

# “WHAT’S UP, GUYS?” KHAIRUL AMING ON TWITTER: THE SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCER ROLE IN SHAPING USERS’ OPINION AND DECISION ON COVID-19 VACCINATION

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**Abstract:** *Influencers seem to be endowed with a certain amount of social capital. Social media influencers (SMIs) position in their social network provides them with the legitimacy and credibility to mobilise societal decisions and behaviours. This study aims to explore the topic of discussion shared by Khairul Amin, one of the prominent Malaysian social media influencers, on Twitter, regarding COVID-19 vaccine. This study conducted a content analysis using Twitter API to determine the presence of specific phrases or concepts among tweets about COVID-19 immunisation and the discussion held by Khairul Aming on Twitter. Based on the findings, it can be seen how he influences other users' opinions and vaccination decisions. As he plays an active role specifically during the early period of COVID-19 vaccination, he is optimistic to educate other users about vaccination and encourage them to be vaccinated. Khairul Aming not only discuss his thoughts, feelings, and beliefs on the COVID-19 vaccine, but also frequently share his own experiences. Such affective information, authentic and genuine content is more likely to be valued, attracts attention, and emotion as well as prompts society positive evaluation, thereby increasing the content’s persuasiveness.*

**Keywords:** *social media, social media influencer, COVID-19, vaccine, Twitter*

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## Introduction

Twitter announced the top ten most tweeted-about accounts in Malaysia in 2021. The top ten included social media personalities, athletes, singers, actresses, and even medical professionals as people utilised the platform for information on the COVID-19 pandemic (Tariq, 2021). Unsurprisingly, Khairul Aming, a prominent social media user, also featured in the list. Khairul Amin Kamaruzaman, also known by the username @khairulaming, earned a degree in Mechanical Engineering from Vanderbilt University (Misrani, 2020). He has considered

himself a digital content creator, with his work primarily focusing on food and recipes since 2016. His name is associated with his viral Ramadhan cooking series called 30 Days 30 Recipes, in which he uploads new cooking videos every day throughout the fasting month (Tong, 2021). The digital creator also best known for his catchphrase “Hey, what's up guys!” in all of all his videos’ introduction. His following has steadily grown since 2018, and now he has over 8 million followers across all social media platforms. In 2021, he started selling his recipe sambal product known as Sambal Nyet and made RM1 million in three months. He even documented his journey in a series of tweets, which have received over 45 thousand retweets as of this writing. With over 1 million followers on Twitter, he primarily posts about his cooking, recipes, and his Sambal Nyet business. Recently, emerged the main winner in the inaugural TikTok Awards Malaysia 2023 (Chua, 2023).

Despite having no background in medicine, his account is one of the most significant accounts to emerge from the COVID-19 vaccination Twitter API data. Evidently, he actively tweeted vaccine-related messages on his Twitter account throughout the early stages of the national immunisation programme. The tweets also garnered thousands of retweets and likes from the Twitter audience, indicating a high level of engagement. As mentioned by Bourdieu (1984), influencers seem to be endowed with a certain amount of social capital. Living in the world of a pandemic and digitally mediated society, it is appropriate and timely to conduct this study. It has also been recognized that social media has allowed SMIs to take an interesting role in such social discourse. Social media influencers (SMIs) position in their social network provides them with the legitimacy and credibility to mobilise societal decisions and behaviours. Thus, it is possible for them to share their knowledge and experiences concerning vaccination in both positively toned and negatively toned messages even though they may be in no position to talk about the issue as they are not experts in the relevant field. Some have also been criticized because rather than educating the public, they present biased health information that evokes irrational fear, and even persuade audiences to behave in a certain way. It is more worrying that there are people who believe these groups are more credible than medical experts (Caulfield & Fahy, 2016).

Taib et al. (2017) even revealed that the main obstacle in vaccination programs is the misconception and limitless information that the public can access from the internet, especially on social media. Despite children in Malaysia receiving free vaccinations from birth under the WHO Expanded Programme on Immunisation (EPI), there is a considerable increase in VPD cases. Thus, the ability of SMIs’ messages to reach and influence the masses indicates that it is important to strive for a better understanding of their impacts on attitudes, behaviours, and preferences towards health issues that are pervasive in society. As a result, the purpose of this study is to determine the extent to which Khairul Amin, as a prominent SMI in Malaysia, influences other users' opinions and vaccination decisions. It is important to be able to discuss the interrelation of society’s vaccination practices in the current context, specifically, the social construction process of the COVID-19 vaccine discussion through SMIs on social media. The missing gaps in the studies of sociological perspectives of vaccines are the lack of social constructivist perspectives that would be able to capture the interactions of people on social media. It is apparent that SMIs such as Khairul Amin plays a significant role in shaping people's opinions and ideas including concerning the topic of health information.

