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Political Influencers in Malaysia:

Growth, Methods and Policy Implications

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Table of Contents

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Executive Summary

The 15th General Election (GE15) in Malaysia saw a noticeable surge in the involvement of social media influencers in the political sphere. It highlighted the modern manifestation of an old phenomenon: the use of key opinion leaders to shape political discourse.

What distinguishes modern, digital influencers, however, is their commercial orientation. Where previously credible experts were sought to explain and promote issues of public importance — often without compensation — influencers are now coveted for their brand promotion and recognition and engaged with on commercial terms. Influence has become a business for hire and political actors see it as an avenue to reach a wider, often younger audience.

The increasing intersection of influencers and politics raises questions about the transactional and opaque nature of the relationships underpinning political influence, and, in turn, how such influence might harm democratic processes. In Malaysia, where rules for political financing and spending remain under deliberation and where influencers are not subject to journalistic standards, there are potentially significant implications for transparency, accountability, and democratic integrity in Malaysia's digital public sphere.

This paper explores and codifies (to the extent possible) the complex ecosystem in which influencers operate, encompassing funders, intermediaries, platforms, and audiences. It did so through interviews with influencers, political staff and industry experts. Influencers, or political influencers, increasingly operate within a sophisticated network including intermediaries such as public relations firms and specialised influencer marketing agencies. There is great variety within this network, ranging from transitory influencers to partisan-aligned messengers whose political leaning is clear. Funders wield significant influence over the delivery and framing of influencer content. This diffusion of power — spread across clients, intermediaries, and influencers — creates a blurring of responsibilities, making it difficult to trace the flow of financing and how content is produced and amplified.

Content creation is not driven by public education objectives, or even tangible political influence outcomes, but audience capture. Speed and 'virality' are more important than information accuracy, with the goal to benefit from algorithmic amplification, audience engagement incentives, and trending topics. The industry operates with near complete opacity, providing audiences with no clarity into the authenticity and accuracy of the content, nor the interest and actors behind it.

As this research is exploratory and the issues complex, the paper concludes with preliminary policy recommendations that are deliberately broad and designed to stimulate further conversation. Three key priorities are identified: transparency, accountability, and literacy. Transparency surrounding the financing of political influencers, the stakeholders involved and how they shape content; accountability requirements for influencers, political actors and social media platforms to increase ethical standards; and literacy through better equipping civil society actors and educators to inform and train content consumers with the skills to critically evaluate online information.

1 Introduction

Online 'political influencers' are now a valuable commodity used by political parties, politicians and others looking to shape political discourse. An 'influencer' is someone who has the perceived ability to shape the attitudes, preferences, and behaviours usually via online platforms.

Although influencers seem new, Malaysian politics has a long history of high-profile individuals. In the late 1990s, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad decided not to regulate or censor the Internet under the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998, preserving freedom for those who produce news and express their views online. Malaysians embraced the opportunity to write more freely online, with less-regulated online platforms becoming a burgeoning and highly influential 'bloggersphere' (Tan & Zawawi, 2008). Malaysian bloggers began a trend that individuals with influential voices online could be wooed or even paid by the political class (Tapsell, 2013).

The rise of social media — first on Facebook and more recently on Instagram and TikTok — transformed online spaces into a monetised marketplace of attention and influence. Marketing companies started to see the influence potential of social media and began paying Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs; such as celebrities, activists, and politicians) to promote products, brands and events. As social media gained popularity, a new generation of KOLs emerged through the platforms themselves, with personal accounts that gained enormous followings creating the 'influencer class'.

In the past five years, the 'influencer' space has become far more professionalised and commodified, with success often requiring coordination, resources, and strategic positioning. There is now an 'influencer industry', a "complex ecosystem comprising influencers and those who aspire to be them, marketers and technologists, brands and sponsors, social media corporations, and a host of others, including talent managers and trend forecasters" (Hund, 2023, p.11). This industry is increasingly utilised by political operatives, with governments and political parties spending more and more money on influencers.

Industry commodification has not been accompanied by a rise in governance standards, instead creating opaque commercial associations between politics and influencers that compromise influence authenticity. To date, the industry has not displayed a willingness to self-regulate and provide information on funding sources and associated impacts on political content. Disclosure of paid partnerships and sponsorships is almost absent. This could reflect the nature of payment. Influencers generally benefit from direct payments, gifts, sponsorships, and non-monetary perks. However, political influencers often gain more diffused and intangible rewards like heightened visibility, party recognition, personal branding, or political career paths.

While commercial and political influencers might appear to belong to distinct categories, the boundaries between them are porous. Each group contains those that prefer to be compensated financially, but also many that are motivated by intangible rewards. These overlapping motivations blur the distinction between genuine political participation and strategic co-optation for one-off political messaging. Opaque motives masquerading as authentic content complicate how citizens interpret and engage with online political discourse and, by extension, how voters make informed decisions at ballot boxes.

Despite the global rise of political influencers and evidence that they shape election discourse, little is known about the financing of political influencers in Malaysia and elsewhere. This study contributes to addressing this gap by examining the machinery of political influence in Malaysia. Specifically, how influencers are engaged, the incentives that drive their work, and the consequences for political communication and public life. In doing so, this study informs emerging policy discussions around political financing, media and public relations transparency, and regulation of the digital political sphere.

2 Research Background, Question and Methodology

Political influencers in Malaysia have increasingly become a part of political and election campaigns. While some may operate independently, many of these influencers partner with funders and intermediaries. The rise and commodification of political influencers is not itself a problem. The concern is the blurring of authenticity and paid persuasion — where the brand authenticity of influencers is exploited to portray strategically manufactured political messaging as organic narratives.

To better understand the situation in Malaysia, the central question of this research is *how do political influencers in Malaysia operate*?

Being a modern phenomenon of only recent topical interest, prior examinations of this question are limited. This section outlines the key examples of greatest relevance to our understanding of political influencers in Malaysia.

Evidence from Southeast Asia highlights the growth of political influencers, institutionalisation of their activities, and deployment in campaigning. A study on the Philippines presents compelling evidence of covert campaigning, with political parties and candidates commissioning influencers via an organised market (Gaw et al., 2025). The study estimates that USD10.9 to 27 million was spent on influencer content during the 2022 presidential election (Gaw et al., 2025). In Indonesia, Wijayanto et al. (2024) document coordinated influence operation workflows, highlighting the formation of teams led by coordinators and composed of cybertroopers, influencers, and content creators working in tandem. These structures reveal an increasingly complex division of labour in the production and dissemination of political influence.

Political influencing in Malaysia became prominent in the aftermath of Malaysia's most recent General Elections in 2022, due to the successful campaign of the Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS). PAS utilised online micro-influencers with "savvy use of TikTok and other social media" (Wong, 2023), which helped it win the most seats in parliament — a first in the party's 74-year history.

Influencers are playing increasingly visible and controversial roles in political campaigning across the country, prompting tighter regulation (Anuar et al., 2025). IMAN Research's 2025 report presents growing concerns over influencers driving problematic narratives — content seen as deliberately sowing seeds of social discord (Azuddin et al., 2025). Since 2022, the Anwar Ibrahim-led Malaysian government has applied stricter approaches to policing social media content. The result is that in 2024, TikTok named Malaysia number one in the world for take-down requests from the government, with 3,234 requests received from July to December) (TikTok, 2025).

To provide conceptual clarity, this study adopts Riedl et al.'s (2023) definition of political influencers as "content creators that endorse a political position, social cause, or candidate through media that they produce and/or share on a given social media platform" (p.2).

The term 'political influencer' is fluid and not every content creator falls into this category. Influencers are seen to possess the ability to shape how people think, act, or decide. In the world of marketing and public relations, influencers are often categorised with reference to their follower count. A nano-influencer might have around 10,000-50,000 followers, a micro-influencer 50,000-100,000 followers, and a mega-influencer over 100,000 followers (Conde & Casais, 2023). However, the number of followers does not directly capture influence, which can also derive from their ability to convey a powerful message to a particular group or audience.

This study draws on 27 semi-structured interviews with influencer industry insiders in Malaysia. Of these, 14 have professional experience working as a political influencer (10 are users with political social media posting and 4 are politicians who actively use social media platforms as part of their communication strategy) and 4 have worked behind the scenes creating content for political parties and/or candidates. The remaining 9 interviewees are experts in areas relevant to political influencers. These included people working in electoral and media reform, digital safety, media and communications, public relations firms and journalists (for more information on the interviewees, refer to Appendix 1).

