Influencers, Virality and Cultural Legitimacy: Audience Perspectives on Business Communication Strategies in the Indonesian Film Industry

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Abstract
This research investigates how viewers understand and engage with commercial communication methods in the Indonesian film industry through digital means. To collect data, this study uses a qualitative descriptive design, with in-depth interviews and participant digital observation. The results indicate a transition from a traditional unidirectional public relations model to an algorithm-driven communication system marked by influence, virality, and crowd-based evaluations of trust and credibility. Instead of merely consuming artistic material, audiences now actively shape the cultural significance, exposure, and legitimacy of film content. Influencers act as amplifiers of meaning, and reputation is largely shaped by viral processes and audience interpretation. This suggests that business communication strategy is emergent rather than an add-on in a complex environment where commercial goals and cultural legitimacy intertwine with audience trust, offering practical insights into how organisations can implement more authentic, culturally anchored, and engagement-focused communication practices.

Keywords: *Influencer Marketing; Virality; Cultural Legitimacy; Business Communication; Indonesian Film Industry; SDG 8; SDG 9; SDG 11*

Introduction

Digitalisation and social media have changed how businesses communicate. Historically, Indonesian film promotion was commodity-based and one-directional, relying on conventional advertising, both formal and informal. In this work, business communication refers to the strategic promotional and relational tactics used by film players, while digital audience engagement refers to the presence, influence, and sharing practices of film audiences in digital spaces.

Previous studies have documented a fundamental transformation in Indonesian film business communication, which once targeted conventional markets. Nurhadi and Sahara describe this structural shift, showing that conventional media outlets have largely been replaced by algorithmic platforms such as TikTok, where catchy challenges and interactive short videos capture

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Generation Z's attention for local films (Nurhadi & Sahara, 2026). Content is also sustained by a massive audience: users have become marketers through user-generated content (UGC), which, according to Iskandar, offers a more authentic, culturally validated form of advertising than studio adverts (Iskandar, 2025). Commercially, this participation was evident in KKN di Desa Penari (2022), which combined a viral social media mythos, influencer endorsements, and interactive digital offerings at themed events to achieve unprecedented box office performance (Dewa, 2023). Afifah, Daud, and Mulyadina found that audiences' acceptance of a viral trailer depended largely on their cognitive and affective trust, as shaped by the opinion leaders who shared it (Afifah et al., 2022). Finally, digital trust depends on cultural legitimacy: the Indonesian digital sphere reinforces a rigid moral landscape in which netizens' shared beliefs, expressed through online discourse, ultimately determine a film's status, prestige, and marketability (Rahmana et al., 2026). Together, these studies support the conclusion that influencers, engineered virality, and cultural sensitivity are no longer ancillary marketing strategies but represent the forefront of key business communication channels within the contemporary Indonesian film industry.

Since films are intangible products, extensive digital marketing plans are essential to make them visible (Xie, 2023). With influencers and the attention economy of Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, audiences are now far less passive. Digital marketing has indeed turned social media into a familiar avenue for filmmakers seeking to market their films, according to Yusuf and Hadiprawoto. As a result, film reviews and critiques are now largely concentrated on social media platforms (Yusuf & Hadiprawoto, 2024).

Traditional marketing concepts are being overturned; audiences have become active contributors to the recontextualization, remixing, and sharing of film narratives on social media platforms. As Iskandar discusses, UGC is often viewed as more genuine and persuasive than traditional studio advertising because audiences themselves participate in transmitting the promotional messages (Iskandar, 2025). Previous research has shown that combining digital promotional strategies (e.g., UGC, influencers) is an effective way for companies to increase engagement and visibility; however, these studies do not show how influencers, virality, and cultural legitimacy work together in an algorithm-mediated context. Additionally, virality and algorithmic mediation influence how ethical assessments, cultural legitimacy, and reputational risk are evaluated (Beer, 2017).

Business communication must therefore evolve beyond selling tickets towards meaning-making, trust-building, and credibility management through influencers and (often viral) content. Accordingly, the article examines how audiences experience, negotiate, and validate the influencer- and algorithm-led participatory communication strategies of Indonesian films. Using an inductive qualitative-descriptive method, the study employs in-depth interviews and participant digital observation to examine how these practices build cultural relevance and trust, and how they create both risks and opportunities across the spectrum of digital media actors.

