

**Please Subscribe!  
Influencers,  
Social Media, and the  
Commodification of Everyday Life**

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## **Abstract**

### **Please Subscribe! Influencers, Social Media, and the Commodification of Everyday Life**

This dissertation is an analysis of how some everyday Internet users shape themselves into a popular form of social media microcelebrities increasingly being labeled “Influencers”. Influencers are shapers of public opinion who persuade their audience through the conscientious calibration of personae on “digital” media such as social media, supported by “physical” space interactions with their followers in the flesh to sustain their accessibility, authenticity, believability, emulatability, and intimacy. Emically, these five qualities are encapsulated in what Influencers refer to as “relatability”, or Influencers’ ability to captivate their audience and evoke in them the desire to identify with the Influencer.

I investigate Influencers in the “lifestyle” genre, in which they accumulate a following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal, everyday lives and proceed to capitalize on their followers by inserting advertisements for products and services through the narrative device of an “advertorial”. Coming from an anthropological perspective, I am interested in the everyday practices of Influencers and their relationships to the larger industry. While the data presented in this thesis include some participant observation and interview snippets from “management firms” and “followers”, and while I pinpoint some of the ways these Influencers have reshaped the media structures in Singapore, my primary focus is on the lived experiences of the Influencers per se rather than a more macro-mapping of this media ecology.

Specifically, I analyze the process of how everyday Internet users fashion themselves into Influencers and argue that Influencers make a spectacle of the ordinary, the everyday, and the mundane through practices I analyze as organized by five key tenets: personae, femininities, taste, intimacies, and attention. More precisely, I argue that the success of an Influencer is premised on the conscientious calibration of extremes within each tenet: between the “privacy” and “publicness” with regards to personae (chapter 5); between “agency” and “vulnerability” with regards to femininities (chapter 6); between “aspiration” and “emulation” with regards to taste (chapter 7); between the “personal” and the “commercial” with regards to intimacies (chapter 8); and, finally, between the “mundane” and the “spectacular” with regards to attention (chapter 9). In other words, it is the Influencers’ savvy negotiation of strategic interaction across multiple personae that constitute their impact and longevity in the industry. Although the ethnographic research was conducted in Singapore from the early to the middle years of the second decade of the 2000s, the analytical conceptualization can be mapped onto creative industries elsewhere.

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## Statement of Candidature Contribution

*The examination of the thesis is an examination of the work of the student. The work must have been substantially conducted by the student during enrolment in the degree.*

*Where the thesis includes work to which others have contributed, the thesis must include a statement that makes the student's contribution clear to the examiners. This may be in the form of a description of the precise contribution of the student to the work presented for examination and/or a statement of the percentage of the work that was done by the student.*

*In addition, in the case of co-authored publications included in the thesis, each author must give their signed permission for the work to be included. If signatures from all the authors cannot be obtained, the statement detailing the student's contribution to the work must be signed by the coordinating supervisor.*

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This thesis contains only sole-authored work, some of which has been published and/or prepared for publication under sole authorship. The bibliographical details of the work and where it appears in the thesis are outlined below.

Abidin, Crystal. (forthcoming, Apr 2016). "(En)gendering cuteness in Singaporean lifestyle blogging: 'The Doll', 'The Darling', 'The Dear'." *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture*. – Reproduced in parts for Chapter 6 in Part III

Abidin, Crystal. 2014. "Privacy for Profit: Commodifying Privacy in Lifestyle Blogging." *Selected Papers of Internet Research 15: The 15th Annual Meeting of the Association of Internet Researchers*. – Expanded in Chapter 5 in Part III under "Lifecycle of commoditized privacy".

Abidin, Crystal. 2014. "#In\$tagLam: Instagram as a repository of taste, a brimming marketplace, a war of eyeballs." Pp. 119-129 in *Mobile Media Making in the Age of Smartphones*, edited by M. Berry, and M. Schleser. Palgrave Pivot. – Reproduced in parts for Chapter 7 opening vignettes.

