INFLUENCER POLITICAL ENDORSEMENTS: GOOD BUSINESS? A CASE STUDY OF THE 2024 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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Abstract

This preliminary study investigates the political endorsement of "internet influencers" in Taiwan during the 2024 Republic of China (ROC) Presidential Election. It aims to explore the tangible effects these endorsements might have on candidates' online public perception (or sentiment), and to uncover the primary considerations for influencers when undertaking such "political endorsement" projects: Is political conviction paramount, or does commercial interest prevail?

Employing a mixed-methods approach, this research utilizes both "big data social listening" and "in-depth interviews." This dual-path methodology, integrating quantitative and qualitative analyses, provides a comprehensive understanding of the "influencer industry's" participation logic and values in significant political events in Taiwan.

The research team observed three representative influencer endorsement events during the month leading up to the election. We quantitatively analyzed the changes in online sentiment and engagement surrounding these events. Simultaneously, we conducted in-depth interviews with three prominent influencer teams in Taiwan to qualitatively assess the "commercial-related" and "non-commercial-related" considerations influencing their decisions to engage in "political endorsement" projects.

The findings indicate that influencers' or influencer channels' political endorsements do have a short-term positive impact on candidates' online engagement, particularly when a candidate's online presence is low. This suggests a valuable investment for underdog candidates seeking to boost their momentum. However, this positive effect is constrained by two main factors: first, whether the candidate themselves possesses influencer-like qualities, and second, the endorsing influencer's own level of online engagement. For instance, while mega-influencer Alisasa endorsed Ko Wen-je, who already commanded a high online presence, the additional boost was relatively limited. Conversely, Jaw Shaw-kang, who had a lower online presence, significantly increased his online engagement after a paid collaboration with a well-known influencer channel.

The in-depth interview results reveal that influencers' motivations for political endorsements are complex, potentially involving political ideals, but more often driven by commercial considerations. Influencers will undertake "political endorsement" projects if they assess that such actions can yield financial gains and expand their market reach; otherwise, they will choose to avoid or refrain from taking a stance. During the 2024 ROC Presidential Election, the severe societal polarization and antagonism within Taiwan likely led to concerns among influencers that supporting one side could alienate half of their market. This is very possibly the primary reason why most Taiwanese influencers chose not to make political endorsements in the 2024 presidential election.

Keywords

1. Introduction

The political participation of Taiwanese internet celebrities (hereinafter referred to as "influencers") in the 2020 Republic of China (Taiwan) Presidential Election was notably impressive. Beyond the efforts of "A-di," an English-teaching influencer who spearheaded a collaborative campaign involving twenty-eight other influencer teams to produce social media videos encouraging youth to return to their hometowns to vote, the incumbent President Tsai Ing-wen also engaged multiple influencers to create videos. These videos employed a lively narrative style to disseminate her electoral appeals through social media platforms. The election ultimately resulted in the highest number of votes ever recorded in a directly elected presidential race in the ROC. Furthermore, international research has increasingly indicated that public endorsements of specific political parties or candidates by influencers can exert a significant influence on election outcomes (Crilley & Gillespie, 2019; Goodwin et al., 2020; Peltekoglu & Tozlu; Woolley, 2022)

However, the robust participation of the influencer industry, widely observed in the 2020 Republic of China Presidential Election, did not reappear in the 2024 presidential contest.

As of 2024, the influencer industry in Taiwan has entered a new phase characterized by several key developments:.

(1)   A significant reshuffling of influence among mainstream online platforms is underway. Traditional dominant social media platforms like YouTube and Facebook are facing robust challenges from emerging platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Xiaohongshu. Consequently, the conventional definitions and operational models of "influencers" are being continuously challenged and revised due to the rise of these new platforms (Wang et al., 2021; YANG, 2024).
(2)   The dissemination of influencer-generated content is trending towards shorter, more fragmented formats.
(3)   Under these preceding waves of change, many earlier-generation influencers have gradually faded from the industry, leading to a discernible generational shift. Concurrently, the influence of influencers is expanding into a wider array of industries, simultaneously establishing itself as a new independent profession (Paganini et al., 2021; Wolfram, 2022). In Taiwan, a recent poll indicated that "influencer" officially became a popular career choice for university graduates in 2023.

Given these dynamic interplay of factors supporting and challenging the influencer industry, this study seeks to explore two primary questions, serving as a preliminary investigation to spark further discussion:

(1)   When influencers made their political endorsements a month before the 2024 Presidential Election, did these actions still carry the kind of "decisive impact" on candidates' online public perception (or sentiment) that we saw in 2020? And crucially, was candidates' investment in these "political endorsement" projects truly "worth the investment"?
(2)   Given the 2024 Republic of China Presidential Election, which was more fiercely contested and involved greater financial investment compared to 2020, why did only a minority of influencers choose to undertake "political endorsement" projects? What were the core "commercial-related" and "non-commercial-related" considerations that shaped their decisions?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Internet Influencers

The term "internet influencer" refers to individuals who have amassed a substantial number of fans or followers online. While early English translations included "Internet Celebrities" or "Internet Key Opinion

Leaders," the term "Internet Influencers" has become the prevalent descriptor in recent years. These individuals typically share aspects of their lives, thoughts, or professional knowledge through social media and live-streaming platforms, thereby gaining attention and popularity (Virkkunen & Norhio, 2019; Chen, 2021).

