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## CAREER ASPIRATIONS AMONG MALAYSIAN YOUTH: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON THE INFLUENCE OF TIKTOK

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### Abstract:

This study examines how TikTok shapes the career aspirations of Malaysian youth, particularly in the context of emerging digital occupations. Although TikTok began as a platform for short-form entertainment, it has evolved into a space where alternative career pathways especially content creation and online influence are prominently visible and increasingly normalised. This visibility appears to influence how young Malaysians evaluate success, stability and future opportunities. Using a qualitative approach, the study draws on in-depth interviews with ten participants to explore how exposure to TikTok content informs young people's understanding of work, achievement and self-identity. The analysis focuses on the factors that attract youth to digital content creation, the motivations driving their interest and the extent to which the platform reshapes their long-term goals. Emotional and social considerations like the desire for autonomy, creative expression and public recognition also emerged as influential elements. The findings suggest that TikTok plays a meaningful role in shaping contemporary attitudes toward career and aspiration, revealing a widening disconnect between traditional educational trajectories and the possibilities offered by digital platforms. The study highlights the need for parents, educators and policymakers to better recognise the influence of fast-

**Keywords:**

TikTok Influence, Career Aspiration, Youth Perception

**Introduction**

TikTok has transformed the digital landscape for Malaysia's younger generation. With its short-form video format and curated content based on algorithm, the platform provides an interactive space that is both entertaining and influential. This study examines TikTok's impact on youth career aspirations in a society where social media plays a central role in shaping identity, ambition and decision-making. It further explores whether sustained exposure to TikTok alters perceptions of conventional career paths and identifies the factors motivating young people to pursue influencer-based careers over tertiary education. Previous research suggests that young people, particularly during formative stages of identity development, are highly susceptible to digital pressures. TikTok's participatory culture, algorithm-driven virality and accessible content creation have made it a powerful medium for shaping lifestyles, ambitions and career goals. By blurring the line between audience and creator, the platform positions digital influence as both attainable and socially rewarding. Merino et. al. (2024) refer to the mechanism of social validation through the system of likes, comments, and shares, which is an aspect of social media that is measurable and infuses with self-worth and body image perception in young people. On TikTok, such validation reinforces the perception that prosperity and influence can be achieved more rapidly than through traditional career routes. This study builds on existing scholarship by investigating how social media trends shape real-world career decisions among Malaysian youth. It highlights the need to integrate digital career literacy into education systems to ensure young people approach emerging opportunities with critical awareness and realistic expectations. While TikTok offers new career possibilities, it also carries the risk of fostering unrealistic ambitions, calling for proactive engagement from educators and policymakers to address the evolving relationship between media and career aspirations.

**Literature Review**

TikTok has become a central platform in shaping how young people negotiate identity, seek visibility and imagine future careers. The growing body of scholarship highlights its influence on youth aspirations, yet studies remain fragmented across themes such as self-representation, influencer culture and digital labour. To frame this study, the literature review is organised around five key areas: TikTok and Youth Career Aspirations, Internet Fame and Emotional Pressures, Young Identity Construction and Online Self-Representation, Opportunities and Sustainability of Influencer Careers and Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT). Together, these areas provide a critical foundation for examining how TikTok informs career imagination and the shifting relationship between digital media, identity and education among Malaysian youth.

***TikTok and Youth Career Aspirations***

Social media platforms have increasingly been recognised as important arenas for youth career exploration. As pointed out by Merino et al. (2024), the use of social media platforms gives adolescents the chance to discover their self-concept and contemplate their personal aspirations in a comparably risk-free online space. According to Ulrich et al. (2021), adolescents turn to

