



RESEARCH ARTICLE

UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS AND CULTURAL VALUES ON CONSUMER PURCHASE BEHAVIOR: A QUALITATIVE STUDY IN BRUNEI DARUSSALAM

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the qualitative dimensions of social media influencers, cultural values, and technology in shaping consumer purchasing behavior in Brunei Darussalam. Employing a thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with five social media influencers, the research highlights how Brunei's unique cultural framework influences consumer trust, purchase behavior, and the digital strategies of influencers. The qualitative findings suggest that while trust in influencers is developing, technological limitations and cultural conservatism still present significant challenges to e-commerce in Brunei. These insights provide practical implications for businesses seeking to navigate Brunei's cultural and digital landscape. Future research should investigate the role of technology in overcoming these barriers.

KEYWORDS

Conservative Societies, Consumer Purchase Intention, Culture, Social Media Influencers, Technology.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media influencers' (SMIs') rapid development has changed how businesses interact with customers throughout the globe. SMIs in Brunei Darussalam serve as a link between brands and customers, influencing opinions via relatability and trust. Nonetheless, social media marketing has particular challenges and possibilities due to the country's strongly ingrained cultural values, religious customs, and Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB) philosophy. Because of these factors, companies and influencers must prioritize cultural and religious congruence when marketing goods.

In Brunei, cultural values have a significant influence on consumer behavior. The preservation of Malay customs and Islamic values is emphasized by the state-approved MIB concept, which permeates every aspect of everyday life, including marketing and commercial operations (Marsidi, 2021; Nazirul Mubin, 2021). Despite its geographical proximity to technologically sophisticated nations such as Malaysia and Singapore, Brunei's digital economy remains undeveloped, notably in the sectors of e-commerce and social media marketing (Kula et al., 2021; Siti Mazidah, 2021). This cultural framework necessitates that firms and influencers follow rigorous conventions when advertising items to Bruneians, generally favoring religious and cultural alignment above modern marketing tactics.

While global studies have extensively examined social media's impact on commerce, research specific to conservative regions like Brunei remains limited. This study explores the intersection of SMIs, cultural values, and technology, highlighting how Brunei's cultural framework influences consumer trust, purchase behavior, and e-commerce adoption. Social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok affect consumer behavior, particularly among younger generations. According to recent research, more than 70% of Bruneians use these sites to make online purchases (Kemp, 2024). Despite its strong internet usage, Brunei's technological infrastructure trails that of its Southeast Asian neighbors.

Slow internet connection, high cost, and limited e-commerce platform presence impede the full potential of social media as a marketing tool (Izzati et al., 2020).

This study focuses on how cultural and technological elements shape SMIs, which impact consumer purchasing behavior in Brunei. Trust in influencers, obedience to religious rules, and delayed technology advancement are all significant challenges to building customer trust and increasing e-commerce adoption. By emphasizing these qualitative characteristics, the study aims to contribute to a better understanding of how cultural and technological mediators influence consumer interactions with SMIs.

Brunei faces a unique challenge in adopting modern digital marketing practices. While neighboring countries have successfully integrated social media marketing into their economic ecosystems, Brunei faces cultural conservatism, and technological restrictions create a gap that hinders similar progress. This research aims to deepen understanding of these dynamics and offer actionable insights for businesses and policymakers navigating Brunei's cultural and digital landscape.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The arrival of social media has transformed global marketing landscapes, giving firms innovative ways to engage with customers. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube have become essential components of modern marketing strategies, allowing businesses to leverage influencers, build interaction, and influence customer attitudes via targeted content. Influencer marketing has grown exponentially, with influencers acting as trusted intermediaries who sway consumer behavior through relatable content and product endorsements (Appel et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2021; Lister, 2023). However, the significance of SMIs in traditional countries such as Brunei Darussalam is underappreciated, particularly in terms of cultural values and technological control.

