WWW.IJRPR.COM

International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Journal homepage: www.ijrpr.com ISSN 2582-7421

The Price of Authenticity: A Critical Ethical Analysis of Undisclosed Political Influencer Marketing in Malaysia's GE15

Mou Yujia[1], Mohd Haizra Bin Hashim[2]

Faculty of Business and Communication, INTI International University, Nilai, Malaysia
[1]I26038981@student.newinti.edu.my; [2]mhaizra.hashim@newinti.edu.my

ABSTRACT :

The scope of political influencer marketing has moved from the periphery of election cycles to their core in Malaysia's 15th general election (GE15) in November 2022. This paper studies the ethical problems that arise when a content creator and their audience are closely connected because of undeclared payment for promoting a specific candidate. The three seldom-used ethical systems in the body of media studies are Kantian deontology, Mill's utilitarianism and Habermas's idea of the public sphere. Based on empirical data, post-election news from Reuters and RSIS, the 2022 Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Content Code, leaked coalition offer sheets during the campaign, and the author's own behaviour as a lifestyle influencer on platforms such as Xiaohongshu and Douyin were used in this study. According to the thesis, unannounced political posts violate the right of voters to be informed, and even a small disclosure label cannot remedy this harm because the basic trust in the model is being exploited for profit. Platforms, authorities, creators and communication educators will also be held accountable.

Keywords: Influencer behaviour; Political advertising; Authenticity; Transparency; Duty-based ethics; Consequentialism; Habermas; Malaysia; GE15

1. Introduction

I have created a micro-program on both Xiaohongshu and Douyin to post pictures of my ginger cat, Lucky, and occasionally share some fashion videos. About a year ago, I made this account and have been responding enthusiastically to all the promotions. Lipsticks, sheet masks and budget phone cases were bought without hesitation because of the financial benefit. Around the sixth month, after a video of a cat I filmed on a Tuesday evening unexpectedly gained tens of thousands of views, I lost the motivation to respond to an employer. I would research the company, look at the ratings of its stores, and decline the promotional offers that were offered twice in the past six months. It was not a change of heart. Instead, the people I have spoken to about my work have not been keen on making a person brand out of me, and I have had to meet the need for funds myself based on their trust in my honesty.

A short, self-centered move has been made in the beginning of this study to explore a more serious expression of this relationship. GE15 significantly increased the incentives for TikTok users, Instagram influencers and local celebrities to support candidates. Reuters reported that the number of sponsored posts by political influencers had risen at that time, and many of the tweets did not disclose advertising (Reuters, 2022). Images of payment agreements from Perikatan Nasional and Barisan Nasional, including rates for videos and mandatory talking points, were posted on Twitter during the election period (World of Buzz, 2022). After the vote, TikTok removed the three racist videos that experts later identified as either the work of or paid for by sponsored creators, and the platform did not identify the funders (RSIS, 2022).

My study of the reasons for financial interference in a democracy is different from others. Therefore, I will focus on one problem: Under what circumstances do non-public subsidies change the ethical qualities of advocacy? I will integrate the three conceptual foundations of Kant's categorical imperative, Mill's hedonism and Habermas's idea of the public sphere, and evaluate them based on the three data-driven environments of the GE15 influencer network, some similar global cases, and my own experience as a commercial, non-political content creator. Please be aware in advance that I am not a member of the Communist Party and have never received funds for political discussion. I am precisely in this situation: I have received funds for endorsements, and now I need to determine, place by place, how to promote what I like and how to market the products of other companies that have paid me to endorse.

2. What Counts as Political Influencer Marketing?

Endorsements by famous people are not new ideas. Actors have been marketing soap and cigarettes since the 1920s, and politicians have used film stars for campaign purposes for many years. What distinguishes the new model of influencer marketing is the quality of the audience's interaction. A celebrity on a billboard is obviously an advertisement; a content creator in a For You Page who speaks directly to the camera as if talking to a roommate, mentions yesterday's meal, and tags the post informally in the first person is structurally no different from a freebie buddy. Crystal Abidin's

ethnographic research on micro-influencers in Southeast Asia has provided an excellent case study for this study and introduced the concept of 'relational labour'—the sustained effort to express affection for a community that believes it knows the person behind the handle (Abidin, 2018, p. 92). Viewers do not pay much attention to the image of an influencer. They believe it is the will of others close to them.

Political influencer marketing is a type of interpersonal structure. The object of promotion is no longer a serum but a candidate, a political party or a position in society. The structure of the language in the tweet is also relatively simple: a selfie view, a free sixty-second clip, and a tag that appears to be a personal post rather than an official announcement. If #ad is added to the start of a caption for a tweet, users will be informed of it and change their behaviour accordingly. On the other hand, if it is not labelled, it will be indistinguishable from the creator's own works and thus lose the characteristic feature of advertising; therefore, it may be perceived by viewers as the creator's genuine thoughts rather than as paid promotion.