social media and their potential future selves revealed through influencers and peer networks to imagine and model their career prospects in an ever-changing, complex world. Collectively, these studies suggest that social media functions as an informal site of career exploration, offering a space where identity work, self-presentation and professional imagination intersect. In the Malaysian context, this dynamic is particularly significant given the pervasive use of social media among young people. According to the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (2022), over 90 percent of users aged 18 to 24 engage with social media on a daily basis, making digital platforms a near-universal component of their everyday lives. As discussed by Kee et. al. (2023), the perceived employability of Malaysian youth when acquiring digital skills through social media platforms is very high, which is an important characteristic of online environments that can be considered not only inspirational but also a practical tool to define the future career path. Latif and Mohamed (2021) further demonstrated that TikTok, in particular, facilitates exposure to a diversity of career paths, reinforcing the notion that online visibility is increasingly interpreted as a marker of professional potential and success. These findings point to the evolving role of social media in shaping how young people imagine and prepare for their futures. Rather than functioning solely as entertainment or social networking platforms, online spaces also serve as informal guidance systems, where youth can observe role models, acquire information and form perceptions of what constitutes a desirable or attainable career. The integration of social media into daily life also means that youth are constantly exposed to curated narratives of success, which can expand their awareness of possibilities but may also generate pressures to conform to idealised standards of achievement. Despite these contributions, important gaps remain in the literature. While evidence suggests that TikTok and similar platforms inspire career exploration, it is not yet clear how this influence translates into concrete decisions, particularly in relation to tertiary education and long-term career planning. The extent to which online career inspiration encourages youth to pursue influencer pathways, as opposed to conventional professions, has yet to be established. This lack of clarity highlights the need for further investigation into the relationship between digital adoption, online visibility and career decision-making. Examining this intersection is crucial for understanding how social media shapes not only the immediate aspirations of Malaysian youth but also their broader professional trajectories.

### ***Internet Fame and Emotional Pressures***

Research on microcelebrity has demonstrated the ways in which internet fame can reconfigure career aspirations and transform the conventional definition of success. Ryu and Han (2021) argues that everyday users have an opportunity to gain both social and commercial power through creating credibility, authenticity and expertise on the social media platform. In turn, it replicates how the logic of the attention economy fosters the emergence of the trend. Chekima et al. (2023) identified that social media influencers establish and maintain audience trust through their credibility, focusing on personal expertise and appeal that reveals the importance of the continued reputation management so that the business online identity can be preserved. At the same time, past literatures also foregrounds the emotional dimensions of these practices. Nielsen et. al. (2025) argues that influencers are burdened with a lot of emotional labour because the 24/7 nature of digital platforms requires them to work all the time to ensure that they are seen. According to Duffy and Sawey (2022), the work nature of social media creators is broad but rather undercompensated as despite their personal brands gain popularity but much of their emotional and relational work remains under wraps. This appears more disproportionately among genders. Meanwhile, Karakose et. al. (2022) stated that digital addiction research has grown rapidly and shifted alongside changes in technology use. Early studies focused mainly on Internet addiction and psychological traits but work from 2013

onward began to centre more on adolescents and university students, especially in relation to smartphones, gaming and social media. The most recent phase of research broadens the conversation further by emphasising emotional well-being, resilience and the wider social context of digital use. This is echoed by Tülübaş et. al. (2023) in a recent bibliometric analysis of 118 studies on digital addiction and academic achievement shows that digital engagement affects young people through cognitive, emotional and behavioural pathways. This includes distraction, multitasking, stress and poor time management. Although focused of their study was on academic outcomes, the finding demonstrates how digital platforms increasingly shape identity, motivation and decision-making. These are the factors that highly relevant to how youth interpret career-related content on TikTok. In the Malaysian context, Nawi et al. (2020) identified the tensions young people face in reconciling the demands of digital identity with cultural and familial expectations. While platforms such as TikTok provide career inspiration, they also generate significant affective strains. As Annisa (2022) highlighted, the maintenance of an online persona requires users to adapt constantly to shifting trends while simultaneously cultivating a distinctive personal brand, a process that can heighten stress and uncertainty. These studies suggest that the pursuit of visibility is inherently tied to both aspiration and anxiety. The creation of digital fame involves not only technical skill and creativity but also emotional resilience. Individuals must manage the unpredictability of online attention and the risks of burnout. For youth, this duality becomes particularly salient, as the promise of social and financial capital through microcelebrity is accompanied by the possibility of instability, exhaustion and conflict with offline expectations. Despite these insights, there remains limited scholarship that directly connects the emotional pressures of online self-presentation to actual career decision-making among Malaysian youth. It is still unclear to what extent the pursuit of internet fame influences the devaluation of formal education or the prioritisation of influencer careers. This absence of evidence points to an important gap in the literature, particularly in understanding how emotional labour, precarity and cultural negotiation intersect with long-term professional pathways. Further research is therefore required to establish whether the appeal of online visibility genuinely displaces conventional career aspirations or whether it functions primarily as a supplementary form of identity exploration within youth culture.

