Celebrity Personal Brand Strategies on Social Media: An Exploratory Of Malaysian Celebrities

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to first examine why Malaysian celebrities utilize social media, what strategies they personally apply and the current issues they face. It is also to show how these celebrities generate income from social media and how it has made an impact on their career. Consequently, in the view of brand professionals, why is it important for Malaysian celebrities to manage their social media? This is an exploratory study and data was collected from interviews, online questionnaires and observation of social media platforms. The main findings include the change of celebrity branding in Malaysia - self-branding via authenticity and storytelling, brand leveraging celebrities' social media platforms as a branding strategy, hackers and privacy issues and the use of social media as an income generating platform for Malaysian celebrities. Finally, a recommended conceptual framework is being derived and this study identified several opportunities for Malaysian celebrities, suggesting practices for effective social media management and also a recommended conceptual framework for Malaysian celebrities' strategic utilization of social media. With the rapid growth and development of social media and their penetration in the entertainment industry, this paper provides insight on the ways Malaysian celebrities utilize social media and how it can serve as a basis for future research in the area.

1.1 Background

Personal branding is the most effective strategy for the human workforce in all fields, especially for celebrities in differentiating themselves from other competitors. Personal branding for celebrities had evolved with the domination of social media and therefore, the ability to master the art of branding themselves on social media had become the most important skills for the celebrities (Green, 2010).

Subsequently, using messages alone is insufficient. In order to gain a deeper connection, short video clips, videos, and images will be a more profound and effective method of engagement with fans (Hutchinson, 2014). Therefore, the social media strategies must be studied in order to be successful strategically in the social media world (Brennan, 2014).

Celebrities are the most influential group of users in the social media world(H. Shaughnessy, 2013; Effron, 2013; Miller, 2014). According to the Vice President for Digital Marketing & Social Media at Los Angeles TAG Strategic, these entire social media phenomena must be studied, analysed and managed strategically to achieve continuous success. Otherwise, it is just a normal tool if it is not used properly and to its full potential(Stuart, 2009).

1.2 Problem Statement

Many studies focus on firms' social media strategies; however, the biggest difference between firms' approach and celebrities' approach to build communities and facilitate social dialogue (J. H. Kietzmann et al., 2011) is that firms are looking for new customers, whereas celebrities are searching for fans' loyalty as they understand the ultimate truth and the art of social media strategies. The personal social media strategies by celebrities are the success

matrix to gain a huge number of fans on their social media platforms. Hence, there need to be a focus on their personal social media strategies to address the gaps in the previous studies (Fladmoe-Lindquist & Tallman, 2002).

Another related issue is determining the importance of celebrities to build their personal branding online as audiences are all moving towards the online world. As stated by Glassman (2012), it is not only important to the social media strategies applied by local famous examples to provide a clearer and more accurate insight of social media management strategies, but also to understand the rationale behind this trend. According to Brown (2013), local celebrities' personal approach in managing their social media platform is the key to achieve social media success, which subsequently affects their career.

As indicated, a majority of the academic studies focus on social media as a new marketing tool (Berinato, 2010) which increases communication effectiveness (Dholakia & Durham, 2010; Hackworth & Kunz, 2010; Monseau, 2009; Selina & Milz, 2009), there is still limited studies focusing on how users may benefit from them (Dong-Hun, 2010).

In addition, the findings of this research will contribute to the existing body of knowledge of celebrities' social media strategies while providing a route map and benchmarks for other local celebrities in Malaysia and also other related firms utilising social media in marketing and building their celebrity brand (Woisetschläger, Hartleb, & Blut, 2008).

1.3 Research Questions

The following six basic questions were used for this research. These questions were designed specially to collect the best practices by Malaysian Celebrities in creating, managing and using their personal branding on social media to expand their career development in the entertainment world.

- RQ1: How had social media impacted Malaysian Celebrities?
- RQ2: What are the useful strategies and practices by Malaysian celebrities on their social media?
- RQ3: How do Malaysian celebrities generate income from their social media?
- RQ4: What are the current issues and limitation faced by Malaysian celebrities on social media?
- RQ5: In the view of the brand professionals, why is it important for Malaysian celebrities to manage their social media?
- RQ6: How could all the findings be combined to establish a conceptual framework for celebrities' strategic utilization of social media?