Interviews targeted 'micro-influencers' with numbers of followers between 10,000 to 100,000 on a single platform. This segment was prioritised as preliminary investigations suggest it especially attracts funding for political commentaries. While efforts were made to interview influencers with a larger following (over 100,000 followers), they were unsuccessful.

We contacted over 30 individuals whom we would consider political influencers. Political influencers were identified according to whether: (a) they had over 10,000 followers and (b) if their social media posts were explicitly political or if they had a known political affiliation. Contact was made via their social media pages or through personal contacts. Of the 14 political influencers interviewed, most post content in English and/or Malay, with one posting content exclusively in Malay. One influencer posts in Mandarin. There were five females and nine males. Most are Klang Valley-based, but our interviews also included influencers from Kelantan and Kedah, and one politician from Sabah. Interviews took place between July and September 2025.

Influencers were asked about the mechanisms of recruitment, funding flows and content strategies, along with their broader understanding of how the 'industry' works. All participation was voluntary and no financial incentives were offered or given. All interviews and transcripts were anonymised to protect participants' identities and no identifiers are retained in published outputs.

The following section presents the findings from our interviews, highlighting the growth and formalisation of political influencers in Malaysia. The discussion is organised into four key areas: the rise of TikTok and short-form content, the professionalisation of political influencing, monetisation strategies, and the use of taxpayers' and political party funds. Explored are the different methods of political influencing and the broader implications of political influencing for democratic discourse in Malaysia over the long term.

3 The Growing Presence of Influencers in Malaysian Politics

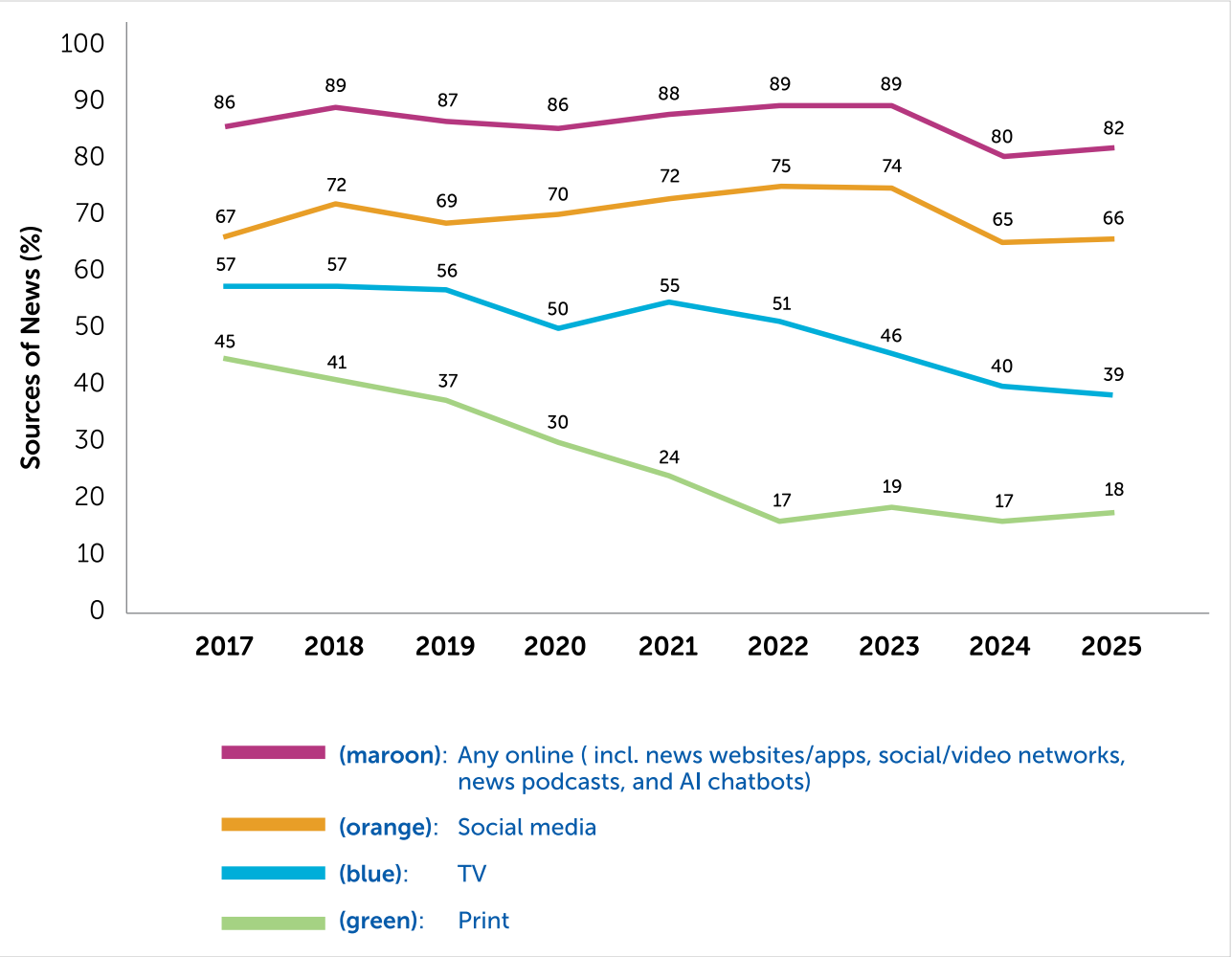
Influencers have emerged as key conduits of political messaging, marking a significant change in how information is communicated and consumed. Historically, mainstream media companies were often tied to political interests and/or government entities, which shaped public narratives in a top-down manner (Randhawa, 2019). In contrast, today's accessible digital landscape is populated by content creators whose material often appears unaffiliated, organic, and independent of political machinery. Yet, the ecosystem has been increasingly encroached by murky politics that leverages on influencers' engagements, relatability, and algorithmic visibility to reach wider audiences.

This section explores the evolution of political influencing in Malaysia and outlines the reasons for the growing presence and importance of influencer activity in political discourse. It first explores the rise of video content driven by short-form image content on social media platforms like TikTok. Second is the splintering of audiences on the internet and social media, making 'nano' and 'micro' influencers more appealing to political campaigns, enabling a wider professional 'industry' of influencers. The final section looks at the increasing trend of political parties and government ministries putting money into influencers, and how these funds are driving growth of the industry.

3.1 The rise of TikTok and video content

Influencers today produce information that feels more accessible and relatable to everyday users. Content creators are no longer distant figures like in traditional media, but everyday personalities who appear just behind the screen. This authenticity and personalised storytelling appeals to and can shape the perceptions of impressionable Malaysians who consume a large volume of online content. Social media is a dominant news source, with two-thirds of Malaysians using such platforms weekly (Nain, 2025). As shown in Figure 1, dependence on online news sources including social media has steadily increased from 86% in 2017 to a peak of 89% in 2022 and 2023. Within the same period, the reliance on traditional media as news sources declined, including television falling from 57% in 2017 to 39% in 2025.

Figure 1: News Consumption Pattern: Sources of News (2017 – 2025)



Source: Digital News Reuters Institute reports 2017-2025

In this environment, influencers act not just as intermediaries but as central messengers of political news content. As the industry continues to grow in scale, the boundary between personal and paid opinion becomes more opaque. In an era defined by shrinking attention spans and endless scrolling, political operatives are leaning on influencers to distil and communicate complex political issues through short, visually engaging clips — leveraging the greater trust in and reach of influencers vis-a-vis politicians.

Empirical and qualitative studies confirm their growing role. For example, Anuar et al. (2025) show that politicians are collaborating more frequently with influencers to promote their campaigns. Such actors are sometimes described as "digital opinion leaders" (Casero-Ripollés, 2020) and, in other contexts, have been shown to evolve from earlier forms of media work, such as newspaper columnists or bloggers. In Malaysia, however, many political influencers are simply laypersons — often youths or individuals with a personal interest in politics — whose perceived authenticity makes their views or opinions especially persuasive.

The liberalisation of political communication was highlighted in interview discussions as a key reason for influencer growth, made possible by the low barriers to entry on social media platforms. In earlier decades, credibility was largely anchored to mainstream media and individuals with known expertise. Today, this is murky, given that anyone with a digital device is able to create and share content, cultivate a steady following and "sell" a product or an opinion. Compared with traditional media where content is heavily regulated and centrally produced, social media short-form video production takes a fraction of this time to generate and can be immediately shared.

