

From Scrolling to Self-Improvement: How Motivational TikTok Influencers Shape User Behaviour Among Young Malaysians Through the Lens of Social Influence Theory

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ABSTRACT

TikTok has grown from an entertainment platform into a space where young Malaysians turn for motivation, encouragement, and personal direction, yet most local research still frames the platform mainly around shopping and brand behaviour. This study looks instead at influencers who share motivational, non-commercial content, and asks how their videos change the way followers think and act, using Kelman's Social Influence Theory (compliance, identification, and internalisation) as the guiding lens. An exploratory qualitative design was adopted within an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with five Malaysian TikTok users aged 18 to 30 - two motivational content creators and three regular followers - and the transcripts were examined using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings show that exposure to motivational TikTok content is associated with greater self-confidence, a more positive outlook, clearer goal-setting, and small but consistent changes in daily habits, such as revisiting a favourite video during a break or trying out advice in stages rather than all at once. Mapped against Social Influence Theory, these shifts appear at every level: some followers comply out of curiosity or short-term reward, others identify with a creator whose values feel familiar, and a smaller group internalise the message so that it continues to guide their choices even without further reminders. Three practical qualities - authenticity, consistency, and message clarity - emerged as what makes this influence last. The study extends Social Influence Theory beyond its usual commercial setting and offers early evidence that non-commercial influencer content can function as a low-cost, accessible source of everyday motivation for young Malaysians.

Keywords- Social Influence Theory, motivational influencers, TikTok, user behaviour, qualitative research, Malaysia, social media, thematic analysis

INTRODUCTION

Scroll through TikTok in Malaysia today and it will not take long before a motivational clip appears - a young entrepreneur talking about failure, a life coach breaking down a mindset shift in under a minute, a student sharing how they turned a bad semester around. What began as a platform built for dance trends and comedic skits has quietly become somewhere many young Malaysians go for encouragement, direction, and a nudge to keep going. By early 2024, TikTok's potential advertising reach in Malaysia had climbed to roughly 28.68 million users aged 18 and above - a 48.6 percent jump, or about 9.4 million additional users, compared with the start of 2023 [6], with Gen Z and the 25-44 age bracket forming the platform's core audience. That growth has not gone unnoticed by brands, but it has also opened space for a different kind of creator - one whose currency is not a product but a feeling: resilience, empathy, or the belief that things can improve.

This shift matters beyond entertainment value. Motivational content on TikTok speaks directly to two of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals - SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) - by offering an informal, accessible channel through which young people build confidence, set goals, and rethink their approach to study or work, often outside the reach of formal classrooms or counselling services.

Yet the bulk of Malaysian research on TikTok has stayed close to commerce - purchase intention, brand recall, and consumer decision-making dominate the literature. Studies on how the platform's Gen Z users behave after exposure to influencer content [1] and how viral products travel through TikTok among Malaysian adolescents [2] both signal that TikTok shapes behaviour, but always through a transactional lens. Motivational content, precisely because nothing is being sold, has largely escaped this scrutiny. Equally, most available insight leans on quantitative surveys, leaving little room to hear, in participants' own words, what actually changes in someone's thinking or daily routine after they follow a motivational creator. And while Social Influence Theory has traveled well into commercial and consumer contexts, including recent work on how short-form video content shapes purchase behaviour [3], [4], its relevance to non-commercial, values-based influence - the kind motivational creators practise - remains comparatively untested.

This study responds to that gap with two objectives: first, to explore the behavioural changes that Malaysian TikTok users experience after engaging with motivational influencers; and second, to examine how well Social Influence Theory explains those changes. The corresponding research questions ask what behavioural shifts users report, and how compliance, identification, and internalisation - the three mechanisms Kelman originally proposed [5] - play out in this specific, non-commercial setting.

The scope is deliberately narrow and grounded: Malaysian TikTok users aged 18 to 30, based in urban and semi-urban areas including Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Perak, and Terengganu, drawn from both sides of the influence relationship - the creators producing motivational content and the followers consuming it. Content tied to product endorsement or paid promotion was excluded, keeping the focus squarely on motivational, non-commercial material. As with any qualitative study built on a small purposive sample, the findings are not meant to generalise to the wider population; instead, they aim to surface the texture and mechanics of an influence process that quantitative studies alone tend to flatten. Self-reported accounts also carry the usual caveats of recall and social desirability bias, and what counts as "motivational" remains, to some extent, in the eye of the beholder.