The rise of internet influencers has introduced numerous phenomena and impacts on society. In the political sphere, influencers are increasingly recognized as a new and potent communication tool. They can leverage their influence to convey political messages to their followers, consequently affecting their political engagement and voting behavior (Flamino et al., 2023; Goodwin et al., 2020).

Current academic research on internet influencers primarily focuses on the following aspects:

(1) Definition and Characteristics of Influencers: While a concrete/operational definition of "influencer" is still evolving within academia, a general consensus suggests that influencers possess the following characteristics: a large number of followers, influence within a specific domain, and the ability to disseminate information online (Virkkunen & Norhio, 2019; Woolley, 2022). However, a definitive threshold for the number of registered followers required to be classified as an "influencer" remains elusive. This difficulty arises from factors such as varying market sizes across regions, the user base of different social media platforms, and the common practice of influencers utilizing multiple platforms for dissemination, making a singular definition challenging (Peltekoglu & Tozlu; Starbird et al., 2023).

(2) Reasons for the Rise of Influencers: The emergence of internet influencers is intrinsically linked to the development of internet technology. The widespread adoption of the internet has made it easier for individuals to access diverse information and opinions, as well as to share their own thoughts. In this context, influencers, acting as a new form of opinion leader, have gradually become a significant force across various fields (Woolley, 2022).

(3) Influence of Influencers: Influencers can leverage their influence to impact their followers' consumer behavior, political attitudes, and other aspects (Flamino et al., 2023).

2.2 Influencer Participation in Politics or Endorsement of Political Events

In recent years, instances of influencers participating in political events have become increasingly common. For example, during the 2020 United States presidential election, numerous online influencers publicly endorsed specific candidates and urged their followers to vote (Flamino et al., 2023; Goodwin et al., 2020). Similarly, in the 2020 presidential election in Taiwan, many influencers engaged in discussions on political issues, initiated online and offline social movements, or were invited to collaborate on videos with the then-incumbent President Tsai Ing-wen. Other examples include the "Gym God" (館長), a popular fitness influencer, being invited by the Ministry of National Defense to promote "All-Out Defense Education," and "Huber & Chien Chih" (許伯&簡芝), influencers known for their pet content, collaborating with the Taipei City Government on videos promoting the city's image and life education**.**

The frequent involvement of influencers in political events can be attributed to several key factors:

(1) Influencer Influence: Influencers command a large audience of fans and followers. Consequently, politicians and political parties are keen to engage with influencers to shape their followers' attitudes towards specific individuals or issues, cultivate public opinion, and even influence voting behavior (Goodwin et al., 2020; Woolley, 2022).

(2) Information Overload and Fragmented Information Landscape in Politics: The internet generation has grown up in an environment of information overload. Young people increasingly exhibit attitudes of "not understanding, not being interested, and not participating" when faced with complex political events and a vast amount of information (Schmuck et al., 2022). This trend naturally poses a significant crisis for democratic societies. The emergence of influencers offers a solution by "simplifying" and "entertainingly packaging" large and complex political information. Furthermore, the trust that influencers have cultivated among their young followers positions them as opinion leaders in an environment characterized by political information overload and fragmented information (Flamino et al., 2023; Woolley, 2022).

(3) Mediatization of Political Events: With the widespread penetration of online communication, the dissemination of political events has inevitably become "mediatized." This "mediatization" is particularly evident in the use of language, the logic applied in analyzing events, and the amplification of emotions. As dominant figures and opinion leaders in the online sphere,

influencers are increasingly adept at cultivating their unique perspectives and advantages in the digital space concerning political events (Bibri, 2022; Crilley & Gillespie, 2019; Dubois et al., 2020).

The participation of influencers in political events can generate the following impacts:

(1)   Increased Public Political Participation: Influencer endorsements can raise public awareness of political issues and encourage citizens to engage in political activities (Starbird et al., 2023).
(2)   Facilitation of Political Opinion Exchange: Influencers can leverage their influence to promote the exchange and dialogue of diverse political opinions (Flamino et al., 2023).
(3)   Influence on Political Election Outcomes: Influencer endorsements may sway their followers' voting intentions, thereby impacting the results of political elections (Baumgartner & Newman, 2023).
        Continuing these concepts, the actual impact of "influencer endorsement" in major election warrants further investigation. The implications of such findings are far-reaching: on a smaller scale, they can inform "campaign strategies" and "resource allocation" in future elections, while also guiding the influencer industry toward developing more refined commercial approaches. On a larger scale, this research can provide valuable information for the necessary systemic enhancements required for the advancement of a nation's democratic institutions

3.   Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, utilizing both "big data social listening" and "in-depth interviews" to preliminarily explore the articulation behaviors of Taiwanese "internet influencers" in "significant political events"—defined for the purpose of this research as the 16th Republic of China (Taiwan) presidential election held in 2024—the substantive effects generated by these behaviors, and the potential implications for the communication industry.

