Performing Authenticity Online: A Rhetorical-Linguistic and Multimodal Analysis of Malaysian Influencers' Instagram Discourse

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Abstract

This study examines how Malaysian social media influencers construct persuasive authenticity on Instagram through rhetorical and visual strategies. Grounded in Aristotle's classical rhetorical theory and Digital Visual Rhetoric, the research seeks to understand the linguistic and visual features that generate *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* in influencer communication. A qualitative case study approach was employed, focusing on two prominent Malaysian influencers, Khairul Aming and Pinn Yang. Twenty of their Instagram posts were analysed using Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), with data coded and organized through NVivo software. The findings indicate that Khairul Aming's informal linguistic style, humour, and depiction of everyday realism reinforced *ethos* through cultural familiarity and transparency, while Pinn Yang's minimalist aesthetic and consistent colour palette evoked *pathos* through visual calmness and emotional intimacy. Collectively, these strategies demonstrate how Malaysian influencers merge classical rhetorical appeals with contemporary visual design to sustain authenticity and audience engagement. This study contributes to the field of digital rhetoric and communication studies by integrating classical and visual rhetorical frameworks within a localized Southeast Asian context. It highlights persuasion as both a linguistic and aesthetic performance, underscoring how authenticity in digital spaces is strategically constructed through the interplay of language, culture, and design.

Keywords: digital visual rhetoric, multimodal discourse analysis, social media influencers, ethos, pathos, logos

1. Introduction

In Malaysia's dynamic communication landscape, social media influencers have assumed an important position in managing public perception and behaviour through communication processes on the various platforms available, namely, social media platforms. Instagram has become a dominant platform for self-presentation and persuasion due to its emphasis on visual storytelling and affective engagement (Rahman et al., 2022). The rise of "Instafamous" personalities demonstrates how ordinary users strategically construct online identities through rhetorical and communicative techniques to maintain visibility and influence (Harif & Yusoff, 2022).

Previous Malaysian studies have examined influencer persuasion primarily from marketing and communication perspectives, focusing on framing, credibility, and endorsement effectiveness. For instance, Ithnin et al. (2020) applied the Electronic Eloquence Model and found that influencers used emotional and performative appeals to humanize brand messages. Similarly, Nasaruddin et al. (2023) identified that logos, or appeals to logic and factuality, dominated Malaysian influencer discourse. More recent research has highlighted authenticity and self-presentation as key dimensions of persuasive success. Influencers often navigate between genuine self-expression and commercial intent to maintain audience trust (Norazman et al., 2023); yet the over-commercialization of sponsored content and lack of transparent disclosure remain significant ethical concerns (Nawi & Faizol, 2021).

Despite the growing body of research on influencer marketing and persuasion, few studies have conducted detailed rhetorical analyses that integrate both verbal and visual elements of Malaysian influencers' Instagram posts. Most existing studies focus on behavioural outcomes such as purchase intention and engagement rate rather than rhetorical mechanisms that shape influencer–audience relationships. Furthermore, while cross-cultural research has explored digital visual rhetoric globally, localized understandings of rhetorical practice within Malaysian digital culture remain limited (Karimova, 2020).

1.1 Research Objectives

Addressing this gap, the present study investigates how rhetorical strategies—ethos, pathos, and logos, interact with visual elements such as composition, colour, and symbolism to construct credibility, authenticity, and persuasion in Malaysian influencer communication. By situating classical rhetorical principles within the dynamic, image-driven logic of Instagram, the study aims to reveal how influencers translate moral credibility, emotional resonance, and logical reasoning into visual performances that reflect Malaysia's cultural context. Accordingly, this research seeks to:

1) Examine how Malaysian influencers employ rhetorical appeals to build credibility, emotion, and reasoning in their Instagram communication.

2) Analyse how visual rhetorical components complement verbal rhetoric to enhance persuasive impact; and

3) Contribute to the theoretical integration of Aristotle's Classical Rhetorical Theory and

Digital Visual Rhetoric within Southeast Asian digital culture.

Although this research is centred on the case of Malaysian influencers, this study also contributes to broader discussions on rhetorical persuasion and online self-representation. By contextualizing the practices of Malaysia's influencers within the discourse on authenticity and visual culture, this research connects local insights with global ones on multimodal persuasion.

2. Literature Review

Social media platforms have reshaped persuasive communication by merging interpersonal interaction with branding and public self-presentation. On Instagram, influencers rely on multimodal resources like captions, images, and aesthetic consistency to sustain attention and trust. In Malaysia, Instagram has become a prominent space where social media influencers (SMIs) construct identities, promote products, and engage audiences through visual storytelling and affective cues. Accordingly, this literature review synthesizes (1) classical rhetorical theory, (2) digital and visual rhetoric, and (3) Malaysian studies on influencer persuasion.