Even with these boundaries, the study offers something the existing literature has not yet provided: a grounded, theory-informed account of how non-commercial social media influence actually works for young Malaysians, with practical relevance for educators, counsellors, and the growing number of creators who see motivation - rather than marketing - as their contribution to their audience's lives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

TikTok and the Rise of Everyday Self-Development Content

TikTok's algorithm-driven "For You" feed rewards content that holds attention rather than content from accounts a user already follows, and this design has allowed motivational creators with no prior following to reach large audiences quickly. Malaysian users, in particular, have begun folding TikTok into self-improvement routines that go beyond passive entertainment - for instance, matriculation students have reported using short-form videos to practise and refine their English-speaking skills [7], suggesting the platform's educational potential is already being tapped informally, even without deliberate instructional design. This pattern is consistent with computational work showing that a short-form video's eventual popularity can be predicted from cues embedded in the content itself - visual, audio, and textual signals combined - well before an algorithm's downstream amplification takes over, underscoring that what a creator puts into a video meaningfully shapes how far it travels [27]. More broadly, developmental research frames social media itself as a kind of digital mirror through which young people work out who they are, trying on values and behaviours before deciding which ones to keep [14], which helps explain why a platform built for entertainment can double as an unplanned space for this kind of self-development activity.

Motivational Influencers and the Mechanics of Behavioural Change

Not all influencers occupy the same role. Where commercial influencers trade primarily on product credibility, motivational creators build their following around perceived authenticity, relatable struggle, and a consistent value system - qualities that research on parasocial interaction and source credibility suggests matter more for behavioural influence than production quality or follower count alone [8]. A recent meta-analysis of social media influencer effects across dozens of studies confirms that credibility and perceived similarity - not simply reach - are the strongest predictors of whether an audience actually acts on what an influencer says [9]. The strength of that parasocial bond matters beyond marketing outcomes too: qualitative work on how youth-facing digital influencers talk about mental health shows that young audiences judge a creator's authenticity by the perceived consistency between what is said and how the creator appears to live, and it is this perceived consistency, more than polish, that determines whether guidance is taken seriously [21]. Underlying this is source credibility theory itself, which decomposes an audience's trust in a communicator into attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness, with trustworthiness - the belief that a source is being honest rather than self-serving - typically carrying the most weight in sustained behavioural response [22].

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social Influence Theory

Kelman's Social Influence Theory identifies three distinct processes through which people respond to social pressure or persuasion [5]. Compliance occurs when a person adopts a behaviour to gain a reward or avoid disapproval, without necessarily agreeing with it internally. Identification occurs when a person adopts a belief or behaviour because they want to resemble, or feel connected to, the person or group promoting it. Internalisation, the deepest level, occurs when the new belief becomes integrated into the person's own value system, continuing to guide behaviour even without external reinforcement. Subsequent work applying these mechanisms to digital contexts has shown that compliance often shows up as short-term engagement (likes, shares, trying an idea once), identification as a felt closeness with the content creator, and internalisation as durable changes in how someone thinks or acts weeks or months later [10]. Work on emotional immersion in short-video environments similarly finds that the sense of "social presence" a platform creates can intensify all three mechanisms simultaneously, which is part of why short-form video seems unusually effective at driving this kind of influence [11]. A recent application of the same three-stage model to influencer marketing more broadly further confirms that compliance, identification, and internalisation are empirically separable audience responses, each triggered by a different combination of influencer attributes rather than by a single underlying trait such as popularity [25].

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Building on Kelman's model, this study frames the relationship between motivational TikTok content, the interaction between influencer and user, and the resulting behavioural change as operating through the three-stage compliance-identification-internalisation pathway. Two contextual constructs - the nature of the motivational content itself, and the quality of interaction between creator and follower (replies, comments, direct messages) - are treated as conditions that determine how far along that pathway a given follower moves.

This framing draws on evidence that parasocial closeness and perceived source credibility jointly shape how deeply an audience absorbs influencer messaging [8], [9], rather than either factor working alone. It is also consistent with recent work showing that when the aspirational standards a creator models feel too distant from a follower's actual circumstances, the psychological gap can undermine self-efficacy and stall movement through the pathway altogether, which is why perceived attainability - not just exposure - is treated here as a boundary condition on how far internalisation can proceed [23].