Two additional problems occur. Although a sponsor's logo is shown, it has not captured the attention of the audience. According to a 2022 ACMA report, many young people have failed to notice or remember the sponsors' names in the advertisements because they are too short and do not stick in their minds (ACMA, 2022). Second, due to the different levels of moral quality for a 50,000-subscriber micro-influencer and a 10-million-follower macro-artist, there is no significant difference in price on the platform. Both are used to refer to the camera as a friend and are based on the emotion of closeness to the audience. Therefore, the number of followers cannot be used as a measure of moral influence, and new users who are unfamiliar with the disclosure rules are relatively numerous and less regulated in this network.

3. Theoretical Framework

The three ethical systems are employed to address all aspects of the problem here. Deontology deals with the system of connections between makers and users; utilitarianism focuses on the total downstream effects; Habermas studies what happens to the conditions under which a participatory public can engage in rational discourse. None of the above are sufficient alone.

3.1 Kantian Deontology and the Manipulation of Trust

Kant's most famous form of the categorical imperative is to always treat rational beings as ends in themselves and never merely as means to an end for one's own purposes (Kant, 1785/1998). Integration of political influencer marketing is to be implemented. A follower who believes she is watching the natural appearance of a figure by a performer is not receiving the data needed for self-reflection in adulthood. She is being led away from home to the polling station and then to a group of people by the false belief that they are talking about someone else. Compensation is not trivial; it is the foundation of the relationship, and to ignore it is to believe that the artist's love for the work is merely a reason for exploitation and does not deserve respect.

It can be seen that the voters are mature people who are aware of the crowding of digital platforms and are therefore not immune to all hidden signals. Kant has not ignored this, and his rule of universalisation worsens the problem. I wish that all the contributors would remain anonymous in their donations. If the answer is no, and almost everyone knows that a society where all suggestions are secretly paid for would destroy the trust underlying recommendations, then the unpublicised contributor is engaging in parasitism against the very system she wishes to reform. She takes advantage of people's desire for authenticity and is paid to harm that trust. Therefore, even if the public does not trust the officials, they will still be annoyed that their favourite influencer was paid.

3.2 Utilitarianism and the Longer Shadow

Deontology focuses on individual behaviour; utilitarianism, on the whole system of results (Mill, 1863/2001). The immediate advantages of an unlisted official position are relatively small; the employee receives a modest bonus, the inventor is rewarded, and the platform's interaction data are increased. However, it is relatively low-cost and difficult to implement precisely. Pollution of the data environment for voters due to paid media has led to less informed decision-making by these voters. Young first-time voters in Malaysia reached the voting age of eighteen after 2019, and because their media consumption is driven by TikTok and Instagram, they have not been well-informed about the funding of elections. A secondary effect of the reputation damage is that, after a large number of paid works are exposed, fans are now suspicious of all suggestions, even free ones. The artist who did not give a ringgit in support of the politician is regarded with the same suspicion as those who did. It is a myth-busting project in the government's office.

For example, an acquaintance posted pictures of her clothes, and in the first six months after posting, she received a promotional offer from a fast-fashion company, but the actual clothes were much thinner than shown in the pictures. She did not know about this at the time. Six months later, she noticed that some of her recommended products were not affordable according to the comments on social media and began to post unboxing videos for these items. It was not a bad moral decision. She chose not to damage her good name for the sake of an additional two minutes of filming. This is a limited form of practical utilitarianism in practice.

3.3 Habermas and the Recommodified Public Sphere

Habermas (1989) envisioned a space of the public sphere where ordinary people gather as equals to discuss life in society freely from interference by the state and businesses. Early social media were often viewed as the realisation of this idea. However, the disruption of this promise by political influencer marketing is not as simple as silencing voices. Rather than eliminating voices, they have added commercialised ones to the line of communication and are visually indistinguishable from the original voices in the areas where most citizens obtain their information nowadays.

Therefore, the Habermasian apprehension is not that gatekeepers have governmental beliefs. It is that the prerequisites for logical reasoning are subtly altered when a sponsored work is distributed by a system to the viewer most likely to be influenced by it. Sunstein's (2009) problem of echo chambers and Zuboff's (2019) concept of surveillance capitalism are related to this issue, but I wish to add a more specific, local observation. A few years ago, I was watching a twelve-second video on Douyin and heard a twelve-year-old girl talk about the exciting news that corporate lunar space agencies were

about to let ordinary people go to the Moon. The group of people in the reaction were unaware of it. I did not, as I had learned about that issue in the news a week before. All that was left of me was the absence of opposition; there were no curators or reference materials, only powerful expressions and a mobile phone camera. Political influencer posts operate in the absence of resistance and, additionally, the information is not trivial knowledge about the Moon but rather a proposal on who should be in charge.

