



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN BUSINESS & SOCIAL SCIENCES



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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v12-i7/13075>

DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v12-i7/13075

Received: 10 May 2022, **Revised:** 16 June 2022, **Accepted:** 30 June 2022

Published Online: 19 July 2022

In-Text Citation: (Shafie et al., 2022)

To Cite this Article: Shafie, L. A., Akil, K. A. K., Radzi, N. A. M., Ling, L. Y., Razali, R., & Rosaidi, N. A. (2022). Pro-Environmental Behaviours, Advertising Literacy and Social Influencers' Leadership Qualities among Malaysian University Students. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*. 12(7), 601 – 613.

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Vol. 12, No. 7, 2022, Pg. 601 – 613

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www.hrmars.com

ISSN: 2222-6990

Pro-Environmental Behaviours, Advertising Literacy and Social Influencers' Leadership Qualities among Malaysian University Students

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Abstract

Nowadays, more environmentalists are using social media platforms to raise awareness on environmental issues such as persuading followers to undertake pro-environmental behaviours. However, to date, studies on the role of social media and social influencers in disseminating pro-environmental behaviours are very limited. Therefore, the aims of the present study are to investigate students' pro-environmental behaviours, their levels of advertising literacy and the leadership qualities of social influencers. Data were collected using an online questionnaire consisting of four sections: demographic information, pro-environmental behaviours, levels of advertising literacy and leadership qualities of the social influencers. Respondents were 128 university students who were active social media users at the largest comprehensive university in Malaysia. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics. Our findings highlighted that university students exhibit pro-environmental behaviours in their daily lives. In addition, these students who were active social media users understood the impact of social media advertising on their lives. Moreover, findings showed that university students trust the leadership of social media influencers due to their qualities. The paper concludes by suggesting university management and policymakers to harness the role of social media and social influencers to promote pro-environmental behaviours to citizens especially the younger generation. Moving forward, more studies on the role of social media influencers in disseminating pro-environmental behaviours to followers should be conducted to understand environmental leaderships through social media platforms.

Keywords: Pro-Environmental Behaviours, Environmental Leadership, Social Influencers, Advertising Literacy, University Students

Introduction

Environmental disasters are aplenty and many man-made environmental disasters have caused millions and fatalities. For instance, the recent flood of Western cities of Peninsular

Malaysia could be prevented if environmental measures had been taken properly by the government and the people. The rise in climate, plastic waste and other environmental disasters can be lessened with pro-environmental behaviours. 17 sustainable development goals (SDG) were adopted by Malaysia in 2015 as a member of The United Nations to protect the environment by 2030.

Social media has been used in marketing and promoting consumerism. There is a current trend of green influencers and digital environmentalists who use their social media platforms for non-profit activities and environmental awareness. Environmentalists are slowly using the power of social media to educate and raise environmental awareness through TikTok, Instagram, YouTube and Facebook. Social influencers have been used by brands to communicate their products as the Millennials are active social media users. Thus, social influencers are known for being able to send effective messages to the target audience (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016). Social influencers' credibility can influence their followers/ behaviours and attitude toward a policy or brand that is being promoted by the social influencers (Wang et al., 2017).

University students are seen as the future drivers of the nation and consumers. One way to create change is to raise awareness and educate university students to be environmentally conscious consumers. University students possess adequate environmental knowledge but do not practise it in their lives (Jusoh et al., 2018). In addition, still little is known about the impacts of social influencers on environmental advocacy among university students. Therefore, in recognition of such research gap, the present study specifically investigates students' pro-environmental behaviours, their levels of advertising literacy and the leadership qualities of social influencers. The findings of the study can contribute to the understanding of environmental leadership among social influencers. Higher education institutions can create appropriate environmental programmes that can enhance university students' pro-environmental behaviours.

Literature Review

Influencer Culture

Social media influencer is an individual who has the ability to influence the audience through his/her social media platforms. Social media influencers have certain lifestyles or some achievements that attract people to look up at them as an inspiration or motivation in their decision making. Through social media platforms such as Telegram, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, influencers build a reputation among the followers by sharing opinion, provide information and making regular posts on knowledge and expertise on a specific topic, hence, have an intimate bond with their followers. Social media influencers are from ordinary people and celebrities such as movie stars and sportsperson. Social media influencer is not only about a lifestyle but also a career path (Szcurski, 2017).