1.4 Objectives

Due to the complexity of different social media strategies, this research aims to examine and focus on the importance of local Malaysian celebrities utilizing and managing their social media and the impact it has towards them. Using them as examples to provide more insights for other celebrities, firms or brand as social media tools are gaining significant roles and are often used in the operation of many firms, ranging from start-ups, small and medium enterprises to large corporations (Andriole, 2010; Bell & Loane, 2010; Lee, 2010; Osimo, 2008).

Besides that, this thesis aims to examine how these local celebrities monetized their social media platforms while also identifying any related issues or limitation faced by them. Also, information would be collected from the brand professionals who have worked closely with

these celebrities in order to gain another perspective for this topic. Lastly, a conceptual framework will be derived for the strategic usage of social media by celebrities for personal branding on social media.

2.0 Research Methodology

This study adopted the exploratory method to reach its aim. Ten selected Malaysian celebrities and five brand professionals will be examined. The process of collecting data is being discussed in the following sections.

2.1 Mixed Methods: Semi-structured Interviews, Phone Interviews, Online Questionnaires, Online Observations.

Due to the type of data that the researcher wanted to obtain, a combination of methods was being utilized.

Firstly, ten semi-structured interviews or phone interviews were conducted with the selected Malaysian celebrities to meet the research objective. The interviews were conducted either face-to-face or through phone for celebrities who were not in Malaysia at the interview period or due to their tight schedules. The study emphasized on celebrities' personal branding strategies on social media, the impact and issues faced. The research questions (RQ) to explore the social media strategies by celebrities were formed with reference to all the above. The research questions also acted as parameter guidance. Initially, a set of questions were tested in the pilot test on three other celebrities. After presenting the pilot test during the second presentation of the proposal defence, it was suggested by the examiners to further re-examine and initiate changes to the questions to gain deeper insight of the issues studied in this research. Hence, a new set of interview questions, which consisted of 15 open-ended interview questions, was designed (Appendix A), and these questions were answered by ten selected Malaysian celebrities.

Subsequently, online questionnaires (Appendix B) will be conducted on five other professionals who had worked closely with celebrities on social media platforms had also been interviewed in providing a different perspective of leveraging celebrities branding on social media platforms. Lastly, a one week online observation will be performed on these celebrities' social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram and Twitter).

2.2 Research Sampling (Top 50 Malaysian Celebrities on Facebook & Choice of Criteria)

The ten local celebrities selected for this research were presented in **Table 2.1** while the five brand professionals were presented in **Table 2.2**.

C1	Lisa Surihani
C2	Scha Alyahya
C3	Leng Yein
C4	Fizo Omar
C5	Liyana Jasmay
C6	Aznil Hj. Nawawi
C7	Namewee
C8	Sazzy Falak

C9	Ayu Raudhah
C10	Siti Nurhaliza

Table 2.1

| P1	Patrick Wee Kok Han
P2	Lee Hua Chang
P3	Melaka Boy
P4	Dixon Oi
P5	Dominique Chiu

Table 2.2

3.0 Findings & Discussion

3.1 The Change of Celebrity Branding Strategy

This study concluded that technologies like Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and Facebook have enabled celebrities in this case to have more contact with their audiences and reach out directly to fans without mediating contact through a manager or fan club. This echoed the point made by Nick Muntean and Petersen (2009) and Alice E Marwick and Boyd (2011). It also echoed the results where social media had initially put the power bank into the hands of artistes and creators where they no longer needed a third party like television or radio to reach a larger audience.

However, as compared, in this current time frame, celebrities who gained their celebrity branding via the combination usage of the online social media and offline media have the most fans (**Figure 3.1**), followed by celebrities who attained their celebrity branding via online social media first and lastly celebrities who attained their celebrity branding via offline media first. Hence, this showed that although social media is taking over the offline media at a rapid rate, offline media should not be ignored.