### **Literature Review**

Social media is reshaping the means and dynamics of exercising social influence, as well as the concept of social constructionism. These digital platforms have an impact on societal

relationships. It is the primary social setting in the contemporary world where social interactions occur (Blundell, 2016). Social media elevated SMIs to the forefront because of their ability to attain prominence in the network's digital conversation and influence others.

SMIs are social media users that have developed a respectable online persona and established a following base, frequently in a particular specialized niche topic area (Bonnievie et al., 2020). They can be renowned celebrities or ordinary individuals from different backgrounds who use their social media accounts to share aspects of their personal lives, promote political views, or advertise services or products (Lutkenhaus et al., 2019). As mentioned, influencers seem to be endowed with a certain amount of social capital (Bourdieu, 1984). The position that they have in their social network grants them legitimacy and credibility to mobilize society's decisions and behaviours (Marchand, 2016).

Social media has also provides a platform to nurture society's health-related preferences including vaccine practices. Medical knowledge that was previously restricted and exclusive to medical professionals is now accessible to anyone (Keelan et al., 2010). As there is a considerable amount of public health concern raised by anti-vaccination groups and messaging on social media, it is no doubt that it has resulted in vaccine hesitancy, affecting public confidence in vaccine development, especially for the current COVID-19 vaccine. Based on this past literature especially, it is important to note that public discourse about vaccines – how vaccines are represented and publicly understood – plays a significant role in understanding health or vaccine practices, particularly their acceptance and hesitancy in society (Abeyasinghe, 2015).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The key tenet of social constructionism is that our knowledge of the world, including our understanding of human beings, is the result of human thought (Zhao, 2020). Individuals create and learn knowledge by participating in social activities that are transmitted, learned, and reproduced in families as well as within groups and communities (Kalok et al., 2020). In other words, reality is a cultural product and formed by people's interactions with one another and their environments (Attwell et al., 2018). Contemporary societies exhibit a decline in tradition and the growth of reflexivity in all domains of society, from formal institutions at the macro-level to self-identity and interpersonal intimacy at the micro-level (Giddens, 1991). This represents a new stage of enlightenment that demands new knowledge and autonomy. Contemporary societies eliminate absolute values that command individual allegiance. Thus, contemporary society is described as a one that values diversity and heterogeneity. Besides that, modernity also brought with it a greater awareness of risk, vulnerability, and insecurity. In line with that, social constructionism of health information such as vaccination is also associated with individuals' unique social environments. As suggested by Peretti-Watel et al. (2015), vaccine hesitancy can be understood using a theoretical framework of social constructionism that incorporates structural features of modern societies.

Knowledge or perception on vaccination takes place in a social world that is constituted by overlapping networks of social interactions (Archetti, 2017). Similarly, the knowledge or perception of vaccines or vaccination is also collectively constructed by a diverse range of social exchange actors, including SMIs on social media. Thus, an individual's narrative regarding vaccines can be defined as their own unique perspective on the world according to their own social reality. Influencers from a variety of backgrounds have established their profiles and assembled followers who value their ideas, opinions, and perspectives. This

ensures that society is exposed to a wide range of viewpoints in a particular discussion through social media (Leader et al., 2020). Despite their credibility or lack of it on the knowledge, they are still able to share it with their mass audience in both positive and negatively-toned messages (Teoh, 2019). This includes the topic of vaccination, which is widely discussed on social media and has regained public attention as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Methods

Twitter provides an application programming interface (API) that allows academics to stream public tweets from the platform in real-time and display key metrics regarding the topic of interest. This has aided this study to conduct a content analysis to determine the presence of specific phrases or concepts among tweets about COVID-19 immunisation and the discussion held by Khairul Aming on Twitter. The original tweets on search results from February 2021 to February 2022 were collected using Twitter's API with the following keyword *vaksin* - which means vaccine in Malay. The time frame is critical because it encompasses all three stages of the National COVID-19 Immunisation Programme in Malaysia. The engagement score and influence percentile from the sample tweets on Twitter API has helped to identify Khairul Aming's relevant tweets on COVID-19 through the influence algorithm.