### ***Young Identity Construction and Online Self-Representation***

In social media identity construction among youth, the primary role is played by self-presentation. Young people are more eager to craft their online identities to satisfy the expectations of the audience and shape their perceptions accordingly. This strengthens the elements of aspirational identity (Hollenbaugh, 2021; Ryu and Han, 2021). Activities like keeping visible and shaping personal brand led to social capital and needs the continuous effort to manage and act an online persona. The social media influencers and microcelebrities also act as career role models and can provide young people with real-life examples of success that are mediated through digital recognition (Nielsen et. al., 2025). On the same note, Nawi et al. (2020) observed that Malaysian younger generation negotiate their digital identities and address the demands of their families and culture. Latif and Mohamed (2021) further noted that metrics on social media such as likes and followers are often perceived as indicators of potential success, reinforcing the association between self-presentation and perceived career readiness. The literature collectively underscores the significance of digital visibility in shaping youth identity formation. Online platforms have emerged as spaces where young people are not only socialising but also experimenting with forms of self-representation that may influence their perceptions of achievement and professional futures. In this regard, self-presentation can be conceptualised as a form of symbolic capital, wherein engagement metrics translate into forms of recognition, legitimacy and validation. Moreover, these practices highlight the ways in

which identity construction in digital contexts extends beyond leisure activities. For many young users, social media functions as a site for rehearsing professional personas, cultivating skills of influence and envisioning possible trajectories that align with the culture of visibility. Such practices may contribute to the development of confidence, entrepreneurial dispositions and communicative competencies, thereby intersecting with broader understandings of career preparedness. At the same time, they introduce tensions, as the pursuit of online popularity may at times displace traditional markers of success, including academic performance and formal career planning. While existing studies affirm the importance of identity negotiation among Malaysian youth, the extent to which these practices inform concrete career choices remains underexplored. It is not yet clear whether the culture of self-branding on platforms such as TikTok translates into a substantive aspiration to pursue influencer careers in place of tertiary education. This gap highlights the need for further inquiry into the relationship between digital identity work, cultural negotiation and youth career orientations, particularly within the Malaysian context.

### ***Opportunities and Sustainability of Influencer Careers***

López-Martínez et. al. (2023) define ‘flexi-vulnerability’ as when digital content creators including gig workers continuously provide labour in hopes of some form of recognition or financial compensation at some point. This works to illustrate how precarious the working conditions are on platform based jobs. This concept captures the uncertainty of digital labour, where sustained effort may or may not be rewarded. Within this context, Abidin (2021) highlighted the central role of TikTok in attention economies, noting that algorithmic performance and audience engagement are crucial determinants of success. At the same time, global trends demonstrate the rapid expansion of influencer marketing, with TikTok emerging as a key platform for brand collaborations (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024). Such developments underscore the increasing legitimacy of digital content creation as an economic activity. Despite these promising prospects, questions of sustainability remain pressing. The influencer economy, while offering visibility and potential income, is marked by precarity, with no guarantees of long-term stability or career progression. In the Malaysian context, there is little empirical research that examines whether influencer careers can provide enduring professional security comparable to more education-based professions. This represents an important omission in the understanding of digital labour, particularly as youth may be drawn to the immediate rewards of online recognition without fully considering the risks of instability and volatility. While the literature recognises both opportunities and challenges in digital content creation, there remains limited exploration of how these dynamics intersect with long-term career decision-making among Malaysian youth. Although TikTok has emerged as a site for career exposure and informal learning, it is still unclear whether such experiences encourage young people to prioritise influencer careers over tertiary education. Addressing this gap is critical for situating the role of digital labour within broader debates about career readiness, sustainability and the evolving aspirations of youth in Malaysia.

