

Beauty, Branding and Breakthroughs: THE.ICS Journey

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Prologue

A ceiling fan turned lazily above the sewing table, but the true colour in the room came from a makeshift vanity crowded with lipsticks, loose pans of pigment, and trial bottles.

“One day I’ll put my own name on these,” whispered Iqah, steadying her hand as she labelled a sample jar.

Months earlier she had tried to sell a foundation and a face mist, but almost no one bought them. The disappointment lingered, but so did curiosity. Her phone chimed. An Instagram follower wrote,

“Your bridal look was gorgeous. Do you sell your own products?”

She looked from the message to the scattered samples and quietly answered herself. Not yet, but soon.

Introduction: Dynamic Cosmetics Market

Youth Startup ventures in Malaysia often emerge at the intersection of personal passion and university exposure. One of the fastest growing sectors in the country is the cosmetics industry. The cosmetics sector in Malaysia is experiencing robust growth, driven by increasing disposable income, changing consumer lifestyles, and a growing awareness of personal grooming. The market is projected to reach US\$486.70 million by 2025, with a steady annual growth rate of 4.23 percent (Compound Annual Growth Rate, CAGR 2025 to 2030). Key segments include skincare, haircare, makeup, and fragrances, with a notable rise in demand for halal certified products.

Malaysia’s beauty and personal care market is a mix of fast fashion trends and established multinational brands. Imported Korean, Japanese, American, and European cosmetics compete with an emerging range of local

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halal oriented and influencer driven labels. Shelf space in physical retail is expensive, while e-commerce platforms reduce barriers but heighten price competition and review scrutiny. For a founder operating from a semi-rural base, challenges include shipping reliability, sourcing ingredients in small quantities, and meeting packaging minimum order requirements.

Within this dynamic environment, Nur Afiqah Auni binti Ismail, hereafter Iqah Ismail, a graduate of the Bachelor of Entrepreneurship (Honours) 2u2i programme at Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK), transformed her hands on experience as a makeup artist into the lip tint brand THE.ICS. Her path demonstrates how resilience, selective formalisation, and social media engagement can help a resource-constrained founder create space in a saturated industry.

Early Entrepreneurial Journey: Before 2017

Iqah Ismail was born on 20 May 1999 at Hospital Sultanah Nur Zahirah in Kuala Terengganu and grew up in Kampung Petai Bubus Manir as the youngest of four siblings. The small village, with its winding roads and close-knit community, shaped her quiet determination and appreciation for personal presentation. Her first brush with entrepreneurship came not from textbooks but from local weddings and engagement ceremonies, where she volunteered to assist older makeup artists. Standing under the warm village lights, holding palettes and brushes, she learned the rhythm of bridal preparations. By her late teens, she was no longer just an observer.

Word of mouth spread quickly about the young girl with a steady hand and an eye for detail. Soon she was earning modest fees preparing clients for ceremonies, formal dinners, and photography shoots. These early interactions became her informal classroom. She quickly understood which textures could withstand Malaysia weather, what shades brides preferred under camera flashes, and how price sensitivities in semi-urban markets shaped customer expectations. Each event, each face, was a lesson that sharpened her instincts and planted the seeds for what would later become her own brand.

Embryonic Phase: 2017 to 2019

Encouraged by repeat clients, she attempted her first product venture in 2017 with a foundation and a face mist. Production was small and informally organised. Without brand equity, structured

distribution, or a defined marketing plan, sales lagged. Packaging was weak, pricing caused confusion, and regulatory notification requirements for cosmetics were not fully understood. The experience dented her confidence but provided crucial lessons on formulation sourcing, labelling, and the effort needed to sell physical products.

In 2019, she enrolled in the Bachelor of Entrepreneurship (Honours) programme at UMK under the 2u2i mode, which alternates 2 years university sessions with 2 years industry immersion. Interaction with entrepreneurial peers and feedback from lecturers encouraged her to re-enter the cosmetics market with a narrower focus. Lip colour products required fewer shade complexities compared to base formulations and were easy to link with her visible makeup portfolio online.