3.1 Big Data Social Listening
Big data social listening is a research method that involves collecting and analyzing publicly available online and social media data to understand public opinions and trends (Wu & Chang, 2017). This study will employ the following steps for big data social listening:

(1)   **Data Collection:** Currently, academia utilizes two main approaches for big data collection: 1. Downloading and adapting open-source online tools to meet specific research needs for data collection and analysis; 2. Collaborating with commercial social listening platforms to leverage their existing tools for collecting online textual data on specific topics (this study utilizes the OpView platform provided by eLAND Information Co., Ltd. OpView is a leading platform in Taiwan for academic, governmental, and industrial sectors conducting big data social listening). Both approaches have their respective advantages and disadvantages. The benefit of open-source tools lies in the researcher's complete control over all parameters and the potential for in-depth customization. However, the limitations include the research unit's or scholar's limited network and data storage resources, making comprehensive collection, storage, and analysis of online textual data on major issues challenging, which can severely impact the research's value. Conversely, commercial social listening platforms offer the capability for more comprehensive data collection and analysis on significant online discourse, but their algorithmic logic and parameters are proprietary, limiting researchers' control and potentially affecting the reliability, validity, and generalizability of the research findings.
(2)   **Data Cleaning:** Removing duplicate, invalid, or irrelevant data.
(3)   **Data Analysis:** Employing methods such as text analysis, sentiment analysis, and topic modeling to analyze the frequency of topic occurrence, sentiment indicators (commonly known as P/N value), and keywords with varying degrees of relevance surrounding the major topics (often visualized as a "word cloud").

        Given that this research is a preliminary, small-scale study within a larger project, the data collection timeframe for big data social listening is relatively short. We focus on "influencer endorsement

events" occurring in the month leading up to the 2024 presidential election. Public opinion in Taiwan during election periods is subject to intense fluctuations due to the constant influx of various factors. Influencer messages released six months prior are highly likely to be diluted by other information to the point of negligible impact after such a duration. This serves as another crucial reason for our narrowed observation window.

The list of Taiwanese influencers was primarily compiled from the following four sources:

(1)   "NetBase e-Buzz Ranking" under the "Popularity Ranking" service on the NetBase website: https://dailyview.tw/top100/topic/36.
(2)   "JustAD AdTech" 2023 Taiwan Top 10 Influencer Ranking: https://www.just-adtech.com/influencer-list/.
(3)   "Confirm Key Internet Marketing: Taiwan Influencer List": https://enterimc.com/台灣網紅名單/.
(4)   KOL Radar's "Influencer Radar" Taiwan TOP 100 YouTube Account Popularity Ranking: https://www.kolradar.com/billboard/top100/youtube/community-volume.

The research team then conducted Google News searches based on this list to identify "public endorsement" events by influencers in the month preceding the 2024 Republic of China presidential election as the "observed events." Through Google News searches, this study identified three relatively representative "observed events" as measurement targets, detailed in Table 1.

Event	Influencer	Event Overview	Event Occurrence Date
One	Alisasa (愛莉莎莎)	Influencer "Alisasa" team planned and filmed a "A Day with Ko Wen-je" video.	December 5, 2023
Two	Holong (賀瓏)	Influencer "Holong" invited KMT vice-presidential candidate Jaw Shaw-kong to the popular online talk show "The Holong Show."	January 2, 2024
Three	Guagua (呱吉)	Influencer "Guagua" was invited to the popular online talk show "The Holong Show" and publicly stated his presidential vote for Lai Ching-te.	January 9, 2024

Table 1 List of "Observed Events" in this Study

Furthermore, given the preliminary nature of this small-scale study, the big data social listening will focus on the week before and after the "observed events" (to observe changes in online volume and sentiment) and the month preceding the "observed events" (to assess the significance of the "observed events" on changes in online popularity over a longer period).

3.2 In-depth Interviews

In-depth interviews are a qualitative research method that involves face-to-face interviews to gain a deep understanding of interviewees' thoughts and feelings (Baumgartner & Newman, 2023). This study will employ the following steps for in-depth interviews:

(1)   Participant Recruitment: Inviting eligible participants based on the research objectives.
(2)   Interview Guide Design: Developing an interview guide to direct participants in sharing their opinions and thoughts.
(3)   Interview Conduct: Conducting interviews by trained interviewers.
(4)   Interview Analysis: Analyzing interview content using methods such as content analysis or thematic analysis.