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2.1 Social Media Usage in Brunei

With a 99% internet penetration rate as of 2024, Brunei is among the most connected countries in Southeast Asia. With 66.9% of internet users regularly using platforms like Facebook and Instagram, these platforms dominate the social media scene. Over 70% of Brunei's consumers participate in online shopping, often using social media for product discovery and purchases ("Brunei - Country Commercial Guide," 2024; Kemp, 2024). Despite this high engagement, Brunei's digital economy lags behind its neighbors, such as Malaysia and Singapore. Platforms like Lazada and Shopee have not gained a significant presence in the country, owing to technological hurdles such as poor internet connections, costly pricing, and insufficient infrastructure (Cordon, 2024). These problems, together with the cultural and religious conventions that govern the MIB concept, offer a unique atmosphere for influencer marketing. Brunei's influencers must traverse these limits, striking a balance between global trends and the country's deeply ingrained cultural and religious norms (Mubin, 2021).

2.2 Consumer Behavior and Cultural Influences

According to Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory, collectivist beliefs have a significant impact on consumer behavior in Brunei. Bruneian customers rely on trusted sources, such as SMIs, for product suggestions, with cultural congruence being critical in buying decisions. This highlights the significance of culturally sensitive marketing methods in building trust and increasing customer involvement (Yin et al., 2019). Digital developments in Brunei are being driven by younger generations, especially Generation Y and Generation Z. However, the high cost of adopting new technology and the lack of local e-commerce possibilities moderate these developments (Kemp, 2023). SMIs have a crucial role in influencing purchasing decisions by acting as cultural mediators and bridging the gap between consumer preferences and cultural expectations.

2.3 The Role of Social Media Influencers

Trustworthiness is an essential component of influencer effectiveness, especially in Brunei, where collectivist ideals reign supreme and customers greatly value influencer credibility. According to research, influencers who follow Islamic principles and embody MIB values are more likely to acquire customer confidence (Mazidah, 2021). However, cynicism toward influencer-promoted items remains challenging, necessitating that influencers constantly create and maintain their reputations. According to the Meaning Transfer Model, customers identify an influencer's values and attributes with the items they advocate (McCracken, 1989; Aw and Labrecque, 2020). Influencers in Brunei must match their messaging with Islamic principles and Malay customs to connect with consumers. Failure to follow these cultural standards might damage their reputation and marketing effectiveness.

Attractiveness is also important in influencer marketing, and it encompasses more than just physical attraction. Bruneian influencers that effectively integrate global trends with local customs make deeper emotional connections with their audience, increasing consumer engagement and buy intent (Lim et al., 2017). The MIB ideology has a strong impact on consumer behavior in Brunei, stressing Islamic values and Malay customs in many aspects of life. Advertising is rigorously regulated to correspond with these standards, restricting the scope of aggressive or non-conforming marketing methods (Marsidi, 2021). SMIs serve as cultural guardians, ensuring that their promotions match society's standards. This cultural connection is critical for establishing trust and acceptability among Bruneian customers.

Collectivist values magnify the importance of subjective standards in purchasing decisions since customers frequently seek reinforcement from their social groups. This dynamic integrates influencers into the decision-making process and emphasizes the necessity of cultural sensitivity in influencer marketing. However, technological aspects provide substantial obstacles. While Brunei has a high internet adoption rate, its poor digital infrastructure reduces the effectiveness of social media marketing. Expensive internet, slow connectivity, and a lack of e-commerce platforms are significant impediments (Kula et al., 2021).

Despite these limits, sites like Instagram and Facebook remain popular among younger audiences, laying the groundwork for influencer-driven marketing. Influencers help overcome technological obstacles by simplifying e-commerce processes and emphasizing the convenience of online transactions. Tutorials, testimonials, and personal guarantees help to decrease perceived dangers and increase adoption. Nonetheless, the sluggish rate of digital development limits Brunei's social media marketing potential.

