

Social Media Influencers: Case Taiwan

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Master's Thesis in Education
Spring Term 2020
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank everyone who has offered guidance and support for this master thesis and my two-year master studies. My sincere gratitude goes to my two thesis supervisors, Dr. Leena Halttunen and Dr. Jaana Kettunen for their valuable comments and precious time commitment.

I appreciate every friend, classmate and staff of the Faculty of Education and Psychology for meaningful moments we cherished and invaluable life lessons we had together. Special thanks to the friend who stayed up till midnight to help me fix page numbers.

Most importantly, I would like to express my warmest thanks to my parents and my brother for their unconditional love and trust.

ABSTRACT

Lin, Anne. 2020. Social Media Influencers: Case Taiwan. Master's Thesis in Education. University of Jyväskylä. Department of Education.

This study looks at social media influence from the perspective of three Social Media Influencers (SMIs) in Taiwan. The purpose of the study is to provide a “behind-the-scenes” accounts of social media work strategy and career reflection from SMIs’ perspective.

This is a qualitative research with a case study approach. The interviews were done through an online platform and video recorded. The data were analyzed with a thematic approach.

The findings first included discussions of SMI social media strategies. The data also revealed SMI insights on creating influential content online. SMIs then provided personal views of current social media trends. Lastly, there were reflections on the challenges and lessons learned from the profession of SMI.

The results show SMI emphasize on finding value at work. They aim to be authentic online and constantly evolve in their work. In addition to content specific advice, SMI provided many universal life values. Finally, spontaneity was a major element of SMI content creation.

Keywords: Social Media Influencer, Taiwan, social media influence, social media

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1 INTRODUCTION

In 2020 we are seeing the rise of a new kind of leaders in the society: Social Media Influencers (SMIs). A handful of content creators are taking on the responsibility to spread messages that are deemed important on an international scale, such as topics related to the sustainable development goals crafted by the United Nations, in particular goal number 3 and goal number 4, which are respectively, to “Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages” and to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.” (Sustainable Development UN, 2020). First, the category of SMI that I work with in this study promote a plant-based lifestyle, which has been shown extensively through studies to promote environmental sustainability (Sabaté & Soret, 2014) and adequate personal health (Ha, 2019). Secondly, the content that they put up is free for all to access, which in turn supports equal learning opportunities for a large number of audiences.

In the case of Taiwan, the education values are being challenged despite the launch of new updated curriculum starting in 2019. YouTube and various other platforms are increasingly gaining popularity as more and more young people turn there instead of traditional schooling to acquire information. They feel a better engagement with the influencers due to the sense of authenticity shared (Arnold, 2017). As online media emerges as a form of education, social media influencers are partaking in the responsibility to spread the agenda that greatly influences the world. Many are becoming leaders of this social movement by incorporating ideas of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into their content as a way to educate the public about urgent and meaningful subjects of the world.

As I have been involved in social media as the role of content creator and manager of a plant-based food page since 2016, I have encountered many people who do work in this field. Plant based food is often linked the topic of sustainable food and is the one of the underlying drives and message of why these influencers choose to devote their time to create plant-based food contents. I was curious to find out how the social media influencers (SMIs) take on the lead to incorporate SDGs ideas into their content in a engaging way.

I have been working with social media content creation since 2016 with a Facebook page called Vegeholic. While it started off as a hobby, as I acquainted myself with professionals in the field, I began to wonder what the similarities and differences are between social media influencers and educational leaders. Finally, I wanted to learn more how the creators create content as a profession and communicate successfully with their viewers.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Social Media

Social Media is a phenomenon that is making significant impact on everyday consumers and in professional firms alike, as described by Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy and Silvestre (2011). The seven building blocks; identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups, offer a basic framework of how elements of social media divides and operates with each other (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Carr and Hayes (2015, p.49-50) describes social media as “Internet-based, disentrained, and persistent channels of masspersonal communication facilitating perceptions of interactions among users, deriving value primarily from user-generated content.” In other words, social media allow users to present themselves to others through the content that they selectively shape and generate. The communicating users do not need to be in constant communication like in real life interactions, so can take time away to think about what they want to say. Carr and Hayes (2015) also give examples of which common media counts as social media, including Youtube, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIN, Twitter. According to Kellogg (2020), these media are a few of the most major platforms judging by monthly active users. Some platforms that do not fit into this definition of social media include Wikipedia, Skype, Netflix, email, online news, etc. A relatively new technology Podcast, which is an episodic series of spoken word digital audio files, have users motivated by social factors such as discussing the show with other fans (Mcclung, S. & Johnson, 2010).

When social media is not purely seen as a platform, authors like Miller et al. (2016) focus primarily on the content that is within the functional software. The idea is to put emphasis on the sociality of human interactions above the medium that mediates the interaction. According to article by Miller et al. (2016), the way we describe social media should not be generalized because its content varies from region to region. Hence social media is a place in which people socialize, rather than just a means of communication (Miller et al., 2016, p. 5).

2.1.1 Social Media Influence

In this paragraph I discuss what consists of Social Media Influence in literature. Influence is an essential component in leadership, especially in a non-profit environment (Friedman, 2013). Social media is comparable to non-profit in the way that there is often no monetary incentive for the audience to listen to or act on what the influencer has to say. This is unlike the traditional leadership role of an employer or manager, where the employee could be bound to specific positions due to monetary gains.

According to Friedman (2013, p. 1), influence is “the power and ability to personally affect others’ actions, decisions, opinions, or thoughts”, since it allows leaders to promote their ideas and inspire people. One can be met with three different outcomes: resistance, compliance or commitment. The stakeholders whom you influence can fall under these categories: allies, opponents, associates, adversaries and those who are undecided (Friedman, 2013). The author also describes the core influence tactic to be rational persuasion, consultation, inspirational appeals and collaboration. Daniel, Crawford Jackson, and Westerman (2018) use the Taylor’s six-segment strategy wheel (SSSW) to increase understanding of SMI influence over loyal audience.

The legitimacy of social media is challenged by those who understand this medium as centered on style over content, where popularity and monetary gains are the center of focus rather than carefully reviewed accountable facts (Cameron, Carley, Weingart & Atkinson, 2017). In the same article, the authors raise the argument that first, sourcing information from a peer-reviewed document does not guarantee legitimacy since the process itself can also be flawed (Smith, 2006). Secondly, the article highlights that it is a cognitive trap to assume that consumers are unable to discern information from one type of media, for example, social media; and capable of discernment regarding another type of more traditional media such as a research article.

While legitimacy of content is undoubtedly important, I will focus the study primarily on the medium itself, since according to authors Garneli, Giannakos and Chorianopoulos (2017), through comparison of computer system based learning and traditional learning it is known that that learners have more motivation when they are

engaged with their preferred medium through which the information flows. In the social age, this represent engaging through and within social and electronic spaces (Stodd, 2016). "The medium is the message."(McLuhan, 1964) is a phrase coined by the pioneering Canadian communication thinker which describes that the medium ought to be the focus rather than the content in media theory. McLuhan describes the 'content' of a medium a "the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind."(McLuhan, 1964, p. 18). As consumers, we are so intrigued by the meat, which is here a metaphor for content, that we miss the burglar, which represents the subtle social structural changes through which the content itself is transmitted. The medium, or media, has the most impact on our lives, "...because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action." (McLuhan, 1964, p. 9). In Malaysia, SMIs are playing a huge role with its newfound trust amongst its youth, which as a result is shaping the entire consumption culture of the generation (Nur, Jayasainan & Hassim, 2018). The same study highlights the phenomenon of evident trust with the influencer enables SMIs to influence a massive number of followers. What they are buying and what the SMIs said to convince them becomes less important next to the obvious implication that they are buying because there is trust in the medium.

The influence of social media also offers a novel definition of information legitimacy, where the control of information is decentralized and power is given to the public for symmetric communication (Knox, 2016). Nur et al. (2018) find that the curation of Instagram posts by SMIs created shared voices among their followers due to their visibility of content.

Regarding the field of influence, workshop summary article (Kamal et al., 2013, p. 3183-3186) about designing social media for change describes that social media is used to address topics such as health and wellness (Foster et al., 2010,, Kamal and Fels, 2012, Kamal et al., 2010, Miller et al., 2013, Munson et al., 2010), collective action (Zhang et al., 2014), consumer engagement (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), and learning (Felt, 2010)."