Within the timeframe of this study, two influencer channels/teams agreed to participate in in-depth interviews: "Shichifufu x Picture & Text Incongruence" (志祺七七x圖文不符), a well-known Taiwanese current affairs YouTube channel, and "Baqi Sun" (霸氣太陽), a channel that capitalized on the "short video" trend in Taiwan, using "explaining news in short videos" as its appeal and accumulating over 77,000 subscribers on TikTok within six months of its establishment. Concurrently, "Alisasa," "The

Holong Show," and "Office Hour Not Watching" (上班不要看, a YouTube channel co-founded by Guagua) did not positively respond to the invitation for in-depth interviews within the study period, which is one of the limitations of this research.

4. Research Results

This study initially employed a "big data social listening" approach to preliminarily explore the impact and substantive effects of Taiwanese internet influencers' endorsements of specific political teams or individuals in major political events. Utilizing the OpView platform as a quantitative tool, this method aimed to provide a quantitative picture of the research topic.

Focusing on the three key figures involved in the 2024 Republic of China presidential election, who were central to the three major "influencer political endorsement" events during the month leading up to the election—Ko Wen-je (presidential candidate of the Taiwan People's Party), Jaw Shaw-kong (vice-presidential candidate of the Kuomintang), and Lai Ching-te (presidential candidate of the Democratic Progressive Party)—several rounds of data cleaning were conducted on the OpView platform. The resulting Boolean search term settings (for text analysis) and word cloud analyses for these three key figures are as follows:

Ko Wen-je's Boolean search term settings (for text analysis): (柯文哲|柯p|柯P|KP|kp)!好狗
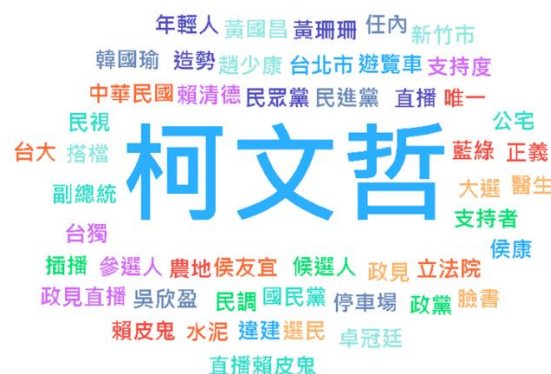

Figure 4.0.1: Word Cloud Analysis Results for Ko Wen-je

Jaw Shaw-kong's Boolean search term settings (for text analysis): (趙少康|政治金童)!來台!膠原

Figure 4.0.2: Word cloud analysis results for Jaw Shaw-kong

Lai Ching-te's Boolean search term settings (for text analysis): (賴清德|賴神|臺獨金孫|台獨金孫|務實臺獨工作者|務實台獨工作者)！代碼

Figure 4.0.2: Word cloud analysis results for Lai Ching-te

The word cloud analysis results on the OpView platform indicated that all keywords represented relevant texts highly correlated with the key figures (i.e., the content of the top 500 most popular posts on key social platforms was related to the respective key figures). Subsequently, based on these settings, this study conducted a quantitative analysis of the three "influencer endorsement" target events.

4.1 Influencer "Alisasa" Uploaded "A Day with Ko Wen-je" Video on YouTube on December 15, 2023

Figure 4.1.1 shows that Ko Wen-je was actually in a period of low online popularity before Alisasa uploaded the video on December 15th. The day after the video was uploaded (December 16th), there was indeed a peak in online popularity. Next, we examined the content of the popular posts on key social platforms that contributed to this increase in popularity to determine whether Alisasa's video was indeed the primary cause.

Figure 4.1.1: Trend of Ko Wen-je's online popularity one week before and after the "Alisasa" event. The x-axis represents the date, and the y-axis represents the number of posts

As shown in Figure 4.1.2, the posts on key social platforms constituting Ko Wen-je's online popularity on December 14th were entirely unrelated to "Alisasa." Even though Alisasa had previously publicly announced the "A Day with Ko Wen-je" video project, such videos are not innovative in the influencer sphere, and Ko Wen-je himself had also collaborated with influencers on similar themed videos in the past. These preceding factors combined may explain why the online community did not engage in much discussion about this event before the "A Day with Ko Wen-je" video was released.

Figure 4.1.2: Before the video upload on December 14th, the top ten most popular online posts on key social platforms related to Ko Wen-je were completely unrelated to "Alisasa"

However, the entire situation changed dramatically after Alisasa officially uploaded the "A Day with Ko Wen-je" video to YouTube on December 15th. As shown in Figure 4.1.3, in addition to creating a small peak in online popularity the following day, the discussion surrounding this video even continued until another peak in popularity on December 20th. As shown in Figure 4.1.4, among the popular online posts on key social platforms related to Ko Wen-je, discussions related to the "A Day with Ko Wen-je" video already appeared after the second item. In fact, discussions related to this video occupied the top 500 most popular posts on key social platforms, excluding the very first one.