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*Chapter one: Introduction*

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Please Subscribe!: Influencers, Social Media, and the Commodification of Everyday Life**

I have kept an online diary since 2001. As an academic, I have been blogging since 2008. When I began my fieldwork for this thesis in 2011, I revamped my academic blog, became more conscious about my use of Twitter (which I was using more socially since 2007), set up a “work” Facebook account to engage with fellow academics, and started an Instagram account (among early adopters in Singapore in late 2011) – all of which I used to conduct research and communicate with my informants. However, I consider myself more as an academic with a blog and web presence rather than an academic blogger, Tweeter, or Influencer. This is quite unlike the Influencers I study in this thesis. Unlike the Influencers, I do not adopt the master status of a blogger, Tweeter, Instagrammer, or YouTuber. Blogging is not my livelihood, nor have I chosen to monetize my web presence. I do not have impact over hundreds of thousands of readers on a daily basis, and I certainly do not have the capacity to command attention and negotiate intimacies with a loyal following to the point that they would dedicate fan sites (and hate sites) to me or attend events to snap “exclusive” selfies with me.

Influencers are everyday, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in “digital” and “physical” spaces, and monetize their following by integrating “advertorials” into their blog or social media posts and making physical appearances at events. A pastiche of “advertisement” and “editorial”, advertorials in the Influencer industry are highly personalized, opinion-laden promotions of products/services that Influencers personally experience and endorse for a fee. This thesis investigates the process

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through which Influencers position their personal lives and depiction of lifestyles to become relatable, accumulate a sizable following, and become commodifiable canvases for advertorials. It is ethnographically grounded in the “lifestyle” genre of Influencer advertising in Singapore from the late-2000s to mid-2010s. Specifically, I argue that Influencers make themselves “relatable” through the vernacular of five key tenets: personae, femininities, taste, intimacies, and attention. More precisely, I argue that Influencers calibrate extremes within each tenet: between the “privacy” and “publicness” with regards to personae (chapter five); between “agency” and “vulnerability” with regards to femininities (chapter six); between “aspiration” and “emulation” with regards to taste (chapter seven); between “personal” and “commercial” with regards to intimacies (chapter eight); and finally, between the “mundane” and the “spectacular” with regards to attention (chapter nine). Simply put, Influencers are shapers of public opinion who persuade their following by cultivating “relatability” on “digital” social media platforms and through “physical” space interactions. This thesis focuses on the ways Influencers convert themselves into commodifiable canvases and appropriate their personal lives for advertising through the tenets of personae, femininities, taste, intimacies, and attention.

Emically, Influencers often brand themselves as having “relatability”, or the ability to persuade their followers to identify with them. Although this concept is largely unarticulated and inarticulable among Influencers (i.e. “so that readers can relate to you”; “to make my posts relatable”) and honed through “gut feeling” and “trial-and-error” (i.e. “it just feels right”; “the more you practice the more you will know”), this thesis etically analyzes how Influencers enact relatability through five key tenets – personae, femininities, taste, intimacies, and attention. Based on my observations and interactions since 2011, I have come to understand that in the vernacular, relatability is comprised of the interrelated but distinct notions of “accessibility” (how easy it is to approach an Influencer in digital and physical spaces), “believability” (how convincing and realistic an Influencer’s *depicted* lifestyle and

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sentiments are), “authenticity” (how genuine an Influencer’s *actual* lifestyle and sentiments are), “emulatability” (how easy it is for followers to model themselves after an Influencer’s lifestyle), and “intimacy” (how familiar and close followers feel to an Influencer). Unless otherwise specified, throughout this thesis I adopt “relatability” as shorthand for the overarching relationship Influencers strive to achieve with their followers.

The five core chapters each demonstrate how Influencers cultivate relatability by using personae, femininities, taste, intimacies, and attention to evoke in their followers a desire to identify with the Influencer by emulating their consumption practices. For instance, Influencers may reveal less than perfectly beautiful “behind-the-scenes” snippets to appear more personable and authentic (chapter five); mobilize different performances of femininity to solicit envy, favor, and care (chapter six); selectively portray material consumptions through tasteful framing of images to influence purchase decisions (chapter seven); adopt forms of speech and interactions to give the impression of affective ties (chapter eight); and instigate “Influencer wars” with fellow Influencers or enact “shamelebrity” practices towards themselves to wrestle followers’ attention to them (chapter nine).