Figure 3.1
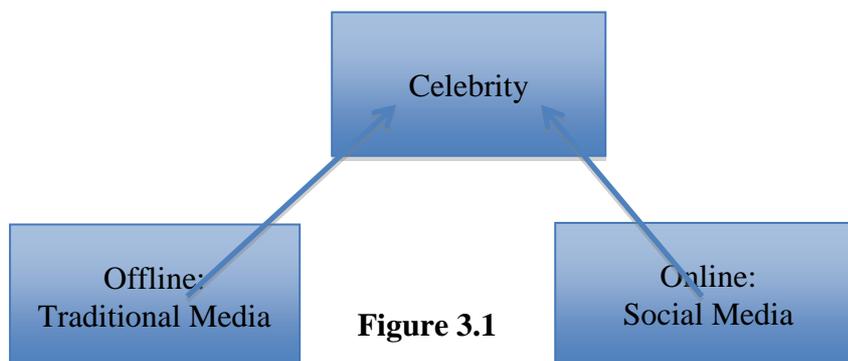
On the other hand, findings also showed that the combination of celebrity popularity online on social media and offline is equivalent to overall popularity. Hence, it is important to manage both offline media and online social media; as shown in **Figure 3.2**.
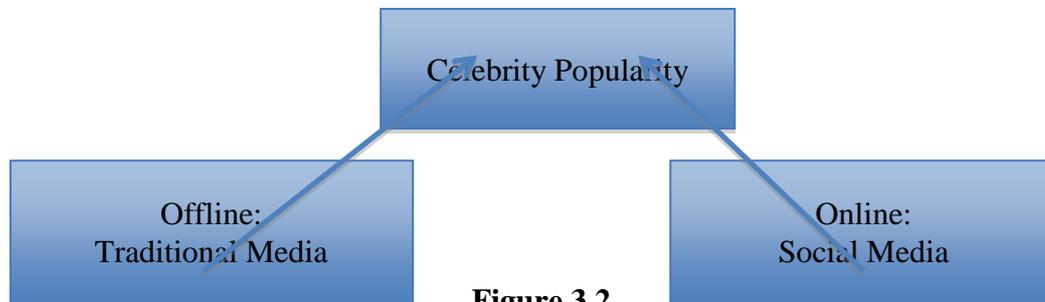

Figure 3.2

A comparison between online and offline popularity, celebrity popularity on online social media would affect the offline media more as compared to celebrity popularity on offline media affecting the popularity on the online social media. In other words, popularity online could affect popularity offline, but popularity offline might not affect popularity online. However both offline and online social media should not be neglected since both are still dependent on each other in this current time frame.
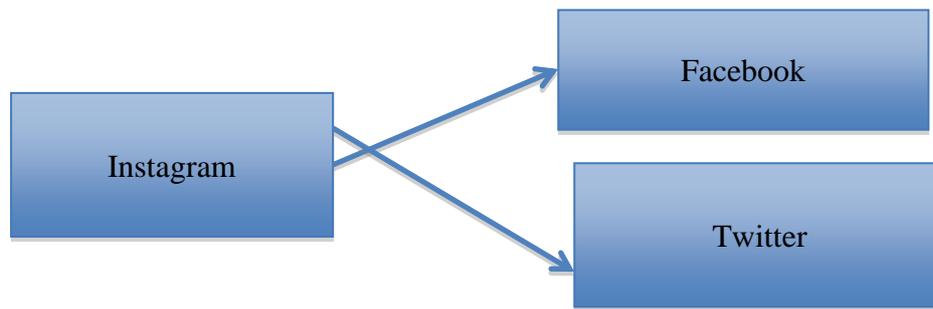
3.2 Self-Branding via Authenticity and Storytelling

This study points out that social media had provided celebrities another effective platform to brand themselves as compared to traditional media. The personal management by celebrities provided a sense of authenticity. This value stems partly from the belief in transparency as a check on abuse of power, which is found in many contemporary social movements (Kelty, 2008).

These results showed that it is important to manage personally but also in a strategic way by setting teams to back up or seek assistance to make each personal site be seen as active, despite the celebrities' busy work schedule. Moreover, Blanchard (2011) also stated that this would constantly keep their fans contented as they receive fresh updates every day, so it is a way to constantly be seen as active online, which is the presence strategy. However, one cannot depend solely on the teams or managers, as users still prefer a sense of authenticity. Hence, managers or teams are seen more as consultants or assistants.

All the celebrities agreed that the utilisation of social media to brand them online is important to boost their popularity in the physical world rather than just focusing on the traditional media as the audience is shifting. This is well supported by Tang et al. (2012), where an individual's identity on their social media platforms will supersede the trails of the individual and will remain engraved online in perpetuity. Undoubtedly, the celebrity culture as pointed by Holmes and Redmond (2010) is enhanced across and sustained by social media.