The presence of influencers in the political communication sphere grew significantly during the COVID-19 period, when government agencies globally engaged them to promote health measures, vaccination campaigns, and movement-control rules. For instance, in Portugal, the Directorate-General of Health recruited and trained 5,000 micro-influencers to disseminate public health messaging (WHO, 2022). This surge coincided with increased indoor activity and unprecedented social media use, enabling ordinary users to participate in creating and spreading narratives that could either support or undermine messages from health authorities and governments (Gallagher et al., 2021). In Malaysia, one interviewee suggests that distrust towards authorities prompted the government to deploy influencers and KOLs to reinforce public health messaging or counter opposition largely on Facebook and X (formerly Twitter). A related parallel can be seen on X, where individuals pushed pro-government health narratives in response to criticism towards the ruling administration (Lee, 2023). Empirical evidence of influencer activity on TikTok in Malaysia remains limited, with most studies focusing on the broader growth of influencers in the commercial sphere.

Another driver of political influencing was the expansion of young voters. In 2021, Malaysia's minimum voting age was lowered from 21 to 18. At the federal election the following year, Malaysians aged 18–20 accounted for 16% of voters (Solhi & Nizam, 2022).

This expansion of the voter base also coincided with the growing role of social media in the everyday 'news diet' among all age groups. Shifting media consumption behaviours, particularly among young users gravitating toward new, short-form video platforms, also contributed to TikTok emerging as a critical platform for political engagement in Malaysia. Other social media platforms are now following the TikTok algorithm model, such as Youtube 'Shorts' and Instagram 'Reels' as younger audiences move towards mass consumption of bite-sized content. This, in turn, has meant political campaigners are engaging younger audiences with video content. Influencers whose core work involves video material act as intermediaries who not only simplify political content into more digestible video form, but also render political actors more approachable for the wider audience by leaning into imagery, humour, and 'organic' content that sends a message of relatability.

By Malaysia's 2022 General Elections, political actors pivoted more towards video content creations and distribution, in particular TikTok (Tapsell, 2023); and TikTok itself was repositioning its content. TikTok was moving away from viral dance trends towards more soundbites and political content, including from podcasts. Influencers explained

that they shifted from Instagram to TikTok because of the platform's growing appetite for political commentary, moving away from platforms like X. As of 2022, there were 14.59 million Malaysians on TikTok (Kemp, 2022). By early 2025 there were 19.3 million Malaysians on TikTok, 15.5 million users on Instagram (IG), 23.1 million users on Facebook, and 5.10 million users on X (Kemp, 2025).

While TikTok is the primary platform for political influencers, adapted content is produced to target all available platforms. Often content is crafted in multiple languages and in styles tailored to multiple platforms to maximise reach. Content might do well on one platform but fall completely flat on another, and influencers need to be aware of trends in audiences and content creation on each social media platform.

3.2 Industry Professionalisation

The influencer marketplace, which was once largely separate from politics and funded by commercial advertisement, is steadily encroaching upon the political sphere. The extent of encroachment is hard to disentangle, as while some influencers appear to operate as independent voices, others are embedded within a wider and opaque network of intermediaries. In some instances, influencers themselves own these intermediaries. There is money to be made and political influencing has emerged as a lucrative niche.

Entry points into this market vary and influencer willingness to accept political commissions often depends on their employment status, financial need, or partisan loyalties. For some, there remains a clear "red line" they will not cross. For others, political commissions are simply another form of paid collaboration within an expanding influence economy.

A core reason for the growing success of an influencer industry is because of influencers' perceived 'authenticity'. As Emily Hund (2023) writes in her book on U.S. influencers: "the influencer industry's core business is continually reassessing, redefining and revaluing authenticity. Authenticity is the value that makes one person more influential than another, even if they have similar metrics" (p.13). Their appeal lies in perceived relatability, enabling them to cut through political fatigue and reach audiences less likely to consume traditional media (Cheng et al., 2023). These developments reflect the growing attempt to humanise not only brands or products, but politics as well. Political influencers try to make political actors appear more personal, approachable, and emotional. The more 'authentic' and independent a political commentary can look, the better. This does not mean influencers always need to be non-partisan, but it does mean that they want to look like they do not benefit financially from their commentaries, otherwise they lose authenticity.

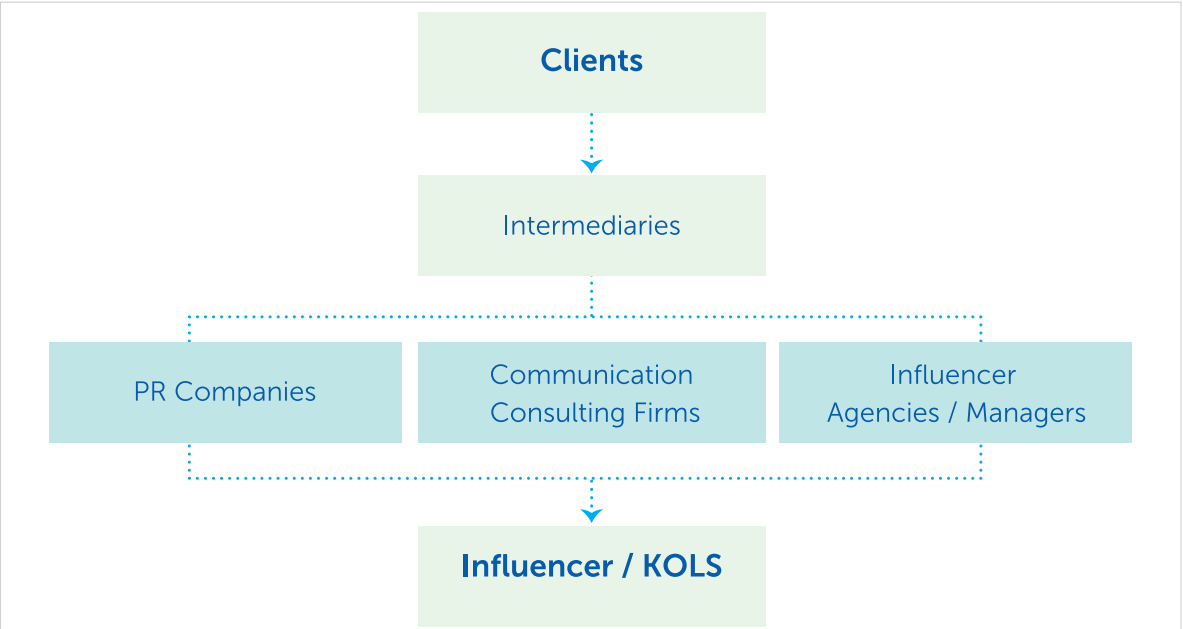
In Malaysia, influencers' growing involvement mirrors global trends where political communication increasingly resembles the logic of influencer marketing. Communication is outsourced to networks of agencies, managers, and intermediaries who trade in

audience engagement as a measurable commodity. The injection of political actors means influencers need to be more professional, prompting some influencers to branch out and collaborate with management or talent agencies to develop their careers. Others create their own small media companies employing videographers, content creators, editors, and more. Meanwhile, some leverage their online persona to cultivate personal brands and launch related business ventures.

As the industry matures, a new layer of intermediaries has emerged. Political communication is growingly outsourced to networks of managers, agencies and public relations (PR) companies. Interviews revealed that a cottage industry of influencer management agencies has also mushroomed, in addition to PR firms that traditionally serve as brokers. These agencies trade audience, engagement and visibility as bankable commodities. However, influencer agencies also position themselves as managing selected influencers as their in-house talents.

At the top of the chain are clients consisting of companies, political actors, and political parties, who commission campaigns built around specific messages or themes. Clients will engage with PR companies to identify suitable influencers, coordinate messaging and manage deliverables (see Figure 2). Interviews suggest that this works in two ways: management of existing in-house influencers most commonly as part of an influencer agency, and by contractual appointment of influencers directly. As one influencer manager explained: "When clients want external influencers, we source via personal contacts. And we will handle everything from outreach to output management" (Expert 3). Political influencers in this ecosystem are no longer independent operators but come under the employment of political clients, which has consequences for content creation.

Figure 2: Chain of Command In Malaysia's Political Influence



The findings from our interviews reveal that political influencing in Malaysia is not a single, uniform category (for more, refer to Appendix 2). Instead, influencers occupy different roles depending on their motivations, the extent of their alignment with political actors and the political content they take up. Below, we sketch the main political influencer types in Malaysia and their delineation of entry points, trigger, employment/ incentives and benefits (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Classification of Different Types of Political Influencers

Types of Influencer		
		
Transitory	**Janus**	**Partisan**
Entry point: Social media user (lifestyle content)	Entry point: Likely interest in politics, or registered member of political party	Entry point: Open political commitment, party membership
Reasoning behind political content: An incident prompted them to pivot toward more politically charged content	Reasoning behind political content: Often to educate or provide a different narrative of current political issue	Reasoning behind political content: Commitment to the party
Employment: May take up political commissions (contract-for-hire)	Employment: Party-linked work, or informal arrangements	Employment: May receive informal help from the party but no known financial benefits
Benefits: Visibility from political content can be leveraged for their offline business or to secure better employment prospects	Benefits: Likely benefits from political access, contracts, or patronage	Benefits: Gains recognition from within party leadership

These three types of political influencers are grounded in our interviewees' accounts highlighting clear differences in how individuals enter and participate in political content creation. Further, the number of interviewees falling into each category is indicated to provide a sense of their distribution.