Various scholars have investigated earlier incarnations of the Influencer industry in parts of the world, similarly adopting both physical and digital ethnographic fieldwork. Most notable are: Senft’s (2008) study of young “camgirls” in the US who broadcast on webcams from their bedrooms as a hobby; Marwick’s (2013) study of Silicon Valley tech workers in the US who used social networking sites like Twitter and Digg for networking; and Hopkins’s (2011 with Thomas; 2015) study of personal and lifestyle bloggers in Malaysia who blogged as a hobby with occasional side income. However, to the best of my knowledge, this thesis is a novel academic attempt in many ways: 1) Unlike earlier geographical foci, this thesis is focused on a digital and physical practice ethnographically unique to

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Singapore; 2) Unlike earlier platform-specific foci (i.e. webcams, Twitter, blogs), this thesis is focused on multiple but interrelated platforms including blogs, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, with minor observations drawn from AskFM, FormSpring, and public online forums; 3) Unlike earlier role-specific foci (i.e. camgirls, Tweeters, Digg users, bloggers), this thesis is focused on Influencers as a conceptual category of everyday, ordinary Internet users who are not bound to or defined by specific technological devices and digital platforms, but who are instead high-profile opinion shapers who persuade their following through techniques promoting relatability; 4) Unlike earlier peripherally-commercial foci (i.e. hobby, monetized hobby, side income, semi-monetized networking), this thesis is focused on Internet users who are Influencers as a full-time career and whose digital/physical depiction of everyday life as lived is the commodifiable entity.

Historically, the Influencer industry in Singapore can be traced back to the early beginnings of the “blogshop” industry from the mid-2000s and the “commercial blogging” industry that debut around the same time (see chapter two). I have been closely following the Influencer industry since 2007, and began my in-depth inquiry working towards this thesis in 2011. Since then, the industry in Singapore has grown, matured, and expanded so rapidly that Influencers have begun to develop emergent models of advertorials (see chapter ten) and monetize several other aspects of their personal lives by curating the image of “power couples” and “micro-microcelebrities” with their partners and children (see appendices A & B). Hence, what this thesis provides is an important analysis of the genesis and growth of the Influencer industry in Singapore from its earliest years.

On the front-end of the industry in Singapore are young women Influencers between the ages of 15 and 35. I use feminine pronouns as the default throughout this thesis since the lifestyle genre I investigate is not only dominated by women Influencers in terms of numbers, impact, and earning power, but even feminized in

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praxis among the few prominent male Influencers. However, I mention three male Influencers in my thesis whose posturing strategies have similarly depended on the five key tenets I develop in chapters five to nine.

The back-end, however, comprises a more varied demographic in terms of gender and age. As will be elaborated upon in chapter two, the Influencer industry in Singapore is supported by management agencies that have variously named themselves digital advertisers, social media advertisers, and Influencer managements. However, these firms operate similarly and take after agencies in the modeling and entertainment industries that broker deals for contracted talents in exchange for a commission. Also included behind-the-scenes is a long line of support staff whom Influencers may engage contractually or casually, or who offer their services to Influencers in exchange for exposure on the latter's social media platforms. These include photographers (since many Influencers are increasingly professionalizing their craft), web page designers (as it has become an industry standard to invest in a high quality and attractive blog template), administrative staff (to handle emails or manage schedules), and even personal assistants, who may be called upon for various errands usually hidden from the view of followers. At times, personal family and friends may fill these roles. Clients and sponsors also form a significant portion of the back-end structure, especially since it is their patronage and investment that secures the livelihood of Influencers. As will be established in chapter two, on the receiving end of the curated content are "followers" whom Influencers emically categorize as "readers" (neutral or supportive towards Influencers), "haters" (disavow Influencers and have been known to denigrate their craft), and "bots" (dummy, purchased accounts that some Influencers have been accused of using to boost their numbers). Although a handful of Influencers do refer to some followers as "fans", this term is the least used as it tended to imply a sense of distance and status elevation between Influencers and followers.