What users see on social media has an effect on consumers' everyday health and wellness. Even when social media influencers promote unhealthy snacks, children's intake of those foods increase (Coates et al., 2019). In areas such as medicine education, social media is being embraced as a means of education as physicians begin to see its

utility (Madanick, 2015). Like Foster et al. (2010) mentioned in their article that social media can be used to motivate physical activity at work, online influencers often post content to motivate viewers to take care of their physical health.

Social media tools are vastly useful to produce significant change, and it is convenient and low cost since it can reach even the most remote area and unbounded by time restrictions. Many have taken the opportunity to share their passion and help others with this incredible tool. Naturally, there are ways to do so as in every method produce the same desirable results. Kamal, Fels and Fergusson (2014) tested designs of online social network to find out how to optimize positive change in health behaviours. They found that while social media provide a good opportunity for users to improve their health conditions, if the posts do not provide enough interest, the users will not be inclined to comment and interact with the content. In the future, they suggest making the design of social media tool more interactive, by implementing design that encourage interaction and personalization. This finding goes hand in hand with a very important factor in social media work: how to engage the audience. It is difficult fairly easy to do so when we are facing just a couple of audience. When there are ten thousand or more watching the content, it becomes trickier without a guideline in technique.

Study by Luo, Wang & Han, (2013) demonstrates an academic library reaping huge success via a social media campaign. For organizations looking to incorporate social media as part of their practice, Kaplan and Haenlein (2009) offers ten great tips. The first point is “choose carefully” the right kind of social media applications to use. The authors also highlight that interaction with consumers on social media is “all about participation, sharing, and collaboration, rather than straightforward advertising and selling. (p.65)” One should know to benefit from the type of user base the social media had rather than attempt to reinvent the wheel. For example, in Taiwan, a communication app similar to WhatsApp called Line is widely used amongst those 50-65 years old (2016), while Instagram’s users most commonly fall between the ages of 20-29 (Jan, 2020). There are five points which all apply well when it comes to helping the companies stay connected with the consumers (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009, p.66-67): be active, be interesting, be humble, be unprofessional and be honest. Since social media shortens the distance between people, companies can no longer hide behind a fabricated corporate image when

interacting with its consumers. Therefore, the above five traits have become simple and crucial elements of behaviour when conducting oneself online. It is worth noting that “being unprofessional” goes along with “not being afraid to make mistakes” since behaving like you got everything figured out might make you seem unrelatable.

2.1.2 Social Media Influencer

According to Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, and Freberg (2011, p. 1), social media influencers “represent a new type of independent third-party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media.” Some see SMIs as potentially hostile competition to existing corporations (Gorry & Westbrook, 2009), whereas others view them as good resources to empower users (Li, 2016). In a study by Li (2016), SMIs are also seen as those who make a significant impact by being very active on social media. SMIs are considered active social media users, described as “opinion leaders who can use their online platforms to diffuse information and affect the attitudes and behaviours of their audiences” (Moreno, Navarro, Tench & Zerfass, 2015, p. 246). Some have proposed a high number of followers to be an adequate indicator of high consumer influence (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). However, when compared to traditional celebrities with huge online following, SMIs can have more power influence on consumer purchasing decisions (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). As many kinds of people there are, also exists many types of SMIs who embody different combinations of traits mentioned above.

Social media influencers (SMIs) are often seen as having a leadership role in our society, as demonstrated in comparative study by Freberg, Graham, McGaughey and Freberg (2011). of SMIs personal traits to those of CEOs. SMIs and CEOs were perceived as “smart, ambitious, productive, poised, power-oriented, candid, and dependable” and were perceived as “NOT being victimized, likely to give up, self-defeating, lacking meaning in life, doubting adequacy, submissive, fearful, anxious, and thin-skinned”(Freberg et al., 2011, p. 91). What differs is CEOs being seen as more harsh in the sense that they are rated as more “critical, skeptical, and difficult to impress” compared to SMIs as “more likely to be sought out for advice and reassurance and more likely to give advice”(Freberg et al., 2011, p. 91). To sum up, while SMIs have a lot of

leadership traits, they also possess traits that make them stand out from traditional offline leaders.

Social media influencers also face the challenge of being authentic in front of their audience, according to Audrezet, Kerviler and Guidry Moulard (2018). The study reveal followers of social media influencers value highly the non-commercial feeling of the influencer; therefore, some tension could be created brands want to collaborate for product promotion. Many content creators are approached frequently with brand deals to promote their products. In the conclusions, the authors offer advice on how the influencers can remain authentic when working with brand deals. The first guideline is about how the influencer can freely express his or her opinion and creative work in spite of the brand deal. The brands must allow spacious leeway when it comes to accommodating the creative decisions of the influencer since he or she knows best what kind of content their audience is attracted to. Overly strict agreements from the companies are to be avoided if it does not suit the influencer fully since it shows that the other side has not done enough research on the nature of content the influencer produces, hence need to set strict guidelines to compensate. Influencers can also choose to actively seek out partnership if it aligns with the content or message of the brand. Lastly, Audrezet et al. state sharing transparency to the audience is extremely important when it comes to being authentic. With brand deals, always be honest about any kind of sponsorship. Before agreeing to a brand deal, always test or review the product first to see if it is actually a good product worth introducing to the consumers. It also helps to not present oneself as who are not, since social media influencers' followers like to see who they are in everyday life (Audrezet et al., 2018) is the ideal strategy for social media influencers when it comes to brand partnerships. It is when high passion and high transparency is displayed in the process of working with a brand deal. These Social Media Influencer strategies, no matter if it is employed by a small or large organization, will reap its intended benefit.

2.2 Plant-based lifestyle

According to the Vegan Society (2019), “veganism is a way of living which seeks to exclude, as far as is possible and practicable, all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose.”

People go on a plant-based lifestyle for various reasons, mainly, it has been shown to be beneficial for health performance (Lynch, Johnston & Wharton, 2018), reduce impact for environment (Sabaté & Soret, 2014). People also adopt a vegan lifestyle because it minimizes animal suffering (Gullone, 2017). Incorporating a plant-based lifestyle is a pragmatic solution to internationally important issues as highlighted in the Sustainable Development Goals (Sustainable Development UN, 2020). Out of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), SDG2 aim to ensure food security and nutrition within sustainable food systems. After examining the current food production system, Fanzo (2019) suggest that replacing animal foods with plant-based alternatives yields results that are better than the other diets when it comes to environmental sustainability. SDG3 strives to ensure health and well-being for all, which can be achieved through a principally plant-based diet (WHO, 2018).

As diet is a significant part of people’s lifestyle, I have chosen to define the term “plant-based diet” separately, which according to Ostfeld (2017, p. 315), “consists of all minimally processed fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes, nuts and seeds, herbs, and spices and excludes all animal products, including red meat, poultry, fish, eggs, and dairy products.”

Eating plant-based used to be a traditionally Buddhist way of eating in Taiwanese society, more popular amongst the older age range. Nowadays, it is becoming more popular across all age range as shown in Taiwanese research paper “Motives for consuming a plant-based”(Cheng, 2011, p.44). “Good for health” and “Kind to environment” are the top reasons that top the list (Cheng, 2011, p.95).

3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Social Media Influencers have risen in popularity in the recent decade (Patel, 2010; Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017; McNary, 2018) and made a big impact on the modern society (Richards, Caldwell & Go, 2015; Choi, Yoo, Noh & Park, 2017; Chahine & Malhotra, 2018). Despite this, while there is literature about the use Social Media (Gary, 2015, p.7; Wazed & Ng, 2015; Hussein & Hassan, 2017), much less is known about how to create influential content from a SMI's point of view. Consequently, this research aims to narrow this research gap and and a research into SMIs strategies of creating influential content online. The research objectives are to answer:

1. What are strategies of different influential SMIs?
2. How is social media used to create influential content?
3. What are perceptions and attitudes of SMIs views on current practices and strategies of social media influence?
4. What can SMIs improve on or change to maximize content influence?

