

Cosmetics Entrepreneurs, Social Media and Malaysian Music Market: The Rise of Pseudo-artist

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Abstract

Social media and music promotion are inextricably linked in the digital-driven music industry. This further proposes a new mechanism in the industry of measuring a music commodity's success or identifying an effective pop music identity in the music market by specificities such as the numbers of followers, views or engagement from social media. However, the changing landscape of the music market or industry as a whole has created an emerging (and worrying) trend, witnessing the presence of 'pseudo-artist' namely the cosmetics entrepreneurs who are apparently not genuine musicians that somehow manage to penetrate the Malaysian music market quite effortlessly. Through this phenomenon, it is, in some ways, demonstrating that social media has simplified music market entry and thus has been manipulated somewhat effectively by the pseudo-pop music identities, namely the cosmetic entrepreneurs for their personal and business brandings. Owing to this, the presence of such individuals in the music market or industry has created sociocultural tensions in Malaysia that are obviously problematic. This article discusses such a phenomenon that is interesting in its own right but damaging specifically to the music industry in the long run if this trend persistently occurs.

Keywords: music promotion, music industry, music market, social media, cosmetic entrepreneurs

Introduction

The emerging trend of cosmetics entrepreneurs becoming pop singers in the Malaysian music industry is a fascinating and probably unprecedented phenomenon in other parts of the world. In Malaysia, Dato' Sri Aliff Syukri, Datuk Seri Vida, Nursajat and Safiey Illias are seen as well-known cosmetics founders that apparently turned into pop singers. Most notably, their songs went viral and reached millions of views on YouTube. In that case, Dato' Sri Aliff Syukri, the cosmetics billionaire, is the best example of that type of entrepreneur who consistently produces music and YouTube hits.

Founding and managing a cosmetics line company namely D'Herbs Holdings Sdn. Bhd., his products include a range of personal care, health and cosmetics products for both men and women. He has expanded his business venture other than consumer products by involving in the entertainment industry, mainly as a sponsor for television programmes. Apart from that, he is also a creative performer or artist as he has starred in films and released his own music. In terms of his music career, he has produced music releases since 2017, and the singles usually garnered impressive views on YouTube. Below is the list of the music releases that he has produced thus far:

Table 1 Dato Aliff Syukri music releases

Year	Single title	YouTube view
2017	'Abang Nak Tegur' (featuring Nur Sajat)	5,020,545 views
	'Abang Nak Tegur 2.0' (featuring Nur Shahida)	7,412,823 views
2018	'Abang Nak Tegur 3.0' (featuring Nur Sajat and Nur Shahida)	2,996,803 views
	'Bobo di Mana' (featuring Nur Sajat dan Lucinta Luna)	24,907,859 views
	'Biar Apa Kata Orang'	845,518 views
2019	'Cowok Baru' (featuring Lucinta Luna dan Upiak Isil)	2,173,612 views
	Jom Raya (featuring Bella Astilah dan Zizi Kirana)	3,241,994 views
	'Haruman Syurga' (featuring Nur Shahida)	2,151,708 views
2020	'Cuba Bahagia'	3,032,190 views
2021	'Lala Raya'	3,037,639 views
2022	'Kelepok Raya'	2,625,804 views
	'Baby Sayang' (featuring Baby Shima)	1,446,481 views

The transformation of Dato' Sri Aliff Syukri into a pop singer and his musical achievement may sound 'harmless' as he is just producing some sort of entertainment in the Malaysian music market. With heavy usage of vocal editing tool such as Autotunes, his music quality (and most of the aforementioned cosmetic entrepreneurs) seem quite acceptable. Taken as a whole, this new creative trend that the cosmetics entrepreneurs proposed, namely their transformation and involvement in the music industry, can be considered as 'nothing serious' as argued by them (Suria.my, 2018). This further demonstrated that their songs have never been shortlisted for music award ceremonies that recognise the quality aspects of the songs. Furthermore, this trend obviously has not been endorsed by any music industry practitioners, bodies or entities whilst some cosmetics entrepreneurs have expressed frustration with the music industry rejection that they received, although their music drew public attention and went viral on the internet (see for examples: Hassan, 2020 and Rafiqhi, 2020).

Nonetheless, this trend proposes an implicit problematic novelty. This further illustrates that the cosmetics entrepreneurs are apparently fashioning their songs with controversies as a way to make their music releases discursive. They produce songs that usually draw attention and debate among the Malaysian audience, which ultimately divert such hype to the cosmetics or consumer products they sell. In other words, the songs are meant to be one of their publicity stunts that are advantageous to their business imperatives. In this type of marketing regime, they already have established a strong connection with millions of followers on Instagram, Facebook, Youtube, etc. They utilise social media with the followers they garnered to create an engaging discourse about the songs, thereby offering publicity and driving sales to their consumer products – the original business that they are in.