- ***Transitory Influencer:*** At least four of the interviewed influencers started as an ordinary social media user before branching out into political messaging. For example, an influencer might start out in lifestyle or cooking content and transition to gradually incorporate political themes. A particular trigger or incident prompted them to pivot towards more politically charged content, leading them to voice their opinions on politics more directly. There could be symmetries here, as their online visibility might help market their offline businesses or advance their careers or activism. However, there is a tendency for these influencers to be 'transitory' or 'contract-for-hire' influencers, who might post certain content when paid or via other incentives but not be deeply invested in political communication.

- ***The Janus or the dual identity influencers:*** The overwhelming majority of influencers interviewed are affiliated with political parties or political movements. These individuals consciously project a veneer of neutrality to maintain credibility with their audiences, often framing their content as educational, or grounded in "data" and "facts". Despite this, many are serving as official media staffers or have a position in a political party, others have long associations with political parties or a particular politician, and they may be paid via political contracts. In this regard they are 'Janus' meaning a dual nature, a term derived from the Roman god Janus who was 'two-faced' looking in two directions,but one face is usually hidden from the public; 'Janus' political influencers rarely disclose their political affiliations or donations.

- ***Partisan-aligned messengers:*** These influencers are more open about their political affiliations and often create content out of a perceived sense of duty to amplify their party's ideology or support a particular candidate or coalition. Their motivation tends to be intrinsic rather than financial. Among the influencers interviewed, three fit this profile. One described his work as "part of [his] responsibility to the party (Influencer 5)," while another had been recruited by the ruling coalition to disseminate information about government policy (Influencer 1). A third produced a pro bono campaign video for a candidate he personally supported, considering the candidate's eventual success as his reward (Influencer 10). A politician (Politician 4) that we interviewed implied that sometimes the motivation of partisan members might be harder to swallow by those outside of party lines. A quote from one of our interviewees encapsulated this succinctly:

  > *"Everyone is hyped up with the narratives sold to them—especially party leaders or supporters who want their political side to win. They want their candidate to secure a parliamentary seat or even the Prime Minister's position. Because of that bias and passion, many [micro-influencers] are willing to help out in campaigns for specific groups or parties without any payment"* (Influencer 10).

A stricter typology requires a large influencer sample, but the broad categorisation suggests that political influencers in Malaysia exist within a fluid ecosystem shaped by intersecting commercial imperatives, ideological leanings and personal branding. Some enter the political influencer sphere, viewing it as a niche market either borne from their own interest or involvement in partisan politics. Others, though formally affiliated as party members or volunteers, maintain a primarily commercial orientation. For these influencers, business interests take precedence and their engagement is transactional — guided by visibility, marketability, and audience growth.

An influencer that starts out providing genuine personal opinions becomes increasingly shaped by commercial logic and strategic manoeuvring beyond a certain scale (or following). Content is often produced with the assistance of intermediaries such as PR companies, consulting firms, and dedicated influencer marketing agencies that are central to the professionalisation of the influencer industry. Typically, a client would present a brief of what political message they want to 'sell', and an agency would advise on social media audience targeting, message design, and what kind of influencer involvement is appropriate for the message. Some agencies also run in-house content production facilities — such as podcast studios — and curate social media campaigns on behalf of clients. PR firms usually receive a commission on retainer basis for, as one respondent described: "developing content, creating videos, managing strategy, even handling advertising budgets", and that "you'd have one budget for content and management, and a separate budget for influencer engagement. That's usually how it works" (Expert 8).

The negotiation process and quality control for content vary depending on the client. For example, several interviewees who had worked with ministry officials described a more stringent review process — scripts and outputs are vetted, and the final product is carefully scrutinised, particularly when the goal is to deliver a public service announcement. However, this differs from political messages, where the process is less transparent. Many interviewed political influencers said they had 'free rein' over content production. That is to say, clients have to hand over some autonomy to the political influencer in terms of the content they produce. This reflects that they bear the greater risk should controversy arise. The following section elucidates who holds the purse strings in the ecosystem of political influence.

3.3 Monetisation

Monetisation sits at the core of Malaysia's political influencer ecosystem, shaping who participates and how they operate. Although influencers are often perceived as earning substantial returns, the reality is far more complex. Rates vary significantly depending on the "premium" an influencer offers — such as reach, following, or credibility. For political influencers in particular, monetisation is constrained by boundaries around what content they can produce, the risks involved, and the level of campaign resources available. Crucially, the market is highly stratified; a small cohort with strong party ties or high visibility secures lucrative contracts, while many others receive modest or irregular payments, often dependent on the financial capacity and strategic priorities of their clients.

A key argument in the study of influencer politics globally is that real power resides with the financiers not the influencers—which to a large extent determines the political content (Borchers, 2024). Understanding whether this power distribution applies to Malaysian political influencers is therefore essential.

Based on our interviews, influencing constitutes a full-time livelihood for some Malaysian influencers. For transitory influencers, the higher stakes can make them more risk-averse, carefully selecting the contracts and campaigns they participate in. There is also indication that other influencers take up contracts out of necessity, treating it primarily as a means of survival. Janus influencers, by contrast, approach political influencing more opportunistically, engaging only in campaigns that align with their party affiliations or political leanings.

Political influencers in Malaysia sustain themselves through multiple but uneven revenue streams. A common perception is that influencers and content creators are "made of gold," earning large sums simply from their online presence. However, interviews suggest that sustaining a livelihood from influencing often requires multiple revenue streams, and not all have regular flows of income. Broadly, their income can fall under three categories:

(1) platform-based monetisation (advertising, livestream gifts)

(2) commercial brand partnerships, and

(3) commissioned political content.

Commercial partnership payment rates vary significantly depending on the influencer's portfolio, audience reach, and engagement level. Naturally, pricing increases as influencers move up the follower bands — from nano- to mega-influencers — but interviews with influencer agencies and PR companies revealed that other factors also shape remuneration. Influencers who "wear multiple hats" — for example, those who can also host events, produce high-quality content, or provide creative direction — often command higher rates. It is strategically tailored to campaign needs and companies weigh up more than just follower count. Recently, the trend towards nano- and micro-influencers as opposed to mega-influencers is also strategic, projecting a more "grassroots" appearance by creating the impression of organic narrative. Compensation can also extend beyond monetary payment, for example, negotiating to keep the products they promote.

Political influencers in Malaysia operate in a more restricted platform monetisation environment. While commercial influencers earn from affiliate marketing, advertisements (ads), and sponsorships, these revenue streams are less available to political influencers. For instance, TikTok imposes strict rules under its Government, Politician, and Political Party Accounts (GPPPA) policy, prohibiting political parties from directly promoting content. Political influencers interviewed are barred from setting up TikTok shops or running paid ads because of their content. A Janus influencer (Influencer 3), for instance, shared that only live broadcasts allow influencers to receive certain rewards directly.

Some political influencers have also adapted creatively: leaving a blank space on their content to advertise third-party services from a range of businesses suggesting that they have secured commercial advertisement. Meta platforms such as Facebook require identity verification for political ads and restrict boosting by political parties. YouTube remains the most viable monetisation channel for political influencers, though returns are modest relative to engagement levels.

Interviewees reported that platform monetisation contributes only a small share of their overall income. For example, one creator with just under 100,000 followers, reported that YouTube accounted for just 15–20% of his overall income (Influencer 4). Despite earning a few million views on a single video, the actual payout is far lower than he had expected (Influencer 4). Low and unpredictable platform remuneration may incentivise influencers to pursue paid political commissions.

Politically commissioned content is more lucrative and central to the financial success of being a political influencer. Payment typically takes a project form basis. Some respondents spoke of being paid approximately RM 2,500 monthly for around 30 posts (Influencer 8). One influencer who received monthly payments of RM 1,000 for disseminating government policy content suggested that once their views dropped the payment ceased (Influencer 1). Interviews revealed a broad pricing spectrum — from several hundred ringgit per post for micro-influencers to contracts worth hundreds of thousands for top-tier creators with national reach.