4. Case Analysis

4.1 The Malaysian GE15 Influencer Landscape

The Malaysian GE15 is a representative case study, and its particular features should be investigated rather than all political problems. The country has many different ethnic and religious groups, and the so-called "3R" problems of race (bangsa), religion (agama) and royalty (raja) are long-standing divisions that the authorities have managed carefully. The 2022 poll was also the first after the reduction of the voter age limit to eighteen, and a large number of new registrants—specifically the group most integrated into TikTok and Instagram—were eligible to vote for the first time.

The Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) worked with Perikatan Nasional to become one of the leading users of this environment. It has been elected to the National People's Congress a large number of times in its 74 years. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (2022) has attributed much of this success to a strategic, well-funded use of micro-influencers on TikTok, and these individuals were not official party members. The work of art did not directly challenge the political power of the Party; instead, it incorporated cultural references, local Malay grievances, and life in the community. According to the RSIS study, relational persuasion is more effective because people are more likely to be persuaded by it from a peer than from a campaign.

The following two details are also related to ethics. Screenshots of the offer documents for PN and BN were spread on social media during the campaign, and details on the charge per video and required content producers were provided (World of Buzz, 2022). After the poll, TikTok removed three racially offensive videos that RSIS later found were either made with paid actors or sponsored activities, and the company did not disclose the identity of the payer (RSIS, 2022). In 2022, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Content Forum added 'influencers' to its Content Code and mandated full disclosure; by 2026, it is expected that short-form content such as 'sp' and 'collab' will also fall under the new transparency requirements (Content Forum of Malaysia, 2022, 2026). However, during the GE15 period, the implementation was irregular, and many small artists were either unaware of the regulations or worked through agencies that did not inform them of the posting requirements.

Malaysian citizens have a higher moral standard than the people in a politically unstable country. A sponsored role linked to ethnicity or religion will not be popular with the public. It may arouse the dormant hostility among the groups and, thus, cannot be addressed by a general announcement. Familiarity with the style of social media helps to spread the material more widely and have a greater impact. Habermas's perception in practice is that the people are not being ignored; instead, the stories of their lives are being financed by groups that do not pay taxes.

4.2 Comparable International Cases

Malaysia is a particular case, but the 2020 American cycle showed the same phenomenon of artists creating political content funded by campaign-affiliated groups; similarly, at the 2024 European primaries, young influencers were employed to spread ideas such as migration, environmental problems and financial stress. The Competition and Markets Authority in the UK (2023) has repeatedly pointed out that influencers fail to disclose paid partnerships in line with the law. This phenomenon is also happening in all these countries: the content is intimate, the payment is hidden, and the audience should be citizens but has been exploited through information falsification. It is not that the person is bad; rather, there are problems with the medium. A self-portrait clip will be for private use. When promoting the idea of "the individual", people tend to develop false expectations; however, this is not accidental but often the aim of commercial activities.

4.3 The Author's Own Practice

At the same time, I would like to share my personal thoughts on the ongoing successes of this system. In the first six months of my online life, I accepted corporate sponsorship, but now I regret it; I was only a college student, the money was needed, and I had taken possession of the goods. I did not learn how the company treated its staff or whether the cost demanded of the followers was reasonable at that time. According to Abidin (2018), I was not acting with integrity at that time. It is a relatively small amount, and if the moral standards in our limited circumstances are too high, they will not be applied to creators of politically sensitive works either. Although I changed my own behaviour and verified the sponsor and took possession of the goods myself, I did not refuse to participate in some projects. Gradually, it was known that the focus of attention for the audience was not on me.

5. Ethical Analysis: What the Three Frameworks Converge On

Although they have different reasons, the three models are to achieve the same goal. The Kantian problem is structural; a secret political office does not meet the needs of its followers as subjects of reason and therefore fails to arouse affection for the original founder. The utilitarian critique is instrumental; the immediate benefits for the contestant, the producer and the company are overlooked, and eventually, a loss of trust occurs due to the spread of propaganda on social networks and indirect harm to honest creators. According to Habermas's institutional view, the conditions for free public participation in rational discourse are indirectly changed when compensated communication cannot be distinguished from spontaneous communication, especially if such messages are directed at groups already used to consuming them.