2.1 Aristotle's Rhetorical Appeals

Rhetoric, originating from Aristotle's Rhetoric, remains one of the most enduring frameworks for understanding persuasion. Aristotle posited three primary modes of persuasion: *ethos* (credibility of the speaker), *pathos* (emotional appeal), and *logos* (logical reasoning). These appeals make up what is also known as the rhetorical triangle, a model that still serves as the foundation of very recent analytical approaches to persuasive communication of various media types and on current social media outlets (Grant, 2019).

In social media contexts, ethos can be defined by the influencer's perceived authenticity and authority; pathos is evoked through sentiment-driven narratives, tone, and visual aesthetics; logos are conveyed via logic-based arguments or information included in a caption, hashtag or product review. Studies using Aristotle theory in relation to social networking sites have proven its viability. For instance, Nasaruddin et al. (2023) reported that Malaysian influencers use logos primarily in their captions to enhance credibility and the reliability of product information. Likewise, Ab Manan and Shukri (2023), in their comparative research on the rhetoric of Malaysian politicians in social media, found that emotional pathos appeals in terms of emotive narratives of compassion and solidarity served as useful enhancers of audience involvement during communication crises (Ab Manan & Shukri, 2023).

In influencer communication, Aristotle's appeals are better understood as interacting resources rather than fixed categories; on Instagram, they often overlap across captions and visuals to shape credibility, emotion, and reasoning. This interaction of ethos, pathos, and logos forms the basis of how influencers craft persuasive narratives that support both personal branding and marketing goals.

2.2 The Rhetorical Situation and Digital Context

In opposition to Aristotle's model, the concept of the rhetorical situation raised by Bitzer

(1968) stressed that persuasion comes about through the complex interplay of speaker, audience, and context. In digital environments, this pattern also bears in mind algorithmic and participatory aspects. Influencers need to constantly update their rhetoric mechanism according to algorithmic exposure, follower reaction and platform affordance (likes, shares, comments). Social media thus transforms the classical one-directional rhetorical situation into a dialogic and participatory process.

As Panigyrakis et al. (2020) argue, social media platforms create spaces where brand communication becomes an extension of the self, reinforcing Aristotle's notion that persuasion is inherently relational. For influencers, this relationship is further complicated by the blurred boundaries between authenticity and commodification, a tension central to understanding rhetorical performance in influencer culture. This shift towards participatory and multimodal communication restructures how rhetorical meaning is created through images and interaction with the audience.

2.3 Visual Rhetoric in Social Media

Digital platforms like Instagram extend rhetorical theory beyond language to include visual and multimodal communication. Visual rhetoric concerns the use of images, colour, composition, and symbolism to persuade audiences. Instagram influencers strategically employ visual framing, sentiment, and product presentation to construct persuasive meanings and cultural identities (Karimova, 2020). The visual and verbal elements are combined to create what scholars refer to as digital visual rhetoric, as a fusion of imagery and discourse that resonates both emotionally and logically with audiences.

In Malaysia, visual culture strongly shapes influencer discourse. A study by Ithnin et al. (2020) identified that Malaysian influencers are wise in integrating performance type of visual narratives with emotional captions to enhance their relatable persona and deepen brand placement. Visual persuasion in this instance, is often framed by cultural references, modest aesthetics and aspirational visuals that are relatable to a multicultural society like Malaysia.

2.4 The Digital Ethos and Online Credibility

In the world of influencer culture, *ethos* traditionally linked to character and moral credibility, extends itself across digital performance. Online *ethos* is constructed through self-presentation, transparency, and consistency of content. An online ethos is constructed through impression management, authenticity and thematic coherence. Norazman et al. (2023) highlighted that the credibility of Malaysian influencers is based on authenticity, engagement and quality of content instead of sheer number of followers. Their results highlight that successful persuasion on Instagram depends on an impression of authenticity between the influencer's personal story and their cooperation with brands.

Additionally, Nawi and Faizol (2021) further identified the problem of disclosure transparency among influencer marketing in Malaysia. Several influencers might not disclose their brand collaborations in a transparent manner thereby affecting on their credibility and moral status (Nawi & Faizol, 2021). Indeed, ethos in digital rhetoric is at once about ethical

transparency and aesthetic self-presentation, ultimately constituting a moral and visual dimension of persuasion.

2.5 Rhetorical Strategies in Influencer Communication

Language remains a critical component of influencer rhetoric. Influencers employ conversational tones, storytelling, and emotional triggers to establish intimacy and relatability with followers. Emotional appeals (*pathos*) in influencer captions often include gratitude expressions, motivational narratives, or moments of vulnerability that humanize the influencer persona.