Payment terms vary significantly. At the lower end, some influencers reported receiving around RM500 for a short video, with rates often open to negotiation. One influencer described being contracted to produce two videos per month for RM400 with the added responsibility of writing scripts independently (Influencer 3). More popular influencers command premium fees that escalate substantially, ranging from RM20,000 to RM40,000 for a five-minute video. Higher rates not only reflect their audience size but also their ability to mobilise extended distribution networks through WhatsApp groups, Telegram channels, and community networks (Political Staff 1).

The different types of political influencers identified in this paper have different work structure and income streams. Among Janus and partisan influencers who can leverage their political affiliations and credibility, the pattern is more complex. Some maintain other day jobs while selectively taking on contracts or employment with a political office. By contrast, transitory influencers tend to engage in political content more sporadically or opportunistically, often dependent on short-term opportunities or project-based commissions. Notably, three interviewees — two Janus and one transitory — also run their own media, PR, or communications companies, suggesting that influencers combine entrepreneurial ventures with political work to diversify income streams.

Intermediaries such as PR firms or influencer agencies usually take a cut. These agencies negotiate a price for their services usually via a tiered package ranging from basic social media posts to premium packages that bundle content production and networked

distribution, depending on the amount of funds available. One content creator who was informally engaged as part of a campaign shared that while he received RM1,000 per month, the official allocation for his role was RM3,000, suggesting that intermediaries or additional "mouths to feed" absorbed a large share of the project budget (Influencer 1). As one interviewee told us: "sometimes the payment doesn't go to the KOL straight away, right? I pay this agency to do the creative work of this campaign. But the creative agency builds in the budget for them to disperse to the KOL" (Political Staff 4). This echoes the sentiment of a former media staffer who emphasises that the bulk of the money is sometimes taken away before reaching the influencer (Political Staff 1).

But where does the funding for politically commissioned content actually come from? The following section examines the two primary channels of political financing: allocations from taxpayer funds and direct disbursements from political party resources. These sources underpin not only the monetisation of political influencer activity but also its layers. In the current opacity of political financing in Malaysia, understanding these funding sources is crucial to comprehending the broader ecosystem of political influencing.

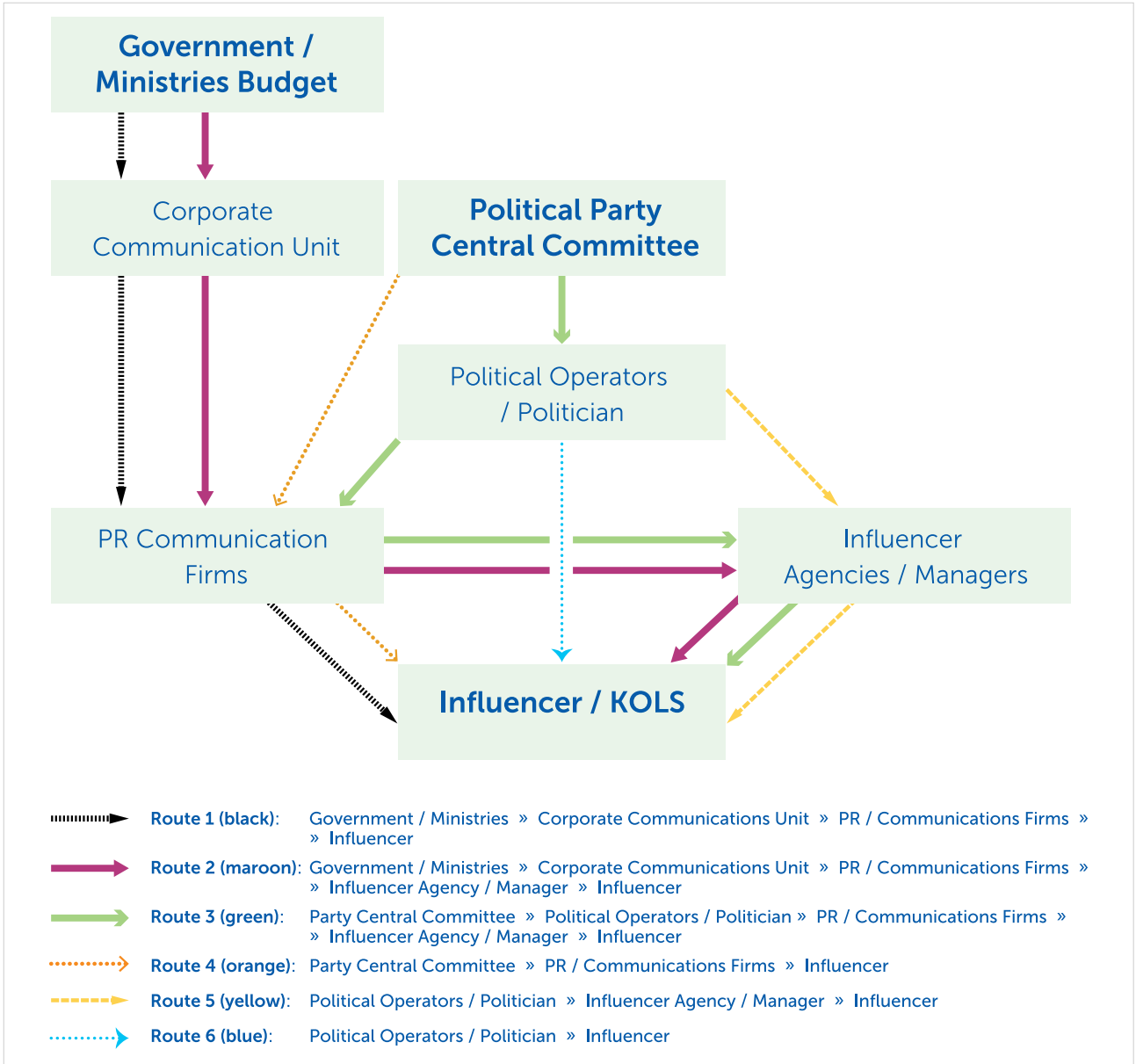
3.4 Taxpayer and political party funds

'Political' funding comes from at least two distinct sources. Government ministries maintain dedicated budgets for communications, particularly for disseminating policy information and public service messages. For political parties, the strategy takes a different shape. Rather than relying solely on hiring external influencers, some cultivate in-house influencers given their limited resources. In neither case is the flow of public or partisan funds transparent.

A key reason for the growth and professionalisation of political influencers is access to money. Interviewees explained how there is strong demand from governments and political parties who recognise that audiences are moving away from mainstream media engagement and moving towards more engagement with social media platforms. Governments now employ influencers to reach a public that is less engaged in mainstream media.

Interviews found that each Ministry has its own budget for media contracts. Increasingly these budgets are moving away from advertising in newspapers or on television and towards social media influencers. For ministries and government agencies, the use of influencers is justified as part of public communication strategy — disseminating policy messages to demographics less reachable through conventional media. One interviewee nominated RM2 million as the baseline allocation for each ministry (Political Staff 1). It was also claimed that the Health Education and Communications Centre (HECC) has managed budgets as large as RM14 million, while the Ministry running the Agenda Nasional received RM25 million annually (Political Staff 1). Note that these allocations are not limited to digital promotions but also fund on-the-ground campaigns, such as health camps, outreach programs, and nationwide roadshows.

Figure 4: Non-exhaustive compilation of potential recruitment pathways and funding flows from ministries and political parties to influencers



Source: Based on conducted interviews

The disbursement of ministry communications budgets often involves politically-connected intermediaries. These intermediaries ultimately determine the size and distribution of contracts, which in turn shapes who participates and the type of content produced, and the strategic alignment of that content. Interviewees, including those operating intermediary firms, suggested that these firms are often not professional companies with an office and a website, but are smaller, adhoc organisations run by political party members. One former political staffer explained that some of the "hired influencers are party members in the government coalition" (Political Staff 4), benefiting from preferential access to government-linked projects and proxy companies. A Janus

influencer confirmed that she was approached by a PR agency (Influencer 3), while a transitory influencer described being contacted by party members working on behalf of politicians seeking to promote a government initiative (Influencer 1). Figure 4 elucidates non-exhaustive recruitment pathways from different political actors to influencers.

Political party financing of influencers usually comes from party coffers, raised through fundraising events or donations and overseen by central leadership (Political Staff 3). Most of our interviewees said political parties have limited resources and therefore money for influencers is not regular or reliable (Politician 1). Influencers may therefore not always be engaged through formal contracts with monetary payments. Interviewees insinuated that 'partisan-aligned messengers' will benefit in numerous non-financial ways. For the "Januses", crafting political content is an attempt to curate their personality, build visibility, cultivate ties with political elites, and position themselves for future opportunities within party structures or government-linked roles. They are, essentially, 'playing the long game'.

