BALANCING FAME AND TALENT: RETHINKING ACTORS' MARKETABILITY IN MALAYSIA'S DIGITAL ERA

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Abstract: The marketability of Malaysian actors is being transformed by the emergence of digital technology and social media. This conceptual paper examines the interplay of talent, fame, and personal branding in shaping an actor's visibility and audience engagement. It contends that contemporary marketability relies not merely on talent or fame, but rather on a strategic equilibrium of both, enhanced by digital platforms. Rooted in personal branding theory and celebrity culture, the paper emphasises the necessity for genuine self-presentation and a robust digital presence. This study proposes a framework to assist Malaysian professionals in navigating their careers within the evolving digital landscape, based on a review of existing literature.

Keyword: Social media, actors' marketability, digital era, malaysian entertainment industry

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INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, actors are shaped by market demands and societal expectations, influencing their self-presentation and public perception. The entertainment industry is transforming due to digitalisation, introducing novel challenges and opportunities, particularly via online platforms. Comprehending marketability in the digital realm is essential, especially regarding the influence of personal branding on social media. While talent continues to hold significance, it is no longer adequate by itself. In the current landscape, visibility, popularity, and online engagement hold equal significance. Consequently, it is imperative to investigate the redefinition of marketability and how individuals can strategically equilibrate fame and talent while maintaining authenticity and professionalism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media Metrics and Marketability

A multitude of studies has examined the relationship between social media presence and marketability, especially within the entertainment sector. Franck and Nuesch (2012) discovered that popularity and talent substantially affect marketability in football; however, their research did not concentrate on the entertainment industry, particularly actors. Rebecca (2012) analysed female celebrities and concluded that fame frequently surpasses talent in determining success, but did not explore how these elements collectively impact marketability. These discrepancies underscore the necessity for a more profound analysis concerning participants, as social media prominence may not consistently correlate with genuine performance abilities vital intelligence for producers and casting agents in the digital age.

Talent Identification and the Digital Influence

Social media is increasingly acknowledged as a "verification tool" for popularity, which indirectly affects casting decisions (Ali, 2019; Nathan, 2017). Loizos et al. (2024) noted that individuals with greater

follower counts are frequently favoured for positions due to their perceived dedication and influence, occasionally to the detriment of actual talent. Evi (2020) recognised the significance of both talent and digital presence in casting, whereas Nuno et al. (2024) highlighted the lack of a definitive framework for reconciling these elements. While Jeong-Seob (2015) and Jelena et al. (2024) advocated for equal significance of traditional and digital criteria, a definitive methodology has yet to be formulated. Furthermore, scholars caution that an excessive focus on social media identities may eclipse genuine acting talent (Steven, 2023; Xu, 2024), potentially distorting casting choices and diminishing equity (Robert et al., 2023; Marta et al., 2024).

Gaps in the current literature

Despite numerous studies investigating the correlation between social media metrics and marketability within the entertainment sector, a significant gap remains unexamined in detail. Prior research predominantly emphasises social media metrics, including follower count, engagement rate, and online visibility, as the primary factors influencing an individual's marketability (Noremi et al., 2020; Selviani et al., 2022). This approach entirely disregards an individual's actual skills, particularly regarding acting talent. Consequently, there exists a risk that skilled individuals who are less visible on social media may be excluded from opportunities within the industry.

Moreover, the majority of current studies are overly general and lack specificity to the domain of acting, thereby allowing for ambiguous and incomplete interpretations within the context of casting. Concerningly, there is an absence of a systematic framework or methodology that can be effectively employed to evaluate the equilibrium between talent and digital visibility in the casting process (Nur, 2024). This skews the selection process towards social media popularity, neglecting to adequately assess genuine performance and acting abilities.

Furthermore, the local context underscores the pressing necessity for increased local research. The Malaysian entertainment sector is influenced by distinct cultural, religious, and socioeconomic factors, which directly affect the assessment of actors by audiences and industry stakeholders (Umar et al., 2024). The preferences of the Malaysian community are significantly shaped by local values, linguistic practices, and media consumption patterns that diverge from those in Western nations (Selviani et al., 2022).

Consequently, local research is essential for formulating an evaluation model that aligns more closely with the realities and sensitivities of the Malaysian market. This concept paper seeks to address the existing gap by proposing a comprehensive evaluation framework that concurrently assesses the efficacy of performance and the impact of social media presence. This proposal considers the cultural dimensions and contemporary context of the Malaysian entertainment industry to enhance inclusivity and facilitate objective and equitable decision-making by producers and talent selection agents.

Theory

This study utilises Impression Management Theory (Goffman, 1959) to analyse how individuals leverage social media platforms to construct their public identities and improve their marketability. Goffman posits that impression management entails intentional actions by individuals to shape others' perceptions, frequently customised to attain particular personal or professional objectives.

In the acting industry, social media serves as a platform for self-presentation, enabling actors to construct and project their identities beyond conventional performance venues. Egon et al. (2012) emphasise that active participation on social media increases visibility and perceived market value, thereby underscoring the importance of curated content in shaping public perception. Rebecca (2012) noted that media professionals frequently emphasise a celebrity's online presence and perceived image rather than conventional indicators like acting ability.