Studies of Malaysian influencers reveal that they favour narrative persuasion, i.e., the combinatory of objective product-related details with feelings-based stories. Ithnin et al. (2020) found that influencers frequently use "daily life" narratives such as family moments or personal reflections to integrate endorsements naturally within personal experiences. Similarly, Harif and Yusoff (2022) identified that Malaysian *Instafamous* users rely heavily on spin and story framing strategies to influence audience perception, aligning with Framing Theory's emphasis on selective meaning construction.

Caption linguistic style further consists of logos appeals to logic through product comparisons and statements of fact and evidence-based reviews. This is indicative of the way in which positive and negative appeals are blended by influencers, confirming reinforcing Aristotle's notion that effective persuasion arises from the integration of rational and affective appeals.

The multicultural and multi-religious setting in Malaysia adds a unique aspect to influencer rhetoric. Many Malaysian influencers, especially those who are Muslim women, incorporate cultural and religious values into their online personas. Shariffadeen and Manaf (2019) argued that celebrity-fan interaction on Instagram plays a crucial role in constructing representations of hijab culture by Muslim women, indicating how online discourses on social media intersect with cultural identity and moral discourse.

This cultural contextualization of persuasion aligns with the *ethos* dimension of rhetoric, where credibility is rooted in moral integrity and cultural authenticity. Unlike Western influencer models centred on individualism and aspirational luxury, Malaysian influencers often emphasize community, modesty, and shared values reflecting a collectivist orientation in their rhetorical strategies.

2.6 Integrating Classical and Digital Visual Rhetoric

Aristotle's Classical Rhetorical Theory provides one of the earliest and most enduring frameworks for understanding persuasion. He defines rhetoric as "the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion," emphasizing three fundamental appeals: ethos (credibility), pathos (emotion), and logos (reason). These rhetorical appeals explain how speakers establish trust, evoke emotion, and communicate logic to influence their audiences (Aristotle, trans. 2007). Even though it was developed for oral and textual discourse, Aristotle's model remains relevant in the digital era, as it addresses universal

mechanisms of persuasion and credibility (Grant, 2019).

In the digital age, persuasion exceeds language and rhetoric as it is multimodal, meaning that in addition to text or words on a page there are images, colour, sound and visual composition at play in the production of meaning. Digital Visual Rhetoric (DVR) scholars argue that images, like verbal rhetoric, have persuasive functions because they influence general perceptions through visual devices and aesthetic unity (Foss, 2004; Karimova, 2020). This multimodal move represents a transition from a linguistic rhetorical situation—grounded in speech discourse to a visual rhetorical situation, in which ethos, pathos, and logos are visually expressed and bodily experienced (Poirier, 2024; Shamayleh et al., 2025).

Integrating these frameworks, this study conceptualizes Digital Visual Rhetoric as a contemporary extension of Aristotelian persuasion, where classical appeals are reinterpreted through visual and aesthetic dimensions. In this integrated model, ethos appears visually through authenticity, coherence and cultural credibility; pathos comes out through affective imagery, colour meaning and emotional tone; while logos is represented by structured visual narratives, sequential logic and design consistency (Baskara & Suminar, 2025; Poirier, 2024). This synthesis not only combines linguistic and visual rhetoric, but also locates persuasion as a live, multimodal performance negotiated through digital culture.

2.7 Bridging Classical and Digital Visual Rhetoric in the Malaysian Context

Recent Malaysian studies have investigated the persuasive power of social media influencers primarily through credibility and relational frameworks. For instance, Sharipudin et al. (2023) examined how influencer credibility and social influence shape young consumers' purchase intentions, while Taher et al. (2022) explored the mediating role of parasocial relationships and reputation signalling in influencer persuasion. These findings emphasize the importance of trust, emotional connection, and perceived expertise, ideas that resonate with Aristotle's rhetorical appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos. Yet, their investigation mostly deals with the written and action side of a post such as how followers react in terms of textual interaction to influencers' posts, rather than what these messages visually contain.

Building on this foundation, the present study introduces a multimodal visual rhetorical lens that extends classical persuasion theory into the realm of digital visual communication. By integrating Aristotle's rhetorical appeals with Digital Visual Rhetoric (DVR), this research investigates how *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* operate not only in captions or linguistic cues but also in visual composition, colour, framing, and symbolism within Instagram content. This approach fills a significant gap by examining how rhetorical meaning is created through the interaction of textual and visual modes, an area that previous Malaysian influencer studies, including those by Sharipudin et al. (2023) and Taher et al. (2022), have not explicitly addressed.