In terms of gender, study shows that female influencers are more likely to promote fashion, beauty and parenting, while male influencers tend to promote technology and gaming products. The male and female followers have preferences towards their corresponding genders as long as the contents are entertaining and informative (Lokithasan et al., 2019).

Leadership Qualities of Social Influencers

Social media influencers are powerful and have a big influence on the audiences. By branding themselves, they manage to be perceived as authentic and relevant, therefore, as role model by people. Their post and content are able to influence audience's opinion and choices

(Ezenwafor et al., 2021). Furthermore, Fakhreddin and Foroudi (2021) revealed that originality of the post and high-quality contents are essential elements the social influencers possessed that impacts consumer behaviour outcome.

Social influencers are also known as opinion leaders. Previous studies show that not only the knowledge and expertise the social influencers have on a specific niche, but also with a charismatic personality, can create trends and encourage their followers to purchase the products they promote or endorse (Cocker and Cronin, 2017) and in preadolescent's life (Aran-Ramspott et al., 2018).

Pro-environmental Behaviours of University Students

Millennials are considered the most well-informed and conscious age group when it comes to environmental issues (Bureau, 2015). However, there is an incongruence between millennials' claimed intentions and actual behaviors towards pro-environmental. Naderi & Van Steenburg's study (2018) indicates that millennials have not truly begun to fully integrate their beliefs and actions. In other words, they are green in attitude, but they may not take actual environmental actions in their daily lives. Therefore, the pro-environmental behaviors of college students nowadays has attracted much attention.

Many studies have investigated the factors that affect the pro-environmental behaviours of college students from different perspectives. Research shows that collective variables directly affect pro-environmental behaviours (Cuadrado et al., 2022); leaders' support can moderate college students' pro-environmental behaviours (Akhtar et al., 2022); subjective norms, perceived usefulness, and green product satisfaction also have a positive linked to college students' green continuance intention (Huang & Yu, 2022). It can be seen that the pro-environmental behaviours of college students nowadays is not only affected by their pro-environmental knowledge but the interpersonal source has a more key impact.

Muralidharan et al (2016) shows that the pro-environmental behaviours of millennials in India and the United States is more susceptible to interpersonal sources. Some studies have shown that social media plays a positive role in facilitating the consumption of green products among millennials (Muralidharan et al., 2016; Sogari et al., 2017). The form, content, platform, and overall style of social media posts can influence college students to further adopt pro-environmental behaviours (Sofio, 2020). Pro-environmental behaviours of college students are also influenced by "influencers" on social media. American millennials' attitudes and behaviours are more likely to be influenced by social ties than psychological proximity (Lee et al., 2020). The findings also reflect the response of millennials, who are expected to be the leading generation in addressing various environmental issues. From the above research, it is important to understand how social media influencers can encourage good environmental attitudes and pro-environmental behaviours among millennials.

Advertising Literacy of Social Followers

Regarding the advertising literacy of social media followers, the recent research subjects are mainly children and teenagers. This is because of their vulnerability and lack of judgment, adolescents are more likely to be influenced by the marketing strategies of social media influencers (Van Dam & Van Reijmersdal, 2019). They generally are positively disposed towards specific commercial content emanating from specific influencers (Sweeney et al., 2021). The studies also investigate how social media influencers are persuasive to this group of followers (De Veirman et al., 2019), and investigate children's advertising literacy by exploring their knowledge and judgment on new advertising (De Pauw et al., 2018).

Less research has been done on the impact of social media influencer posts and advertisements on college students or adults, although millennials and Gen Z are the main audience for social media and are more interested in social media than older generations (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020). In fact, most audiences do not clearly identify the advertising on social media because the commercial social media posts resemble and blend with non-commercial posts (Boerman, 2020); followers are mostly mild-mannered about influencer-sponsored posts, and interpreted the sponsorship disclosures of influencers as genuine and transparent (Lou, 2021). According to Lou's study (2021), millennials self-justify that sponsored posts from social media influencers do not negatively influence them because they have autonomy over what to buy and will also cross-reference other information sources before making a purchase decisions. Recent research has also found that the inclusion of sponsorship disclosures activates viewers' recognition of the advertising (De Jans & Hudders, 2020; Evans et al., 2017; Harms et al., 2022; Van Reijmersdal & Van Dam, 2020). So far, there is no research on the advertising literacy of followers of pro-environmental social media in Malaysia.