Public Disclosure Requirements Are Necessary But Insufficient. A small '#'ad at the end of a long caption may meet the requirements of the Malaysian Content Code and UK CMA standards, but according to the ACMA (2022), many young people are unaware of it. Although it is disclosed, the problem

has not been solved: the follower still feels like a friend of the creator and is not compensated. Therefore, I have not been influenced by the popular idea that "if it is labelled, then it will be popular". Although it is better than no labelling, this method believes that the problem is one of data and does not consider the impact of reliable voices on explicit promotion.

I do not wish to mention the problem at present. Even fully disclosed political appointments are worrying. Does the creation knowingly support a candidate, disclose the team's bribery, and inform the public of such a connection with the public generally violate the rules? In my opinion, she will not participate in the event if the support is not sincere and the promotion is insufficient. She addresses the public in her later years. Under the pressure of excess from the artist or due to the algorithmic promotion of emotionally stirring expressions by the system, this boundary can shift from producing belief to inspiring it. The moral problem is not the political speeches of the creators. It is the hidden compensation, the construction of belief, and how the platform increases material wealth without thought.

6. Distributed Responsibilities

If the previous claims are valid, then the creator will not be held fully liable. Platforms will take the most practical steps. Given that a disclosure badge hidden in the caption is unlikely to be seen by users of vertical videos in this style, platforms should require a conspicuous and permanent on-screen badge for sponsored political content. They may also be more willing to disclose which messages have been funded for promotion and who the financiers are; the RSIS study in which TikTok refused to disclose the sources of the discarded GE15 clips is, in itself, strong evidence for improved firm documentation.

Administrative offices also have other duties. Although the new Malaysian Content Code 2022 requires the disclosure of influencer endorsements, according to the 2026 inquiry report, abbreviated labels such as 'spon' have not been used. However, there is still an inconsistency in the implementation for small producers and the agencies that represent them. Governments should be careful not to mistake the genuine creation ideas of individuals for paid content by corporations. However, it is not for the audience's information that a difference is made between a producer expressing their own views and a producer presenting what they have been paid to present.

It will be created by one person; that person is me. I will be humble in my work and do nothing to boast about the money I earn from my friends. If it is not allowed, I will not post that information. As a graduate student in the field of communication at present, I cannot offer advice to others on communication educators; instead, I have learned that genuineness is not a form of creativity. It provides a foundation for all the implementation of recommendations by the government and businesses in China. The next generation of makers and public communicators will be better equipped to succeed in life by learning to be confident.

7. Conclusion

Political influencer marketing will not disappear; in fact, it is likely to continue. Creators are entitled to own and spread political ideas, and parties can try to connect with the younger generation who now spends more time on TikTok than on any other TV station. Should Influencers Speak Out About Politics? Is it a Moral Issue? Otherwise, they will not be able to treat the people they meet well.

I have not been given a specific plan for living my life by this work. I will continue to post pictures of Lucky and occasionally agree to a brand collaboration. However, due to changes in my circumstances, I now observe the organisation, use the goods, and would be more inclined to decline a paid political position if the remuneration were shown upfront in the first video. It is not a good deed; it is the very worst for the people who believe what I have sincerely said. The cost of integrity is that makers do not turn down cash. Instead, it seeks to prevent money from changing the ideas of our audiences without their knowledge. If we are willing to do so, we will no longer be called artists. We are the people, and we are human.

REFERENCES

- Abidin, C. (2018). Internet celebrity: Understanding fame online. Emerald Publishing.
- Australian Communications and Media Authority. (2022). Influencer recognisability, effect and audience responses. ACMA.
- Competition and Markets Authority. (2023). Influencer endorsements: Online claim and investigation. UK CMA.
- Content Forum of Malaysia. (2022). Communications and multimedia content code 2022. Communications and Multimedia Content Forum of Malaysia.
- Content Forum of Malaysia. (2026). Public consultation paper No. 1/2026 on influencer guidelines. CFM.
- Habermas, J. (1989). The structural transformation of the public sphere (T. Burger & F. Lawrence, Trans.). MIT Press. (Original work published 1962)
- Kant, I. (1998). Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals (M. Gregor, Ed. & Trans.). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1785)
- Mill, J. S. (2001). Utilitarianism. Hackett Publishing. (Original work published 1863)
- Reuters. (2022, November 16). Malaysian parties turn to TikTok influencers in tight election race. Reuters.
- S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies. (2022, December 22). How political parties used TikTok in the 2022 Malaysian general election. RSIS Commentaries.
- Sunstein, C. R. (2009). Republic.com 2.0. Princeton University Press.
- World of Buzz. (2022, November 10). M'sians accuse PN & BN of offering to pay TikTokers to tell their followers to vote for them. World of Buzz.
- Zuboff, S. (2019). The age of surveillance capitalism. PublicAffairs.