However, this approach is frowned upon in the Malaysian music industry, especially by industry practitioners. Such a reception that the cosmetics moguls received from the industry was owing to their factitious musical skills. In addition to that, these entrepreneurs are seen to be exploiting the music industry systems for their personal gains and nothing embodying positive contributions to the industry in general. As reported by Utusan Malaysia, Datuk Awie warned a handful of cosmetics entrepreneurs to not tarnish the art industry with their pop songs. The prolific Malaysian rock singer further asserted that the emergence of this type of singer has had a negative impact and seems to be 'destroying' the industry (Razali, 2022). Apart from the tension induced by the cosmetics entrepreneurs in the music industry, they are likely to create sociocultural tensions that are obviously problematic in Malaysia. For instance, Dato' Sri Aliff Syukri has drawn the bemusement and dismay of Malaysian netizens for his new release featuring dangdut sensation, Baby Shima - the teaser for the music video displayed inappropriate and obscene dance moves for Malaysian cultures (Mstar, 2022). Due to the bad reception that the teaser garnered,

Dato' Sri Aliff Syukri has expressed his sadness with a posting on Instagram that he would take a break from social media. A few days later, he announced that his Instagram account, which has 4.3 million followers, was on sale for RM 500,000.00 (Kosmo, 2022). However, as reported on MalayMail, this controversial cosmetics entrepreneur was back on social media after four days of the dramatic exit and continued promoting his controversial song again, with a new video showing him dancing with a mop (Zikri, 2022).

Apart from this new controversy that he created, his first music debut with transgender cosmetics entrepreneurs Nur Sajat titled 'Abang Nak Tegur' in 2017 and 'Bobo di Mana' in 2019 (that also featured Indonesian transgender singer, Lucinta Luna) have already created hostile responses from the Malaysian netizens and criticisms from the Muslim religious figures. In that respect, Dato' Sri Aliff Syukri has already established a negative portrayal of his pop music identity since his initial attempt to be a pop singer. Bear in mind that all the controversies associated with or created by him apparently contradicted the Malaysian norms as a modern Muslim country. This further suggested that he, in a way, had empowered the 'oppressed' community in Malaysia, the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ), when he produced songs featuring famous LGBTQ figures in Malaysia and Indonesia. Besides, and most notably, he proudly proclaimed that he is Malaysia's number one male singer owing to the hype and viral songs he had produced (Nordin, 2022). The idiosyncrasy he curated through his pop music identity and musical narratives is apparently unprecedented in the Malaysian realm. Hence, this article focuses on the aspect of the music industry and views on how cosmetics entrepreneurs such as Dato' Sri Aliff Syukri mediate and exploit music with the help of social media for their business imperatives.

Social media and music industry

Social media is traditionally known as a new social platform that allows users to communicate or interact with each other through online applications such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, YouTube and many more. As demonstrated in the work of Boshier (2021: 111), "social media is growing in popularity, with an estimated 45 per cent of the world's population now using social media channels and spending on average 136 minutes per day on social networks". With the interactivity that social media offers to its users, it can be considered the most preferred communication tool nowadays whilst the users are not only able to exchange messages, but they also can share images, sounds or videos. Plus, the users are free to use social media regardless of their agenda or intention and only require a sense of self-censorship as the social media content creator.

In music industry, social media can be seen as a technological mediation used by musicians to reach target audiences or establish influence in the music market. To a certain degree, "social media has largely replaced the idea of fan clubs in the modern-day music industry." (Boshier, 2021: 111). That said, social media currently act as an imperative tool for artists or popular acts to deploy as part of their marketing and branding strategies that ensure the constant visibility of their popular identities, or the continuity of iconography, as articulated by Dyer (2004) in relation to stardom and popular culture. From another perspective, especially for new aspiring acts, social media can be a useful tool for them to establish their presence and branding in the music industry. Although social media can be an essential tool for most artists and literally provide advantages to them, there are also significant disadvantages in which social media's benefits, especially for musicians, have likely been overstated (Haynes and Marshall, 2018).

The exploitation of social media by cosmetics entrepreneurs in the music industry

The change that social media proposed in the music industry has usurped the long-standing dominance and power that conventional media (e.g. radio, television and print media) have had. This further suggests that social media is likely to take control and weaken the precedents' role and functions. This recalls the work of Järvekülg and Wikström (2021) on social media and music industry. They note that "the digitalisation of creative industries has undermined the business models of legacy media outlets as well as the music industries" (2021: 1).

To a certain degree, the impact of social media on music industry seems to propose that social media disrupts the music industry systems in the sense that it scrapped the industry 'gatekeeper', namely the role of music labels that usually have the authority of 'awarding' the industry access to aspiring amateur musicians. This means that the change, in a way, has streamlined the market entry, thereby allowing self-enabled musicians (or individuals), regardless of their musicianship or talent, to obtain access to the industrial system. This sounds exciting to aspiring amateur and professional musicians as they are not required to rely upon and gain market entry from the music companies as ever ritualised in the music industry.

However, this new approach further suggests that anyone who has the intention, ambition or agenda to be in the music industry, regardless of the level of musicianship, can utilise this new and open digital platform.