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This ethnography was formulated using qualitative research methods that form the foundation in sociocultural anthropology, namely participant observation and personal interviews, and innovative ones appropriate to the newer genres of digital ethnography (Murthy 2008; Postill 2015; Underberg & Zorn 2013), such as netnography (Kozinets 1997, 1998, 2002, 2006), technobiography (Kennedy 2003), social media ethnography (Postill & Pink 2012) and web archaeology (Foot & Schneider 2007; Leung et al. 2001: 1; Rauber et al. 2002) (see chapter three). The data presented in this thesis comprise original material from Influencers, their back-end management, and their followers (see chapter two), although I focus mainly on Influencers' perspectives. As I will later detail in chapter three, the notion of being online/offline was not particularly productive or helpful to me. I found that in popular scholarship, "online" tended to connote the mediated use of Internet access, technology, and devices, while "offline" tended to connote the unmediated use of the same three facets. However, all throughout my fieldwork I observed that the interactions and communicative norms among Influencers, between them and their fans, and indeed between them and myself have taken place in the flesh, albeit mediated by the use of Internet lingo, electronic devices that did not require an Internet connection, and various digital interfaces that required an Internet connection. As a result, I found it more helpful to conceptualize the shift as demarcations of platforms and spaces, as physical/digital, where the "physical" connotes interactions in the flesh and the "digital" as interactions via screens (whether or not these interactions were mediated by the Internet, technology, or devices).

All my methodological approaches took place across physical and digital spaces (i.e. physically embedding into Influencer management agencies, digitally embedding into Influencer social networks and follower communities), utilized various social media platforms (i.e. blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube,



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AskFM, Formspring, Snapchat, user forums), and required nuanced parlance (i.e. emoji and emoticons, Singlish creole and homosocial slang, jargon and lingo). Most crucially, the physical space aspect of my fieldwork granted me exclusive access to the physical/digital, front-end/back-end, and formal/informal elements of the industry, which would otherwise have been largely unattainable, had I focused only on digital ethnography. This valuable experience afforded me an extremely rich contextual and cultural knowledge of the industry, upon which I was able to draw when I was simultaneously continuing digital ethnography. For instance, some of the coveted insider knowledge I held allowed me to understand why some Influencers began or stopped being photographed together, interpret ambiguous and passive-aggressive subtweets that only made sense to particular sections of Influencers and followers, and establish relationships between disparate but interrelated controversies and conflict among Influencers. Following these developments with such intensity, I literally became a follower, a blogger, a personal assistant, and an Influencer manager at different stages throughout my fieldwork, walking in the footsteps of anthropologists such as Liza Dalby, who became a *Geisha* (1983) in order to produce an in-depth ethnography about the women she was investigating.

In Singapore, owing to Influencers' initial use of blog hosts such as LiveJournal, Blogspot, and WordPress, these women are still most commonly referred to as "bloggers" among local Singaporeans. In the local vernacular, this label has also had the most longevity and been the most accessible to everyday people even outside the target audience. In recent years, local press nomenclature has branded them as "bloggers", "personalities", "entrepreneurs", "celebrities", and "Influencers". Academically, similar Internet users have been analyzed as examples of "DIY celebrity" (Turner 2004), "ordinary celebrity" (Turner 2004), or "microcelebrity" (Senft 2008; Marwick & boyd 2011; Marwick 2013). In this thesis, I choose to refer to these women as "Influencers" rather than by a variety of alternative labels:

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bloggers, personalities, entrepreneurs, celebrities, DIY celebrities, Ordinary celebrities, and microcelebrities.

Following after the vernacular most commonly used in the industry and most accessibly understood by the everyday person in Singapore, I used to refer to these women as “commercial bloggers” in my earlier writing. I chose the modifier “commercial” over a more loaded term such as “professional”, since the latter could connote reputation, status, quality, or rate of pay, whereas the former simply signposted that the women were receiving monetary compensation for their work. With hindsight, upon deeper engagement with my informants, “Influencers” seems to be a more conceptually useful and accurate term. While they debuted on blogs, in the short ten years since the birth of the industry in Singapore, these women have progressed beyond a single platform and are no longer anchored in blogging as their main activity. Framing them as Influencers acknowledges their all-rounded command of social media platforms and commerce, where they are primed to persuade. It also shifts the foci away from platform specificity, which is crucial since these women enact their personae both in physical and digital spaces. While “Influencer” denotes these women’s livelihood and careers, I found that using the term “blogger” usually required a modifier such as in “commercial blogger” to signify that these were actors who were blogging as a career and receiving monetary compensation for their work, as opposed to the significant majority of blog users who use the platform as a hobby. However, because the Influencer industry has its early beginnings in the commercial lifestyle blogging industry, I refer to Influencers as commercial bloggers in some sections of the thesis for historical accuracy.