On the other hand, the online observation indicated that Malaysian celebrities are most active on Instagram and fans are more active on Instagram as compared to other social media. This showed that the authenticity and online presence of the celebrities would affect the activeness of fans online. Majority of Malaysian celebrities would post on Instagram and linked their activities towards Facebook and Twitter. This is shown in **Figure 3.3.**

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┌──────────────┐                        ┌──────────────────┐
│              │ ─────────────────────▶ │     Facebook     │
│              │           ╲          ╱ └──────────────────┘
│  Instagram   │            ╲        ╱
│              │             ╲      ╱   ┌──────────────────┐
│              │ ─────────────╲────▶    │     Twitter      │
└──────────────┘                        └──────────────────┘
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In conclusion, the authenticity via storytelling is important, as social media had become an official news outlet for celebrities and also the main drive for the activeness of fans. While authenticity is held up as a virtue, social media encourages highly constructed and edited forms of self-presentation that are carefully created to boost popularity and gain status without alienating potential interventions.

3.3 Social Media as an Income Generating Platform for Celebrities

As observed on these celebrities' social media platforms, C1, C2 and C5 were heavily involved with social media campaigns. C4 took a further step in this by setting up a business and gathering other celebrities who have significant number of fans sell their Facebook promoting platforms to interested brands as a more effective advertising outlet for business marketing. C6 indicated that this is a new source of income for celebrities. C3 further stated that most of her income comes from her online posts.

P2 pointed that apart from social media campaigns, another way of generating income on social media platforms is in terms of sponsorship deals. As indicated previously, Malaysian social media celebrities can get up to five to six figure deals for video sponsorships. This is especially the case concerning advertising products that would not be allowed to be advertised on traditional media. Celebrities nowadays monetize their entire fan base and are viewed online via advertisements and sponsorships. They also get many new opportunities such as television spots, film cameos, radio spots and more due to their number of fans. As pointed by C7, he monetised these number of hits or fans online via his videos posts. C7 explained that traditionally, brands would advertise their brands on radio or television due to the audience visibility. However, nowadays, advertisers would pay them to advertise in a modern way, for instance, product placement in their movies or online videos. C7 illustrated that "as you noticed, when you enter into some of the videos on YouTube, some advertisement would appear before loading the actual video. Nowadays, there are agents collaborating with YouTube to sell space to advertise on these videos. Each of our YouTube account acts as a channel. Those brands' clients could even specify which channel that they would want their advertisement to tap on to, which is more specific in targeting their targeted consumers."

Apart from that, more jobs and endorsement deals come in as the number of fans acts like a rating system to rate the popularity of the celebrities nowadays and indeed, it is a very important profile for celebrities. As indicated by C1, C2, C4 and C5, they gained more jobs and endorsement deals. C2, C8 and C10 further illustrated that their platforms not only provided other brands to advertise, but also for them to start up their own business, as their social media platforms affected the sales of their business and this saves them a lot on advertising fee.

3.4 Hackers &Privacy Issue

The Internet technology has grown tremendously over the past decade, and the same growth will continue to persist into the future. Social media provides a space accessible for all users, including those with criminal intents. Social media has allowed celebrities to share their information and private daily lives, as well as to get closer to the public and their fans. However, this also makes it possible for the violation of the celebrities' privacy through a variety of means. Social networking sites and associated privacy concerns are among the most debated topics nowadays as participation in such sites have increased dramatically.

On the other hand, another biggest issue is impersonations as indicated by C2, where there were fake accounts created and pretended to be her in order to take advantage of their phenomenon fame online to do business. As indicated by Sloane and Stilwell (2012), impostor profiles actually impersonate a particular victim, utilising without permission the name and likeness of that victim, and purporting to speak on behalf of him or her. Such impersonations can occur regardless whether the victim uses social networking sites at all. These findings are very significant as online crime, forecasted by Schmidt and Cohen (2013) whichhas started to occur now in Malaysia.

These standards include greater security consciousness among all computer system users, as well as tougher security measures and more stringent laws. The outcome of Internet hacking and surveillance seemingly appear to be negative, especially for those celebrities who possess a huge number of fans on their social media account. The reduction of privacy for the sake of greater security remains a controversial topic.

Hence, more precaution is needed in order to solve all these issues and related laws or organisations are still very limited in Malaysia. There need to be more local online enforcement or assistance in order to assist all these victims.