This study also used thematic analysis, a method of analysing qualitative data, to identify, analyse, and interpret the patterns and interior hidden themes in the data (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012). This is useful for summarising key features of a data set, and it guides researcher to handle data in a well-structured manner. Thematic analysis in this research followed six steps as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006): 1) familiarization of the dataset, 2) coding and identifying 3) generating themes based on the codes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) writing. The dataset consists of tweets from Khairul Aming about COVID-19 vaccine on Twitter. Each of the tweets was labelled and identified with possible codes. After identifying the tweets, the suggested codes were organised and assigned to appropriate themes. These themes help to answer the study's research question by identifying the topic of vaccination-related messages shared on Twitter by Khairul Aming.

## Findings and Discussion

Most of the top tweets from Khairul Aming on Twitter stated that it is critical for everyone to provide accurate information to family members. It is clear that the vulnerability of the older generations, such as grandparents, mothers, fathers, uncles, and aunts, is seen as the primary concern for these SMIs. According to his tweets, this group has the most difficulty accepting vaccinations and is more likely than any other group to encounter false vaccination information. This concern was amplified by the fact that they were also the first group in Malaysia to receive the COVID-19 vaccine. The Malaysian government has set the first phase of vaccination for five hundred thousand frontliners, including medical and non-medical personnel, through the National Vaccination Program. Following that are the high-risk groups, namely senior citizens and vulnerable groups aged 60 and above, who also face other conditions such as heart disease, obesity, diabetes, and high blood pressure along with the disabled. National Institute on Aging (2022) even acknowledged that older adults are more likely than younger people to get very sick from COVID-19 which can lead to serious illness and death. This is due to the immune system weakens and it can be more difficult to fight off infections.

However, due to the high level of uncertainty surrounding the novel COVID-19 vaccine at that time, there was still a great deal of vaccine hesitation in Malaysia. Furthermore, the fear stems from the health risks that this group faces. Given the certainty that vulnerable older populations

face significantly higher mortality and morbidity from COVID-19, society bears the responsibility to protect them from severe illness. This includes the SMIs that play a prominent role in shaping the audiences' perceptions as these people control how other users perceive things and issues (Mijar & Manaf, 2021). Khairul Aming's trustworthiness and active online presence are salient features of an SMI when communicating vaccine-related messages through Twitter. Besides that, the social media influencer shown an optimistic behaviour and generally supportive of the vaccination programme. This is similar to Yousefinaghani et al. (2021) who found positive sentiment about the COVID-19 vaccine was the dominant polarity on Twitter. However, most the primary concern shown by SMIs such as Khairul Aming, which was also the main theme for vaccine-related tweets during the study period, was the vulnerability of elderly populations to vaccine misinformation. Khairul Aming acted on the issue by actively participating in the vaccine discussion, posting positive vaccine messages, encouraging people to get the vaccine, and spreading awareness about the COVID-19 vaccine without being paid or instructed to do so. This is further explained by Khairul Aming, one of the Twitter SMI, through his tweet:



SMI's Tweet	Translation
 <p>ni baru satu dm. ada banyak lagi yg kena fight setiap hari. takpela yang penting dia dh seen message. nak educate orang ramai ni tak mudah. yang muda pun tolonglah stop sebar benda palsu and mengarut ni. kesian kat pakcik makcik yg jadi mangsa</p> <p>Translate Tweet</p> <p>Only you can see this</p> <p>vaksin tk dpt hentikan pandemik ni pon bro... Ini adalah virus yg dicipta 🤔👍</p> <p>Yesterday at 23:57</p> <p>Replied to your story</p> <p>bnyak kali promote bro... dah terima ke payment 20k ? tnye je kikiki</p> <p>01:57</p> <p>tak dapat satu sen pun. saya buat ni ikhlas untuk educate orang ramai yg dah dicemari dengan gerakan antivaksin yang menyusahkan negara ni. negara dah tenat. cukup2 lah sebar benda mengarut yg tak ada asas ilmu ni. kesian org ramai yg dh kehilangan mak ayah disebabkan pandemik ni. janganlah disebabkan kesombongan kita untuk menuntut ilmu yg betul membuatkan orang</p>	<p>This is only a single direct message (DM). Every day, I have to deal with a lot more. But that's fine because the user has already seen the message. It is difficult to educate the general public. I hope that the youth will stop spreading lies and nonsense as well. Poor our elderly, the unfortunate victims.</p> <p>User A: Vaccines cannot stop the pandemic, bro. This is a man-created virus.</p> <p>User A: I see you promoting a lot... already received 20k? I'm just asking hahaha</p> <p>I do not receive a single cent. I do this sincerely to educate the public who are defiled by the anti-vaccine movement that is causing trouble for this country. The country is in dire. Stop spreading nonsense and do not let others suffer because of your arrogance to seek the right knowledge.</p>