4 RESEARCH DESIGN

4.1 The Participants

The participants of this study have several common traits, which was the criteria for my selection. First, they advocate heavily a plant-based diet. Second, they are advocates of personal wellbeing. In a preliminary search I did on Instagram, I asked the audience about their “favorite vegan, wellbeing lifestyle, travel channel” on YouTube. There were a lot of miscellaneous replies which included overseas influencers and a few traditional media contents. 23 people out of my followers answered my survey. The two most repeated answers were youtubers *Traveggo* and *Govegan*, with 4 of 23 people and 3 of 23 people respectively. Since they were the only two names that had multiple votes and there was a good possibility of securing an interview due to my personal relationship with them, I decided to include the influencers from these two social media brands in my research. *Traveggo* has 69,000 followers on Facebook, 68,000 subscribers on Youtube and 25,000 followers on Instagram. I interviewed Hao who manages *Traveggo* with teammate Yang. She studied advertising and worked as a classroom teacher. *Govegan* has 91,000 followers on Facebook, 99,000 subscribers on YouTube and 17,000 followers on Instagram. I interviewed Bai who manages the online platform *Go Vegan* along with his teammate Tree. He posts content mainly about plant-based eating and about personal growth, wellbeing and lifestyle. He started his Youtube career with educational animations about nutrition.

They have each substantial number of followers on social media, including Facebook, Youtube and Instagram and consider this as their profession and their primary source of income. These two participants are an extreme instance sampling (Tracy, 2012, p.136) since they represent the unique and extreme of this research field. They are excelling at their job which makes people choose them in my preliminary research survey.

In addition to the these two, I also chose Pei Pei from *Peipeifitlife* based on convenience and opportunistic sampling (Tracy, 2012, p.136). I have known Pei Pei from

through a product launch event for bloggers in 2019 and we have kept touch through social media. She is a health and fitness blogger with nearly 70,000 followers on Instagram. She posts nutrition, eco-friendly lifestyle infographics and started the educational podcast "Girls: stand out, FIT in." discussing issues about mental health and recovery. Prior to being an SMI, she worked as a visual designer full time at a company.

The age range of the participants is from 25 to 30. They have been full time SMI ranging from one to two years.

4.2 Data Collection

Individual interviews were used to get a deeper understanding of the subject matter. Through a more intimate setting of one on one interview, the hope was to touch on more personal perspectives that SMIs might not naturally disclose publicly. Qualitative interviews are used both for the individual interviews. The form was semi-structured interviews (Tracy, 2019, p. 139) with a set of questions, however still allowing participants to answer freely. This type of interview is flexible yet organized, which suits my needs as a first-time researcher. In terms of interview types, respondent interview was used since the participants are the professionals in the field, thus in an appropriate position where they can speak of and for themselves (Tracy, 2019, p.141).

The one-hour long interviews were done through the software GoToMeeting through which the video file was recorded, and an additional audio file was recorded with mobile as backup. The video file offered additional emotional cues that facilitated meaning interpretation during the transcription process. The participants were advised to sit in a comfortable and quiet area. An additional ice-breaker game was conducted prior to the hour-long interview. All three interviewees answered in their mother tongue Mandarin to ensure maximum capacity of expression.

4.3 Data Analysis

Inductive qualitative analysis was employed to analyze the data since there are no specific studies dealing with the specific phenomenon I was looking at, and I was not testing or comparing a designated theory (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

To prepare the data, the video recordings of the three individual interviews were transcribed. I first tried the google document internal audio transcription software but quickly realized the audio was not clear enough for the software. I then did manual transcription for all three interviews which helped me familiarize deeply with the data. Afterwards I translated all the mandarin text into English. In the end, the three interview transcriptions along with translation yield a total of 55 pages of text (font Times, font size 12, single line spacing). This time consuming process enabled me to have a deeper understanding and retention of the data content, which would help in the later process of coding and categorizing content. I divided up the paragraphs and condensed them into shorter meaning units, followed by assigning codes to the meaning units (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017). After I assigned codes to all the meaning units once, I went back again to group together some codes into categories. Through that process I modified some codes that conveyed similar meanings; such as turning “Viewers’ preferences” into “Viewing preference” since that would include both the SMI’s viewing preference and the viewers’ viewing preference. I also changed code names to differentiate them from each other, such as changing “Social media technical strategy” to “Platform specific strategy”, so that the code does not have meaning overlap with “Content strategy”. I did not label all the meaning units with the corresponding interviewee label since I know by heart who said what, but did so to some specific data to facilitate content presentation for readers.

Then I looked for overarching themes and I grouped together codes with similar themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Codes with similar themes are assigned the same number and listed under the same category. There are ten general categories. Some codes have a general theme so I transferred the name directly to the category name. For example, the category “Value of social media”, “SMI mindset” and “SMI reflections” have the same names as one of the codes they include. Finally, I grouped the general categories under the research question that they would answer to the best (See Table 1).

TABLE 1 Categorizing Codes

Research question answered	General Categories	Codes belonging to the categories
Q1: What are strategies of different influential SMIs?	1 Social media strategy 7 Viewer interaction	1 Content strategy 1 Operating strategy 1 Evolution of strategy 1 Platform specific strategy 7 SMI credibility 7 Target audience
	...	
Q2: How is social media used to create influential content?	2 Value of social media 3 Social media platforms 8 Definitions of social media & influence 9 Benefits of social media 10 Viewer influence	2 Value of social media 2 Value contribution 3 Choice of social media platform 3 Characteristic of social media platform 8 Definition of influence 8 Definition of social media influencer 9 Benefits of social media
	...	
Q3: What are perceptions and attitudes of SMIs views on current practices and strategies of social media influence?	4 SMI mindset 5 Social media trends	4 SMI mindset 5 Social media trend 5 Platform Influence
	...	
Q4: What can SMIs improve or change to maximize content influence?	6 SMI reflections	6 SMI reflection 6 SMI career decision 6 Future of SMI 6 Benefits of being SMI

Table 2 (See Appendix 2) shows two examples of open coding process for research question one. In the first paragraph, P2 shared about including content which advocates being friendly to the environment as a way to introduce veganism to the public, including using eco-friendly products and incorporating eco-friendly values. The paragraph was condensed into “Eco-friendly content” since that was the overall repeated theme. Then I assigned the meaning unit with the code “Content strategy”, because it was a direct answer to the interview question concerning the content strategies SMIs use.

The next paragraph is where P3 explained the situation where her viewers came to her for health advice and she could not help them because she did not have the knowledge to do so and could not take the personal responsibility. The paragraph was condensed into “Viewers sometimes ask influencers for health advice when they should be asking professional doctors”, since that was what I felt P3 wanted to convey. Then I assigned the meaning unit the code “SMI credibility”, because SMI legitimacy was a theme that I came across when doing literature review prior to the interview, except that in this paragraph the subject was approached through the influencer’s point of view. Later on, in the coding process I found out that this was the only time this theme was brought up, so I further categorized the code into the category “Interaction with viewers”, since an SMI credibility is part of how an SMI interacts with viewers.

Table 3 (See Appendix 2) shows two examples of the open coding process that answers to research question two. The first paragraph is a personal description of how P3 started in social media while being a full-time designer. She described her from struggling with weight to gradually gaining confidence through fitness and sharing her experience with viewers in a similar situation. I condensed the paragraph into the meaning unit “Personal story of finding content value on social media” as this reflects the overarching theme of the paragraph. I also noticed that finding value in one’s work was a recurring theme throughout all three interviews. I then assigned the meaning unit the general code of “Value of social media” for ease of categorizing with other influencers’ answers since this was a common theme, except that others did not necessarily iterate from a personal story perspective.

The next paragraph was a short description by P2 about how she was able to help businesses during the COVID19 pandemic, which I simply condensed into “Using personal influence to help businesses who are struggling in the pandemic”. I assigned to this meaning unit the code “Benefits of social media” as the influencer could not have assisted businesses in this unique way without the power of social media.

Table 4 (See Appendix 2) shows the open coding process of 2 paragraphs from research question 3. In the first paragraph P2 explained how YouTuber *TKstories* is able to create never ending content by holding onto his original intentions of spreading the Taiwanese value and promoting eco-friendly attitudes. This powerful intention which

steadies him is like a steady anchor that prevents boats to go adrift. Meaning unit “YouTubers like *TKstories* have an original intention that allows endless creation” was given, followed by assigning the meaning unit the code “SMI beneficial mindset”. This mindset is beneficial for SMIs to thrive continuously and steadily in an environment where people tend to burn out. Afterwards I included the code in the category “SMI mindset” in order to compare and contrast with different ideas of SMI mindset other influencers responded in different questions.