In the political party machinery, however, the recruitment and use of influencers often differs from external arrangements. An interviewee said they are creating a team of in-house influencers aligned with party values rather than hiring external influencers because they are more likely to serve as ideological messengers (Political Staff 2). In some cases, political parties are paying influencers to mentor and enhance political staffers' creative and technical skills and provide advice as to how to nurture their own influencers for future election campaigns. This view was supported by other interviewees who explained that party members cum future influencers were recruited as a government initiative by someone in the coalition (Influencer 1).

Interviews with party operatives suggest that political actors are doubling down on influencer-driven political content for election campaigns. They are inclined to employ and cultivate a network of professional in-house influencers as well as engage 'influence-for-hire' contractors during election times (Influencer 8). One party committee member explained how they are actively "cultivating a team of content creators or influencers through collaborating with budding content creators, browsing for issues, angles, analytical capabilities, narrative building — to create streams of content" (Influencer 4).

There is no single revenue stream for political influencers in Malaysia. Their remuneration is shaped by a combination of platform monetisation, commissioned political content, intermediary negotiations, other paid employment and the financial capacity of parties or other clients. Far from being an organic or incidental phenomenon, the integration of influencers into political communication reflects deliberate efforts by political actors to capitalise on the rise of digital media penetration and the liberalisation of information, tethering to influencers' reach and credibility to amplify their messaging.

However, this new mode of communication carries its own set of challenges. The next two sections delve into the issue of the type of content that is being created by political influencers, and the wider implications of this content on the Malaysian digital public sphere.

4 Methods of Political Influencing and its Implications for Content

Political influencers operate under a dual set of pressures: the demands of financiers, and to appeal to the algorithmic logic of social media platforms, which both reward visibility or engagement. As one interviewee noted, funding can be withdrawn if performance or engagement drops, highlighting how remuneration and content strategies are closely intertwined. Hund (2023) observes: "arbitrary metric benchmarks... help determine how much an influencer can charge for campaign work" (p.61), illustrating that content is often crafted not solely to convey political messages, but to maximise clicks, shares, and platform visibility. The interweaving of client and algorithmic incentives shapes both the form and substance of political communication online, with important consequences for accuracy, framing, and the broader digital public sphere.

Audience size (e.g. views and reach) and influence (the spread and impact of messages) are often conflated. While audience engagement drives virality and engagement rewards the platform, it does not strictly capture whether a message reaches or persuades its intended audience.

Interview discussions suggest that an influencer's power lies in their ability to shape opinions and behaviours through a combination of credibility, relatability, and reach. The effectiveness of political influencers in influencing however cannot be measured by readily available online metrics alone. This would require measuring impacts on influence objectives like voter turnout or party membership. Measures of impact appear driven by ease and availability, not accuracy. They capture audience metrics instead and/or qualitatively assess the framing of a political narrative. In doing so, influencers continuously experiment with different content strategies to sustain engagement while highlighting, subtly or explicitly, their connections to political parties or campaigns.

In today's online media landscape, it is a matter of visibility and getting ahead of the opaque algorithmic logic. What little is known suggests that these systems reward engagement driven by strong emotions — often fear, outrage, or anger. All these lead to content creation centred on what the algorithm wants rather than what is accurate or meaningful. To capture a fleeting attention span, content creators increasingly design content that immediately seizes the audience.

The content resulting from algorithmic incentives matters to a healthy digital public sphere and democratic society. If the result is authentic and informative messages supported by transparent conflict of interest disclosures including around funding, then there is little to be concerned about.

In practice, the current incentive structure and limited policing contribute to a range of problematic practices being employed by political influencers. First, the manipulation of influencer content by organised networks, which warps or skews the digital public sphere

with inauthentic content. Second, the "fast and furious" logic of social media algorithms creates perverse incentives, encouraging the production of content that is sensational or offensive in order to capture a wider audience.

The need to maintain an appearance of authenticity also contributes to the political influence 'industry' in Malaysia being highly opaque. Indeed, many influencers interviewed believe that they are independent and autonomous even if they are receiving funds from political donors. They explained that while they might get vague directions from funders, they had significant autonomy in their content creation. In this regard, influencers are very different from a 'cybertrooper' operation, where the same content is 'cut and paste' across a large number of accounts and social media platforms. Micro-influencers create unique material for their niche audiences and they need to sound 'themselves', so their material is almost always their own creation. As an influencer explained when describing how they create content for their audiences: "I don't tell them which [political] side to choose — I just give them a narrative" (Influencer 8).

So while some might accuse influencers of being political lackeys, the reality is more complex. Influencers *do* have some independence, and in a competitive political environment, they can choose to reject or take up offers with other political actors. This gives them a reasonable amount of autonomy and it can be hard for audiences to keep up with their possible affiliations.

That a rising number of political influencers in Malaysia are creating content that incites and enrages is a concerning outcome of skewed measurement. Some successful online influencers are doing more to polarise and/or enrage citizens rather than inform them of policies and provide reliable information. As platforms reward virality over accuracy, sensationalism and divisiveness become the new currency of influence. Influencers have to maximise 2-3 seconds of the opening video to capture viewers' attention. Since algorithms also tend to reward posts that trigger strong responses, this explains the prevalence of "rage-bait" content, or in some cases, the political equivalent of the traditional clickbait news repackaged as bite-size social media video content, designed to provoke and enrage. Many nano – and micro-influencers play into racial and religious rhetoric in order to drive engagement.

Despite the assurance of some interviewees that their content aims to educate viewers, or provide a different narrative, the primary incentive for most influencers remains engagement, measured through likes, comments and shares (Duffy et al., 2021). The influencers and experts interviewed acknowledged how negative or sensational content often circulates faster and is more widely viewed. If engagement is the key to success, then influencers are encouraged to be provocative, and many play on audience fears and insecurities. As one interviewee put it: "The more engagement that you have, the more exposure that you get" (Influencer 7), and this may translate into greater monetisation.

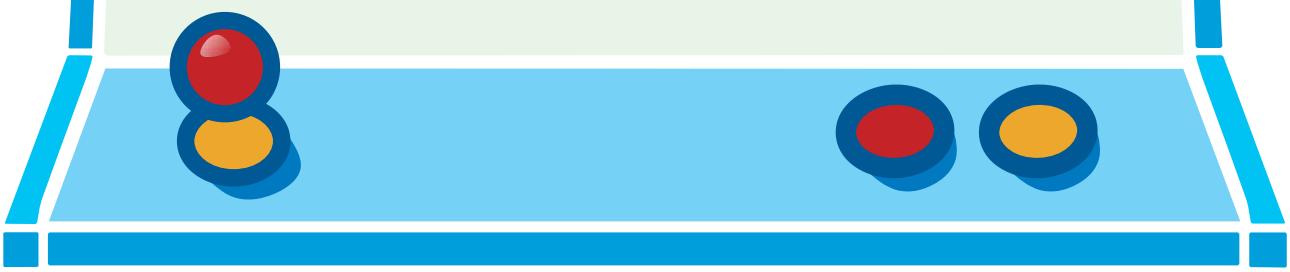
Box 1: Rigging the Game – Algorithmic Virality

Given that the industry is ever-evolving, there is a constant flow of innovations — guided or at times hounded by the illusive social media platform 'algorithm'. One interviewee described 'the algorithm' as "the most overused and most misunderstood term" (Influencer 2) — yet, all agreed that it determines their pre-production or content creation process. Another said they "rely heavily on the performance of the content according to the algorithm setting" (Influencer 10).

For many, the strategy of 'gaming the algorithm' through controversial content is a critical process: "That's why my content goes further — because it attracts arguments, attracts backlash, it attracts comments. I think partly because that's the algorithm that TikTok is currently using" (Influencer 8). Such algorithmic gaming suggests that the same engagement tactics used for commercial virality are deployed to amplify political sentiment.

Influencer content is often boosted or made 'viral' through other networks of nano-influencers or cybertroopers, manipulating their reach and engagement. As one interviewee said, there is "a network of large accounts that retweet, reply, or quote-tweet to boost visibility in the algorithm. That's how content goes viral inorganically. Once it reaches a critical mass, it looks organic" (Influencer 8).

In this process, the influencer plays a role to create the content, but the spread and virality of the content is professionalised but opaque. For example, the practice of cybertroopers flooding the comments section with similar messages is part of the political influencer industry algorithmic gaming process (Political Staff 3). Some respondents also alluded to the use of "buzzers" and "seeder" services — paid accounts that are deployed to farm for engagements. Manufacturing virality via an algorithmic system can also involve influencers convening in "pods", which are semi-formal groups of influencers mutually liking and commenting on each other's posts (O'Meara, 2019).