3. UNDERPINNING THEORIES

SMIs play a multifaceted role in shaping consumer behavior, particularly in culturally distinct regions like Brunei. This study employs several theoretical frameworks to explain these dynamics, including Social Learning Theory, Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions, the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), and the Means-End Theory.

According to Social Learning Theory, people learn by observing others, especially significant characters in their social surroundings (Bandura, 1971). In Brunei, SMIs serve as role models, encouraging activities that are consistent with the cultural and religious values espoused by the MIB concept. In conservative cultures such as Brunei, SMIs must straddle cultural and religious norms, encouraging behaviors that correspond with societal expectations (Lim et al., 2017). They function as trustworthy sources of information, influencing customer behavior through their visibility and authority online (Mazidah, 2021). This theoretical foundation underscores the importance of influencers in Brunei's marketplace, where cultural sensitivities and conservative values significantly shape consumer engagement.

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory identifies key cultural dimensions, such as power distance, collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance, which are critical in shaping consumer behavior (Hofstede, 2011). In Brunei, high power distance and collectivism reinforce influencers' status as trusted authorities, while high uncertainty avoidance highlights their importance in lowering perceived risks associated with online purchases. The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) highlights the importance of perceived ease of use and usefulness in technology adoption (Portz et al., 2019). Influencers in Brunei assist in alleviating technological obstacles by demonstrating the benefits and ease of use of e-commerce platforms, despite constraints such as sluggish internet connections and expensive expenses.

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) focuses on attitudes, subjective standards, and perceived behavioral control in influencing behavior (Lim et al., 2016). Influencers in Brunei influence purchase intentions by matching their recommendations with societal norms and cultural expectations, therefore increasing customer trust. Finally, the Means-End Theory describes how product features relate to the consumer's values. In Brunei, SMIs serve as intermediaries between products and consumers, connecting product features (quality, religious appropriateness) to consumers' higher-level personal values. By emphasizing how products align with Brunei's cultural and religious values, influencers enhance the perceived value of products and facilitate purchase decisions.

By integrating these frameworks, the study highlights how influencers navigate Brunei's cultural and technological context to shape consumer purchasing behavior.

4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework for this study is based on the interplay between SMIs, cultural values, and technology, and their collective impact on consumer purchasing behavior in Brunei. The framework integrates several theoretical models, including Social Learning Theory, Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions, the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). These models provide insight into how influencers drive consumer behavior through cultural alignment and technological adoption. According to Social Learning Theory, individuals learn by observing important figures. In Brunei, SMIs are seen as reliable sources of knowledge, promoting actions that are consistent with social and religious standards.

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions theory helps frame the role of power distance, collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance, which influence how Bruneian consumers respond to influencers. TAM explores how perceived ease of use and usefulness impact the adoption of technology—critical in understanding how influencers help consumers navigate e-commerce platforms despite Brunei's technological constraints. TPB leverages attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control to impact purchase decisions, with influencers mediating these components within a conservative cultural framework. The conceptual framework thus identifies the relationships between trustworthiness, attractiveness, meaning transfer, and perceived value of influencers, which are moderated by technology and mediated by cultural values and lead to consumer purchasing behavior.

5. METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS

This study adopts a qualitative research approach that includes in-depth interviews to investigate the influence of SMIs in determining consumer purchasing behavior in Brunei Darussalam. The qualitative method is ideal for comprehending complicated, culturally affected phenomena since it allows for an in-depth examination of human experiences and views. By focusing on SMIs operating within Brunei's unique cultural and technological context, the study provides nuanced insights into the interplay between influencers, cultural values, and consumer behavior.

The study purposefully sampled five SMIs from diverse niches, including fashion, lifestyle, food, and technology. These influencers were chosen based on particular criteria, ensuring their relevance and effect. They required a substantial following to ensure broad content reach, with at least 10,000 followers on networks such as Instagram and Facebook. Second, their content had to align with Brunei's cultural and religious values, adhering to the MIB philosophy. Lastly, the influencers demonstrated active engagement with their audience, as evidenced by metrics such as likes, comments, and shares, showcasing their ability to influence consumer decisions effectively. This purposive sample guarantees that the chosen influencers represent Brunei's larger network of active, culturally sensitive social media personalities.