In the second paragraph P3 gave her opinion on SMIs in the present times and the industry trend for the future, to which I assigned the meaning unit “SMIs have become more professional with information-based SMIs as trend for the future”. I then assigned it the code “Social media trend” because theme of social media trends recurred a number of times when YouTubers described the context of their work environment.

Lastly, Table 5 (See Appendix 2) shows the open coding process of two paragraphs answering to research question 4. In the first paragraph P2 seemed totally baffled by the current situation of being a so called SMI. I decided to condense the text into “My situation with social media is unexpected so people should try it out too”, to which the code “SMI reflection” was assigned. I chose this code because she seemed to be simply reflecting without putting a strong opinion on whether she thought her situation of being SMI full time was positive or negative. In the second paragraph P1 gave personal opinion on how creators are being pushed to limits by pleasing viewers with what they like to watch, which I shortened to “people are pushed beyond their limit to produce drastic content”. The code “challenges of SMI” was assigned to the meaning unit since this was an overarching theme identified throughout answers from all three participants.

4.4 Ethical Solutions

Procedural ethics, which refer to the requirements of not doing harm, avoiding deception, getting informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality, are all carefully considered along the research process (Tracy, 2013, p. 243).

One of the concerns was that the participants are influencers that are in some ways public figures who might be concerned about revealing private information to the public.

On the other hand, I was not too concerned as one of the traits that differentiate the social media influencers from traditional celebrities is that SMIs are more willing to be transparent and authentic. To clear out any doubts, I explained the aim of the research and reminded that the participants can opt out of any sensitive discussions, regulate what is shown in the final research pertaining to their answers and ask further questions about the study.

As I was previously acquainted with all three participants, there was already a level of trust that I would treat the data ethically thus received no objections either before or after the interview process. In other words, there is a certain level of relational ethics on my part, which is an ethical concept explained by Ellis (2017), pointing to the ability to treat participants as whole people rather than tools to fabricate a juicy story. I believe that the other reason why they were not too concerned is that they already reveal a substantial amount of information of what would be considered private information as a mainstream celebrity, such as relationship status, private health conditions and personal opinions on sensitive topics. I also obtained written consent to use the participants names and related professional titles in the research.

5 FINDINGS

In this chapter the findings obtained following the data analysis and categorization are presented. The four main themes are: strategies of SMIs, how social media is used to create influential content, perceptions and attitudes of SMIs on current social media practices and how to maximize content influence.

5.1 Strategies of Social Media Influencers (SMIs)

The Social Media Strategies used by the three influencers are categorized into Content strategies, Operating strategies, Evolution of strategies, Platform Technical Strategies and Profit model.

5.1.1 Content strategies

All three influencers showed preference for natural and real looking content while P1 enjoyed content with a good storyline. Both P1 and P2 described current content strategies by mentioning having food and eco-friendly themes as content. Interviewee P2 talked about sharing eco-friendly products and values as strategies to get people to know veganism. P1 and P2 talked about the platforms Instagram, Facebook and YouTube with the main focus on YouTube. As content strategy, P1's claimed using delicious food to be an effective way of vegan activism since it invokes people's curiosity about the plant-based diet. The influencer shared about the time where many viewers voluntarily spread their video which featured an organic soymilk business, even though they did not urge people to do so. According to P1, viewers did so because the video had a touching core message. According to P1, stating out loud what people think stimulates viewer interaction and the spread of content. In P1's words,

"When a lot of people comment and share more stories because of the content this influences more people to resonate with it. This is social media influence. To put it simply it's to state out loud what is in everyone's heart. (P1)

(當很多人因為這個內容而留言分享更多故事的時候就是會引起更多人的共鳴這樣)

他就是一個社群的影響
簡單來講就是要講出大家的心聲啦 (P1)

The influencer also noticed that information-based channels are entertainment channels in disguise. P1 gave an example of a popular YouTube personality Ray *Du English*, who manages a channel targeted towards English learning. P1 pointed out that Ray Du's English tutorial videos get very few views while his entertainment videos are massively popular. P1 came to the conclusion that most people want the impression of learning instead of actually having to learn.

P2 learned about viewer preferences through market feedback. In line with the influencer's positive viewer feedback, the influencer focused on a theme based on minimalist lifestyle which embodied eco-friendly values. Street interview is a specific content style that P2 would like to explore in the future to extract and merge different ideas from the public. The influencer also stated observing the market trend to be important because viewer preference could be different from the creator's own expectations.

Due to the COVID19 pandemic, the influencer planned to shoot more cooking related content. P2 felt it was just as important to help people remain on the plant-based diet as it is introducing it to them. Meanwhile, P3 also shared personal content strategies on Instagram. We were taken through the initial stages of growth and continuously evolving strategies of the influencer's platform. The influencer credited part of her success to speaking her core values and being a voice for others. In addition, P3 highlighted that the authenticity of content, such as sharing her real side to people is an advantage as an SMI. In this case, it was sharing personal real-life story of the slow and hard process of losing weight on social media. P3 successfully combined personal profession and expertise of visual design with social media to produce popular content. Cost and efficacy was emphasized, as there was a need to balance between designing higher cost infographics content and lower cost picture content. Lastly, the influencer described making content as offering value to viewers.

Because I have found that when you offer them valuable content, they would want to follow you. They would want to see you. Yes... I am continuously thinking what kind of value I can offer. (P3)

(因為我有發現說當你提供有價值的內容給他們的話他們就會想要追蹤你
他們就會想要看你
對那我就是一直去思考我到底能夠提供什麼價值) (P3)

5.1.2 Operating and Platform Specific Strategies

P1 suggested laying down content differentiation from the start of a YouTube channel since it propels growth of Fanbase. The influencer highlighted the importance of channel direction since people do not tend to explore unfamiliar content. P2 stated that increasing the aesthetic quality of the media content increased the viewers' general level of acceptance to the video. P3 shared operating strategies and platform specific strategies for Instagram and Podcast. The influencer mentioned that consistent production and themed content make people want to follow the platform and suggested smoothly incorporating new content into current content for a successful content transition. Concerning the evolution of strategies, the importance of changing strategies based on feedback and growth is put into focus, while no set strategies are employed, since it is always evolving according to the P3. The influencer explained starting Podcast, to incorporate new styles of content into her continuously evolving brand.

In terms of platform specific strategy, P3 shared some technical adjustments for Instagram to make the social media platform appear more professional; proposing various assisting software and functional tips. According to the influencer, different accounts require different content styles. P3 also shared recommendations from a social media consulting specialist, such as putting multiple pictures in a single Instagram post to boost interaction algorithm. The influencer also recommended posting videos to increase the interaction rate and including Call To Action prompts to remind people what they need to do after viewing content. When it comes to Podcasts, the influencer asked people to leave comments in order to give feedback when recording the Podcast audio files.

Lastly, profit models of social media platforms were explored. Group buying and sponsorships was P3's current profit model although the influencer favoured building brand as profit model for the long term. The influencer revealed that more and more influencers are selling online courses and teaching digitally. P3 pointed out that YouTubers are switching from doing sponsorships to selling their own products. The influencer mentioned that contrary to popular belief, micro bloggers can gather niche customers and sell products better than influencers with a huge following.

5.1.3 Interaction with Viewers

P3 expressed enjoyment interacting with viewers, while also recognizing that some others content creators find personal interaction troublesome and time consuming. In fact, content creators do not always have time to take care of everyone. P3 also revealed to be able to create content based on personal needs since the platforms' target audience share many similar personal traits with the creator. P3 also stressed that as an audience, choosing who you are letting influence you is essential for mental wellbeing. The influencer pointed out that viewers sometimes ask influencers for health advice when professionals should be sought instead. For example, P3 was struggling to deal with viewers who came for health advice which the influencer could not take responsibility for.

I thought how I might know why you haven't got your period? I was thinking... don't you need to go to the doctor, like find a professional? Then I will educate everyone that people online might not be professional people. Like they might be more experienced; however, they might not necessarily be professional and not necessarily understand everything about you. (P3)

(例如說他問我說為什麼我月經不來

我想說我怎麼會知道妳月經不來

我就想說你要去看醫生吧就是要找專業的人

那我就會去教育大家說網路上的人不一定是專業的人

就是他可能是比較有經驗的人

那不一定是專業的人也不一定是真的了解你所有一切的人) (P3)

5.2 Creating Influential Content

This section reveals the findings answering to how social media is used to create influential content. First are the definitions of social media influence shared by the interviewees. Then there are descriptions on various social media platforms as well as their value and benefits. Lastly the influencers shared their insights concerning viewer influence.