Figure 1: Tweet by Khairul Aming

Source: Twitter

Khairul Aming tweeted about how he was condemned by one of his fellow social media users for his constant vaccine-related messages. He acknowledged that educating the public is a difficult task and expressed sympathy for the elderly who are the targets for the false and absurd vaccine information that has been circulating online. The user even accused him of receiving RM20000 as payment for promoting the COVID-19 vaccine, to which he responded that he did it out of a genuine desire to educate the public. In his other tweet, which gained over 10 thousand retweets and made it one of his highest vaccine-related tweets, he encouraged Twitter users with families who are still afraid and sceptical to make use of his tweets, videos, and photos to show and convince their families. He tweeted:

SMI's Tweet	Translation
	<p>As much as we read a lot of things on Twitter every day, a lot of things are also happening on WhatsApp without our knowledge, including the group chats that our parents joined. It is impossible to keep track of everything that is shared there. It is also difficult to break the chain of misinformation.</p> <p>Please take a moment to call your parents, check on them, and educate them on COVID and other current issues. If we do not take this into serious consideration, it will be challenging to re-educate people once their mindsets have changed as a result of daily exposure to false information.</p>

**Figure 2: Tweet by Khairul Aming**

Source: Twitter

Khairul Aming also had compiled a collection of images of the elderly who completed their COVID-19 vaccine dose that were shared by his followers and posted on his Twitter account. This action is intended to assist Twitter users' families who are still anxious about the COVID-19 vaccine. Using his digital authority as a SMI, he is aware of how he has the ability to create messages and content that can potentially influence the public agenda. Although SMIs are generally located on the margins such as citizens, they are able to exert social influence in the digital environment. The thread gained the attention of the Twitter audience and received over 17.9 thousand likes on the platform. He specifically posted:

SMI's Tweet

Translation



I have shared as many images as I could of elderly people who have received vaccinations successfully; some of them are 90 years old or more. There are other hundreds of stories that people tag me, but I have yet to repost any of them.