Shake Out Phase: 2020 to 2022

The COVID 19 pandemic, which reshaped consumer habits and pushed many businesses online, accelerated her brand visibility and sales. With movement restrictions and increased social media usage during lockdowns, her IG based marketing strategy gained rapid traction. Customers were more open to online shopping and digital engagement, which allowed her to create a stronger online presence and establish trust without physical retail.

On 18 August 2020, she launched THE.ICS with two lip tint shades positioned for daily wear that could build from sheer to bolder colour. From the start, she relied on Instagram (IG) storytelling, featuring short application clips, before and after posts from client sessions, and interactive Question and Answer live streams. Her approachable personality translated well on camera, and her personal IG followers grew beyond 5,600, giving her personal brand a measurable audience.

Formalisation followed quickly. On 1 October 2020, she registered ICS Global Empire as a sole proprietorship under the Business Registration Act 1956 with the Companies Commission of Malaysia (SSM). Operations remained home based in Kampung Petai Bubus Manir, but the registration signalled a commitment to compliance, proper invoicing, and potential scaling. Remarkably, while still a university student, she managed to achieve average sales of around RM3,000 per month, balancing academic commitments with growing her brand.

Maturity Phase: 2023 to Present

Product diversification reduced overreliance on lip tints, created multiple price points, and enabled bundled service product packages. In 2023, Iqah Ismail expanded beyond colour cosmetics by introducing tinted sunscreen and face oil, two skincare adjacent products that strengthened her credibility in skin preparation and long wear makeup outcomes. Rather than treating these as standalone retail items, she integrated them directly into her professional makeup services, using them in client prep, demonstrating benefits in real time, and then offering post service purchase options. This freemium strategy increased trust, conversion, and repeat sales.

After completing her degree in 2023, she shifted focus to improving her technical makeup expertise. She invested time in advanced bridal finishes, lighting sensitive editorial looks, and higher margin event work. Earnings increased, her client base grew, and her reputation as a makeup artist travelled faster than her inventory. However, service bookings consumed most evenings and weekends, slowing THE.ICS product development. Batches remained small, new shades were postponed, and packaging refreshes were delayed.

Life advanced again when she married on 30 November 2024. The following year became a period of consolidation as she balanced household routines, makeup assignments, and light brand maintenance. Although 2025 saw minimal product innovation, she used the time to gather customer feedback and explore ingredient preferences. With personal stability restored, she is preparing to restart product growth in 2026 with improved formulations, a broader shade range, and structured compliance measures.

Future: After 2026

With personal and household routines stabilised, Iqah intends to execute a staged relaunch starting in 2026. The first phase will refresh existing lip tints with improved formulations for longer wear in humid conditions, a broader shade range, and upgraded packaging designed for shipping durability. The second phase will explore halal compliant ingredient lists and, if feasible, seek halal certification to strengthen trust among domestic and regional Muslim consumers. She is evaluating contract manufacturers capable of producing small, scalable batches to reduce capital

strain. Content creation will shift to a structured editorial calendar, linking seasonal campaigns, festival promotions, and user generated testimonials. A dedicated beauty studio combining retail, service, and content production is also planned, with financing sourced from retained service income, pre orders, and small enterprise grants. Additionally, she will strengthen skills in digital advertising, inventory management, and financial monitoring to enhance decision making.

Highlights of Key Challenges

Iqah's journey has been shaped by a series of evolving constraints across different phases of her business growth. Her first product launch in 2017 revealed critical gaps in formulation reliability, packaging durability, pricing strategy, and marketing. The emotional fallout from this setback left her hesitant to try again, fearing that any new attempt would repeat the same mistakes.