5.2.1 Definition of Social Media & Social Media Influence

P1 shared that in the past, one can judge an influential person by the audience liking their channel and what they say and do; however, P1 revealed two novel ways to define influence for present days: lifestyle influence and influence of moral principles on viewers. P2 described social media as a double-edged sword which can be used for good and bad depending on one's mindset. This influencer defined influence by stating the most direct way to judge influence to be audience feedback. To P3, no matter the number of followers, everyone is exerting influence in their unique way. The influencer also explained influence as transmitting distinct moral values and being a voice for others or changing someone's perspective by making them reflect or take action. To the influencer, SMIs who organize information packages such as "Restaurants in Taichung (major city in Taiwan)" for the online community is exerting influence by transmitting value to those who need it. In this case, the content is valuable for people who want a one stop shop information on quality restaurants in the city of Taichung.

5.2.2 Social Media Platforms

P2 described characteristics of social media platforms: Instagram is fast-paced and focuses on instant visual images; YouTube emphasizes video posting frequency for the system to push the content and the average user age of Facebook users is higher. The influencer reflected on how the eco-friendly content concerning reusable menstrual pads did not perform so well on Facebook, possibly due to its higher age demographic. P3 explained that different platforms have different ways to present content, and these various presentation styles satisfy different needs. For example, the influencer mentioned that on Instagram, people do not bother to look at the lengthy text which accompany the pictures. P3 claimed that the content characteristics of Instagram is rich visual media and simple texts, so it is better not to write large amounts of text. Going against the grain would result in exhaustion for both the creator and the viewer, since one had taken so much time to write without getting satisfying feedback and the other had read a lot more than expected.

The influencer further explained the choice of the social media platform Podcast, stating that not only is it a growing market opportunity in Taiwan, the audio

characteristics of the platform also supports P3's content style. The influencer also chose Podcast due to the complexity of YouTube, which was the other platform P3 was considering developing. P3 emphasized that choosing wisely what kind of content to put on which platform would save influencer and viewer alike time and energy. Lastly, the influencer also shared that content can be efficiently used by being repackaged and re-exposed in different ways on suitable platforms.

5.2.3 Value of Social Media

P1 planned to add more content with moral values into the previous entertainment focused content, such as their vegan dating themed videos.

The strategy for content creation was to make fun content a while back. So, we emphasized this a lot. Then now, we realized that things with moral principles leaves a deeper impression on people. Plus, they want to watch this type of thing. So onwards with the content creation, we will add more things with moral principles related to our channel. For example, elements like environmental protection, health issues or being kind to animals. We will increase the percentage a little. For example, the video that we are shooting tomorrow is a vegan dating video. It's the next episode again. Before, there was no moral message, so it was not okay. (P1)

(因為前一陣子創作的策略是想辦法做出有趣的影片

所以會把這個比重放的很大

然後但最近發現有理念型的東西的內容大家會記得比較深刻

而且會想要看這樣的東西

所以之後創作方向的內容我們會把比較多跟頻道主題有關的理念型東西放在裡面

例如環保健康啊或是愛動物的元素

比例會放比較多一點

例如明天要拍的那支影片就是素食約的影片

又是下一集了

之前都沒有理念就覺得不行) (P1)

According to P2, there are many ways to promote the plant-based lifestyle. P3 reiterated the personal journey of finding content value on social media. The influencer also emphasized the importance of mindset in a good fitness plan. From working as a full-time designer to becoming an SMI, P3 explained how the value contribution has changes for her; it went from contributing her skills to a specific client to contributing to a general audience. Most elements in P3's SMI profession are unclear and self-defined, except for sponsorships where the requirements are clear: the influencers receive clear guidelines from sponsoring companies to create specific content value, then viewers return monetary value to the company by purchasing the advertised product.

5.2.4 Benefits of Social Media

P2 was able to assist struggling businesses during the pandemic using social media platforms. The number of people dining out dropped drastically so the influencer decided make the public aware of the restaurants' new take out options by organizing individual restaurant information into one single formatted Facebook post. P3 also mentioned that due to the pandemic, people are starting to become aware of the value of working remotely. In fact, the influencer pointed out that SMIs are in an even better position now because more people are watching more social media since staying home.

Furthermore, P2 proved that new media can even triumph in what has yet to be attempted by traditional medias, citing the case of talk show "The night night show". According to P2, "The night night show" single-handedly successfully introduced the culture of talk show to Taiwan using solely social media platforms. The influencer realized that important values can be incorporated into video content to spread around and encouraged those who wish to spread positivity to build their own social media and try it out.

Lastly, another of the many benefits of social media mentioned by P2 is its speed which promotes instantaneous transmission of ideas. According to P3, instead of having to use time and resource consuming traditional news outlets, like publishing on newspaper or getting featured on radio, people can now use social media to expose one's values. The influencer noted that on Instagram, even strangers are easily within reach. P3 is grateful to have chosen this unique career path since this profession combines all the elements the influencer enjoys.

5.2.5 Viewer Influence

P1 frowned at people's desire to watch shocking content over quality content. The influencer also observed that most viewers watch videos to kill time rather than to learn. P2 also agreed by pointing out the popularity of sensational topics on the internet, while wishing for less sensational and negative topics which the principal motivation is the please people. On the other hand, P2 found through creation process that people like healing and relaxing videos, and daily lifestyle videos like the series "what a vegan eats in a day". The influencer also recognized that talk show type of content like *Mr. and Mrs.*

Gao are popular. As a viewer, P2 showed disdain for sensational content with shocking titles, while displaying preference for talk show content and unpretentious lifestyle type videos. P1 came to the conclusion that people only like the feeling of learning rather than actually learning, providing the example of *AD English's* popular YouTube channel, where very few people watch his English tutorial videos compared to his entertainment videos. P1 further commented that there are real information learning channels but very few in Taiwan. This echoed P3's point of view that people like content that is effortless to understand. When it comes to viewers' influence on platform, P1 pointed out that the viewers' feedback greatly affects YouTube algorithms. In terms of viewer mentality, the influencer described that viewers might not necessarily like the content that they end up watching. For example, P1 gave an example where unexpectedly, viewers reacted strongly to an incident. The influencer remarked that we should influence audiences' viewing habits.

5.3 SMI Views on Current Social Media Trends

This section includes findings on the mindset of SMIs at work and social media trends.

5.3.1 SMI mindset

P1 believed that content reflects a creator's state of mind. The influencer hoped that people would not exhaust themselves for the sake of earning money or becoming famous. P1 and P2 also shared some beneficial mindsets for SMIs. The former stated that liking what one does and being oneself is most important when creating content. The latter mentioned the importance of intention by giving the example that one can get lost if they do YouTube just for fame. The influencer credited popular YouTube channel *TKstories's* success to its content creator *Al K Lin* who established a strong original intention of promoting deep Taiwanese values, resulting in endless creation throughout the years.

Furthermore, P2 revealed that creators must to have a solid positive mentality in order to effectively influence others. P3 remarked that to remain continuously active on social media requires liking what you do rather than pleasing others. It was equally important to balance audience preference with what the creator wanted to produce,

otherwise it would lead to disappointment and lack of meaning. P3 emphasized that even though many methods can be employed when it came to managing social media, mindset and action are the most deciding factors. Lastly, the influencer also identified discipline as a crucial habit to cultivate for consistent media production.

5.3.2 Social media trends

According to P1 and P2, the decision makers behind the YouTube platform have major influence over how social media content is produced in the larger community. P1 stated that YouTube is starting to push content that have unique themes and not purely entertainment based. Entertainment channels that do not have a real core message are decreasing in number due to the platform's influence.