Figure 4.1.3: On December 15th, the Top 50 most popular online posts related to Ko Wen-je were all discussions about the "Alisasa" video

Figure 4.1.4: Ko Wen-je experienced another traffic peak on December 20th, but the Top 10 most popular posts were still dominated by discussions related to the "Alisasa" video

From this, it appears that Alisasa did indeed generate a wave of traffic and popularity for Ko Wen-je. However, if we extend the timeline to one month, we find that this effect was not significant for Ko Wen-je's long-term recovery in online popularity.

Figure 4.1.5 illustrates that November 24th was a watershed moment for Ko Wen-je's online popularity. After November 24th, his online popularity experienced a sharp decline. Examining the events around November 24th, it can be observed that the "Grand Hyatt Hotel incident" involving the Kuomintang, the Taiwan People's Party, and Terry Gou (The CEO OF Foxconn, he also was a presidential candidate running as an independent) occurred on November 23rd. This "Grand Hyatt Hotel incident" also led to the "Blue-White split," which marked the breakdown of the collaboration between the Kuomintang and the Taiwan People's Party and significantly impacted the election results. The popular online texts related to Ko Wen-je after the "Grand Hyatt Hotel incident" were indeed uniformly discussing the TPP's self-positioning and corresponding strategies following the "Blue-White split," as shown in Figure 4.1.6.
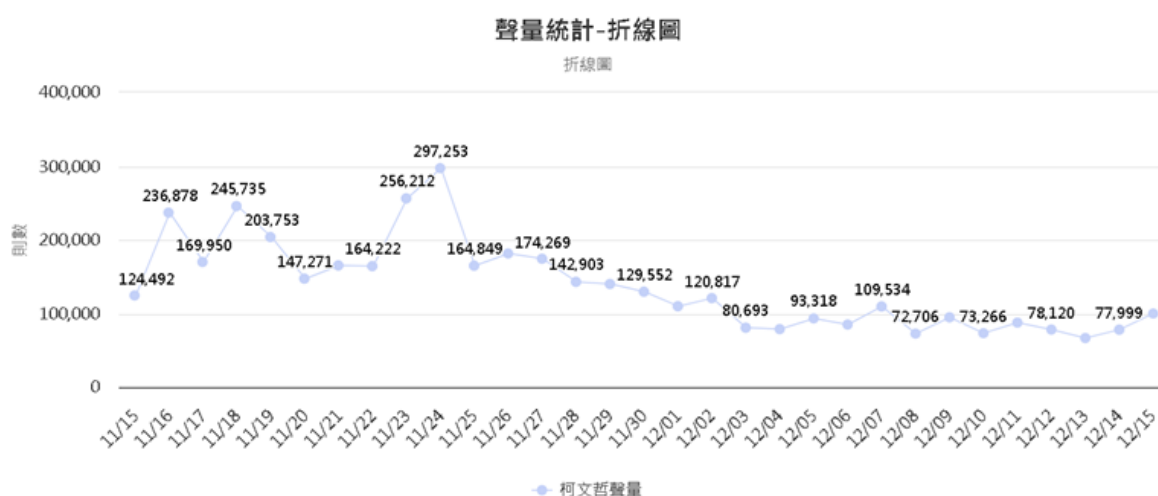
Figure 4.1.5: Extending the observation period to one month reveals that the traffic "peak" caused on December 15th was not high. The x-axis represents the date, and the y-axis represents the number of posts

Figure 4.1.6: The "Blue-White Split" occurred on November 23rd, and therefore the focus of discussion after November 24th was the "Blue-White Split," occupying the Top 500 most popular posts related to Ko Wen-je

This study also measured the online sentiment P/N ratio regarding whether Alisasa's "A Day with Ko Wen-je" video could influence online public opinion's attitude towards Ko Wen-je. The results are shown in Figure 4.1.7:

Figure 4.1.7: Trend of online sentiment P/N ratio for "Ko Wen-je" during the measurement period. The x-axis represents the date, and the y-axis represents the number of posts

As shown in the figure, the P/N ratio for Ko Wen-je did show a slight upward fluctuation on November 16th. However, this upward trend only lasted for one day before entering a continuous four-day decline. Ko Wen-je's P/N ratio did not return to its peak even on the election voting day of January 13th. In other words, Alisasa's "A Day with Ko Wen-je" video had a very limited impact on "changing online public attitude towards Ko Wen-je."

4.2 Influencer "Holong" Invited Kuomintang Vice-Presidential Candidate Jaw Shaw-kong to the Popular Online Talk Show "The Holong Show," Uploaded to YouTube on January 2, 2024

As shown in Figure 4.2.1, Jaw Shaw-kong's online popularity reached a peak on the night of his appearance on "The Holong Show" (January 1st), and the discussion intensity continued for nearly a week. This event significantly boosted Jaw Shaw-kong's online discussion. By analyzing Jaw Shaw-kong's online popularity trend since announcing his candidacy, we can observe the importance of "The Holong Show" event in his "online campaigning.".