Methodology

This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore audience perspectives on influencers, virality, and cultural legitimacy in business communication strategies within the Indonesian film industry. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with eight informants selected using purposive sampling. The informants were selected based on their experience as audiences of Indonesian films and their exposure to film-related communication through digital media. The interviews were conducted in March–April 2026 and explored informants' perspectives on the use of influencers in film promotion, the role of viral content in attracting audience attention and engagement, and how digital communication shapes perceptions of the cultural legitimacy of Indonesian films. Digital observation was conducted during the same period on TikTok, X, and Instagram to examine film-related communication and audience interactions surrounding a range of Indonesian films. The observation focused on promotional content, influencer-generated content, trailers, short-form videos, audience comments, discussions, reposts, and other forms of digital engagement related to Indonesian films.

The collected data were analysed thematically by identifying, coding, and organising recurring patterns emerging from the interviews and digital observations. The analysis focused on four interconnected aspects: influencer communication, virality, audience engagement, and cultural legitimacy. The interview findings were compared with the observed digital content to identify similarities, differences, and complementary patterns between audience perspectives and communication practices in digital spaces. This process enabled the research to examine how audiences perceive business communication strategies in the Indonesian film industry and how these strategies are constructed, circulated, and responded to through digital media. The analysis was conducted iteratively to ensure that the emerging themes remained grounded in the empirical data and reflected the perspectives of the eight informants.

Discussion

The Shift of Film Business Communication Toward Digital and Influencer-Based Strategies

The findings show that audiences clearly recognise the shift in Indonesian film promotion from traditional channels to new digital, influencer-led communication systems. Informants said they rarely decide whether to see a film based on posters, TV commercials, or press conferences, which shows that the effectiveness of one-way communication has begun to decline. Instead, they are increasingly exposed to promotional content across social platforms like Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Twitter (X), suggesting that digital platforms are the main battleground for communication. This finding supports Adilla et al. (2023), who propose that rapid digitalisation shifts film promotion toward soft-sell and interactive strategies; this

research elaborates by showing how audiences consciously treat digital media as the primary basis for decision-making rather than merely a source of exposure.

Many informants specifically associated film visibility with short videos, influencer reviews, memes in their timelines, and algorithmically recommended content, which points to an intrinsic link between algorithmic culture and influencer marketing. This affirms Beer's (2017) conclusions about the algorithmic conditions of visibility, but it also suggests that audiences are not simply passive recipients of the system: they notice influencer selection strategies and what these imply in terms of algorithmic targeting. This is shaped by their cultural experiences and backgrounds. In the present study, this audience agency is reflected in informants' awareness of influencer selection and algorithmic targeting, suggesting that audiences can recognise and interpret the strategic intentions embedded in digital film promotion (Ni, 2024). Informants perceived that production houses select influencers whose followers match the target demographic, which shows that influencer marketing is strategic business communication rather than random promotion. This confirms previous studies, but also highlights audience awareness of such strategic processes, pointing to a more reflexive digital audience.

This works both ways: informants frequently equate a high number of likes, comments, and shares with trendiness and a film's popularity, so that engagement metrics come to stand for quality and relevance. This shows how audiences internalise the logic of algorithmic culture. The finding both supports Iskandar's (2025) thesis on virality as a digital promotional strategy and suggests that audiences are becoming agents in relation to metrics, which function as evaluative frames rather than mere data points in passive experiences of exposure.

This research also highlights an important point: the change is not only structural but also perceptual, because audiences have already redefined what they consider "good marketing." From their perspective, influencers and digital channels are the primary sources of exposure, whereas traditional media play a secondary role. This is further supported by Riswanto et al. (2024), while the present study adds to the discussion of audiences in this space by providing evidence that digital communication is seen as more authentic and relevant than traditional media channels, furthering theoretical shifts from institutional trust towards relational trust through influencers.

For example, Agak Laen (2024) and KKN di Desa Penari (2022) published their trailers on YouTube and then re-uploaded them as one-minute vertical videos on TikTok and Instagram. Informants perceived these as more engaging and accessible, which is consistent with previous studies on platform-based promotion (Annisa et al., 2024). The key to business communication is to develop content in a format suited to each platform to optimise visibility and engagement. This research adds that these tactics resonate because they suit how audiences engage with information in a world mediated through algorithmic feeds.