### ***Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)***

UGT is an excellent theoretical model for studying how people consume media to satisfy their unique needs. Researchers have shown that social media engagement is largely driven by gratifications including entertainment, self-identity development and social connection (Luo, 2020). The features of digital media platforms including the ability to interact and be in control of your experience, influence the gratification that users will receive from using those platforms, and the way that users will engage with content (Hoque & Hossain, 2023). This expansion reflects the dynamic ways in which users interact with new platforms, suggesting

that digital environments offer not only passive consumption but also active participation that may shape personal and professional identities. In line with this, recent research has situated TikTok within the context of informal learning and motivational engagement. Literat (2021) demonstrated that TikTok functions as a site of informal learning, where entertainment and education intersect and where students may relate career aspirations to their media use. Similarly, Azlan et. al. (2021) found that Malaysian students use TikTok not only for leisure but also as a motivational tool to support their personal and academic goals. Tan (2022) further noted that the platform's features can be adapted for educational purposes, which in turn influence the ways young people conceptualise their future careers. Together, these studies indicate that TikTok plays a multifaceted role in youth life, encompassing entertainment, education and identity development. However, despite these insights, Malaysian scholarship has often positioned TikTok predominantly as an entertainment application. The broader potential of TikTok as a medium for fostering long-term aspirations and career-oriented goals has not been thoroughly examined. While existing studies highlight short-term gratifications and immediate benefits such as motivation and engagement, they provide limited evidence of whether these gratifications translate into sustained career planning. This presents a notable gap in the literature, as the capacity of digital gratifications to inform career decision-making among Malaysian youth remains underexplored. Positioning TikTok within the framework of UGT grounded the study on track by explaining why young people turn to TikTok and how the gratifications they seek influence their career aspirations. As active users, participants engage with TikTok for entertainment, inspiration, creative expression and social validation. These gratifications shape how they interpret the possibilities of digital careers and inform their long-term goals. Therefore, UGT provides an appropriate lens to analyse how TikTok content aligns with users' needs and ultimately influences their thinking about future careers.

### Methodology

A total of ten participants aged between 18 to 39 who are active on TikTok were recruited through purposive sampling for the in-depth interviews. The number of sample size was chosen because the study focuses on a very specific issue which is how Malaysian youth make sense of career possibilities after being exposed to TikTok content. Since the participants shared similar characteristics and were already familiar with the platform, each interview produced rich and detailed accounts that were directly relevant to the research aim. Data collection and analysis were carried out simultaneously. By the later interviews, the discussions were no longer introducing new insights. This suggested that the core ideas had been sufficiently explored and reached the saturation point. In this study, sufficient data were gathered and analysed based on the depth of the narratives, the clarity of the research question and the focused sample. The data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, underlying motivations and shared perspectives. This approach allowed for understanding of how TikTok shapes the career-related thinking of both students and young working professionals. With a concentrated sample, ethical handling of the interview data and practical considerations were more efficient. In addition, the study protocol was reviewed and approved by relevant institutional ethics committee and all participants provided informed consent prior to data collection.

### Finding and Discussion

This section presents the results of the thematic analysis, integrated with relevant literature to interpret the patterns observed. To provide context for the qualitative findings, the demographic characteristics of the study participants are first outlined in Table 1. The participants ranged in age from 19 to 39 and represented a variety of professional and educational backgrounds,

including students, freelancers and professionals in established careers. This diversity offered a balanced perspective on how TikTok influences both individuals still in education and those already participating in the labour market. Notably, several participants with stable employment admitted that TikTok exposure had prompted them to reconsider their career satisfaction and aspirations.

