it, *"The job is unstable, and there is no guarantee of consistent income,"* reinforcing the notion that while the rewards can be high, the dangers and insecurities are equally substantial.

Disadvantages: Exposure to Negative Aspects

Respondents highlighted exposure to online harassment, controversy, and the psychological impact of fame. One respondent noted, *"We are more exposed to controversy and our location can be tracked easily,"* reflecting concerns over privacy and safety. The constant scrutiny and pressure to maintain a positive image can lead to stress and mental health issues. Additionally, the risk of online harassment and cyberbullying can

have severe emotional and psychological impacts. Other respondents shared similar concerns, emphasizing the instability and mental strain associated with influencing. One mentioned, *"It's very insecure as it depends on the audience engagement which is not consistent,"* pointing out the unpredictable nature of audience behavior. The mental toll of maintaining a certain persona was also noted: *"Mental pressure to maintain a certain image and constant online presence,"* illustrating the relentless demand to stay relevant. The impact of negative feedback and criticism is another significant challenge, as one respondent expressed, *"Being exposed to negative comments and criticism which can affect mental health."* This sentiment was echoed by another who highlighted the dual risks of harassment and job insecurity: *"Online harassment, vulnerable to online harassment and no job security."* These insights underscore the psychological challenges that come with a career in social media influencing, where the rewards are often tempered by the emotional and mental health risks involved.

Disadvantages: Pressure to Maintain Relevance

Continuously producing engaging content and staying relevant was also seen as a significant pressure. One respondent mentioned, *"Time by time we don't get more views or if we don't post more,"* indicating the constant need to remain in the public eye. This pressure can lead to burnout and a loss of creativity. The algorithm-driven nature of social media platforms means that even a short break can significantly drop engagement and income, adding to the stress of maintaining an influencer career. Other respondents shared similar concerns, highlighting the challenges of keeping an audience engaged over time. One stated, *"Not really, people tend to get bored when they see the same thing repeatedly,"* emphasizing the difficulty of consistently capturing attention. Another added, *"I think it is not because we can't expect the same level of engagement forever,"* reflecting the inevitable decline in engagement many influencers face. The importance of innovation in sustaining a career as an influencer was also noted: *"A career as a social media influencer can be sustainable only if one can continuously innovate."* This need for constant creativity adds to the mental strain, as another respondent pointed out, *"Being exposed to negative comments and criticism which can affect mental health,"* further underscoring the emotional challenges involved. Multiple respondents reiterated the mental pressure to maintain a certain image and stay relevant. One mentioned *"Mental pressure to maintain a certain image and constant online presence,"* while another highlighted *"Exposure to negative feedback and the pressure to always stay relevant."* These factors, combined with the insecurity of fluctuating audience engagement, as one respondent stated, *"It's very insecure as it depends on the audience engagement which is not consistent,"* contribute to the overall stress and instability of a career in social media influencing. This collection of perspectives highlights the significant pressures and challenges of sustaining a social media influencer career, where the need for continuous innovation, relevance, and audience engagement can lead to burnout and mental health struggles.

Societal Perceptions and Peer View

Mixed Opinions on Peer Participation

There are mixed views about peers becoming influencers. Some respondents admire their peers' talent and confidence, while others are skeptical about the guarantees of success in this field. One interviewee mentioned, *"It's good for them who have courage and confidence,"* whereas another said, *"Don't hope too much, because it's not guaranteed."* This dichotomy reflects the varied perceptions of success in the influencer industry. While some see it as a platform for self-expression and entrepreneurial success, others view it as an unstable and competitive field with no guaranteed outcomes. Other respondents elaborated on this perspective, noting that *"They must face the challengers to become social media influencers. It's not easy but some are doing well,"* and *"About people my age becoming an influencer, it can be good for those who have the talent and confidence, but not everyone will succeed."* The competitive nature of the industry was also highlighted, with one respondent advising, *"Don't hope too much because it's not something guaranteed. There are many challenges and it's very competitive."* This mix of admiration and caution is further illustrated by comments like, *"It's good for them who have the courage and confidence to stand out and influence others positively,"* and *"I think they are very talented because they already have their followers, but it's not a guaranteed career."* These differing perspectives highlight the importance of a realistic understanding of the opportunities and challenges in the influencer industry.

Motivating Elements for Becoming Influencers

Aspiration for Fame and Recognition

Many respondents are excited by the prospect of becoming famous and gaining recognition. The idea of being known and admired by a large audience is appealing. One respondent reflected this desire by stating, *"The fact that I become a famous person and many people recognize me."* The allure of fame and the associated social status are strong motivators, as many students are drawn to the validation and admiration that comes from having a large following. Other respondents expressed similar sentiments, noting, *"The recognition and admiration from followers excites me,"* and adding, *"Becoming popular and known to a large audience is very appealing."* The excitement of gaining popularity was also highlighted by respondents who said, *"The popularity that comes with being an influencer is something that excites me,"* and *"I look forward to the recognition and the large following that comes with it."* The desire to be admired and known was summed up by another respondent: *"Being admired and known by many people is a major draw for me."* These responses illustrate that the prospect of fame and recognition of being a social media influencer are powerful motivators for students, driving their interest in pursuing this career path.