Related Empirical Studies

Local research on TikTok and Gen Z purchasing behaviour in Malaysia confirms that the platform shapes consumer decisions through exposure and repetition [1], while international work on TikTok influencers and consumer wellbeing finds that emotional engagement - not simply exposure - is what converts viewing into behavioural or attitudinal change [12]. Related findings on green influencers show a comparable pattern: trust and engagement, rather than reach, predict whether audiences adopt the behaviours a creator promotes [13], and a parallel study on influencer marketing through a social identity lens finds that followers who see part of their own identity reflected in a creator are more likely to act on their recommendations [3]. Beyond marketing contexts, a broader meta-analysis of social comparison research finds that exposure to seemingly superior others online produces measurably worse self-evaluations on average [24], which sets up an important contrast: motivational content that models an attainable, rather than idealised, standard may be one of the few genres of social media content capable of reversing that typical pattern. Consistent with this, research on social-media credibility and trustworthiness finds that these two qualities, together with a source's perceived self-efficacy, are what ultimately convert a follower's attention into a concrete behavioural response [26]. None of these studies, however, addresses influence in a context where nothing is being purchased - a gap this study is positioned to fill.

Research Gap

Three gaps stand out. First, Malaysian TikTok research has concentrated almost entirely on commercial behaviour, leaving motivational, non-commercial influence largely unexamined - a pattern that mirrors the wider influencer-marketing literature, where even recent studies of influencer credibility continue to be framed almost entirely around whether a recommendation converts into a specific purchase, rather than a broader behavioural or attitudinal shift [28]. Second, the qualitative texture of how influence actually unfolds - in participants' own words - is thin compared to the volume of survey-based work. Third, Social Influence Theory, though well-tested in marketing and consumer settings, has rarely been applied to a context where the "product" being adopted is a mindset or habit rather than a purchase. This study addresses all three.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative design situated within an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm, on the basis that behavioural change driven by social media influence is best understood through participants' own interpretations of their experience rather than through predetermined variables [15]. This approach fits a topic where the "outcome" - a shift in motivation or mindset - is inherently subjective and personally constructed [16].

Data Sources

Primary data came from semi-structured interviews with five participants: two motivational TikTok content creators (coded MTI 1 and MTI 2) and three followers of motivational content (coded FMTI 1, FMTI 2, and FMTI 3). Secondary data - peer-reviewed journal articles, books, theses, and industry reports - supported the construction of the interview protocol and contextualised the findings.

Sampling

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, selecting individuals who actively create or consistently follow motivational TikTok content, supplemented by snowball sampling once initial contacts referred other eligible participants [17]. Inclusion required that participants be Malaysian, aged between 18 and 30, and regular engagers with motivational (non-commercial) TikTok content. A sample of five was considered sufficient for this exploratory stage given the depth of the interviews and the point at which recurring themes stopped generating substantially new insight.

Location

Interviews were conducted with participants based in Malaysia's urban and semi-urban areas - Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Johor, and Melaka - regions with high smartphone and social media penetration where motivational content is both consumed and produced.

Interview Procedure

Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and was conducted either face-to-face or via Zoom/Google Meet, depending on participant availability. Interviews were conducted mainly in Malay and English, audio-recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim before analysis. A structured protocol guided each session: preparation, introduction and rapport-building, informed consent, assurance of confidentiality, the interview itself, closing remarks, transcription and secure data storage, and a final member-checking step where participants could review and confirm their transcribed responses.

Data Analysis

Transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, which treats the researcher's interpretive judgement as an active and valuable part of identifying patterns rather than a bias to be eliminated [18], [20]. Coding moved from familiarisation with the transcripts, to generating initial codes, to grouping codes into candidate themes, and finally to reviewing and naming themes against the two research objectives and the three Social Influence Theory mechanisms.

Time Horizon and Trustworthiness

The study is cross-sectional, capturing participants' experiences at a single point in time. Trustworthiness was supported through member-checking, a clear and consistent interview protocol, and triangulation between influencer and follower perspectives on the same underlying phenomenon.

FINDINGS

Participant Profiles

MTI 1 is an entrepreneur running a publishing and consultancy business, producing short, Islamic-values-based motivational videos since 2022; several followers reported that his content changed their mindset toward daily challenges, and some went on to purchase his books after following his page. MTI 2 is a communications professional and published author with prior television hosting experience, who joined TikTok later than most creators (during the 2021 movement-control period) but grew to roughly 100,000 followers within about a year by tailoring short, engaging videos to a general audience. FMTI 1, FMTI 2, and FMTI 3 are regular followers of motivational TikTok content who described consistent viewing habits and specific instances of behavioural change linked to that content.