**Table 1: Demographic Profile of Participants**

| Participant | Age | Occupation                 | Education Level              |
|-------------|-----|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| P1          | 19  | Undergraduate Student      | Diploma (on-going)           |
| P2          | 22  | Freelance Graphic Designer | Diploma                      |
| P3          | 20  | Undergraduate Student      | Bachelor's Degree (on-going) |
| P4          | 21  | Undergraduate Student      | Bachelor's Degree (on-going) |
| P5          | 25  | Freelance Editor           | Bachelor's Degree            |
| P6          | 27  | Marketing Executive        | Bachelor's Degree            |
| P7          | 29  | Medical Doctor             | Bachelor's Degree            |
| P8          | 23  | Content Creator            | Bachelor's Degree            |
| P9          | 34  | Human Resource Executive   | Master's Degree              |
| P10         | 39  | Senior Engineer            | Bachelor's Degree            |

The responses received during the interviews conducted with all participants were arranged in a tabular format and three key themes emerged. The themes refer to recurring ideas and patterns identified across participants' narratives, offering insight into how TikTok influences career aspirations, perceptions of traditional career paths and definitions of professional success among Malaysian youth. Data saturation was assessed through concurrent data collection and analysis. After each interview, the transcript was coded and compared with the existing codebook to identify the emergence of new categories. Saturation was considered achieved when successive interviews no longer produced new codes or insights and the data demonstrated repetition and thematic redundancy. A saturation tracking matrix was maintained to document the point at which no additional themes emerged. This indicated that further interviews were unlikely to produce new information. It is worth to note that all participants agreed that TikTok played a role influencing career aspirations among them, while calling for a structured intervention through education in managing the potential shift in career pathway. Table 2 below indicates the key themes and sub-themes emerged upon data saturation through the thematic analysis.

**Table 2: Key Themes and Sub-Themes on TikTok's Influence on Career Aspirations**

| Key Themes                   | Sub-Themes                                | Summary of Insights                                                                                                                                                     |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| TikTok as career inspiration | Aspirational influence of TikTok creators | Participants reported that observing successful TikTok creators reshaped their personal career ambitions, often motivating them to pursue similar online-based careers. |
|                              | Autonomy, visibility, financial potential | Participants were attracted to content creation due to the perceived creative freedom, visibility and the belief that it                                                |

|                                                 |                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|-------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                 |                                              | offered faster financial rewards than conventional employment.                                                                                                                                            |
| Declining interest in conventional career paths | Devaluation of traditional professions       | Several participants expressed reduced motivation to pursue conventional career paths, viewing them as rigid and less rewarding compared to careers in social media content creation.                     |
|                                                 | Redefined success: lifestyle and recognition | Career success was defined less by job stability or workplace status and more by lifestyle flexibility, online popularity and high engagement metrics.                                                    |
| Peer validation and online identity             | Media literacy and realistic guidance        | Participants emphasized the need for educators and policymakers to provide guidance that would help youth manage social media pressures while balancing digital ambitions with practical career planning. |

### ***TikTok as Career Inspiration***

One of the most prominent themes to emerge from the interviews was the role of TikTok as a source of career inspiration. Across participants, observing successful creators on the platform reshaped personal ambitions and influenced how professional futures were imagined. Exposure to these creators often motivated participants to consider online-based careers, with many describing visibility and recognition as both aspirational and attainable. As P3 (20, undergraduate student) explained,

*“Watching creators who are just like us gain followers and income makes me think maybe I could do the same.”*

In addition to inspiration, participants highlighted features of content creation that made it an attractive career pathway. Autonomy and creative freedom were consistently emphasised, particularly in comparison to conventional employment. P2 (22, freelance graphic designer) reflected,

*“I like the idea of being my own boss, deciding what content to make and not having to follow rigid office rules.”*

Similarly, P5 (25, freelance editor) noted that the flexibility of digital content creation was appealing:

*“It feels less restrictive than a 9-to-5 job and you can turn your creativity into income.”*

Visibility was also considered a form of symbolic capital, as recognition from peers and audiences reinforced legitimacy and the possibility of career success. P1 (19, diploma student) described the motivational effect of engagement metrics:

*“Even getting a few thousand likes gives me confidence, it shows people are noticing what I do.”*

For some, the financial potential was equally persuasive. P8 (23, content creator) shared,

*“You see others making money from brand deals and it seems faster than working years to climb the career ladder.”*

These responses suggest that TikTok functions as more than an entertainment platform for young Malaysians. Instead, it operates as a catalyst for reimagining career trajectories, with aspirations shaped around creativity, independence, visibility and alternative markers of success. This echoed early studies that had pointed towards this broader pattern. Abidin (2021) shows how TikTok’s attention-driven ecosystem encourages young people to think about visibility and performance as forms of value. Literat (2021) further demonstrates that the platform doubles as an informal learning space, where entertainment and self-development often overlap. Malaysian research echoes this: Azlan et al. (2021) found that students increasingly turn to TikTok for motivation and guidance, while Tan (2022) notes that its features can be repurposed for educational and future-oriented exploration. These insights reinforce the present study’s finding that TikTok operates as more than an entertainment outlet for Malaysian youth. It has become a catalyst for reimagining careers with aspirations shaped around creativity, independence, visibility and alternative markers of success.

### ***Declining Interest in Conventional Career Paths***

Another key theme that emerged was the declining interest among participants in pursuing conventional career paths. Traditional professions were often described as rigid, stressful and less rewarding when compared to the perceived opportunities in social media content creation. Several participants emphasised that conventional jobs required long years of study, training, or hierarchical progression, while TikTok offered faster routes to recognition and financial gain.

For younger participants still in education, the contrast was particularly evident. P4 (21, undergraduate student) remarked,

*“I see friends spending years in university just to get a normal job, but on TikTok you can blow up overnight and already start earning.”*

Similarly, P1 (19, diploma student) admitted that his motivation for formal studies had declined:

*“Honestly, studying feels slow and tiring when I see people my age becoming famous online. It makes the traditional path look boring.”*

Even those who had completed their studies echoed this sentiment. P5 (25, freelance editor) explained,

*“Working in a conventional company feels rigid. There’s no flexibility and promotions are too slow. Content creation feels more exciting.”*

P2 (22, freelance graphic designer) shared the same perspective, adding that,

*“Clients and bosses can limit creativity. On TikTok, I get to decide what I want to put out.”*

Interestingly, participants in established careers also admitted to re-evaluating their professions in light of the visibility and opportunities available on TikTok. P7 (29, medical doctor) reflected,

*“Becoming a doctor took years but sometimes I feel that content creators get more recognition and financial rewards with much less struggle. It does make me question things.”*

Likewise, P9 (34, human resource executive) noted,

*“In HR, success is about years of experience. On TikTok, it’s about how fast you connect with people. It makes the traditional way feel old-fashioned.”*

This shift in perception highlights how TikTok has not only reshaped career aspirations but also diminished the perceived value of conventional professional careers. Traditional jobs, once viewed as symbols of stability and prestige, were increasingly seen as less rewarding when compared to the flexibility, autonomy and recognition associated with social media content creation. Past literatures explained why such sentiments are taking root. López-Martínez et al. (2023) describe how digital labour operates within conditions of ‘flexi-vulnerability’ where creators invest ongoing effort with no guaranteed return but many still view these pathways as worthwhile because the possibility of recognition or income remains enticing. Abidin (2021) further illustrates the power of TikTok’s attention economy, noting that platform algorithms and audience engagement strongly shape who becomes visible and who succeeds. These dynamics are reinforced by the rapid growth of influencer marketing, with TikTok increasingly positioned as a major site for brand collaborations (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024). Taken together, these studies and current findings help contextualise the participants’ views. Despite uncertainties, the narratives from participants suggest that the creator economy offers a form of aspiration that feels more aligned with their ideals of creative freedom and self-directed success.