Creative and Personal Expression

Many students find the ability to express creativity and share personal interests motivating. One respondent highlighted this by saying, *"Sharing my knowledge about the thing I am passionate about,"* indicating a strong desire for self-expression through social media. This platform allows individuals to showcase their talents, hobbies, and unique perspectives, fostering a sense of community and belonging. Other respondents echoed this sentiment, emphasizing the appeal of creative freedom. One noted, *"Influencers from other countries know you, and you get to express your creativity,"* while another shared, *"To become YouTubers or content creators, sharing my interests and ideas."* The chance to share passions and connect with like-minded individuals was further emphasized with comments like, *"The chance to express myself and share what I love with others"* and *"Creating content that reflects my passions and interests."* The ability to show-case creativity and build connections is a significant draw, as highlighted by another respondent who said, *"The ability to showcase my creativity and connect with others who share similar interests."* These respons-es illustrate that creative freedom and opportunity for self-expression are key motivators for those interested in pursuing a career as a social media influencer, offering an alternative to conventional career paths and al-lowing individuals to explore their artistic or intellectual passions.

Discussion

The results indicate a complex and nuanced perspective among Malaysian Gen Z students regarding a career as a social media influencer. A career as a social media influencer can be highly rewarding for those who are passionate, creative, and willing to navigate its challenges. Success in this field requires strategic planning, resilience, and a deep understanding of the audience. While it offers flexibility and the potential for high earnings, it also demands a proactive approach to managing income stability, mental health, and the ever-changing landscape of social media platforms. This finding aligns with the aspect of work-life balance iden-tified in a systematic literature review conducted by Barhate and Dirani (2022). As addressed by the study Gen Z, regardless of gender, values work-life balance in their future careers. Ernst and Young (2020) report-ed similar expectations between men and women for flexible hours, time off for personal interests, and re-mote work options. Other studies (Arar & Öneren, 2018; Bohdziewicz, 2016; Hampton & Welsh, 2019; Puiu, 2017; Fodor et al., 2017) also confirmed Gen Z's strong preference for work-life balance, with the po-tential for them to pressure organisations to accommodate this need. Companies that offer work-life balance are more likely to attract and retain Gen Z employees.

While there is enthusiasm about the flexibility, potential income, and personal fulfilment that such a career can bring, there are also significant concerns about its sustainability and the pressures involved. The mixed feelings about societal acceptance and peer involvement in social media influence suggest that while

this career path is attractive to many, it is not without its perceived risks and challenges. The allure of fame, financial independence, and creative freedom are counterbalanced by the fears of job insecurity, mental health issues, and the relentless pressure to stay relevant. Overall, this study highlights the importance of addressing the concerns of job security, mental health, and market saturation while exploring the potential of social media influencing as a viable career option for future generations. This corresponds to a study conducted by An and Haryanto (2021) where the scholars identified that for those aspiring to become SMIs, it's important to realize that sustaining a long-term commitment, whether as a career or a side job for income, relies on staying intrinsically motivated and keeping that motivation throughout the journey. Thus, there is a need for better support systems, education on digital literacy, and strategies to manage the pressures associated with this career. By addressing these concerns comprehensively, creating a more supportive and sustainable environment for social media influencers is possible. This involves a combination of education, mental health support, diversification strategies, community building, and advocating for fair treatment and protection. Understanding and tackling these challenges will benefit individual influencers and contribute to the overall health and stability of the influencer industry. On the other hand, Gen Z students looking to become social media influencers face opportunities and challenges in the fast-changing digital and gig economies. The growing digital landscape boosts influencer demand, offering new career and financial opportunities (Andreani et al., 2021; Raza et al., 2022). However, this growth requires strategic career planning (Artemova, 2018). Schools and policymakers should incorporate digital skills and entrepreneurship into their teaching (Bellaaj, 2023). Emphasising mental health and providing support for online challenges is crucial. Partnerships between schools and industry can create mentorship and hands-on learning experiences, preparing students for dynamic careers and ensuring sustainable growth and economic stability for future generations.

Conclusion

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of Malaysian Higher Education Institution (HEI) Gen Z students' perceptions of pursuing a career as a social media influencer within the gig economy. The research highlights this career path's duality, presenting its allure and inherent challenges. On the positive side, the flexibility, potential financial rewards, and personal fulfilment associated with being a social media influencer are significant motivators for students. The ability to set one's schedule, engage in creative expression, and achieve financial independence are compelling benefits that align with the entrepreneurial spirit and digital fluency of Gen Z. However, the study also underscores substantial concerns about the sustainability and security of this career. Students are acutely aware of the potential instability, the pressure to maintain relevance, and the risks of online harassment and mental health issues. These concerns reflect a broader apprehension about the transient nature of online popularity and the unpredictable dynamics

of social media platforms. The mixed societal perceptions and peer pressure further complicate these students' decision-making processes. While some admire the confidence and success of their peers in the influencer industry, others remain sceptical about the long-term viability of such a career. In conclusion, while the career of a social media influencer offers exciting opportunities, it is fraught with significant challenges that need to be carefully navigated. A balanced and strategic approach, coupled with robust support systems and education on digital literacy, is essential for aspiring influencers. Addressing job security, mental health, and market saturation is crucial for creating a sustainable environment for this career path. Future research and policies should focus on developing comprehensive support mechanisms to help young individuals make informed career decisions in the evolving digital economy.

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All authors contributed equally to this work.

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Data availability statement

All data underlying the results are available as part of the article and no additional source data are required.

Conflicts of interest

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