While “personality” in its “celebrity” genre implies a certain degree of fame and popularity, it gives the impression that these women bear a distinctive character, quality, or persona, which is hardly the case. Instead, successful Influencers are

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those who are able to produce, curate, and switch among various personae on which they selectively leverage depending on the context at hand. In this sense, the “personae” of Influencers I describe throughout this thesis mirror Goffman’s notion of the “self” (1956), and shift away from platform-confined understandings of identities such as “virtual identity” (Kennedy 2003), “online lives” (Zuern 2003), “the electric self” (Rak 2009), and “embodied selves” (Boellstorff et al. 2012). Framing them as Influencers underscores their abilities to shape opinions and behaviors by drawing on their cross-platform charismatic authority.

Mainstream press fascination with the earning and spending power of these young Influencers (see appendix C) has encouraged some to refer to them as “entrepreneurs”. However, this suggests that Influencers are independent business actors and obscures the complex back-end production processes and front-end emotional labor with followers in which they engage. In addition, while some Influencers have capitalized on their microcelebrity and gone on to set up businesses in food and beverage (F&B) and retail, these new ventures rely heavily on the reputation and resources derived from their position as Influencers.

While Influencers have some *form* of “celebrity”, I hesitate to refer to them as “celebrities” in order to differentiate them from the more traditional celebrity figures from the entertainment and sporting industries. Moreover, the mode of celebrity engagement in which Influencers operate with their followers on social media cannot be easily emulated simply by transporting traditional celebrity figures from mainstream industries into the model, although this has been attempted recently (see chapter ten). Crucially, traditional mainstream celebrity figures lack the relatability required in Influencer advertising.

Using the term “DIY celebrity” (Turner 2004) implies that the tropes for producing the more traditional celebrity figure from entertainment and sporting industries can

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be reproduced through the use of apparently “democratizing” technologies, such as blogs and social media. The “DIY celebrity” template appears comprehensible and approachable to everyday users with little technical knowledge about attaining fame. Users who have some consciousness of these processes appear to be merely emulating traditional modes of celebrity production in social media-based adaptations, as evidenced in Marwick’s (2015) study on Instagram-based celebrities and what she terms “Instafame”. However, as later discussed in the thesis, most Influencers refuse to be co-opted into mainstream celebrity industries, but instead engage on the periphery on their own terms; and also refute claims that they are emulating the more traditional celebrity figure, but instead continually emphasize their relatability to their followers. In fact, it is their very distinction from the more mainstream and traditional “celebrity” that accords Influencers their semi-public, semi-popular interstitial space where they are conduits for inculcating followers about symbols for social mobility (see chapter seven).

“Ordinary celebrities” are everyday individuals who voluntarily “turn themselves into media content” (Turner 2010: 2) through media formats such as reality TV, radio talk shows, and user-generated online media. However, the celebrity, repute, and function of Influencers is distinct from “ordinary celebrity” in that they are not transient, become iconic, and are positioned as a buffer between ordinary people/celebrity and mainstream celebrity. As such, many of their engagements as Influencers are premised on inciting aspiration among followers, and performing a model of gendered and classed mobility that is perpetually in transitional mode (see chapter seven).