During her university years, networking posed another challenge. Supplier negotiations and industry discussions felt intimidating, making it difficult for her to establish professional connections. The successful launch of THE.ICS in 2020 introduced its own set of hurdles, with limited resources leading to stockouts and occasional customer dissatisfaction. After graduating, time became her biggest constraint as makeup service bookings filled her schedule, leaving little room for product research or development. Her marriage in November 2024 brought additional personal responsibilities, making 2025 a year of slowed innovation and careful consolidation.

Industry-wide pressures further added to these challenges. The fast pace of beauty trends meant that a popular lip tint shade in January could feel outdated by Raya season. Larger brands with aggressive pricing and marketing strategies created constant competition, while regulatory requirements demanded strict compliance and attention to detail.

Family circumstances have been a central motivator throughout her journey. Her late father, Ismail Bin Muda, has long struggled with an illness that limits his ability to work, while her mother, Che Puan Binti Mohd, supports the family with a small food stall. Witnessing the family's uneven cash flow reinforced Iqah's determination to generate her own income and contribute financially. Support and encouragement from her siblings and parents gave her the strength to recover from the 2017 setback and persevere.

Structured guidance from higher education also played a crucial role. At UMK, lecturers treated student business ideas with genuine seriousness, providing frameworks for costing, compliance, and branding. Their mentorship extended beyond academic requirements, helping her decide when to experiment, how to present herself online with limited resources, and how to pace her growth while balancing personal obligations.

Over time, these challenges built her resilience and strategic mindset. The failure in 2017 taught her that passion alone could not drive a product without proper positioning and compliance. University exposure gave her the tools, networks, and confidence to successfully relaunch in 2020 with a focused product line and disciplined digital presence. Registration with SSM in October 2020 further strengthened her credibility, while growing an Instagram following of over 5,600 provided a cost-effective marketing channel. Even the pause in 2025 served as a strategic regrouping period, proving that setbacks can be temporary steppingstones toward sustainable growth.

Conclusion

Through achievements and setbacks, Iqah has maintained the belief that when exhaustion sets in, rest is acceptable, but quitting is not. She often recalls the Malay proverb:

“Alang alang berdakwat, biarlah hitam; alang alang menyeluk pekasam, biarlah sampai ke pangkal lengan,”

which reflects her commitment to making full effort once a task is begun. These values explain why she paused production without abandoning THE.ICS, why she formalised operations at a micro scale, and why she continues to plan a relaunch rather than quietly ending her business.

Iqah Ismail’s journey from community makeup services to establishing a registered cosmetics brand demonstrates that entrepreneurial success does not always follow a linear growth path. By learning from early failure, leveraging educational resources, formalising operations, and maintaining a strong digital presence, she now approaches 2026 with strategic clarity. Her

experience encourages aspiring entrepreneurs to view pauses as opportunities for regrouping and to build brands whose authenticity endures the fluctuations of founder availability.

Epilogue

Late afternoon light filtered through lace curtains in her home studio as Iqah packed a bridal kit for the weekend. On the shelf beside her sat a short run of freshly labelled THE.ICS lip tints reserved for loyal clients. A message pulsed on her phone:

“Iqah, when will the new colours launch?”

She laughed, tapped a reply to promising news soon, and slid the samples into her travel case. The relaunch calendar on her desk read January 2026. The pause had done its work, and the next story was on its way.

Acknowledgement

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Appendices





Instagram

- Home
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- Messages
- Notifications
- Create
- Dashboard
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- Threads
- More

iqah.ismail Following Message

283 posts 6,989 followers 2,839 following

MUA TERENGGANU / OPEN BOOKING UNTIL DECEMBER 2025

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Travel Makeup ; Kuantan, Kelantan
For makeup details click below
wa.me/message/Q2KOJRUM3EC2C1

Followed by stitiamaliya, the.ics + 5 more

FEEDBACK

AA

No False

DEGREE

STUDENT

BRIDE

KHADIJAHZA...

Message