These formats not only inform but also drive high engagement, with people tagging friends and debating characters, according to the informants. This reflects the concept of participatory communication discussed by Djafarova and Bowes (2021), but this research shows how it also creates interactive value. Film business communication strategies therefore must bridge storytelling with interactive affordances to keep audiences engaged within the cycles of algorithmic capitalism (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021).

Informants also identified hashtags as an important tool for shaping visibility and discourse. The comparison between *Gara-gara Cicilan* (2025), with limited hashtag usage, and *Agak Laen* (2024), with extensive hashtag circulation, clearly demonstrates how virality operates as a measurable communication outcome. This finding supports existing research on digital engagement metrics but adds a practical insight: hashtag volume can function as an early indicator of campaign effectiveness. Therefore, the research contributes to business communication practice by emphasising the strategic role of hashtag management in amplifying digital reach and audience participation.

Influencer engagement is also becoming more prominent in marketing communications. According to informants, influencer content such as opinion pieces, reaction videos, drawings, and vlogs sometimes serves as a more appealing form of advertisement than official promotional material. Jin et al. (2019) made similar observations. However, this research contributes to theory by conceptualising influencers as meaning-coders instead of simple product endorsers in the promotional context. The practical implication is that film companies should view influencers not as promotional vehicles but as communication partners.

In line with participatory culture theory, the informants found user-generated content integral to disseminating promotional messages. This research brings a fresh perspective to the discussion by demonstrating that virality is not serendipitous; it is carefully nurtured through formats and content designed to maximise algorithmic reach. This implies that business communication strategies need to be designed to facilitate user participation.

Film marketing has thus become a platform-based communication model combining creative production and algorithmic distribution with influencer collaboration and audience engagement. Rather than being passive recipients of promotional messages, as in standard one-to-many communication models, audiences are production agents in their own right. Djafarova and Bowes (2021) support this finding. Importantly, however, each of these elements is only one component of a larger, emergent, algorithmically constructed communicative ecology involving influencers and engaged audiences.

To conclude, these results point to an adaptive and hybrid communication model. In the current landscape, marketing a film successfully requires a calibrated mix of influencer credibility, algorithmic visibility, and grassroots participatory engagement. This research contributes to theory by integrating

influencer marketing, virality, and algorithmic culture into one framework, and to practice by showing how digital communication strategies for films, or other products, can be developed effectively to drive user engagement.

Influencers as Trust Builders in the New Film Business Communication Ecosystem

The findings show that influencer marketing significantly affects audiences' intention to watch, because people tend to trust influencers' opinions about films. Most informants were also more likely to watch a film when an influencer they followed regularly covered or mentioned it. According to the Stimulus-Organism-Response theory, influencer characteristics are an external stimulus that builds internal trust (organism), which then leads to viewing intention (response) (Ramadhiana & Fahrudi, 2025). Confirming previous research showing how influencers affect behavioural intentions, this result extends that influence from common goods to film consumption, where emotions are even more influential than in other domains (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Informants criticised overblown promotional content and gravitated toward influencers whose opinions felt personal, balanced, and forthright. This aligns with influencer credibility theory, where authenticity is a growing predictor of trustworthiness and expertise (Afifah et al., 2022).

In addition, many informants showed the capacity to distinguish between authentic commentary and paid promotional material, suggesting a more discerning media audience. When promotional intent is too overt, trust decreases sharply, while content that incorporates elements from the film (quoting lines or recreating scenes) is seen as more authentic. This reinforces Iskandar's findings that UGC is received as more trustworthy than direct commercial messaging (Iskandar, 2025). Unlike previous studies that treated audiences as passive readers, this research adds a new dimension by demonstrating how audiences negotiate meaning and credibility on the platforms, supporting participatory communication and the idea of cultural legitimacy in digital media.

The audience's trust and intention to watch a film are directly influenced by influencers' credibility, based on honesty, competence, and representational ability. This points to a more relational aspect than product-based influencer marketing.