The primary data collection method was semi-structured interviews conducted with the selected influencers. This approach allowed for flexibility in exploring emerging themes while ensuring consistency across key topics. To enhance the richness of the data, contextual information was gathered by reviewing the influencers' social media content, including posts, captions, and comments. This provides new insights into how influencers interact with their audiences while navigating cultural and technological restrictions. The interviews were transcribed and examined thematically. The data was coded and classified using the ATLAS.ti tool, revealing key topics such as technological challenges, cultural effects, and trust. A word cloud was also created to visually represent the most often stated topics, offering an overview of the major themes.

5.1 Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis, supported by the word cloud visualization, underscores the intricate interaction of cultural alignment, technology challenges, and influencer strategies in shaping consumer behavior in Brunei. By adhering to cultural norms, fostering relatability, and navigating technological obstacles, influencers act as cultural custodians and digital pioneers. However, their effectiveness is constrained by structural limitations in Brunei's e-commerce ecosystem, highlighting the need for broader infrastructural improvements to support digital marketing efforts. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of how influencers operate within culturally and technologically distinct contexts, offering practical implications for businesses and policymakers aiming to leverage influencer marketing in Brunei.

The thematic analysis discovered several essential themes that explain how influencers in Brunei negotiate cultural and technological constraints to affect customer purchasing behavior. Given Brunei's small population, the research focuses on five influencers who have a significant local impact, providing depth of knowledge rather than breadth. Codes were grouped into broader themes that reflected the research objectives, such as "cultural alignment," "technological barriers," and "trust-building strategies." Several major topics emerged from the thematic analysis, illustrating how influencers in Brunei deal with the difficulties posed by cultural and technological constraints to influence customer purchase decisions. Additionally, a word cloud visualization was generated to highlight the most frequently mentioned themes from the qualitative interviews, reinforcing the significance of trust, cultural values, Islamic guidelines, technological challenges, and purchase behavior in the influencers' approaches.

5.2 Trust-building through Cultural Alignment

One of the most significant issues was the need to connect influencer content with Brunei's cultural and religious values, as guided by the MIB ideology. According to influencers, Bruneian customers are selective, with a strong preference for things that correspond with their ideals. An influencer stated: "When I promote a product, I always ensure it aligns with Islamic values because that's what my audience expects from me." Another influencer commented, "If my content does not reflect Bruneian traditions, my followers will not believe my recommendations."

This alignment fosters trust in a collectivist culture where social norms heavily influence purchase decisions. Influencers underlined the need to keep their messaging honest and culturally appropriate to maintain client confidence. The word cloud analysis reinforced this theme, with "trust"

and "cultural values" being the dominant keywords in the dataset.

5.3 Cultural Sensitivity and Ethical Promotion

Influencers emphasized the need for cultural awareness while promoting products. For example, advertising items related to fashion or beauty requires careful consideration of Islamic clothing regulations and modesty requirements. This topic was especially relevant when influencers discussed which things they would refuse to promote owing to concerns about their legality under Islamic law. The word cloud results highlighted the prominence of terms like "Islamic guidelines" and "cultural sensitivity," indicating the crucial role of ethical marketing strategies in Brunei's digital landscape.

5.4 Technological Challenges in Brunei

Despite Brunei's high internet usage, influencers recognized technological obstacles as a major impediment to their efficacy. Slow internet connections, high costs, and a restricted number of e-commerce platforms make it difficult for influencers and consumers to fully engage in digital commerce. Influencers also remarked that Brunei's delayed adoption of technology reduces customer confidence in online buying. Many consumers remain cautious about using online payment methods, preferring in-person transactions.