The direction they are heading is closely related to the platform. Because YouTube is now adjusting to, they are not recommending so much anymore purely entertainment style channels. They hope to see many different styles of content. Channels with themes. Like how we specifically introduce vegan food. Like others might specifically tell stories. Or channels that specifically showcase dancing. They hope it would not be channels that are purely entertainment. (P1)

(他們往的方向前進其實跟平台蠻有關係的

因為現在 YouTube 在調整成

純娛樂型的頻道他們就比較不會推薦了

希望看到的事各種不一樣

有主題性的頻道

像我們專門介紹素食

像其他可能是專門講故事

或是專門跳舞的頻道

他們希望不要是純娛樂型的頻道) (P1)

P2 showed approval for YouTube's decision to use demonetization to prevent content creators from creating excessive sensational content. P1 shared that due to increase of content creators these few years, influencers are pushed to make content based on what the viewers enjoy watching. P3 noticed the trend of micro-blogging, which has been a popular way recently for SMIs with around or less than ten to twenty thousand followers to market oneself and earn money through product sponsorship. The influencer stated that generally speaking, SMIs have become more professional with information based SMIs becoming the major trend in the future. For P1, the YouTube channel *Mr. & Mrs. Gao*, which is a story-telling channel about urban legends and

mystical sciences, is a popular channel that could be labelled as informational channel. P2 also spoke about the subject of traditional media versus new media. The influencer remarked that traditional media tend to look down on new media, while some new media channels are trying to make content similar to traditional media without major success to date. P2 noticed that social media channels that attempt content that traditionally belong to traditional media still remain immature in terms of execution.

5.4 SMI career reflection

In this final section we include the findings on SMIs' career reflections. There are SMI general reflections and challenges of being SMI.

5.4.1 SMI general reflections

P2 was at awe with the volatile nature of this social media lifestyle. The influencer encouraged those who wish to influence others to go ahead and do so by holding onto their original intentions.

Actually, at first I never thought I would have now how to say... Like the situation now. Yeah. I never thought really never ever. And so I really encourage everyone to try it. As long as you want to promote want to spread things and values. And as long as you remember the original intention. Try to use this media to do it. Perhaps the result is what you never expected. (P2)

(其實我當初也沒有想到有現在的 怎麼講

就是現在這樣子的 對

完全沒有想到 真的完全沒有想到

然後所以我很鼓勵大家可以嘗試看看

只要你有想推廣 想傳播的東西跟理念

然後你只要記得這個初衷

想辦法去運用這個媒體 去做做看

說不定成果是你想像不到的) (P2)

The influencer decided to be SMI full time in 2019 because there were many emerging opportunities on the market. P3 shared that being SMI means having an identity where the future is not clearly laid out. To the influencer, focusing on the present tasks at hand has produced the current successes of the platform. P3 also brought up that becoming SMI was not part of the life plan and there are still no clear personal goals assigned to this job. P3 disclosed that executing well every current matter leads to desired future

opportunities. In other words, the influencer advised to just focus on present moments instead of the past or future. Finally, P3 warned that sticking to a plan without compromise might result in missing many opportunities in life.

5.4.2 Challenges of SMI

First, P1 revealed that SMIs are stereotyped and stuck with the content they are known for. P1 commented that although it is challenging, there is the possibility to make content that people enjoy while also conveying information authentic to oneself. For the influencer it is hard to influence others while also producing content they like. P1 also expressed that people are pushed beyond their limits to produce drastic content. According to the influencer, people might deviate from what they originally wanted to create if SMI becomes a full-time job. For P2, working with real life partner caused the tense situations in life and work to bleed into each other.

The mentality. We started our business I would say as a couple because it's not just myself. Even until now when we shoot videos as two people sometimes, we still fight because we are a couple. So it is like mixing life and career everything together
 So sometimes maybe the small things in life bleeds into to work
 And the emotions at work is brought back again to the original time spent together
 (就是心態
 我們算是兩個人創業也嘛因為不只我一個
 其實到現在遇到兩格人一起拍片的時候還是會吵架因為情侶嘛
 等於生活跟工作全部都混為一潭
 所以有時候可能生活上面的小事到工作
 然後工作上的情緒又帶回到原本長相處的時候) (P2)

As a result, the quality of content was adversely affected. To ameliorate the situation, P2 allowed the other party to work on tasks connected to personal preference. Meanwhile, P3 revealed facing people's doubts when leaving the previous stable job to become freelancer with no label.

6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This chapter discusses and concludes the findings of this research and intends to answer the research questions: 1) What are strategies of different influential SMIs? 2) How is social media is used to create influential content? 3) What are perceptions and attitudes of SMIs views on current practices and strategies of social media influence? 4) What can SMIs improve on or change to maximize content influence? There are six main topics of discussions organized from the findings which attempt to answer the above research questions: 1) Finding value at work, 2) Being authentic online, 3) Constant evolution, 4) Lack of tangible advice, 5) Content creation is spontaneous and 6) From entertainment to edutainment. In addition, there is a review of the study in terms of ethical concern and trustworthiness, followed by recommendations for future research.

6.1 Finding Value at Work

All three influencers found significant value in helping others. P1 did so by collaborating with quality businesses to help them advertise their products. The influencer was quick to self-criticize when video content did not provide moral value. P2 helped many businesses who were struggling during the virus pandemic to advertise their services free of charge, and looked visibly disheartened when reflecting on how the businesses were having a hard time during the pandemic. P3 stated that she loves to interact with people online. It was clear that the influencer made a conscious effort to answer to people's needs even though it is very time consuming and there were no designated monetary compensations to attend to those individuals. The influencers seemed very invested and emotional when discussing about helping other. P3 got choked up when

talking about a massive personal life change with fitness and immediately followed by stating a strong will to transmit this value to other women.

To be able to transmit value to others and receive equal amount of value is a motivation that keeps these influencers going. This is in line with the idea of reciprocity as a key concept which is desired in social interactions (Pelaprat & Brown, 2012). Reciprocity is an exchange with two parties which involves giving and returning, which can be for mutual benefit or otherwise (Lewis, 2015). To start off, monetary feedback is a very important driving factor for the influencers. According to P3, viewers should know that influencers do not have the responsibility to take care of each person since viewers are not paying influencers directly to do their job. However, when sponsors pay the influencer to advertise their products, there is a duty to fulfil the expectations. P2 demonstrated reliance on social reciprocity when with the response to how to gage influence was through immediate viewer feedback. In this case, people's feedback is the value that is returned to the influencer in exchange for the hard work put into the content.

To sum up, the value provided by these three influencers include emotional support for the viewers, moral guidance for viewers and publicity support for other affiliated parties like the sponsoring company. In return, the influencers receive value in the form of: monetary feedback, positive recognition from the viewers and companies, positive feedback from other content creators. Although the influencers did not mention the impact of receiving positive feedback from other creators, P2 took time to compliment my own video content during the interview, which left me feeling motivated and happy. We can see this similarity in the popular podcast *A Conversation With* with well known YouTubers from *SimplyNailLogical*, where channel manager Ben pointed out that one of the most encouraging factors in content creation is receiving positive feedback from fellow creators.

6.2 Being Authentic Online

A major theme that surfaced throughout the interview process is the idea of being authentic online. To start off, influencers P1 and P2 both mentioned liking content that

seem natural. P1 liked to watch content that have a natural flow, shot in everyday life. The influencer advised strongly against producing drastic attention seeking videos to acquire profit and fame. P2 also showed preference for daily vlogs when it came to content since its improvisational nature encourage genuine expression. The content is more authentic when it comes to Video Blogs (Vlogs). P3 credited a part of her success for showing her real side online. She said that this human side of her makes her more accessible to her viewers. Sometimes being real meant having the courage to show one's unglamorous side. P3 talked about her experience of binge eating, which helped her gain people's trust.

P1 bluntly stated to not be watching YouTube any longer when asked which influencer strategy was memorable. This is honesty that is not often seen from traditional celebrities in Taiwan, where politically correct "stage speech" is often practiced in the professional field to minimize interpersonal conflicts, as discussed in study by Li, Lin, Yang and Yeh (2018). Being authentic is a trait of influencers on social media. This differs from traditional celebrities who are known to be packaged as ideal as possible for the fans. SMI influencers often include authenticity as part of their brand. Just as P1 said, setting the direction of one's channel from the beginning and remaining integrated to it greatly helps channel growth. Firstly, they often make content which includes their real life, such as shooting vlogs or street interview videos which include their real opinions. Secondly, they were always known for being a real person so they do not have pressure to be someone they are not. This reflects the findings of study by Jin, Muqaddam and Ryu (2019) in which consumers exposed to an SMI perceived the source to be more trustworthy than those exposed to a traditional celebrity. Unlike mainstream celebrities who often have to be someone they are not, SMIs often do not have to make that sacrifice since perfection was never the starting point of their personal brand. Besides, viewers nowadays can catch what is real and what is not very easily in the long run, echoing what P1 answered in interview.