Figure 4.2.1 Trend of Jaw Shaw-kong's online popularity one week before and after the release of his "The Holong Show" . The x-axis represents the date, and the y-axis represents the number of posts

The data analysis results (refer to Figure 4.2.2) indicate that the release of the "Jaw Shaw-kong's appearance on The Holong Show" video was the second-highest peak in Jaw Shaw-kong's online popularity since announcing his participation in the 2024 presidential election (the highest peak being the day he announced his joint candidacy with Hou Yu-ih, i.e., November 24th). During this period, Jaw Shaw-kong's last-minute efforts to engage with university students through campus visits and speeches yielded limited discussion. "The Holong Show" successfully generated a wave of discussion. As shown in Figures 4.2.3a and 4.2.3b, on January 2nd, among the top 500 popular online texts related to Jaw Shaw-kong, aside from the first two discussions about the DPP's literary-style advertisement, the rest were uniformly discussions about "Jaw Shaw-kong's appearance on The Holong Show."

Figure 4.2.2 Online popularity trend of Jaw Shaw-kong from November 24th, after announcing his candidacy, to the release of his "The Holong Show" appearance video. The x-axis represents the date, and the y-axis represents the number of posts

Figure 4.2.3a Top 500 popular online posts related to Jaw Shaw-kong on January 2nd, aside from the first two discussions about "On the Road" (Lai Ching-te's campaign short film), the rest were discussions about "The Holong Show" (Screen Capture of the first page)

Figure 4.2.3b Top 500 popular online posts related to Jaw Shaw-kong on January 2nd, aside from the first two discussions about "On the Road" video, the rest were discussions about "The Holong Show" (Screen Capture of the last page)

This study also measured the online text sentiment P/N ratio regarding whether "The Holong Show" event could influence online public opinion's attitude towards Jaw Shaw-kong. The results are shown in Figure 4.2.4:

Figure 4.2.4 Trend of online sentiment P/N ratio for "Jaw Shaw-kong" during the measurement period. The x-axis represents the date, and the y-axis represents the number of posts

As shown in the Figure 4.2.4, the P/N ratio for Jaw Shaw-kong did not show significant fluctuations after the video was uploaded to YouTube. However, this value gradually reached its highest point on the election voting day of January 13th. In other words, "The Holong Show" video may have had an effective impact on "accumulating Jaw Shaw-kong's favorability" in online public opinion.

Currently, it appears that the role of "influencers" or "influencer events" in relation to event topics seems to be limited to "generating a topic (peak)" and "establishing a discussion platform," subsequently retiring from the discussion. However, the difference between the first and second events lies in the fact that "Alisasa's" contribution to accumulating Ko Wen-je's online energy was not significant. Ko Wen-je's online popularity consistently ranked first among the three campaign teams, making "Alisasa's" video comparable to "adding flowers to embroidery." In contrast, although Jaw Shaw-kong is a well-known political figure and media host, he did not intentionally cultivate online popularity. Therefore, "The Holong Show" event's contribution to accumulating Jaw Shaw-kong's online energy can be described as "providing charcoal in the snow."

4.3 Former Taipei City Councilor Chiu Wei-chieh, also known as Influencer "Guagua," Invited to Popular Online Talk Show "The Holong Show," Publicly Stated Presidential Vote for Lai Ching-te. Uploaded to YouTube on January 9, 2024

As shown in Figure 4.3.1, Lai Ching-te's online popularity showed a slight increase on the day Guagua's appearance on "The Holong Show" was released, but declined the next day. We further examined the popular online posts from January 9th and 10th, as shown in Figures 4.3.2a, 4.3.2b, and 4.3.2c. The results indicated that discussions related to Guagua's appearance on "The Holong Show" did not even break into the top 500 popular online posts.

Figure 4.3.1 Lai Ching-te's online popularity trend one week before and after Guagua's appearance on "The Holong Show. The x-axis represents the date, and the y-axis represents the number of posts

Figure 4.3.2a Top 500 popular online posts related to Lai Ching-te on January 9th: The first and second posted were "hijacked" by Ko Wen-je, followed by discussions exclusively about Lai Ching-te's campaign short film "On the Road" from third to 500th (Screen Capture of the First Page)

Figure 4.3.2b Top 500 popular online posts related to Lai Ching-te on January 9th: The first and second posted were "hijacked" by Ko Wen-je, followed by discussions exclusively about Lai Ching-te's campaign short film "On the Road" from third to 500th (Screen Capture of the Last Page)

Figure 4.3.2c Top 500 popular online posts related to Lai Ching-te on January 10th: The ranking situation was the same as on January 9th, with the first and second "hijacked" by Ko Wen-je, followed by discussions exclusively about "On the Road" from third to 500th (Screen Capture of the First Page)