The research also shows how influencers act as cultural brokers by turning film stories into information that is emotionally relevant to their communities. This research supports and builds on the idea of cultural mediation by suggesting that, in the digital era, film advertising has become more about relationships and personalities than institutions when it comes to building trust. This represents a departure from the monopolised, centralised communications "gatekeeping" that defined traditional media (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

The research also shows that an influencer's credibility doesn't always directly affect the intention to watch, but it does play a significant role in building trust

and increasing the intention to watch. This is in line with Alcántara-Pilar et al. (2024), but this research adds value by putting that mechanism into the context of the film business communication system, where platform-specific features (like the viral effect on TikTok and the visual steadiness on Instagram) help to make influencer impact stronger.

This finding generally confirms prior research on digital content marketing but extends it by revealing that original formats elevate emotional and narrative engagement with film promotion. Beyond generating exposure, such content actively engages audiences, encouraging virality and cultural proximity (Permana & Maulana, 2024).

This is consistent with the established role of influencers in spreading information, but with one vital difference: in film advertising, virality depends not only on informational content but also on emotional relatability and narrative features. This extends the role of narrative-driven engagement within the audiovisual industries, furthering virality theory.

At the same time, production houses are increasingly partnering with influencers, micro-influencers in particular, a trend that reaffirms the importance of integrated communication. Studios enlist influencers as partners and co-creators during content development and run promotional campaigns alongside the cast. This supports Fauzan's (2025) observation that influencers are increasingly replacing film stars rather than acting as mere promoters, a systemic shift in the relationship between content creators and the film industry.

This blurs the line between in-person events and their digital amplification, creating a symbiosis between the two. It generates more interactive and personalised engagement than traditional premiere publicity, with influencers acting as intermediaries between the industry and its audience (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

A second key insight concerns post-viewing reviews, in which influencers shape audience perception through personal, opinion-based critiques. While previous studies have discussed this phenomenon as electronic word-of-mouth, this research expands that explanation, finding that influencer reviews act as cultural decoder devices that make film narratives more accessible to audiences (Permana & Maulana, 2024).

Influencers mediate a dialogic and personalised approach to communication between production houses and their audiences. This research offers an integrated perspective that brings together influencer credibility, virality, and cultural legitimacy within a single lens applied to the film industry. It contributes to theory by showing that trust in digital film marketing is socially constructed, shaped by interaction, emotional relatability, and the characteristics of networked channels.

From a practical standpoint, these findings suggest that film practitioners should build long-term partnerships with credible influencers and create authentic, narrative-driven content to improve reach and engagement on each platform. Rather than conventional promotional communication, these strategies

need to embrace collaborative, audience-driven communication. This shift signals that trust has become a form of currency in today's film business, which remains transactional at its core.

Virality as a Strategic Business Communication Tool for Box Office Performance

The findings indicate that virality influences audience awareness, curiosity, and viewing intention. Informants reported becoming aware of films through viral clips, memes, remakes, and reaction videos circulating on social media. This repeated exposure created perceptions of relevance and popularity and, in some cases, FOMO, encouraging audiences to join shared conversations about films. This finding supports the concept of virality as social validation, in which repeated exposure within social networks signals relevance and popularity (Nurhadi & Sahara, 2026). It also extends previous research by showing that virality in film promotion functions not only as an attention-generating mechanism but also as a source of audience anticipation before consumption.

The role of audience-generated content was particularly evident in the circulation of viral narratives. Informants reported relying more on short clips, memes, and reaction videos than on official trailers or synopses when developing initial expectations about a film. The case of KKN di Desa Penari (2022) illustrates this process, as its narrative had already attracted substantial attention through the @SimpleMan account on X before being adapted into a film. This finding shows how e-WOM and audience-generated storytelling can contribute to film promotion before formal promotional activities begin, supporting Iskandar's (2025) discussion of UGC and extending it to pre-release film communication. In this context, audiences help create the visibility and meaning around a film rather than simply receiving institutional promotional messages.

The findings further indicate that virality contributes to perceived cultural legitimacy. Informants associated frequently circulated stories with greater credibility and relevance, although they also recognised that repeated information is not necessarily true. This suggests that virality can function simultaneously as amplification and social validation within the film business communication ecosystem. However, its effectiveness depends on perceived authenticity and transparency. Informants indicated that manipulative or misleading viral campaigns could be rejected, suggesting that production houses must balance the pursuit of visibility with the maintenance of audience trust. Virality therefore should not be understood as an inherently positive outcome; its communicative value depends on how audiences interpret and participate in content circulation.