While the influencers are seen as real, it is important to note that the influencers here are real not to the extent of being rude or expressing their ruthless opinions in the expense of others. In P2's case, the influencer expressed wanting less entertainment content, while still acknowledging that it is fun and relaxing. We could also see P3

honestly commenting on other social media influencers while still appreciating individual differences.

6.3 Constant Evolution

Constant change is another identifying factor in the world of social media according to the influencers. P2 described to always updating the quality of their videos, since the better quality it is, the more people can accept the content of the videos. SMIs have to constantly update their skills because according to P3, influencers nowadays are becoming more and more professional.

On the other hand, P1 reflected having difficulties evolving their content with what their own interest, since their viewers accustomed to watch a specific type of content they produced. P3 also faced the challenges regarding content evolution when wanting to move away from her original bento box meal content and incorporate more information about health and wellness. A social media content specialist provided technical strategies to assist with a smoother transition. To sum up, influencers are often faced with the issue of being stereotyped into a certain category of content, which is beneficial to help them accumulate similar profile audience, and at the same time limiting in terms of content development.

6.4 Lack of Tangible Advice

The influencers generally had difficulties giving specific strategic advice. There were a certain level of apprehension and lack of confidence when having to do so. For instance, when giving opinion about what kind of content is popular online, P2 hesitated to make generalizations.

P1 replied directly to not knowing how to respond to the questions about how one wishes other influencers can modify their content. P1 tend to emphasize individual experiences and perspectives rather than make generalizations. In P1's words, content is just a reflection of the content creators mind. This is a very subjective view of reality where people's experiences are mainly based on their personal perspectives. For that

reason, there is lack of tangible advice since what works for them might not work for another person.

When they do offer advice, the focus is on general mindset rather than technical tips. For one, technical strategies might not be the priority since the world of social media changes rapidly, so core values are more important. When came to suggestions, P3 stressed that in the end, these strategies have too many changing variables. The important element to the influencer was execute well every present moment since the past cannot be changed and we never know how the future will turn out. For P2, holding on the one's original intention is a crucial part of being able to do this job long term. Lastly, P1 strongly advised to be authentic and enjoy what we do. These are all suggestions that concern human core motives which lean towards idealistic values that they are striving towards.

6.5 Content Creation is Spontaneous

Another element that stood out in the interviews is the process of content creation that often occurred spontaneously or unexpectedly. Co creation was a big part of what made social media work interesting for the SMIs. For P1, co creation with the viewers was neither described as a positive or negative phenomenon. The influencer mentioned that their content was once widely distributed due of an accident that happened during the shoot which caused an uproar online.

P1 explained that this is the part of the job where things could be controlled because you never know how the viewers would react to an event or how external factors would play out during a shoot.

P2 shared many events where co creation came into play in her social media creation journey. First, the influencer always looked out for market trends and feedback as a basis for video content. "What I eat in a day" videos blogs were originally not planned but became a regular series on the channel because many showed interest to see P2's daily life and to get to know the influencer's personal values related to minimalism, eco-friendly living and otherwise. P2 showed a strong interest to do street interviews since it represented content co creation with the public.

Lastly, P3 described not having specific plans for the future because uncompromising goals often meant that one could miss great opportunities that come along the way. The influencer described that most content creation happened unexpectedly, like incidents in the course of life. P3 never imagined her personal trainer to suggest about starting an Instagram one day, nor to be asked by a publisher to write a book. To the influencer, the concept of mindfulness is like living every present moment well because only then life will lead you to the place that you want to go. To P3, mindfulness was a strategy to deal with the spontaneous nature of the profession.

All three influencers dealt with the spontaneity of content creation with a unique mindset. The indicator of how an individual react to an experience lies in how mindful they are, which is a concept described in study by Agnoli and Vannucci (2020) that originates from Buddhist meditation traditions and has received a great deal of attention in medicine, psychology, and neuroscience. In other words, it is the subject's ability to regulate the focus of the attention in the present moment with an open attitude to accept the experience, that determines how much stress or wellbeing one feels (Agnoli & Vannucci, 2020).

6.6 From Entertainment to Edutainment

To round up the discussions, one major trend we have seen from the influencers answers is the shift from having social media as a tool for pure entertainment to a tool for education. Social media has become a medium of entertainment from which the educational content is carried out. This echoes the study by Garneli et al. (2017) demonstrating learning mediums having an impact on student performance and attitude. Edutainment is a learning method combining education and entertainment, beneficial for the integration of formal and informal learning (Isacsson & Gretzel, 2011). In the world of social media, famous SMIs have reaped success by following this model of edutainment. For instance, in YouTuber *Ray Du English's* case iterated by P1, Ray's success could be attributed to the meticulously combination of the education and

entertainment aspects of his channel. Even though in P1's opinion, Ray's actual educational videos have very few views compared to his entertainment style videos, carefully examining Ray's channel statistics has led me to the conclusion that there is really no clear differentiation between education and entertainment in his video content. In addition, all of his videos range from downwards fifty thousand views to upward six hundred thousand views, which one can argue is only a difference of being influential and being super influential. Having accumulated over two and a half million subscribers to date, it is hard to deny Ray's strategy of incorporating entertainment into his educational content.

Mr. and Ms. Gao is another YouTube channel deemed to be successful by both P1 and P2. To P1, *Mr. and Ms. Gao* is an information channel packaged as an entertaining storytelling channel. Again, despite the educational content the channel provides, the element of entertainment pervades each of the videos that have well over an impressive two million views.

Finally, from P3 emphasizing information-based SMIs becoming the future market trend, to P1 disclosing YouTube's change of strategic emphasis on themed content channels instead of purely entertainment channels, it is clear that the general trend of the social media is increasingly moving from entertainment to edutainment.

7 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

It is important to note that some factors of this qualitative research might affect the trustworthiness of the studied topic. The trustworthiness of the study can be reviewed in terms of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1988). First, looking at credibility, which is the confidence in the “truth” of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1988). In this research, the soundness of the research by involving a larger audience other than myself in the selection of study participants, as well as only choosing participants who are within my criteria of being full time SMIs. Honesty of informants was ensured to the maximum capacity by ensuring full willingness of participation and freedom of withdrawal (Shenton, 2014, p. 67). Credibility of the researcher is ensured since I transparency stated knowing the informants and to be familiar with the field. There is no personal interest to gain from any specific data from the participants since this is neither funded by an external source or intended to be used as data for a specific project. One concern is the lost of meaning through the process of Chinese to English translation from the participants’ mother tongue to the thesis written language. The counterargument to this inevitable loss of credibility is the extra time put into analysis in the time translation consumes. Translation is a process that promotes deep analysis since translating from and to languages with such different cultural context require complex understanding of many factors underlying the words themselves. It requires the researcher to examine the data repeatedly from different cultural and social angles. Since I have received my education throughout the years equally in the English and Mandarin language, in both a western and eastern context, I can understand and express myself adequately well in both languages.

Another criterion is transferability, which refers to whether the findings of the research can be applied to other times, settings, situations or people (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Although this research does not intent to serve as a guideline for all SMIs in Taiwan, the moral values and general advice shared by the participants are general enough to be transferred to SMIs of similar background profiles. Though we should keep

in mind that strategic advices that are constrained by socio-economic factors, time and location are does meet the criteria of transferability for a wider group of SMIs.

The third criteria is dependability, which refers to the evaluation of research accuracy and whether or not the findings, interpretations and conclusions are supported by the data. It shows findings to be consistent and could be repeated (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). To increase research dependability, I received assistance from my thesis supervisor who reviewed the study several times in the entire process, specifically after literature review and formulating research questions, after presenting data findings and again after writing discussions and conclusions.

Lastly, the criteria of conformability refers to the findings of the research shaped by the participants rather than the result of the researcher's own biases. Triangulation is a technique which involves using multiple data sources in an investigation to test validity (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). The triangulation of this research is weak due to the scale of the research which was not able to satisfy the four methods of triangulation described by Denzin (1978) and Patton (1999). Due to constraint of time and monetary resources, we were not able to meet methods triangulation, analyst triangulation, theory/perspective triangulation and triangulation of sources (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). First, all three influencers are in the beginning stage of their careers ranging from 1-2 years of experience. Longitudinal studies are needed to get a full picture of how the influencers' point of view changes in time. Secondly, all three influencers have fairly uniform moral values in terms of ideas they advocate for: helping others, coming across as an authentic person, finding value at work. The results might differ greatly if the research was conducted on different styles of influencers, such as entertainment or sensational personalities. Third, even though I would like to think that knowing the influencers personally made them more comfortable to reveal some deeper perspectives, it is a possible that it make them uncomfortable to state views that are not so politically correct.