Methodology

The current study used a survey research. Data were collected using an online questionnaire consisting of four sections: Demographic information, pro-environmental behaviours and levels of advertising literacy and leadership qualities of the social influencers. 128 respondents of a comprehensive Malaysian university volunteered to participate in the current study. The respondents were chosen based on purposive sampling based on these characteristics: university students, possess active social media accounts and the age of 20 – 40 years old. An e-mail invitation to complete an electronic form of the survey was sent to potential respondents. They were asked to share the e-mail invitation to their peers. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of the study are discussed in four sections.

Demographic Information

108 females and 20 males responded to the survey. 127 students were from Generation Z. Only one participant was a millennial. Purposive sampling was used in the study, with informants were chosen based on their knowledge and understanding of the topic under investigation (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The informants were chosen based on the following criteria:

- i. between the ages of 23 and 40
- ii. maintain active social media profiles
- iii. university students

Table 4.1

Demographic information

Gender	Female – 108 Male - 20
Age	20 years – 10.2% 21 years - 18% 22 - 30.5% 23- 20.3% 24- 17.2% 25- 2.3% 26- 0.8%
Races	98.4% - Malay 1.6% - Others
Qualifications	Degree – 68.8% Diploma – 23.4% SPM (High school diploma) – 7.8%

Generation Z between the ages of 20 and 25 years old was chosen to address the study's goal. This was because they were digitally involved and followed other social media influencers (Daniel et al., 2018). More than 80% of users on social media are between the ages of 18 and 29, indicating that it has entered a generation of loyal users from the Millennial generation (PewResearch, 2016). Millennials are the generation with the most purchasing power and the most social media activity. It is the age group in which making connections with others is quite crucial. They are the ones that are going to influence the followers in propagating about the environment.

These informants were mostly Malays from local universities around Malaysia. These informants were sifting the immense amount of information available through the media exposes thus Malays to ideas, cultures, and values that can be both enlightening and dangerous. Simultaneously, the opportunity to participate in the digital world, as well as create and share original content, is altering how Malays deal with their identity (Mohamed, S,2020). In a way, the Malays are more conscious and can contribute to the awareness of the environment.

According to Iakovidou et al (2005), in the *Mediterranean tourism beyond the shores: New trends in tourism and social organization of landscape (In Greek)* mentioned that the majority of rural visitors are young individuals (19-35 years old - millennials) with a high level of education were the ones who chose a rural destination based on the exceptional natural resources available. In a way, these millennials are the ones that promote a better environment for their followers.

Pro-environmental Behaviours

Pro-environmental behaviours describe participants' behaviours in sustaining the environment. The table below shows ten examples of the pro environmental behaviours among the social media influencers in a Malaysian university. Among all of these, the two highest behaviours were items no. 1 and 5, "I turn off household devices and lights after use to reduce energy consumption" and "I use water wisely to save money and energy" with 98.5% and 91.2% respectively. The environmental behaviours they practiced the most were more on lifestyle and energy-saving habits.

Table 4.2

Pro-environmental Behaviours

1. I turn off household devices and lights after use to reduce energy consumption.	98.5
2. I talk with friends/family about problems related to the environment.	84.3%
3. I read papers/books/internet sites about environmental issues.	86.6%
4. I point out (for example to your friends or family) behaviour that can generate energy waste.	70.9%
5. I use water wisely to save money and energy	91.2%
6. I walk to one or more of the following or similar services; Bank, Supermarket, Beauty salon, Park, Grocery Store, Post office, Restaurant, Fitness Center, Laundry, Cleaners, Place of Worship, Daycare.	63.8%
7. I use public transportation such as the bus or rail.	63%
8. I use the bicycle to and from work, to the store	21.3%
9. I carpool or ride-share with one or more people.	81.9%
10. I recycle paper, glass, cardboard, plastic, metal.	75.6%