### ***Peer Validation and Online Identity***

A recurring theme in the interviews was the role of peer validation and online identity in shaping how participants defined career success. Unlike conventional measures such as job stability, salary, or professional hierarchy, participants increasingly equated success with lifestyle flexibility, social visibility and recognition on digital platforms. Metrics such as likes, shares and follower counts emerged as tangible markers of achievement, reinforcing the idea that online popularity could serve as a legitimate form of professional validation.

Several younger participants openly connected their aspirations to the recognition they observed or personally received online. P3 (20, undergraduate student) explained,

*“When people like or share my videos, it feels like I’ve achieved something. That validation makes me think, why not make this a career?”*

P1 (19, diploma student) also shared similar insight and described the appeal of social approval:

*“Seeing people my age go viral and get noticed makes me want to try harder online than in my studies.”*

Participants in their mid-twenties also reflected on the way digital visibility redefined professional ambition. P5 (25, freelance editor) noted,

*“For me, it’s not just about earning. It’s about being recognised. A career now is about how people see you, not just the title on your job card.”*

P2 (22, freelance graphic designer) echoed this sentiment by explaining that,

*“Likes and followers are like currency. They show your worth in a way that a certificate doesn’t.”*

Even participants with established careers acknowledged the pull of online recognition. P7 (29, medical doctor) remarked,

*“You can save lives as a doctor and still not get much recognition, but a TikTok with a million views makes you instantly visible. It changes how we see success.”*

P9 (34, human resource executive) similarly expressed,

*“In my field, promotions take years. Online, one viral video makes you more influential than senior managers.”*

At the same time, participants expressed concerns about the sustainability of defining success solely through online validation. P10 (39, senior engineer) warned,

*“It’s dangerous if young people only chase likes. They need proper guidance to balance real-world careers with digital dreams.”*

This view was supported by P6 (27, marketing executive) who emphasised the role of media literacy:

*“Schools and universities need to prepare students to navigate these pressures. They should know that being an influencer is not always stable.”*

The findings suggest that peer validation and online identity are powerful forces that reshape how Malaysian youth conceptualise success. This amplified Nawi et. al. (2020) when he noted that younger generation seek validation of their online presence from family, friends and culture of their surroundings. Metrics like number of followers, virality and online recognition were also became the centre of idea amongst participants. This validated the study by Latif and Mohamed (2021) which found that such metrics became indicators of success among youth. However, Annisa (2022) highlights how maintaining an online persona requires constant adaptation to shifting trends. These insights mirror the experiences shared by participants in this study; peer validation was not merely a source of encouragement but a mechanism through which they assessed their own worth, talent and success. While social media platforms like TikTok create spaces for self-expression and recognition, participants also highlighted the need for educators and policymakers to step in with realistic guidance. This dual perspective underscores both the empowering and precarious nature of online validation in influencing long-term career aspirations.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that TikTok operates as both an inspirational and disruptive force in the career aspirations of Malaysian youth. It provides models of creative independence and fast-track visibility, encourages a reconsideration of traditional professions and reshapes how success is defined through peer validation and online recognition. At the same time, participants acknowledged the risks of instability, calling for greater media literacy and career guidance to help young people navigate the pressures of digital ambition alongside long-term career planning.

## Conclusion

This study has shown that TikTok has a significant influence on the career aspirations of Malaysian youth by reshaping how success, visibility, and financial independence are understood. For many participants, content creation emerged as a more appealing pathway than conventional professions, offering autonomy, rapid recognition, and perceived economic potential. This shift reflects not only a change in career preferences but also a deeper transformation in the values and aspirations that guide young people's decisions about their futures. It can be concluded that TikTok has a massive impact on the careers that young people want to pursue because it redefines success, visibility, and financial independence. This change in attitude toward traditional careers to content creation represents a more fundamental change in values and aspirations. To respond effectively, educators, policymakers, and families must recognise this phenomenon and provide practical guidance and digital literacy interventions that enable youth to balance online ambitions with sustainable long-term career planning. Overall, the study highlights both the opportunities and challenges presented by TikTok as a career inspiration platform. While it offers new avenues for creativity and entrepreneurship, it also raises important questions about stability and realistic career trajectories, which can be further explored future research.

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