To that end, this study contributes to the understanding of influencer communication by bringing together classical rhetoric and multimodal discourse to better explain how Malaysian influencers perform persuasion via visual ethos (credibility through authenticity), pathos (affective imagery), and logos (logical visual sequencing) in local digital
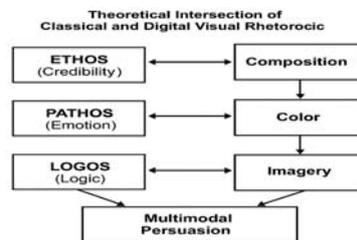
environments.

2.8 Theoretical Framework

Figure 1. Theoretical intersection of classical and digital visual rhetoric

This study integrates Aristotle's Classical Rhetorical Theory and Digital Visual Rhetoric (DVR) to examine persuasive discourses found on Instagram. Aristotle's lens includes the three appeals: ethos (credibility), pathos (emotion), and logos (logic) when articulating how a speaker, or in this case communicator, makes an appeal to audiences through integrity, emotional connection, and reasoning (Aristotle, trans. 2007; Grant, 2019). These rhetorical moves reach from language into multimodal ones between text and image, colour and composition. Rhetoric in this visual age, as Foss (2004) argues, must consider the symbolic actions presented by images; they now have persuasive power that can be compared to verbal speech.

Digital Visual Rhetoric extends Aristotle's model by showing how visual elements achieve persuasive effects analogous to verbal appeals (Karimova, 2020; Poirier, 2024). Within this framework, ethos is established through visual authenticity, coherence, and credibility (Baskara & Suminar, 2025); pathos through imagery, tone, and emotional symbolism (Shamayleh et al., 2025); and logos through structured visual narratives, sequencing, and logical composition (Poirier, 2024). Instead of replacing classical rhetoric, DVR makes persuasion visible through the combination between language and image in multimodal communication (Foss, 2004; Baskara & Suminar, 2025).

It is important to include multimodal features given that there is hardly any persuasion in social media that depends exclusively on the text. Colour, imagery, composition and narrative design are the language that influencers use to communicate something deeper than just words. This multimodal perspective allows for a deeper understanding of the interrelated relationships among ethos, pathos, and logos online that considers verbal and visual modes of communication.

This integrated framework guided the analytic and coding process. Each rhetorical appeal—ethos, pathos, and logos, served as a main coding category in NVivo, while visual elements such as composition, framing, and colour were applied as subcodes. For instance, ethos included textual self-presentation and visual authenticity; pathos captured emotional tone and affective imagery; and logos reflected logical sequencing in visuals. This design

ensured theoretical coherence between the conceptual framework and multimodal discourse analysis, allowing the study to trace how linguistic and visual strategies operate together as persuasive tools.

By synthesizing Aristotle's rhetorical principles with Digital Visual Rhetoric, this study shows how classical persuasion is reconfigured through Instagram's visual affordances in Malaysia's evolving influencer culture (Grant, 2019; Karimova, 2020).

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine how two prominent Malaysian influencers; Khairul Aming and Pinn Yang construct persuasive and authentic personas on Instagram. A qualitative approach was selected because it supports in-depth interpretation of meaning, context, and symbolism in social media discourse, prioritising depth over statistical generalisation. Guided by Aristotle's rhetorical appeals (ethos, pathos, logos) and Digital Visual Rhetoric (DVR), the analysis focused on how verbal and visual resources interact to produce persuasion.

The influencers were selected through purposive sampling based on prominence, audience engagement, and cultural influence within Malaysia's digital landscape. Khairul Aming, a culinary influencer known for relatable cooking tutorials, and Pinn Yang, a lifestyle content creator associated with minimalist aesthetics, represent contrasting rhetorical styles. The unit of analysis was the individual Instagram post, comprising both visual and textual components. In total, 20 posts (10 per influencer) published between January 2024 and October 2025 were analysed. This dataset was considered sufficient to capture variation in persuasive style across personal, promotional, and reflective content.

Posts were collected as screenshots and transcribed to ensure both verbal elements (captions, hashtags) and visual elements (imagery, colour, framing, composition) were available for analysis. The study followed a three-stage multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) procedure. First, captions were examined for rhetorical appeals (ethos, pathos, logos). Second, images were interpreted using DVR principles to identify visual strategies and meaning making. Third, verbal and visual layers were integrated through simultaneous coding in NVivo 14 Pro, allowing the two modes to be analysed in relation to each other.

Intercoder reliability was assessed using Cohen's kappa ($\kappa = .82$), indicating strong agreement (McHugh, 2012). Analytical memoing was used to document interpretive decisions during coding, and thematic triangulation was applied by comparing patterns across both influencers to enhance consistency. NVivo 14 Pro supported code organisation, visualisation, and frequency mapping of rhetorical elements. Ethical considerations were addressed by analysing only publicly available content and acknowledging intellectual property.

All coding and interpretations were conducted by the authors through manual analysis of captions and visuals. Language-editing support was used only to improve clarity and grammar and did not generate the study's analysis, results, or interpretations.