Future research where the interviewee can remain totally anonymous to even the interviewer would ensure total comfort in terms of the risks of being judged as a public figure. It would also be beneficial to do a comparative study interviewing SMIs at different stages of their careers, for example those who worked as SMIs full time for over one year, then those over three years, then those over seven years, to examine any

difference of career perceptions. Lastly, longitudinal studies showing how these SMIs change throughout the years could show a fuller picture of how their perceptions change and evolve with time. It would generate more extensive data to identify whether there are repeated SMI strategies that could be a deciding factor for success in this line of work.

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APPENDIX 1 INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What are strategies of social media content creation by different influential SMIs?

關於創作者的内容策略?

- a) In general, could you describe the main strategies of social media content creation?
- b) Do you have main strategies when making content?
- c) What are some memorable strategies from other SMIs?

a) 你能不能大致描述創作社群媒體内容的策略/創作方式?

b) 你自己做内容主要的策略/創作方式?

c) 在其他創作者身上有哪些讓你印象深刻的策略/創作方式?

2. How is social media used to create influential content? 關於社群媒體如何促進内容創作?

内容創作?

- a) How do you define influential content?
- b) How does social media play in the role of content making?
- c) How do you increase content influence with social media?

a) 你如何定義「有影響力」的創作内容?

b) 社群媒體如何去影響内容創作的過程?

c) 要如何運用社群媒體提升創作内容的影響力?

3. What are perceptions and attitudes of SMIs views on current practices and strategies of social media influence? 社群媒體創作者如何看待現在的創作走向?

- a) How do you feel about current practices and strategies of social media?
- b) What do you think SMIs can include more of in their current practice? Why?
- c) What do you think SMIs can focus less on in their current practice? Why?

a) 妳對目前社群媒體的操作方式和策略有什麼想法/感覺?

- b) 妳認為社群媒體創作者能在現有的創作過程中多融入什麼？
 - c) 妳認為社群媒體創作者能在現有的創作過程中可以少一些什麼？
4. What can SMIs improve on or change to maximize content influence? 社群媒體創作者希望做出的提升或改變？
- a) What factors do you keep in mind when you want to create influential content?
 - b) Is there anything you would improve on or change in your current practice to maximize content influence?
 - c) What do you think is the collective direction creating influential content online is moving towards?
 - a) 在創作有影響力的內容時你會記住哪些元素？
 - b) 當妳自己創作有影響力的內容的過程中會想要提升或修改什麼？
 - c) 關於有影響力的網上內容，你認為集體創作者正朝著什麼方向前進？

APPENDIX 2 INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

TABLE 2 Initial Analysis - Open Coding

Participant	Original Text (Translated)	Meaning Condensations	Units	Codes
Theme: (Q1) Strategies of SMIs				
P2	<p>Secondly it is the environmental perspective Perhaps sharing about the eco friendly products that I use or some eco friendly values</p> <p>And because maybe people get to know veganism through the environmental aspect</p> <p>...</p>	Eco-friendly content		Content strategy
P3	<p>Or I might also meet some people who should be seeking professional doctors but find me instead</p> <p>For example they will ask me why they haven't got their period</p> <p>I thought how might I know why you haven't got your period</p> <p>I was thinking don't you need to go to the doctor like find a professional</p> <p>Then I will educate everyone that people online might not be professional people</p> <p>Like they might be more experienced</p> <p>However they might not necessarily be professional and not necessarily understand everything about you</p> <p>Because there is truly too many reasons why you have this result</p> <p>Maybe there's a whole bunch of things that is hidden</p> <p>I cannot gage for you using text message</p> <p>I cannot prescribe medicine remotely even doctors cannot prescribe remotely</p> <p>If doctors cannot prescribe remotely then not to mention if it's me</p> <p>So I think doing social media we cannot give a very fixed solution to those who are asking</p> <p>This way you might have to take responsibility of what you cannot take responsibility for</p>	Viewers sometimes ask influencer for health advice when they should be asking professional doctors	SMI credibility (Interaction with viewers)	

For example there will be some who ask me how much food they should eat and how many calories to consume but it's different for everyone

The nutrients and energy that each person need varies so I don't know how much you should be eating

Maybe some people don't understand so they will give you an approximate number of calories that you should eat

Then after consuming that there will be issues

We cannot take responsibility for this

But most people who click into my instagram still think that it is primarily based on food

TABLE 3 Initial Analysis - Open Coding

Participant	Original Text (Translated)	Meaning Condensations	Units	Codes
Theme: (Q2) Creating influential content on social media				
P3	<p>At the time I started this because on a daily basis I am a designer</p> <p>And I know the importance of having a personal brand</p> <p>To let people know who you are what is your story and what kind of abilities you have</p> <p>So social media has always been what i wanted to maintain seriously</p> <p>A bit like building a brand portfolio</p> <p>And despite really liking design work</p> <p>But my everyday job is design so I didn't want to have to come home after work to continue design related social media</p> <p>So this goes back to when growing up I've always struggled with body image</p>	<p>Personal story of finding content value on social media</p>		<p>Value of social media</p>

I've always struggled losing weight and been through lots of weird experiences
 And when I came across fitness I think it changed my life
 It let me know that I have the potential to change my body image
 Not only to become thin
 And I realized that eating healthy and varied and filling is very important
 I also changed a lot mentally and gained a lot of inspiration
 So I really wanted to spread this value to more women
 Especially those who fell into dieting and continuously gaining weight back
 And women who are very unhealthy physically and mentally

...

P2	<p>The Current News</p> <p>Like nowadays with the spread of the pandemic I want to use my influence</p> <p>Like organize some of their (vegan business) promotions or something</p> <p>I have also never thought about doing this</p> <p>But nowadays I've heard too many stories not being able to continue on</p> <p>So I think I should be doing this</p>	<p>Using personal influence to help businesses who are struggling in the pandemic</p>	<p>Benefits of social media</p>
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TABLE 4 Initial Analysis - Open Coding

Participant	Original Text (Translated)	Meaning Condensations	Units	Codes
Theme: (Q3) SMI views on current practices of social media				
P2	<p>But some YouTubers like <i>TKstories</i></p> <p>He wants to spread the value of Taiwanese people</p> <p>And promote some eco-friendly attitudes</p> <p>So his content is never ending</p> <p>His topics are also unlimited</p> <p>So I think his original intention is important</p> <p>If you just remember to hold on to the original intention</p> <p>You can use all sorts of ways to promote the things you want to spread</p> <p>...</p>	<p>YouTubers like <i>TKstories</i> have an original intention that allows endless creation</p>	like	SMI beneficial mindset (SMI mindset)
P3	<p>I think the general trend is that it has become more professional</p> <p>Everyone has become more and more professional</p> <p>There is a saying right now that information based SMIs will be the industry trend in the future</p> <p>The future profit of information based SMIs is very impressive</p>	<p>SMIs have become more professional with information based SMIs as trend for the future</p>		Social media trend

TABLE 5 Initial Analysis - Open Coding

Participant	Original Text (Translated)	Meaning Condensations	Units	Codes
Theme: (Q4) SMI career reflection				
P2	<p>Actually at first I never thought I would have now how to say</p> <p>Like the situation now yeah</p> <p>I never thought really never ever</p> <p>And so I really encourage everyone to try it</p> <p>As long as you want to promote want to spread things and values</p> <p>And as long as you remember the original intention</p> <p>Try to use this media to do it</p> <p>Perhaps the result is what you never expected</p> <p>...</p>	<p>My situation with social media is unexpected so people should try it out too by holding onto original intention.</p>		SMI reflection
P1	<p>I think content creation now is a bit blown out of proportion</p> <p>It pushes people to their limits</p> <p>Because we have to constantly think what people like to watch</p> <p>And sometimes it's necessary to make very drastic content so that people want to watch</p>	<p>People are pushed beyond their limit to produce drastic content</p>		Challenges of SMI