These findings correspond with IMT, as they emphasise the strategic utilisation of social media to exhibit selective, appealing attributes to a targeted audience. Recent studies (Aamir et al., 2023; Pavel et al., 2024) reinforce the concept of social media as a 'verification tool', wherein follower count, curated content, and digital branding enhance an individual's perceived legitimacy and worth. This conceptual model is informed by IMT to analyse the interaction between actors' self-presentation strategies on social media and both conventional talent metrics and novel digital indicators.

Within a qualitative framework, Impression Management Theory (IMT) offers the theoretical basis for examining how online impression tactics affect the formulation of marketability, with the overarching objective of advocating for a more equitable and comprehensive method of actor recruitment and assessment.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative methodology utilising semi-structured interviews with a selected cohort of around 15 participants, including professional actors and directors with experience in the Malaysian entertainment sector and an active presence on social media.

Participants will be chosen through purposive sampling, focussing on their significance to the research objectives, specifically individuals involved in casting decisions or whose public personas have been influenced by social media interactions. The quantity of interviews will be established according to the principle of data saturation, when no additional themes or insights arise, data collection will cease.

An interview protocol will direct the data collection process, featuring open-ended questions aimed at examining participants' perspectives on the impact of social media on casting decisions, the perceived significance of online popularity relative to acting proficiency, and the formulation of marketability in the digital era. The semi-structured format facilitates adaptability while maintaining thematic coherence throughout the interviews.

Ethical considerations will be rigorously upheld. All participants will receive an information sheet and informed consent form before the interview. Participation is voluntary, and participants may withdraw at any point without repercussions. Interviews will be audio-recorded with consent, and all data will be anonymised and securely stored in password-protected digital formats. The research ethics committee of the institution has reviewed and approved the study protocol.

Thematic analysis will be performed inductively utilising NVivo version 25 to code, organise, and analyse the data. This process entails familiarisation with the transcripts, generating preliminary codes, identifying patterns and themes, and refining these themes to encapsulate essential insights. Thematic analysis is appropriate for this study as it facilitates the identification of underlying meanings and recurring narratives pertinent to the marketability of actors in the context of social media and casting practices in Malaysia.
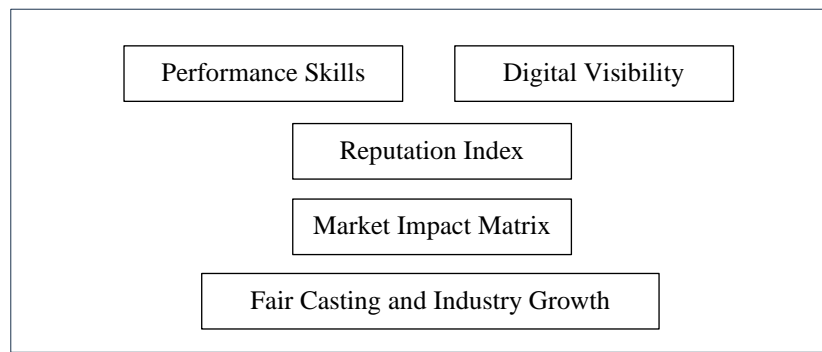
DISCUSSION

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│   │  Performance Skills │      │  Digital Visibility │    │
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│        ┌────────────────────────────┐                     │
│        │       Reputation Index     │                     │
│        └────────────────────────────┘                     │
│        ┌────────────────────────────┐                     │
│        │    Market Impact Matrix    │                     │
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│      │   Fair Casting and Industry Growth │               │
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Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Rectifying Industry Deficiencies via Equitable Casting

The proposed conceptual model has significant implications for industry practice and policy development, especially within the Malaysian entertainment sector. It rectifies a considerable disparity in contemporary casting practices, wherein actors are frequently chosen based on social media prominence rather than genuine performance capability. This inclination has led to dubious casting decisions and inferior production quality. The model fosters a more equitable and comprehensive evaluation of talent by integrating both performance-based and digital metrics.

Reputation Index: Assessing Credibility Beyond Notoriety

The Reputation Index, as presented in this model, addresses increasing apprehensions about the superficiality of fame derived from social media. The Index prioritises credibility, consistency, and perceived authenticity over follower count or online virality, providing a more profound and significant assessment of an actor's long-term professional worth.

Market Impact Matrix: A Pragmatic Instrument for Industry Participants

The Market Impact Matrix functions as a pragmatic framework for industry stakeholders such as directors, producers, and broadcasters to assess how an actor's marketability is influenced by the convergence of talent and digital visibility. This dual consideration facilitates more strategic and informed casting decisions, thereby enhancing production quality and audience trust.

Implications for Policy and Cultural Transformation

This model encourages governmental entities and industry regulators to reevaluate talent development policies. It advocates for initiatives that acknowledge authentic acting talent through merit-based awards, funding programs, or mentorship opportunities, thereby diminishing reliance on online popularity. Fostering such a culture may motivate performers to concentrate on refining their skills while preserving a genuine online persona, ultimately advantageous for both the industry and its viewers.

CONCLUSION

This paper concludes that the heavy emphasis on social media metrics within the Malaysian acting industry has created an imbalance in recognizing acting talent, resulting in lower production quality and dissatisfaction among actors. The proposed conceptual model offers a solution by integrating social media metrics with traditional talent evaluation methods, leading to a fairer decision-making process. This model not only supports actors but also improves industry practices and boosts overall production quality. Future research

could empirically test the model's effectiveness, further advancing efforts to foster a more inclusive and equitable entertainment environment in Malaysia.

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Appendix section (if required) appears before acknowledgement section.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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