4. Results and Discussion

This study analysed the Instagram content of two leading Malaysian influencers**,** Khairul Aming and Pinn Yang, to identify dominant rhetorical strategies, thematic patterns, and persuasive techniques. Guided by Aristotle's rhetorical appeals (ethos, pathos, logos) and Digital Visual Rhetoric, the analysis compared how both influencers constructed authenticity, credibility, and emotional engagement through linguistic and visual means. The findings are presented below, followed by a discussion integrating relevant literature to contextualize their persuasive strategies within Malaysian social media culture.

Table 1 presents the distribution of rhetorical appeals across 20 analysed posts. Khairul Aming primarily emphasized ethos and logos, using humour, linguistic informality, and detailed explanations to build trust and convey expertise. In contrast, Pinn Yang relied more heavily on pathos, using mood, colour palette, and reflective captions to evoke emotion and calmness.

Khairul Aming's posts often displayed scenes of everyday life - messy kitchen counters, casual attire, and colloquial Malay phrases which enhanced perceived authenticity and local relatability. Pinn Yang's visuals, however, showcased minimalist compositions and soft tones that conveyed elegance and emotional introspection. These contrasting visual rhetorics highlight how each influencer's ethos is culturally constructed: Khairul Aming's through communal familiarity, and Pinn Yang's through aesthetic restraint.

4.1 Rhetorical Patterns of 20 Instagram Posts

Table 1. Frequency of rhetorical appeals and visual rhetoric in instagram posts by Khairul Aming (KA) and Pinn Yang (PY)

Rhetorical Element	Khairul Aming (Culinary Influencer)	Pinn Yang (Lifestyle & Fashion Influencer)	Frequency Across 20 Posts
Ethos (Credibility)	Use of colloquial Malay, humour, relatable persona **8/10 (80%)**	Consistent aesthetic branding and professional tone **6/10 (60%)**	**14/20 (70%)**
Pathos (Emotion)	Humour, community connection, personal storytelling **5/10 (50%)**	Emotional tone, serene imagery, reflective captions **7/10 (70%)**	**12/20 (60%)**
Logos (Reasoning)	Instructional content, practical explanations **6/10 (60%)**	Experiential justification, sensory appeal **3/10 (30%)**	**9/20 (45%)**
Visual Rhetoric (Metaphor, Framing, Symbolism)	Everyday realism, natural lighting, and local culinary symbols **10/10 (100%)**	Minimalist visuals, pastel tones, and emotional metaphors **10/10 (100%)**	**20/20 (100%)**

Note. Percentages are based on 10 posts per influencer (KA = 10; PY = 10), total N = 20.

Table 1 summarises the distribution of rhetorical appeals and visual rhetoric across 20 Instagram posts (10 from Khairul Aming; 10 from Pinn Yang). Overall, ethos appears most frequently (KA: 8/10; PY: 6/10), followed by logos (KA: 6/10; PY: 3/10) and pathos (KA: 5/10; PY: 7/10). Notably, visual rhetoric (metaphor, framing, symbolism) is present in all posts for both influencers (20/20), confirming the centrality of Instagram's visual affordances in shaping persuasion and perceived authenticity.

For Khairul Aming, ethos is dominant (8/10), with logos also occurring frequently (6/10). His credibility is consistently reinforced through self-presentation as a relatable and culturally grounded cook, often conveyed through colloquial Malay expressions, humour, and an instructional tone. The rhetorical pattern suggests that his authenticity is built through a blend of cultural intimacy (ethos) and practical usefulness (logos), positioning him as both approachable and competent.

To increase transparency in how these patterns were identified, Table 2 provides illustrative post-level evidence showing how caption excerpts and visual cues were coded using ethos, pathos, and logos alongside digital visual rhetoric (Aristotle, 2007; Foss, 2004). Across both influencers, the examples demonstrate that authenticity is performed through the interaction between language and image, humour and procedural explanations gain credibility when paired with everyday realism and sequential visuals, while reflective captions become more affectively persuasive when supported by calm, minimalist aesthetics (Foss, 2004; Karimova, 2020). In this way, the excerpts make the coding process visible and help explain the frequency patterns reported in Table 1 by linking the reported trends to concrete multimodal features in the dataset (Huang et al., 2022).