In the case of the controversial cosmetics entrepreneur Dato' Sri Aliff Syukri, he seems to have his own agenda as a pop singer, which is arguably far from qualified to be one. It can be argued that one undisputed factor of his venture in the music industry is to expand his income stream as an entrepreneur, not as a musician. His social media

account such as Instagram, which has 4.3 million followers, clearly shows that the key objective of all his postings is to create high engagement. In order to achieve the objective, it is essential to have high numbers of followers on social media platforms as a base. This is to ensure that any social media postings are capable of generating high numbers of views, likes, and comments. This ultimately contributes to the increase of followers. Therefore, it can be said that his social media strategy is to make any postings discursive.

As explained, the controversial short teaser about his new release features Baby Shima is apparently not only discursive on social media platforms. It has also been in the attention of conventional media such as newspapers whilst it has been criticised by music industry practitioners and respected Islamic preachers in Malaysia. What can be learnt from this scenario is that it demonstrated that the essential parts of mobilising social media in the music industry are the narrative and discourse, which further informs that the aesthetic value of music becomes a peripheral element in creating an effective pop music commodity, as demonstrated in the case of Dato' Sri Aliff Syukri. In addition, and most essentially, social media has enabled and undermined the music market entry.

The rise of pseudo-artist

From the phenomenon that Dato' Sri Aliff Syukri created (which may be similarly occurred in the case of Dato Seri Vida, Nursajat and Safiey Illias), it can be said that the phenomenon cultivates the emerging trend of pseudo-artist. This trend also inspires other cosmetics entrepreneurs to join this pathway as they view this strategy as advantageous for their business imperatives (see for example: Hashim, 2022 on ESW cosmetics founder, Iddin Syah who was inspired by the precedents' strategy in the pop music industry).

Pseudo-artist is the type of artist that refers to individuals who are not musicians - they have no or lack musical talent but ultimately have access to the music industry and obtain the desired fame by exploiting social media as the vehicle. The exploitation of social media by cosmetic entrepreneurs further undermines the music market, and this scenario is likely to embody the notion of creative destruction that is found in the Malaysian music industry context, as argued in the work of Muhid (2022). The scholar explores the career experience of music reality television musicians by focusing on the experience of Akademi Fantasia's 'graduates' and found that the industrial systems in the Malaysian music industry are both helpful and harmful. The scholar further argues that the industrial systems are built upon the implicit ideology of creative destruction. They implicitly hinder the musicians from achieving self- realisation in pop musicking, which ultimately disrupt the musical ambition of the creative individuals in the music industry and, therefore, does perfect harm to their utopian desire especially in the musical activity or in the wider creative industries context (see also Dyer, 2002; Breen, 2004 and Stahl, 2004 for the notion of utopia in creative industries). This means that the long-standing industrial systems in music are not entirely favouring the musicians.

The analysis from Muhid resonates with the account of Roger and Preston (2016) in music industry in relation to the ideology of creative destruction. The scholars addressed the digitalisation crisis in the music industry and demonstrated that new media innovations radically undermined the music business's fundamental economics, which ultimately collapsed the established order.

Hence, it can be said that the trend that pseudo-artists proposed with the utilisation of social media as the new means of self-promotion platform implicitly has a destructive nature to the industry, as seen in the aforementioned scholarly accounts.

When entrepreneurs with financial and social capital dominate the economics of opportunity, it becomes a real challenge for genuine and aspiring musicians to get the attention, appreciation and recognition of their music commodities when such 'real' musicians have no similar power or resources as to what the pseudo-artists have.

Conclusion

The rise of pseudo-artists is likely to embody the disposition of the creative destruction (as seen in the music industry accounts) as the artists are not genuine pop singers who exploit the music industry for their personal or business gains. The existence of this type of artist has posed detrimental effects to the industry as they are, in some ways, revising the existing music industry's systems. Meaning that, with the financial power and remarkable social influence that the pseudo-artists have, they are able to shape the new creative production trend that seems to be recognised in the music industry. As such, it may impact aspiring pop musicians who genuinely seek music market validation solely by their musicianship. The current trend that the pseudo-artists proposed, predominantly embodied with controversies, is apparently an effective strategy for fashioning pop music. Nonetheless, this trend obviously brings more negative than positive impacts to the industry in the long run if it persistently occurs. In that respect, it becomes a real challenge for the industry to be out of the typical stigma and sceptics of the Malaysian public that usually perceives this industry predominantly promotes negative values and serves no positive purpose to the public. With the presence of the pseudo-artists that are quite mushrooming over time, this trend promotes low-class entertainment – a cultural genre that seems to be prominent, at present.

Therefore, it can be said that social media has partly revised the music industry systems. To an extent, social media has helped and implicitly cultivated the rise of

pseudo-artists and granted such factitious pop music identities to exploit popular music and industry for their personal and business purposes. Social media is indeed a new mode of appropriation optimised by pseudo-artists to market and establish their consumer products or bolster their personal brandings, which eventually further established a 'gateless' Malaysian music industry, especially in the age of digitisation.

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