These technological challenges highlight the significance of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) in understanding consumer behavior in Brunei. While influencers play an important role in promoting the convenience and advantages of e-commerce, fundamental upgrades to digital infrastructure are required for wider adoption. The word cloud further validated this concern, as "technology challenges" and "purchase behavior" emerged as key discussion points.

5.5 Balancing Global Trends with Local Norms

Influencers must navigate global marketing trends while still meeting local cultural standards. They carefully select content to appeal to Brunei consumers while remaining culturally authentic. For example, one fashion influencer stated, "I adapt global styles to meet local modesty standards, and my followers appreciate this effort." This balance is especially critical when advertising lifestyle items like fashion and food, where cultural norms significantly impact consumer acceptability. The Meaning Transfer Model provides a valuable framework for understanding how influencers function as cultural mediators. By merging global trends with local customs, influencers increase the perceived worth of items and strengthen emotional ties with their audience.

5.6 Consumer Engagement Through Relatability

Relatability emerged as an important aspect in increasing customer involvement. Influencers who share personal stories and insights that resonate with their audience are more successful in fostering loyalty and trust. Relatability extends beyond personal anecdotes to include shared cultural experiences. Influencers reported that their followers often engage more with posts that highlight Brunei's unique traditions and way of life. Relatability enhances the relationship between influencers and their target audience, increasing customer trust and purchase intent. This conclusion supports the Theory of Planned Behavior, which emphasizes the importance of subjective standards in shaping consumer attitudes and actions.

5.7 Overcoming Skepticism Toward Influencer Marketing

Despite Brunei's high internet penetration, technological hurdles such as sluggish internet connections and high costs prevent full participation in digital commerce. Influencers play a critical role in reducing these barriers by educating their audiences on e-commerce processes and offering reassurances about online payment security. One influencer explained, "I often share step-by-step tutorials on how to use online shopping platforms because many of my followers are still hesitant about trying them." Additionally, the word cloud analysis highlighted "influencer authority" as a recurring theme, reinforcing the idea that consumers in Brunei place significant trust in influencers who align with cultural and religious norms. This trust is critical for influencing purchase decisions, as customers rely on influencers to confirm product quality and appropriateness within a conservative cultural context.

6. FINDINGS

The findings highlight the intricate interaction of cultural alignment, technology challenges, and influencer techniques in determining consumer behavior in Brunei. By adhering to cultural norms, fostering

relatability, and navigating technological obstacles, influencers act as cultural custodians and digital pioneers. However, their effectiveness is constrained by structural limitations in Brunei's e-commerce ecosystem, highlighting the need for broader infrastructural improvements to support digital marketing efforts. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of how influencers operate within culturally and technologically distinct contexts, offering practical implications for businesses and policymakers aiming to leverage influencer marketing in Brunei.

7. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study align with Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions and Social Learning theories, emphasizing the importance of cultural alignment and trust in influencing consumer behavior in Brunei. SMIs have become key players in shaping purchasing decisions, particularly in a society where traditional values dominate. However, compared to influencers in more technologically advanced countries, Bruneians have additional challenges because of limited e-commerce platforms and slow internet. The study also highlights the mediating role of technology in consumer behavior. While influencers have successfully built trust with their audience, the technological limitations in Brunei slow down the full potential of digital commerce. The TAM applies here as well, showing that perceived barriers to technology use hinder both influencers and consumers from fully embracing online shopping.

8. CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the understanding of how SMIs operate within culturally conservative societies like Brunei. Influencers not only promote products but also act as cultural mediators, aligning their content with local values to gain consumer trust. However, the slow technological development in Brunei remains a significant barrier to the growth of e-commerce, despite influencers' efforts to bridge this gap. For businesses, these findings suggest that collaboration with local influencers can provide a culturally sensitive way to reach consumers, but investments in technology infrastructure are also necessary to fully leverage this marketing channel. Future research should explore how improvements in technology could enhance the effectiveness of influencer marketing in Brunei.

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