Table 2. Evidence table: Sample post-level excerpts and multimodal coding (KA & PY)

Post code	Caption excerpt	Visual cues	Rhetorical code(s)	Brief interpretation (authenticity signal)
KA01	"Hangit sikit tak apa, janji sedap!"	Unpolished realism (home kitchens/cooking mishaps)	**Ethos** (+ culturally familiar tone); supports **Logos** context	Humour + modest, local speech style builds "relatable Malaysian" credibility and trust.
PY01	"Healing takes time; be kind to yourself."	Minimalist visuals: soft lighting, neutral tones, open spaces	**Pathos** + visual rhetoric (mood/tone)	Emotional reassurance + calm aesthetic frames authenticity as mindful, reflective selfhood.
KA02	"Resepi Sambal Nyet, kali ni kita buat versi pedas kaw!"	Modest kitchen, minimal editing; traditional tools (mortar/pestle/banana leaf) as cultural symbolism	**Ethos** + visual symbolism	Cultural familiarity + everyday cooking setting signals sincerity and "down-to-earth" expertise.
PY02	"Gentle mornings and gratitude."	Clean spaces, minimalist decor, luxury products; consistent aspirational aesthetic	**Ethos** (aesthetic/professional credibility) + visual coherence	Trust is built through consistent lifestyle branding and polished visual identity.
KA03	"Kalau hang gagal kali ni, jangan risau, aku pun dulu pernah hangitkan sambal!"	Short video of a failed cooking attempt (vulnerability turned humourous)	**Pathos** (empathy/solidarity) + ethos (humility)	Admitting mistakes + friendly reassurance creates parasocial closeness and "human" authenticity.
PY03	"Healing is not a trend—it's learning to pause and breathe."	Muted tones and soft lighting as metaphors for emotional balance	**Pathos** + visual rhetoric (affective composition)	Serenity-focused visuals + motivational line position authenticity as emotional steadiness and care.
KA04	"Guna minyak jenis ni sebab titik asap dia tinggi, jadi tak cepat hangus."	Sequential visual storytelling (step-by-step demonstrations)	**Logos** (practical reasoning)	Clear explanation + procedural visuals signal competence and trustworthy instructional authority.
PY04	"Why I love this serum: it makes my skin feel hydrated instantly."	(In text: framed as experiential/sensory justification rather than factual proof)	**Limited Logos** (experiential reasoning) + soft ethos	Authenticity is performed through personal experience ("felt effect") that invites trust emotionally.

In KA01: "Hangit sikit tak apa, janji sedap!"

("*A little burnt is fine, as long as it tastes good!*").

The informal humour and modest stance align with local oral norms of friendliness and relatability. This supports Ithnin et al. (2020), who noted that Malaysian influencers often build credibility through cultural familiarity and inclusive language. Beyond humour, Khairul Aming also uses logos through step-by-step explanations and rationalised ingredient choices such as KA04, which strengthens credibility by framing him as a knowledgeable and reliable source of practical information. This is consistent with Ab Manan and Shukri (2023), who argue that logical appeals can enhance perceived trustworthiness by positioning communicators as competent and informed.

In contrast, Pinn Yang's rhetorical identity relies more heavily on pathos (7/10) and carefully curated visual aesthetics. His captions frequently evoke calmness, self-reflection, and empowerment such as in PY01 *"Healing takes time; be kind to yourself."* and PY03 *"Healing is not a trend, it's learning to pause and breathe.",* which are paired with minimalist visuals such as soft lighting, neutral tones, and open spaces. These aesthetic choices function as affective cues; shaping mood and emotional reception rather than relying on dense linguistic persuasion, aligning with digital visual rhetoric principles that emphasise tone, composition, and visual coherence (Foss, 2004; Karimova, 2020). In the Malaysian context, such visual harmony can also intersect with credibility, as Norazman et al. (2023) observed that audiences often associate aesthetic consistency with trust in influencers.

Despite these differences, both influencers demonstrate the centrality of visual rhetoric, which appears in all analysed posts (20/20). This reinforces the view that persuasion on Instagram is inseparable from its visual storytelling and platform affordances. For Khairul Aming, authenticity is communicated through unpolished realism in home kitchens, minor cooking mishaps, and laughter, signalling cultural closeness and everyday relatability. For Pinn Yang, authenticity is constructed through visual serenity and emotional consistency, projecting mindful selfhood and aspirational identity. This dual pattern is consistent with Panigyrakis et al. (2020), who found that visual cohesion strengthens emotional connection and supports personal brand identification.

Overall, the findings suggest two distinct, culturally situated performances of authenticity. Khairul Aming's discourse reflects a more collectivist orientation grounded in community, humility, and shared identity, whereas Pinn Yang's discourse leans toward individualised aesthetics that foreground emotional well-being and aspirational self-expression. While both construct authenticity, they do so through different rhetorical logics: Khairul through cultural intimacy and practical reasoning, and Pinn Yang through emotional resonance and visual elegance. Taken together, the integration of classical rhetorical theory and digital visual rhetoric highlights how ethos, pathos, and logos are adapted to the multimodal and affective nature of Instagram communication in Malaysia.