3.5 Brand Leveraging Celebrities' Social Media Platforms as Branding Strategy

According to the brand professionals in this study, celebrities' social media platforms are a big leverage to promote other brands as celebrities shorten the time for other brands to build their brand equity. P1 further explained that the brand could leverage on the brand built by celebrities into their branding. This is because as a celebrity talks about the brand on their social networking pages, the personal comment gives the partnership more credibility. This is also supported by the view of Keller (1993), where there are a lot of interests to promote and produce brand equity via celebrities by deploying them in promotions segmented into different quarters of consumer culture (J. Evans, 2005). Therefore, most of the celebrities who have a significant number of fans on social media platforms are hired by other brands to promote their products using the celebrity brand value online. This was indicated by the online observation made on the celebrities' social media platforms. Celebrities like C1, C2 and C5 promoted for brands which they endorsed by posting their thoughts after using certain promoted products that generated a lot of likes and comments from fans. The personal comment by the celebrities gave the partnership more credibility in this way, as the brands gained a highly personal way across highly personal media.

3.6 Recommended Conceptual Framework

Various main themes of findings have been identified and discussed by incorporation with the available literature. With combination of all the findings and analysis, the following recommended conceptual framework is being derived in **Figure 3.5**
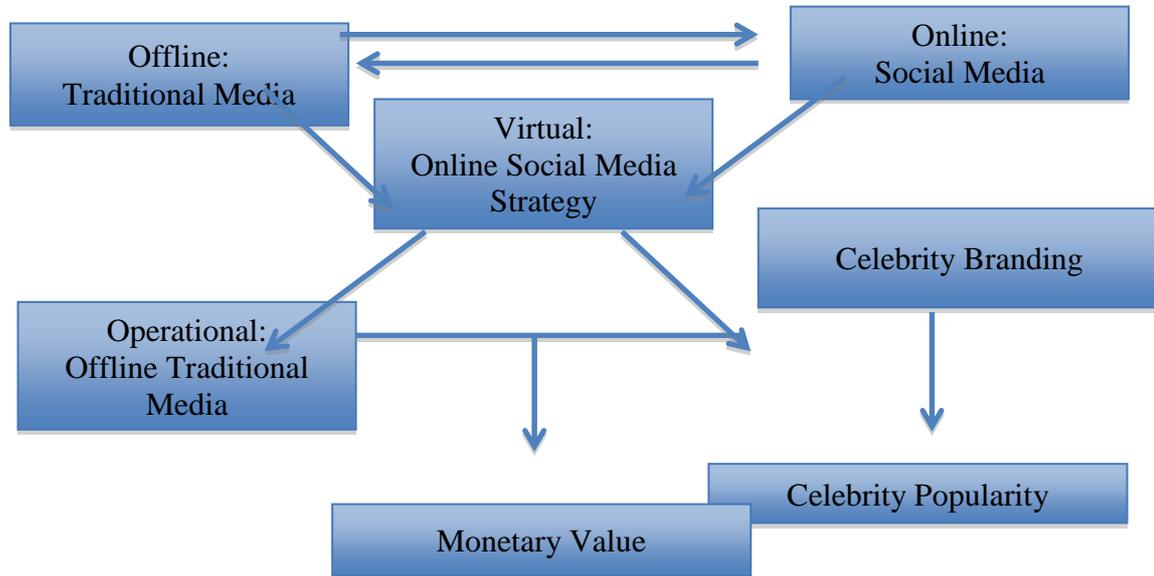

Figure 3.5

As shown above, celebrity branding could be attained either via offline traditional media or online social media or both simultaneously. This is because, the change of celebrity status was influenced by the social media platforms, where celebrities' fan base online had become an indicator of their branding success in both online and offline worlds, the term celebrities varied and could be achieved via the modern way on social media platforms without going through the traditional media. Hence, it is important for celebrities to build their branding via their social media platforms. However, there must be a balance of the branding via offline traditional media and online social media to attain overall popularity. Subsequently, this shows that it is important to have a significant presence online, as this is the main drive for the fans and media to the celebrities' social media platforms. Hence, authenticity via storytelling is one of the most effective strategies used by celebrities on their social media platforms. However, at times, it is hard to achieve both simultaneously due to celebrities' busy schedule; however, this could be bridged by team building or seeking professional assistance. While authenticity is held up as a virtue, social media encourages highly constructed and edited forms of self-presentation that are carefully created to boost popularity and gain status without alienating potential interventions.