The narrative is often linked to the trending topic of the day or week rather than a cultivated, informative message. One strategy of an influencer is to quickly produce a video of a trending political issue online. As one influencer told us: "When an issue becomes a hot topic, people don't Google to find out more [from news media] — instead, they search TikTok" (Influencer 7). Influencers know they must 'strike while the iron is hot' on certain political issues, such as a legal case, political spat between two politicians or a government policy. As one said, "all influencers know that if you don't write about this issue as soon as possible, you will lose the traffic" (Influencer 7). And in this mad rush to capture attention, accuracy and careful reporting become casualties.

As some interviewees explained, some influencers whose content engages racial issues are often hired by political operators. These operators recognise that engagement metrics act as signals for visibility and reinforce existing worldviews. One expert attributed this to "deliberate design choices — the affordances, user interface (UI) and user experience (UX) decisions, and the underlying profit-maximising revenue model that steers certain behaviours" (Expert 7). These design choices create perverse incentives, amplifying content that provokes stronger emotional reactions. As the expert explained, "these platforms are optimised for reach and engagement, and we know that negative, polarising, or offensive content tends to receive far greater distribution" (Expert 7).

In Malaysia, the "3Rs" (race, religion, and royalty) are considered highly sensitive topics for the media industry but are nonetheless widespread. During the recent elections, the Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ) (2023) observed that race-based narratives dominated online discourse with 66,933 posts across platforms. Content created by TikTok had substantial cross-platform amplification, with politicians themselves acting as the largest amplifiers (CIJ, 2023). Outside of the election period, our interviews suggest that political content invoking the Malay-Muslim identity, minority rights, or religion continue to circulate widely.

Public debate and policy action has so far focused on content moderation by the state to curtail messages that weaponise race and religion. A number of influencers have had their content removed, accounts taken down, or been summoned for questioning by media regulators. For example, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) opened investigations into a political influencer (and another individual) accused of stoking racial sentiments through posts involving the Perak state anthem, Malay economic dominance, and the takeover of Menara Kuala Lumpur (Al As, 2025). One influencer interviewed also recounted having their accounts taken down multiple times, often without clear explanation. While such takedowns were considered minor by the interviewee, the evidence points to social media content on sensitive topics being subject to regulatory interventions — even when the specific enforcement rationale appears to be opaque.

4.1 Insights and Blind Spots

Before discussing policy implications, this section summarises what has been learned about the nature of political influencing in Malaysia. Three types of political influencers have been identified: transitory, partisan, and Janus. These are not exclusive categories but are differentiated by the depth of their political affiliations and the types of commercial engagements they are willing to accept.

Each type raises problems in terms of their relationships, content creation, and contributions to public (especially political) discourse. Transitory influencers' momentary engagements in political discourse blur the line between casual political expression and paid persuasion, as persons without obvious political affiliations are covertly brought into politics. Partisan influencers, who are more easily identifiable given their declaration of political party support, are relatively transparent but not always completely identifiable or immune from inciteful content. Janus influencers operate in the grey zone — not formally affiliated with parties or paid commissions but subtly amplifying narratives that align with certain political interests. The challenge lies in discerning whether such content reflects genuine message or indirect paid endorsement by political actors.

Informal networks and intermediaries have come to occupy important roles in a more professionalised influencer industry. Political actors use opaque intermediary channels to engage influencers, creating a barrier to identifying relationships between clients and influencers. Platform monetisation rules and restrictions on political party advertising act as a partial stopgap, but they also open the door for proxies — commercial influencers or those operating in the "Janus" grey area — to disseminate political content.

The digital era of content creation and dispersion is fundamentally different from traditional media in its incentives structure. Influencers must navigate algorithmic logics that shape visibility and engagement, with pre-production and dissemination decisions increasingly influenced by opaque algorithms, which often reward provocative or emotionally charged content. While content related to sensitive issues such as race and religion may not always be intended to cause harm, it can easily be weaponised to incite violence, raising difficult questions about where political influencers should draw the line.

Despite the growing visibility of political influencers, much remains unknown about how this ecosystem is financed, structured, and regulated. One of the least transparent aspects concerns the flow of funding — from the demand side such as political clients or parties, to the supply side consisting of intermediaries, influencers, and ultimately the audience. Notably, because platform monetisation is considerably low and unstable, many influencers turn to commissioned political content as a necessary means of earning an income. Currently, Malaysia's Political Financing Bill by the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Political Financing stops short of regulating media spending. In addition, the Election Offences Act does not adequately address the limits or reporting of campaign expenditures related to influencer-driven campaigns. Equally opaque are the algorithmic

forces that shape the visibility and reach of political content, subtly influencing what narratives gain traction. Without clear rules, disclosure requirements or transparency mechanisms, the attention economy remains a regulatory blind spot.

In short, influencer financing opacity and perverse incentives for content creation are public policy issues requiring further attention. The role of the state in encouraging transparency and regulating content engages fundamental questions of democracy and freedom of expression in Malaysia. The final section provides a preliminary discussion of these issues.

5 Implications

As an exploratory study in a poorly understood area, this paper cannot and does not seek to provide a full assessment of policy implications and recommendations. Political influencing in Malaysia is rapidly evolving and researchers, policymakers, NGOs and citizens are struggling to keep up with the changes. This research contributes by providing greater clarity on issues such as promoting healthy political competition and free speech and building an informed public space. But with much to explore, this section provides some policy considerations and further research opportunities concerning the mechanics of political influencers and social media platforms in Malaysia.

Malaysia's political influencer ecosystem can be understood through a demand-and-supply lens, where clients such as political actors and government ministries represent the demand side, while intermediaries and influencers occupy the supply side. Three considerations emerge for further inquiry. First, the position of influencers within the broader media landscape remains fluid — many move in and out of the role, yet when they comment on public or political issues they effectively function as de facto journalists but without being bound by the ethical or professional codes that guide traditional media. Second, the expansion of influencer-driven political communication engages key democratic levers including political accountability and informed voter participation. Lastly, transparency emerges as a critical concern — with financial relationships and content curation important information for audiences to interpret influencer messaging. However, questions remain about the scope and limits of transparency — to what extent disclosure is appropriate and practically achievable without undermining freedom of expression.

One policy option would be some form of regulation on the influencer industry. The government's proposed Gig Workers Bill, for instance, has primarily focused on e-hailing and delivery workers, but the Ministry of Human Resources (KESUMA) has struggled to determine if and how social media content creators fit into the bill (Politician 4). Another expert suggests that the electoral laws should be strengthened so that, for example, political financing laws allow for the auditing of influencer content (Expert 1). Current regulations focus on political candidate spending but rarely address third-party campaigning or influencer-driven promotions. Thus, among those interviewed, transparency was considered key to progressing policy debate. One influencer told us there was a dire "need to know where this money is coming from, we need to be able to keep track of that. I think that is the more pertinent stage of it" (Influencer 4).

The recently established Malaysian Media Council aims to set journalistic standards (among other initiatives), but the Council's unclear remit and the scope of the broader social media ecosystem highlights a deeper structural challenge. Social media platforms and the influencer industry are outpacing the institutions that might be expected to govern them.

Concerns around selective regulatory enforcement of social media content need to be addressed. Malaysia's previous attempt to introduce an 'Anti-Fake News Law' in 2018 is a good example of how a law can curb freedom of expression and target opposition politicians and those critical of the government. Interviews with influencers who would be considered part of the political 'opposition' expressed concerns that they are currently being targeted or victimised by the government. One influencer explained: "There are elements in government or those in power who will try to victimise you for it ... they will know for sure you are paid by certain individuals and they will try to stop you" (Influencer 4).

Professional self-regulation is another option. Unlike mainstream media journalists, influencers are not regulated under any professional body or union. As one expert put it, "we might need to start recognising influencers as a new kind of journalist" (Expert 6), given that influencers and content creators on social media platforms command a greater reach than the traditional press. Some experts who were interviewed raised the question of whether new forms of governance over the digital public sphere should include 'influencer ethics' or 'disclosure norms' for prominent social media figures who routinely comment on public affairs. This might see them governed in some way by an industry-agreed-upon code of ethics. However, when the question of setting a code of conduct was posed to some interviewees, several argued for their legal right to express opinion as enshrined by the Federal Constitution.