4.2 Ethos Construction and Authenticity

Both influencers communicate authenticity through *ethos*, but their methods reflect

contrasting dimensions of Malaysian digital culture.

Table 3. Thematic summary of authenticity and cultural ethos in influencer rhetoric

Aspect	Khairul Aming (Culinary Influencer)	Pinn Yang (Lifestyle & Fashion Influencer)
Language and Tone	Colloquial Malay, humourous, community-oriented	English/bilingual, reflective, calm
Visual Presentation	Modest kitchen, local symbols, minimal editing	Minimalist interiors, soft colour palette, product integration
Ethos Construction	Credibility through cultural authenticity and transparency	Credibility through aesthetic coherence and professionalism
Dominant Appeal	Ethos and logos	Pathos and ethos

Table 3 presents thematic summary of authenticity and cultural ethos in both influencers. Khairul Aming's rhetorical identity is grounded in cultural authenticity and personal transparency.

KA02: *"Resepi Sambal Nyet, kali ni kita buat versi pedas kaw!"*

　　("Sambal Nyet recipe, this time we're making the extra spicy version!")

His posts demonstrated ethos through colloquial Malay and a casual tone, reinforcing his persona as a humble, relatable *"kampung boy"* despite his national fame. Visuals frequently depicted him cooking in a modest kitchen with minimal editing, conveying sincerity and accessibility. The recurring use of traditional kitchen tools such as the mortar, pestle, and banana leaf acted as visual symbolism for Malaysian heritage, aligning with Ithnin et al. (2020), who noted that local influencers strengthen credibility through cultural familiarity and linguistic inclusivity.

In contrast, Pinn Yang's ethos emerged primarily from visual consistency and aspirational aesthetics rather than linguistic cues.

PY02: *"Gentle mornings and gratitude."*

His bilingual captions reflected a cosmopolitan identity and aspirational calm. He constructed ethos through his lifestyle portrayal; clean spaces, minimalist decor, and luxury products, signaling sophistication and trustworthiness. This echoes Norazman et al. (2023), who found that influencer credibility in Malaysia often stems from alignment between personal image and aesthetic style.

4.3 Pathos and Emotional Connection

Pathos, or emotional engagement, was a dominant rhetorical appeal for both influencers but manifested differently. Khairul Aming connected with audiences through humour, humility, and community engagement.

KA03: *"Kalau hang gagal kali ni, jangan risau, aku pun dulu pernah hangitkan sambal!"*

("If you fail this time, don't worry, I also once burned my sambal!")

He used self-deprecation and collective language *("aku pun dulu pernah...")* to humanize himself, invoking empathy and solidarity. A short video of a failed cooking attempt transformed vulnerability into humour, consistent with Harif and Yusoff (2022), who noted that emotional relatability enhances parasocial intimacy between influencers and followers.

In contrast, Pinn Yang conveyed pathos through visual serenity and emotional storytelling.

PY03: *"Healing is not a trend—it's learning to pause and breathe."*

His muted tones and soft lighting acted as visual metaphors for emotional balance. This supports Karimova (2020), who emphasized that aesthetic composition conveys affective meaning beyond language. His motivational captions turned personal reflection into collective emotion, aligning with Nasaruddin et al. (2023), who found that influencers' narrative persuasion strengthens emotional engagement through everyday authenticity.

4.4 Logos and Informational Structure

Khairul Aming frequently demonstrated logos through structured explanations and rational justifications.

KA04: *"Guna minyak jenis ni sebab titik asap dia tinggi, jadi tak cepat hangus."*

("Use this type of oil because it has a high smoke point, so it doesn't burn easily")

He rationalized his choices, appealing to logic and practical knowledge. Sequential visual storytelling reinforced his reasoning through step-by-step demonstrations. Such logical appeals align with Ab Manan and Shukri (2023), who observed that digital communicators often balance emotion with information to enhance credibility. Conversely, Pinn Yang employed limited logos-based reasoning.

PY04: *"Why I love this serum: it makes my skin feel hydrated instantly."*

His persuasion relied more on experiential reasoning, appealing to sensory and emotional satisfaction rather than factual proof. This aligns with Huang et al. (2022), who argued that in lifestyle rhetoric, emotional authenticity often substitutes for logical argumentation, particularly when trust and aesthetic value are central to persuasion.

4.5 Visual Rhetoric and Persona Construction

Visual rhetoric through metaphor, colour, framing, and symbolism was the unifying thread across both influencers' communication. For Khairul Aming, visuals emphasized everyday realism, messy counters, stainless pots, and natural lighting. His "behind-the-scenes" images operated as visual ethos, suggesting transparency and honesty. This form of storytelling reinforced his "authentic Malaysian" brand, aligning with Baskara, Suminar, and Firmansyah (2025), who reported that unpolished visual rhetoric can strengthen follower trust by signalling authenticity.