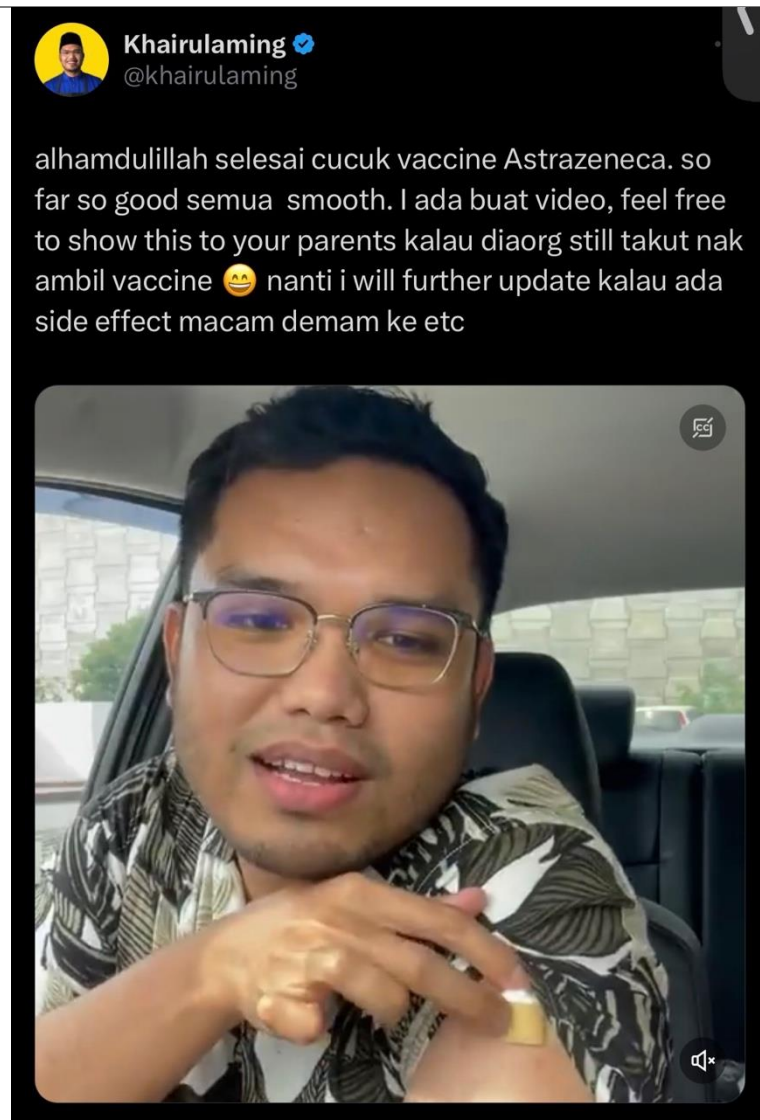
Figure 3: Tweet by Khairul Aming

Source: Twitter

Khairul Aming's followers have reacted positively to his initiative, with hundreds tagging him on Instagram stories displaying their parents, grandparents, and other elderly relatives receiving the COVID-19 vaccine. Other users on Twitter have also been replying to his post with photos and stories of their loved ones getting vaccinated. This proves that vaccine experiences can be used metaphorically as a form of testimony for Twitter users, especially when it comes from someone as influential as Khairul Aming. Social media has enabled SMIs to play a larger role in social discourse. They frequently share almost everything about their lives on social media, and people find their story or content interesting and want to learn and know more. With millions of followers, these people have a platform to spread messages on a variety of issues, including some unrelated to their background and expertise. Their participation in ongoing discussions can make any issues prominent and shape the zeitgeist. This is similar to vaccine experience where people look up to their experience as a reference or an example.

For instances, people are curious to know what these influencers experienced post-vaccine. This enlightens the public how to prepare for vaccinations and what to expect during and after vaccinations. When Malaysian government first open the registration to opt-in for the AstraZeneca (AZ) vaccine, people were sceptical and online disinformation has left many Malaysians too afraid to get jabbed and is fuelling 'vaccine choosiness' (Balasubramaniam, 2021). However, Khairul Amin, being one of the earliest Malaysian to register for AZ vaccine, mentioned in his tweet:

### SMI's Tweet



### Translation

Alhamdulillah (thank God in Arabic) I had completed the AstraZeneca vaccine injection. So far, so good. Everything is going smoothly. If your parents are still afraid to take the vaccine, please show them this video. If there are any side effects, such as fever, I will provide an update later if I experience any side effect such as fever or etc.

**Figure 4: Tweet by Khairul Aming**

Source: Twitter

In short, SMIs' online posting, sharing, thoughts, and opinions are crucial. Many organisations, both public and private, seek for their endorsement. These issues have become particularly pressing in the context of public health with COVID-19, where SMIs have been playing a role in attempting to support public health messages. It is critical that the public has some sort of 'manual' before experiencing the vaccine for themselves. The utility and impact of SMIs have become especially crucial during a pandemic like COVID-19 when uncertainty is extreme, and people look to key opinion leaders for information and guidance.

Khairul Aming, who has no expertise in health or medicine is a terrific example of this phenomenon. He posted a lot regarding vaccines on his social media, urging others to get vaccinated. Despite the fact that he has no formal education in the relevant topic, his tweets are still well-received and very much appreciated by most Twitter users given that all of his vaccine-related tweets achieved high engagements on the platform.



## Conclusion

It can be concluded that Khairul Aming, as a social media influencer, plays an active role specifically during the early period of COVID-19 vaccination. He is optimistic to educate other users about vaccination and encourage them to be vaccinated. As there has been lot of disinformation on social media, he also addresses his concern towards vulnerable groups like the elderly that should be safeguarded from it so that they can make informed decisions without being swayed by bogus news. Khairul Aming not only discuss his thoughts, feelings, and beliefs on the COVID-19 vaccine, but also frequently share his own experiences. This is the type of content that social media audiences such as on Twitter, desire. They prefer authentic and genuine content as they are involved in a para-social relationship with SMIs. The more they value their relationship with these SMIs, the more they value SMIs's thoughts and opinions expressed online. SMIs such as Khairul Aming is capable of generating content with positive affective information that attracts the audience's attention, and emotion and prompts their positive evaluation, thereby increasing the content's persuasiveness for other users including the topic of vaccination.

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