Overall, the findings position virality as a collaborative process involving audiences, influencers, and digital platforms. Audience actions such as sharing, commenting, creating memes, and producing reaction content contribute to the circulation and interpretation of film-related messages, while algorithmic systems amplify content that generates interaction. Thus, virality functions as a strategic form of business communication in Indonesian film promotion by connecting

algorithmic visibility with audience participation, anticipation, and viewing intention. Rather than being an accidental exposure effect, virality emerges as a process shaped by the interaction between platform mechanisms, promotional strategies, and audience practices.

Cultural Sensitivity and the Risk of Backlash

The findings indicate that cultural legitimacy functions as an important pre-consumption filter in Indonesian film audiences. Informants evaluated films not only for entertainment value but also for their compatibility with religious, moral, social, and national values. This suggests that cultural legitimacy is not merely an after-the-fact judgment but can influence viewing intention before consumption. The finding extends previous research by showing how cultural and identity considerations operate within film business communication in the Indonesian context (Yusuf & Hadiprawoto, 2024).

Cultural sensitivity also creates both opportunities and risks in viral communication. Informants indicated that films perceived as disrespectful toward values or identities could spark negative discussions, criticism, or calls for boycotts on social media. Because viral discourse can spread rapidly, negative framing may shape audience perceptions before they watch the film. This supports the view that virality functions not only as a promotional asset but also as a reputational mechanism (Anom & Rassanjani, 2026). The case of Budi Pekerti (2023), for example, shows how social media can become a space for public moral evaluation, while the controversy surrounding Business Proposal (2022) demonstrates how actors' statements and subsequent influencer commentary can amplify negative perceptions before release.

The findings further show that audiences are sensitive to perceived cultural misrepresentation, including the inappropriate use of cultural symbols or representations that conflict with community identities. This finding is consistent with Ni, who, through Hall's encoding and decoding model, emphasises that audiences do not simply receive media messages passively but interpret them according to their social, cultural, ethical, and religious backgrounds. In the present study, this interpretive agency is reflected in how informants evaluated film-related promotional content through culturally embedded expectations and values (Ni, 2024). Such reactions demonstrate that film promotion cannot be separated from the cultural context in which audiences interpret promotional messages. Influencers and other content creators may further amplify these interpretations, functioning as intermediaries who can either reinforce or undermine audience trust.

From a business communication perspective, cultural sensitivity should be incorporated into promotional planning alongside visibility and engagement. Audience research, cultural consultation, and careful evaluation of promotional content can help production houses anticipate potential backlash. Overall, this research shows that effective film communication in the digital environment requires integrating cultural accountability, influencer communication, and

virality. Visibility alone does not guarantee positive reception; digital film promotion must also be perceived as culturally relevant and socially responsible.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The research shows that, as Indonesian film companies increasingly use digital technology, their communication with customers has shifted from traditional monologue-style communication to two-way dialogue. This shift creates greater opportunities for production houses and audiences to engage in an evolving, interactive conversation driven by influencer credibility, audience engagement, and social media algorithms. Influencers build trust and, therefore, their integrity and reliability can strongly shape how people respond to content. Virality also amplifies content through user-generated content, memes, and online debates, which can rapidly increase awareness and prompt audiences to engage in viewing behaviour. Audience acceptance depends on cultural values and moral alignment, and audiences will accept or reject content based on whether it meets their social or religious norms. This research adds to corporate communication theory in the film industry by proposing a triangular relationship between influencer credibility, virality, and cultural legitimacy, and by identifying trust, involvement, and socio-cultural congruence as key outcomes for commercial success. Building long-term relationships with credible influencers who understand the story and can convey it in a way that encourages their audiences to engage is best practice, along with creating narrative-driven, platform-specific viral content through influencer engagement, using social listening to monitor audience sentiment, conducting pre-campaign audience research, and working closely with cultural experts before launching campaigns. Given the study's qualitative nature and its reliance on a narrow set of informants who cannot represent the full diversity of Indonesian audiences, further studies are encouraged to use mixed methods, include a wider range of respondents, and compare cross-cultural contexts or algorithmic approaches across platforms. Moreover, this research contributes to the Sustainable Development Goals by linking insights into digital engagement and influencer communication to innovation in the creative economy, particularly SDG 9 (industry, innovation, and infrastructure) along with SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth) and SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities) through public discourse in creating cultural legitimacy as well as film industry mobilisation.

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