On the other hand, with the increasing number of brands leveraging celebrities' social media platforms as a branding strategy, celebrities must be careful in balancing their social media platforms with marketing from other brands. The selection of brands is really important in order to avoid a clash of branding for both parties and turning celebrities' social media platforms into purely marketing platforms for brands, which might annoy the available fans online. Subtle marketing and incorporating into celebrities' storytelling method is another way to gain support from fans, in comparison with the "hard sell" marketing method.

Besides that, due to the low security enforcement law locally for hackers and privacy issues, it is important for celebrities to have extra personal precaution. The online law enforcement in Malaysia is still vague; hence, some self-precaution is needed to avoid all these issues from

happening. Meanwhile, all these issues must be reported to the traditional media in order to create more awareness for all online users.

5.4 Implications & Conclusion

This thesis is also concerned with one aspect of the social media effects, which is changes in the process, in which talented people achieve individual success. It investigates how people rise to the status of celebrity when they cannot or choose not to rely on traditional media entertainment industry infrastructures. This balances between celebrities manufactured for us and celebrities manufactured by us.

Brands have made use of these celebrities, which possess a huge number of fans online to leverage their brands. Celebrities' social media platforms have certain targeted group of fans on their platforms as each of their branding is built online. Hence, brands would reach their targeted audience more effectively via these celebrities' social media platforms as compared to traditional media, which are losing the attention from consumers. In other words, celebrities' social media platforms have become the new "channel" with higher visibility, which provide brands a new medium for branding. This leads to the creation of social media campaigns, which is an additional way for brands to promote their products instead of depending on endorsement. Social media campaigns are different from endorsement as it is very reliant on creative content and storytelling. Social media campaign nowadays could be incorporated into endorsement by weaving storytelling about the ambassador into the campaign. On the other hand, social media campaign is a more casual and subtle way of engaging celebrities in promoting a brand. The brand professional in this studies had also indicated that mainstream media is declining and more brands are going into the social media world as the case studies showed more significant ROI.

The changing nature of technology and the sensitivity of information raise the standards needed to protect the privacy and security of the celebrities. With a significant amount of fans on their social media account, celebrities are the target of hackers. Higher standards of protection, which includes greater security consciousness among all computer system users, as well as tougher security measures and more stringent laws, are needed. The outcome of Internet hacking and surveillance seemingly appear to be negative, especially for celebrities who possess huge number of fans on their social media account. The reduction of privacy for the sake of greater security remains a controversial topic. Hence, more precaution is needed in order to solve all these issues, and related laws or organisations are still very limited in Malaysia. There needs to be more local online enforcement or assistance to help all these victims.

As a result of the shift of audience towards celebrities' social media platforms, various new method of monetising these attentions are fully utilised by these celebrities. Insights provided by these celebrities and brand professionals further indicated the reason and the means behind the method of generating income from these social media platforms. Celebrities and brand professionals in this had provided more insights regarding the methods of monetizing these social media values into monetary value.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Interview Questions For Celebrities

Q1: How did you started off with your social media platform? Was it before or after you became a celebrity?
Q2: Did you gain your fame via offline media or via online social media?
Q3: Why did you manage your social media platforms personally?
Q4: Did you also seek help from consultants or did you also have a team?
Q5: Among a few social media platforms, which you are active on?
Q6: Did you post separately on each of your social media platforms? Or did you auto-link altogether?

Q7: What did you normally post on your social media?
Q8: What types of posting were on your social media, and which of them received the most likes or comments?
Q9: Did you post on specific time?
Q10: How frequently did you post on your social media platforms?
Q11: Did you interact with your fans on your social media platforms?
Q12: How did you manage all the negative comments on your social media platforms?
Q13: Who are the majority group of fans on your social media platforms?
Q14: Was there any problem or limitation faced on your social media platforms?
Q15: How had your social media platforms impact your career?

Appendix B

Interview Questions For The Professional Group

Q1. How had the social media impacted the branding strategy nowadays?

Q2. How had celebrities' social media platform helped in leveraging other brands?

Q3. What is the difference between social media campaign and endorsement?

Q4. Normally how much do local celebrities charge for social media campaigns?

Q5. What is the current status of the social media branding in Malaysia as compared to other countries?

Q6. Any other insight that you want to share about celebrities' social media strategy?