The third highest behaviour was represented by item no.3, "I read papers/books/internet sites about environmental issues" with 86.6%, followed by item no.2, "I talk with friends/family about problems related to the environment" with 84.3%. There were quite a number of respondents who communicated with other people on environmental issues. However, they did not really point out a behaviour that can generate an energy waste, since item no. 4 only scored 70.9%. This might due to the nature of people in Eastern society who do not critique the others openly on certain things or issue as it is not considered as a good manner. Or it might because of certain culture. In the United States, for example, people are being ostracized when they adopt a green lifestyle (Bennett & Williams, 2011).

From the result, 81.9% of them carpooled with their colleagues as one of the options to practice green effort and only 75.6% of them practiced recycling in their daily life. This shows that even though people know that recycling is important but they still do not really put the campaign into practice. According to Yang et al (2021), Malaysia's environmental awareness and pro-environmental-behavioural is still considered as low. There are still many interferences that hamper the society from embracing green behaviours (Nguyen & Zhang, 2020). According to a research, even though social media influencers might have many followers but they could not guarantee successful influence and change on people's perceptions (Solis & Webber, 2012). Therefore, the society or social influencers need to keep on reminding others on environmental issues to improve their environmental knowledge which can be transformed into pro-environmental behaviours, since most of the studies posited positive impact on environmental concepts and behaviours by social media influencers to their followers (Awang et al., 2021; Okuah et al., 2019; Xu & Han, 2019). People need to be constantly reminded on environmental issues so that they can have the awareness and know what, where when, who and how they should do it.

From this study, it could be observed that social influencers did not really practice pro-environmental behaviours in transportation. Item no. 6, "I walk to one or more of the following or similar services" and no.7, "I use public transportation such as the bus or rail" only scored 63.8% and 63% respectively. The lowest behaviour practiced by these influencer

was represented by item no.8, “I use the bicycle to and from work, to the store” with only 21.3%. It shows that many of the respondents did not really favour cycling as an option for their means of transportation to and fro one place to the other.

The levels of advertising literacy

The findings suggest that the respondents have high advertising literacy. They understand the input and impact that the advertisements make on their life. The highest percentages were on item no. 1 and no.3 on products and lifestyle and recognizing the persuasive intent of social influencers with 96.9% each. This finding is supported by Lim et al (2017) that stated social influencers connect brands or companies or organisations to their followers. Somehow, this pro-environmental lifestyle shown by the social-influencers can be seen as a form of effective communication (Cornelio et al., 2021) to relay certain topic to their followers.

The third highest advertising literacy among the respondents was on their awareness that there was persuasive intent of the products and services promoted by social influencers, with 93.6%. 90.5% of the respondents were also aware on the advertising’s sources used by social influencer and the majority or 88.2% of them could detect persuasive tactics used by social influencers.

Table 4.3

The levels of advertising literacy

1. Social influencers advertise their products and lifestyles.	96.9%
2. You are aware that there is persuasive intent of the products and services promoted by social influencers.	93.6%
3. You recognise that persuasive intent of social influencers when they post their campaigns and messages.	96.9%
4. You are aware of the social influencers’ advertising’s sources.	90.5%
5. You can detect persuasive tactics used by social influencers.	88.2%

All of these figures show that the respondents or the social media followers were aware of the advertising literacy employed by the social influencers. It means they do not just inadvertently read and believe what being posted, but they are responsible enough to understand and digest the messages brought upon them: they filter and analysed the information before them. Jalali & Khalid (2022) proposed that the perceived credibility of followers help to create a link between green word of mouth and green consumption intention. This result also supports the statements that social influencers influence their followers through strong persuasive content to engage them towards the desired response (Audrezet et al., 2017; Thompson et al., 2011). Their posts need to be appealing enough to affect attitude, opinion, intention and behaviour of their followers. If their posts are not persuasive enough, then the followers might not believe and support the ideas that they present in their social media platforms.