In contrast, Pinn Yang's visual identity was curated and cinematic. His use of white space, symmetry, and pastel tones created a consistent visual ethos of calm sophistication. Symbolic elements such as mirrors, sunlight, and minimalist interiors evoked self-reflection and purity, suggesting emotional harmony. This aligns with Panigyrakis et al. (2020), who reported that cohesive aesthetic branding strengthens emotional identification between influencer and follower. His visuals operated as both aesthetic statements and persuasive devices, transforming style into rhetorical substance.

Building on these observations, this study sought to explore how rhetorical and visual strategies function as persuasive tools within Malaysian social media contexts. Overall, these patterns show that rhetorical appeals are realised through multimodal resources, supporting the integrated framework used in this study.

4.6 Comparative Interpretation

Table 4. Summary of rhetorical findings

Aspect	Khairul Aming (Culinary Influencer)	Pinn Yang (Lifestyle & Fashion Influencer)
Main Rhetorical Focus	*Ethos* (credibility) and *Logos* (logic)	*Pathos* (emotion) and *Ethos* (credibility)
Language Style	Informal Malay, humourous, and instructive	Minimalist English, calm, and reflective
Visual Style	Realistic and culturally grounded visuals	Clean, aesthetic, and emotionally expressive visuals
Persona	Friendly and relatable expert	Elegant and thoughtful lifestyle figure
Audience Engagement	Builds community through humour and cultural identity	Inspires followers through emotional storytelling and visuals
Authenticity Approach	Emphasizes honesty and local identity	Emphasizes visual consistency and emotional sincerity

Table 4 summarizes the overall rhetorical distinctions between both influencers. Khairul Aming relied on ethos and logos to present himself as an authentic, approachable expert who connects with audiences through humour, cultural pride, and practical instruction. His informal Malay and everyday visuals reinforced trust and relatability. Pinn Yang, however, focused on pathos and ethos, using soft visuals, reflective captions, and emotional storytelling to evoke calmness and inspiration. His minimalist aesthetics communicated sophistication and sincerity.

Comparatively, Khairul Aming's persuasion was dialogic and collectivist, grounded in shared identity and practical wisdom, whereas Pinn Yang's was aesthetic and individualist, centred on emotional wellness and aspirational self-expression. Both achieved authenticity, one through cultural intimacy, the other through emotional elegance. This duality supports Norazman et al. (2023) and Karimova (2020), who argued that authenticity in influencer

culture is context-dependent rather than uniform.

Overall, these findings show that Malaysian influencers employ distinct multimodal rhetorical integrations that reflect cultural, aesthetic, and emotional values. The analysis demonstrates that ethos, pathos, and logos operate not only through language but also through visual resources, supporting the combined use of Aristotle's Rhetorical Theory and Digital Visual Rhetoric. The comparison further suggests that persuasion on Instagram depends on the alignment between message content, cultural positioning, and visual presentation, reinforcing the view that authenticity is performed through both linguistic choices and aesthetic coherence.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how two leading Malaysian influencers like Khairul Aming and Pinn Yang use rhetorical strategies on Instagram to construct persuasive and authentic digital personas. Drawing on Aristotle's rhetorical appeals (ethos, pathos, logos) alongside Digital Visual Rhetoric, the analysis showed how language, emotional tone, and visual design interact to engage audiences within Malaysia's hybrid digital culture.

The findings indicate two distinct yet complementary performances of authenticity. Khairul Aming's persuasion is driven primarily by ethos and logos, grounded in cultural familiarity, humour, and practical explanation that reflect communal values and everyday relatability. In contrast, Pinn Yang's persuasion relies more strongly on pathos and aesthetic coherence, using minimalist visuals and emotionally resonant captions to convey sincerity, calmness, and aspirational selfhood. These patterns reinforce the claim that persuasion on Instagram operates through the integration of verbal and visual modes rather than through captions or imagery alone.

Theoretically, this study contributes to rhetorical scholarship by extending Aristotle's classical appeals into multimodal contexts, demonstrating that ethos, pathos, and logos are performed through affective and visual resources as well as through language. It also advances Digital Visual Rhetoric by clarifying how visual coherence, colour symbolism, composition, and framing function as rhetorical resources that shape perceived authenticity in influencer discourse.

This study is limited to two Malaysian influencers and a selected set of Instagram posts, which constrains the generalisability of the findings. Future research could broaden the dataset to include additional influencers and content genres, incorporate audience reception analysis, or compare rhetorical performances across platforms such as TikTok and YouTube. Examining how audiences interpret visual rhetorical cues would further deepen understanding of digital persuasion within Malaysian and wider Southeast Asian contexts.

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