This study also measured the online text sentiment P/N ratio regarding whether "Guagua's endorsement of Lai on The Holong Show" event could influence online public opinion's attitude towards Lai Ching-te. The results are shown in Figure 4.3.3. Lai Ching-te's P/N ratio showed no fluctuation after the video was uploaded on January 9th, and then ended with a slight increase on the election voting day of January 13th. In other words, "Guagua's endorsement of Lai on The Holong Show" event had a very limited impact on "changing online public opinion's attitude towards Lai Ching-te."
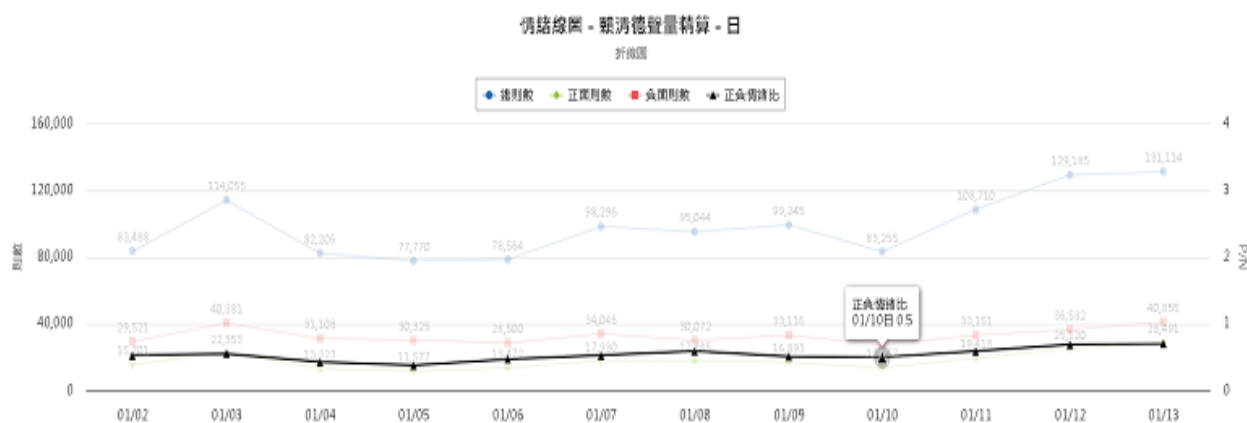
Figure 4.3.3 Trend of online sentiment P/N ratio for "Lai Ching-te" during the measurement period. The x-axis represents the date, and the y-axis represents the number of posts

4.4 In-depth Interviews with Key Influencer Teams

This study also conducted in-depth interviews with influencer teams regarding the "influencer endorsement" phenomenon during the 2024 Republic of China presidential election in Taiwan. The interviewees' identities are listed in Table 2.

Table 2   List of Interviewees' Identities for In-depth Interviews

Interviewee	Job Title	Interview Time
Interviewee A	Development Director of "Shichifufu x Picture & Text Incongruence" Channel (KOL on YouTube, News Channel)	January 27, 2025
Interviewee B	Development Director of "Baqi Sun" Channel (Focuses on "Explaining News in Short Videos," Rapidly Rose in Popularity on TikTok during the Election)	January 9, 2025

In contrast to the vibrant and diverse landscape of the 2020 election, there was a noticeable decrease in "influencer endorsements" during the 2024 Republic of China presidential election. Interviewee A, representing the "Shichifufu x Picture & Text Incongruence" team, frankly stated:

"We observed a heightened atmosphere of 'ideological polarization' in the public opinion market during the 2024 presidential election. Netizens scrutinized influencers' every word and action with a microscope and reacted with immediate and intense emotions. This created significant pressure for channel operators. There were reports within the industry of losing tens of thousands of followers overnight. This should be the reason why the majority of influencer teams were reluctant to publicly endorse candidates during the 2024 presidential election."

Interviewee A indicated that, in their view, the motivation behind "influencer endorsements" is often not political ideology but more likely "commercial considerations." Whether an "endorsement" behavior can attract more followers and generate more business opportunities are the core considerations for influencer teams when making such endorsements. Of course, there are also teams with different stances. Interviewee B from the "Baqi Sun" channel believes that each channel has its own characteristics and unique attributes, and it is perfectly reasonable for most channels to avoid discussing politics to protect their political neutrality. However, for "news channels," doing a good job of reporting news is the key to gaining followers. Therefore, "Baqi Sun" did not hesitate to criticize the policies of all three candidate combinations during the election. At the same time, "Baqi Sun" also shared some of their principles:

"Looking at the history of democratic development, wholeheartedly endorsing a political figure is dangerous. We believe that the result of 'supporting a person' will inevitably be disappointment and anger, while 'supporting an idea' will always remain clear and beautiful. Therefore, we only endorse 'ideas' and 'policies.' This is why you can find strong criticisms of the Green, White, and Blue parties on our channel. We speak our mind; right is right, and wrong is wrong. I think our approach is actually very helpful for business development! While those in your echo chamber naturally like you, people on the opposing side will also subscribe because they are very curious about your perspective and logic on specific events and what methods you will use to refute them!"