Behavioural Changes (Research Objective 1)

- Emotional and psychological responses: Several followers described a lift in self-confidence and motivation directly tied to specific videos, along with a more deliberate effort to manage negative emotions after watching motivational clips - describing the content as something they turned to specifically when they needed to reset their mood or outlook.
- Attitudinal changes: Followers reported clearer, more deliberate goal-setting after sustained exposure to motivational content, and a noticeable shift in how they interpreted setbacks - reframing failure as part of a growth process rather than as a stopping point. One follower described the content as resonating strongly enough to reshape how she and her peers talked about their own struggles.
- Behavioural changes in daily life: Motivational videos became part of small daily routines - one participant described watching a favourite creator specifically during lunch breaks as a mood-reset habit. Several participants also described applying advice in gradual, staged steps rather than attempting

wholesale change, and passing content along to friends and family in what one participant called a “give and take” of encouragement within her own social circle.

Relevance of Social Influence Theory (Research Objective 2)

- Compliance: Some followers acted on a creator's suggestions relatively quickly - for instance, purchasing a book after a creator discussed it - motivated in part by the creator's visible credibility and the fast-moving nature of TikTok trends, which rewards timely engagement.
- Identification: Followers who felt a creator was relatable - responding personally to comments and direct messages rather than maintaining a distant “celebrity” persona - reported a stronger sense of connection, describing these creators less as distant public figures and more as familiar, trustworthy voices.
- Internalisation: A smaller number of participants described advice or mindset shifts that persisted well after the original video had been watched, continuing to shape decisions even without repeated exposure - the clearest marker, within this study, of internalisation as Kelman defined it [5].

Emergent Factors Behind Effective Motivational Influence

Beyond the three Social Influence Theory mechanisms, five recurring qualities surfaced as central to why some motivational content worked and other content did not: authenticity and transparency in how creators present themselves; consistency of posting and message, which both influencers linked directly to audience growth and retention; clarity and practicality of the advice given, often communicated in short, direct language rather than abstract encouragement; active engagement and interaction with followers, including replying to comments and messages; and a creator's own willingness to keep learning and adapting their delivery across platforms and formats.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Discussion

Taken together, the findings suggest that motivational TikTok content changes not just how young Malaysians feel in the moment but, for some, how they think about setbacks, structure their goals, and organise parts of their daily routine - a pattern broadly consistent with earlier work on TikTok's growing role in Malaysian self-development practices [7], [19]. Mapping these changes onto Social Influence Theory shows that all three mechanisms are active among this sample, but they are not equally common: compliance-level engagement appeared most frequently, identification appeared where creators maintained personal, responsive contact with followers, and internalisation - the most durable form of influence - was reported by only a subset of participants, consistent with the theory's own assumption that internalisation requires the deepest alignment between a message and a person's existing values [10]. The five emergent factors - authenticity, consistency, clarity, engagement, and adaptability - offer a practical bridge between the theory and what creators themselves can control, echoing findings from influencer-marketing research that credibility and perceived similarity, not follower count, drive real behavioural impact [9], [3]. Participants' emphasis on creators who framed progress as attainable, rather than distant or idealised, also lends support to the view that perceived goal attainability - not exposure alone - is what keeps a motivational message from becoming self-defeating [24].

Contributions

This study extends Social Influence Theory into a non-commercial, values-based context where existing applications have concentrated almost exclusively on consumer behaviour, and it does so by drawing on both sides of the influence relationship - creators and followers - rather than followers alone. Practically, the findings suggest that motivational TikTok content can serve as an accessible, low-cost complement to formal guidance from educators and counsellors, particularly for young people who might not otherwise seek out structured support, while also giving creators themselves a clearer sense of which practices (authenticity, consistency, responsiveness) meaningfully shape their impact.

Limitations and Future Research

The study's qualitative design and small sample of five participants mean the findings describe patterns worth further investigation rather than population-wide conclusions, and the reliance on self-reported accounts carries the usual risks of recall and social desirability bias. The cross-sectional design also cannot confirm whether reported behavioural changes persist over time. Future research would benefit from longitudinal designs that track behavioural change over months rather than at a single point, larger and more geographically diverse samples across Malaysia, and comparative work examining whether motivational content functions similarly on other platforms such as Instagram and YouTube.

Conclusion

Motivational TikTok content, even without any commercial motive behind it, appears able to shift how young Malaysians feel, think, and, in some cases, behave day to day - and Social Influence Theory offers a workable lens for understanding why, tracing a path from simple compliance through identification and, for some, into genuine internalisation. As TikTok's motivational-content space continues to grow, understanding what makes that influence effective - relatability, consistency, and clarity, above all - matters for creators, educators, and the young Malaysians who increasingly look to their feeds for more than entertainment.

CREDIT AUTHOR STATEMENT

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