An area of clear policy need is to elevate financial transparency in the political influencer space. As one interviewee said: "We need transparency standards. If you are doing content being paid by a certain political party, it has to be labelled clearly so people understand why they are being persuaded or being informed" (Expert 8).

But there are challenges in determining how to elevate standards, including who should be regulated and by whom. Social media platforms say they do not accept political advertising (TikTok) or require verification for paid political advertisements (Meta) but influencers get around these regulations. Influencers, especially those in the transitory and to an extent, Janus category, can effectively act as proxies for political actors who are unable to advertise directly. This loophole enables paid political content to look 'organic'. Pushing social media platforms to allow for greater transparency is important, including providing access for the public (and, in turn, researchers and journalists) to analyse their paid activities. Platforms publishing regular transparency reports detailing content takedowns, political ad spending, and algorithmic moderation processes offers regulators a clearer window into the "black box" of digital influence.

Transparency standards might also be applied to the clients who fund influencers. While influencers serve as the public face, the ultimate control often resides with those who fund influencers (i.e. companies, political parties). There is thus a need to consider greater transparency around who is funding influencers, especially where taxpayer funds are involved. Interviews described money from ministerial budgets increasingly going to influencers and companies that pay influencers. These funds should be accountable to public scrutiny. Without clear reporting obligations or enforcement mechanisms,

paid political content exists in a grey zone — one where money flows invisibly and the public cannot discern between authentic advocacy and sponsored influence. Tracking funders is inherently challenging and may inadvertently encourage the mushrooming of more intermediaries, making enforcement harder. Global practices of legal frameworks on tracing foreign investment, stock ownership may offer some guidance, however enforcement remains a challenge. In contrast, for government funds accountability and transparency can be more easily adopted.

Given that influencers occupy a grey zone and are largely unregulated, efforts to enforce transparency or ethical standards face significant hurdles. Influencers interviewed were unconvinced about the potential for greater transparency and regulation of the industry. Many feared it would "ruin" their reputation as independent voices, and no one readily said they would self-declare or adhere to a code of ethics. As one influencer put it, "If people find out I was paid, they'll say I sold my soul" (Influencer 2). Most agreed that declaring funding or political affiliation would not be a 'silver bullet' (Influencer 6).

Potentially, strategies to inculcate awareness of how influencers and algorithms shape or manipulate political narratives are also pursued through community initiatives. These include fact-checking, media literacy, and other 'bottom-up' community based strategies. Some previously successful indigenous (or *orang asli)*-led information programs are seen as highly effective here, including *Orang Asli Lindungi Komuniti* created by academic and indigenous activist Dr Rusaslina Idris, and *Gerai Orang Asli* run by indigenous craft expert Reita Rahim. But digital literacy programs cannot be the only solution and are not a panacea. Malaysian audiences are bombarded daily with overlapping political narratives, and their ability to critically evaluate the rapidly evolving content creation techniques and narratives becomes almost impossible.

6 Conclusion and next steps

The paper set out to understand the nature of political influencers in Malaysia, and to examine the different recruitment mechanisms, coordination, and the content polarisation. As was observed through interviews, political influencing is a growing yet complex industry. Some are operating on a very casual, ad hoc basis, others have built financially sustainable careers around the regular production of political content online. Money is a strong motivator but direct funds are not the only motivation for political influencers. Social capital and connection to the political class is just as important, and influencer commentary can often be bartered for access, recognition, or advancement within political hierarchies. Interviews suggest government funds are moving towards influencers for political content rather than mainstream media. Taxpayer funds used for media or advertising are being repurposed, as "digital opinion leaders" become increasingly essential to disseminating government messages.

Malaysia's more competitive political environment, where no one party is dominating, is leading to much more contested online space, and elections are increasingly free and fair. But new layers of opacity are being created for political campaigning. As 'middlemen' multiply — management firms, PR agencies, digital strategists — the flow of money and instructions becomes more difficult to trace. Influencer recruitment may appear organic, but in reality, it often passes through a chain of contracts and intermediaries that obscure the original client and the funder. The diffusion of accountability is particularly evident during an election campaign, where genuine political expression and paid content became more disparate. Understanding this eclectic marketplace requires uncovering how recruitment operates, who are the actors that coordinates these networks and how compensation is factored into influencer marketing.

Interviews revealed a layered and evolving ecosystem in Malaysia's political communication landscape. Influencers exhibited diverse practices and motivations, ranging from commercially driven actors to those with clear partisan loyalties. What is increasingly clear is that the influencer economy can no longer be understood in isolation, and is part of a larger communications industry. PR firms and marketing agencies act as intermediaries that function to manage influencers' career progression down to crafting messages. However, what is implicit from interviews is the existence of shadowy actors in the background. Some intermediaries are owned and run by active partisan members, functioning under commercial guises while also facilitating information flow to partisan entities. This signals a more sophisticated evolution of Malaysia's political parties' longstanding tradition of using media as an instrument of political influence.

Most that have been interviewed express their comfort with the current information environment, with some voicing hesitancy towards stronger regulation, perceiving it as a potential threat to creative freedom. In the current landscape, however, content moderation has been hinted as being inconsistently enforced, and boundaries between legitimate political commentary and prohibited speech are increasingly blurred.

With a broad understanding of how the political influencer ecosystem functions, regulatory and policy interventions should be targeted to be specific parts of the system. On the demand side, where funds flow and power is often wielded by actors behind the scenes, bringing these actors into the foreground is crucial. This requires disclosure of payments from political clients to intermediaries, as well as transparency around campaign spending during elections. More importantly, political actors should be held accountable not only for the amounts spent but also for the channels and mechanisms through which influence is exerted, including social media campaigns, paid partnerships, and in-kind support for influencers.

Regulations that could be strengthened include the Election Offences Act and the Gig Workers Bill, which could clarify the status and responsibilities of influencers as part of digital labour. In the long term, the enactment of a Political Financing Act could improve transparency through tracing the flow of money within political campaigns, promoting a more level playing field for political parties. Within the broader digital ecosystem, platform accountability is also essential: transparency requirements should compel social media companies to disclose paid political advertisements, amplification mechanisms, and algorithmic reporting.

Social media can seem like harmless fun — once a digital dancefloor where reels or videos are scrolled past without a second thought. Yet over time, what is watched shapes perception of the world, and political content can persuade opinions and decisions at the voting booth. The more unsettling reality is that sometimes an opinion that appears organic is, in fact, crafted with intent. It is time to look beyond the small screen and pay attention to the three-dimensional world behind it: the agendas, the funders, the intermediaries invisible to the audience. Once politics and money enter the frame, influence is rarely organic and almost never neutral.

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Appendix 1: List of Interviewees

Code	Description
Influencer 1	Started as ordinary social media user speaking about statelessness issue
Influencer 2	Started his content to provide an alternative political narrative
Influencer 3	Has a position in a political party
Influencer 4	Work with ADUN office, and stated leaning towards a coalition
Influencer 5	Stated political party affiliation and disperse political ideologies
Influencer 6	From lifestyle content to creating more political content
Influencer 7	Started career in a political party and currently working with a politician
Influencer 8	Media company owner, declared partisan alignment
Influencer 9	Started producing because of a life event
Influencer 10	PR company owner, have created content for an electoral candidate
Political Staff 1	Former staffer
Political Staff 2	Communication staff for a political party
Political Staff 3	Former staffer
Political Staff 4	Former staffer

Politician 1	Holds position in their political party
Politician 2	State assemblyman/woman
Politician 3	Holds position in their political party
Politician 4	Member of Parliament
Expert 1	Electoral reform
Expert 2	Political scientist
Expert 3	Researcher
Expert 4	Influencer agency manager
Expert 5	Political scientist
Expert 6	Digital safety
Expert 7	Digital safety
Expert 8	PR company owner and electoral reform expert
Regulatory 1	Member of a regulatory body

Appendix 2: Categorisation of Influencers Based on Typologies

Code	Categorisation	Description
Influencer 1	Transitory	Started as ordinary social media user speaking about statelessness issue
Influencer 2	Transitory	Started his content to provide an alternative political narrative
Influencer 3	Janus	Has a position in a political party
Influencer 4	Janus	Work with ADUN office, and stated leaning towards a coalition
Influencer 5	Partisan-aligned messengers	Stated political party affiliation and disperse political ideologies
Influencer 6	Transitory	From lifestyle content to creating more political content .
Influencer 7	Janus	Started career in one political party and currently working with a politician
Influencer 8	Partisan-aligned messengers	Media company owner, declared partisan alignment
Influencer 9	Transitory	Started producing because of a life event
Influencer 10	Partisan-aligned messengers	PR company owner, have created content for an electoral candidate

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