The "Shichifufu x Picture & Text Incongruence" team ultimately chose to remain neutral during the 2024 presidential election but continued to produce content from a policy oversight perspective. However, the team admitted that in the six months leading up to the presidential election, "Shichifufu x Picture & Text Incongruence" prioritized "non-political topics" as the main focus of their content strategy. Meanwhile, the "Baqi Sun" channel insisted on taking a "head-on confrontation" approach.

In today's era of rapid decline in traditional news media, could social media and influencer platforms become ideal havens for the resurgence of the news industry? Interviewees A and B from different teams both expressed pessimistic views on this question. Interviewee A stated:

"From the perspective of government management of the media, the online speech environment is the most open, seemingly a beautiful landscape. However, when you turn online communication from a 'hobby' into a 'profession,' or even establish a company like we did, you may face all the difficulties you see in traditional news media, without exception. For example, we face pressure daily regarding our news stance from political and business circles."

Interviewee B stated:

> "'Baqi Sun' is able to adhere to its principles because the core members are all 'slashies' (individuals with multiple professions). We all have other full-time jobs and do not rely on the internet for a living. We run the channel purely out of passion and a sense of self-taught social responsibility. The surface of the internet suggests freedom of speech for everyone, but the reality is that the '1450' (a term referring to paid online commentators) is very powerful. Cyber armies use various means to interfere with and obstruct our message dissemination. For example, if ten people collectively and maliciously report a short video intensively within a short period, they can often successfully trigger the social media platform's automatic mechanism to temporarily block the video. This is a fatal blow for content that relies on timeliness. Current social media platforms are definitely not ideal havens for the future of news media. Our team is working hard to use technology to overcome these blind spots in platform mechanisms."

5. Conclusion

As this study is a preliminary, small-scale investigation within a larger project, it has yielded the following conclusions through both quantitative and qualitative exploratory approaches, laying the groundwork for further in-depth research:

(1)   "Influencer endorsements" do provide a certain boost to candidates, for example, in revitalizing online popularity when it is low. However, the effectiveness of this "boost" appears to depend on two main factors: a. whether the candidate themselves is an internet celebrity; b. the inherent popularity of the influencer. Taking "Event One" as an example, Alisasa is a mega-influencer in Taiwan with millions of followers but rarely engages in political topics. In contrast, Ko Wen-je's official YouTube channel has a similar number of subscribers to Alisasa, making Ko Wen-je himself an internet celebrity. Consequently, Alisasa's impact on increasing Ko Wen-je's online popularity was quite limited. Looking at "Event Two," although Jaw Shaw-kong is a well-known political figure and media host, his usual online presence is moderate, and he is by no means considered an "influencer." Relatively, Holong's online popularity significantly surpasses Jaw Shaw-kong's. Therefore, when Jaw Shaw-kong appeared on Holong's online talk show, the benefit to Jaw Shaw-kong's online popularity was evident.

(2)   Cultivating oneself as a "political influencer" has almost become a compulsory skill for political workers worldwide. Although Ko Wen-je's online popularity experienced a precipitous decline after the "Blue-White split," his inherent influencer characteristics were undoubtedly crucial in securing over 25% of the vote in his first presidential run while having the lowest campaign expenditure since the ROC presidential direct elections began. How to interpret, explain, and disseminate complex policies beneficial to the country and its people using popular online slang should be a mandatory lesson for all those aspiring to the highest office.

(3)   Facing the current highly polarized and antagonistic political climate in Taiwanese society, most influencers adopt an avoidance strategy towards "political endorsement." This is primarily to prevent offending groups with differing political stances and, consequently, damaging their fan base. However, a minority of teams, aiming to avoid constantly catering to public taste, employ a business model of "diversifying income streams." This approach allows them to establish a firm professional standing within their channels and convey messages expected of professionals. While such an attitude often draws attacks from netizens with differing political views, it paradoxically enables them to navigate between different candidate camps due to their perceived "neutral stance" when executing "political endorsement" projects. Nevertheless, whether these teams can grow and thrive while "adhering to their principles" still requires longer-term observation and empirical study.

Given the preliminary and exploratory nature of this small-scale study, it naturally has several limitations. For instance, the observation period for big data social listening could be extended. To enhance the reliability and validity of the research, one or two additional big data social listening platforms could be incorporated to verify whether the popularity trends measured by different platforms are consistent using the same timeframe and Boolean search term settings. Furthermore, if more influencer teams were

willing to share their perspectives in the in-depth interviews, it would provide a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the considerations and strategies of influencer teams in deciding on "influencer endorsements."

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