The Leadership qualities of the social influencers

In line with earlier research, the findings suggest that influential personalities and leadership qualities have inviting factors that might impact their followers' attitudes and decisions about specific products (Byrne et al., 2017). The endorsement process relies heavily on credibility, which is gained from a social influencer's reputation. When followers believe that social influencers have expertise and experience with environmental issues/challenges/products, they gain credibility and also leadership qualities. They either invite their supporters to

activities or demonstrate activities at home, frequently through the media. Therefore, the informants obtained 90% and above for their skills in managing the issues and product experiences. It should also be mentioned that the approaches or strategies used by micro-influencers are incredibly essential. Originality and distinctiveness are important qualities for social media influencers as opinion leaders, according to research (Casaló et al., 2020). While micro-influencers are generous with their personal information, social timing is crucial for them to understand how to publish content at the correct time and on the right day to boost likes, shares, and hits (Patel, 2017).

Table 4.4

The Leadership qualities of the social influencers

1. Social influencers are trusted because of their skills or expertise	92 %
2. Social influencers are trusted because of their product experiences	90.6%
3. Social influencers are trusted because of their intelligence.	79.6%
4. Social influencers are trusted because of their attractiveness.	94.4%
5. Social influencers are trusted because of their popularity.	82.7%
6. Social influencers are trusted because of the quality of the argument.	83.4%

Micro-influencers typically allow their followers to voice their views and opinions online, and they connect with them in the comment section. Social media influencers listen to and respond to the voices in the comment section, making followers feel heard and giving them a better grasp of the conversation's direction (Okuah et al., 2019). The informants trusted them with their attractiveness in the sense of being physically attractive and also because of their appeal on the subject matter.

The informants were also trusted by their popularity because they the ways they spent time with their followers. Followers' messages are discussions with social media influencers and other followers, thus this will not be a monologue by influencers, but rather an interaction between followers and stories and their narrators (Junior, 2020), or even group communication. These will be personal interactions with the followers because they felt intimate and close to the social influencers. In comparison to traditional celebrities, social media influencers develop more harmonic and amicable connections and interactions with their audiences, making them more credible and trustworthy (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). The quality of arguments by the social influencers must be trusted by the followers. The followers would not accept any biasness if they did not argue about it. Again this is at par with the interactions had by the influencers and followers. This is in line with earlier research, which revealed that trust is a source of credibility in engaging awareness (Awang et al., 2019) and product purchasing (Awang et al., 2019; Hassan et al., 2021). It's also worth noting that trust is a positive factor in improving advertising effectiveness (Chekima et al., 2020). Being trustworthy is the main factor that tied up the whole leadership qualities of an influencer.

Conclusion

There are some limitations to our study. First, the respondents were students at a single university in Malaysia. This implies that results of the study might not reflect the perceptions of university students in Malaysia as a whole. Secondly, the results may not be generalisable to other age groups as majority of the participants was from Generation Z. Therefore, more future research needs to be carried out on different age groups and locations so that the conclusions can be applied to other contexts with different characteristics. However,

conclusions drawn from our study are sufficient for future researchers who are interested to investigate pro-environmental behaviours among university students.

While there is a wide range of studies on social media influencers in product marketing and advertising, the topics related to environment advocacy by social media influencers remain under-explored. Our study extends the body of knowledge by investigating the perceptions of social media users on pro-environmental behaviours, advertising literacy and social influencers' leadership qualities. It can be concluded from our study that university students in Malaysia have a good awareness on pro-environmental behaviours and broad view of advertising literacy on social media influencers. In addition, it can also be concluded that university students trust social influencers based on the leadership qualities they exhibit on social media.

In line with the government's efforts towards making the Sustainable Development Goals a reality by 2030, findings of this study provide insights for university management and policymakers to devise strategies and programmes to foster pro-environmental behaviours among university students. This is important as university students are future leaders of the country. Students who possess pro-environmental behaviours will become citizens who are responsible towards the environment.

In addition, the context of our study which focuses on social media also illustrates the significant role of social media in disseminating knowledge and information to users. Therefore, value should be placed on social media as an important avenue to spread awareness on pro-environmental behaviours especially to the younger generation. This calls for government and non-government organisations to harness the potentials of social media and social influencers to promote green consumerism and pro-environmental behaviours to citizens.

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