Theresa Senft first coined the term “microcelebrity” in her work *Camgirls* (2008) as a burgeoning online trend, wherein people attempt to gain popularity by employing digital media technologies, such as videos, blogs, and social media. This concept was further developed in Alice Marwick’s work on the San Francisco technology

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community in *Status Update* (2013). Microcelebrities are “non-actors as performers” whose narratives take place “without overt manipulation”, and who are “more ‘real’ than television personalities with ‘perfect hair, perfect friends and perfect lives’” (Senft 2008: 16). Unlike mainstream celebrities in the entertainment and sporting industries, who are public icons with large-scale followings, microcelebrities are famous only within small niche networks (Marwick 2013). In the case of the Influencers in this ethnography, this following can be anywhere between 7,000 to over 500,000, depending on the Influencer and the social media platform being investigated, although general awareness of these women and what they do is certainly even larger and difficult to measure. This following usually comprises a significant regional and international readership; it is noted in the comments section of various social media feeds where international followers mark their “exoticism” and loyalty by mentioning the region or country from which they hail, and the duration of time in which they have been “following” the Influencer. These numbers also do not represent the Internet users who do not “follow” Influencers on their social media platforms, but who stay abreast of Influencers’ happenings through online forums and the word-of-mouth. At this extent, the following of Influencers in Singapore can scarcely be considered “small” or “niche” within the media ecology of a relatively small nation. Additionally, as will be discussed later, Influencers rarely remain in the niche of “lifestyle” social media advertising and usually springboard into multimedia popularity.

Senft (2008) also foregrounds microcelebrities’ focus on responding to their communities in the ways that maintain open channels of feedback on social media to engage with their following. Adding to this, Marwick (2013: 114) argues that microcelebrity involves the curation of a persona that feels “authentic” to fans. Marwick (2013: 116-117) further distinguishes between two types of microcelebrity: “ascribed microcelebrity” where the online personality is made recognizable through the “production of celebrity media” such as paparazzi shots and user-

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produced online memes, or “achieved microcelebrity” where users engage in “self-presentation strateg[ies]”, such as fostering the illusion of intimacy with fans, maintaining a persona, and selective disclosure about oneself. Popular Internet personalities such as Grumpy Cat, Bad Luck Brian, and other viral people-turned-memes are examples of “ascribed microcelebrity”. The Influencers in this ethnography usually debut as “achieved microcelebrity”, but eventually shift between both “achieved” and “ascribed” microcelebrity when their impact extends beyond social media into more traditional mass media markets including television, radio, cinema, theatre, and print ads. Hence, unlike Senft’s (2008) and Marwick’s (2013) study of microcelebrity situated in specific Internet spaces, the type of microcelebrity Influencers possess is located across multiple media.

Influencers are one *type* of microcelebrity, specifically “multimedia microcelebrity”. In the lifestyle genre in Singapore, their success is rooted in mastering the curation of multiple personae for a following both in the digital landscape of blogs and social media and the physical landscape of face-to-face interactions. This is motivated by the need to engage in homosocial intimacies with their predominantly female followers in order to remain relatable and distinct from mainstream celebrity. “Microcelebrity” describes the *model* of their celebrity and their *mode* of fame, but does not contextualize *how* they have come to accumulate their fame, power, and influence. “Microcelebrity” encapsulates the *platforms* in which these women thrive and the media of their production and transmission, but does not scrutinize what they actually *do* for a living on a daily basis.

In addition, the term “influencer” has been used in business studies to describe a model of marketing and advertising that targets key individuals who exert influence over a large pool of potential customers. These key individuals generally filter and disseminate content for their audience and include industry retailers and manufacturers, journalists and magazine editors, and more recently, high profile

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bloggers. Business scholars have studied such influencers in terms of where they are located within communication flows (Hallam 2013), how they are used by brands (Bhargava 2008; Schaefer 2012), some of their marketing strategies (Li et al. 2000; Dent & Brent 2006), and their impact on business models (Solis 2012). However, I distinguish the “influencer” as a *mediator* situated in business research from the “Influencer” I investigate as a *career role* focused on social media-based, multimedia microcelebrities in my research.

Coming from an anthropological perspective, I am interested in the everyday practices of Influencers and how they posture their personal lives and depictions of lifestyles into commodifiable canvases. While I briefly signpost some of the ways Influencers have reshaped media structures in Singapore (see chapters two and ten), my primary focus is on the everyday practice of Influencers per se (see Appendix D for a glossary of emic terminology) rather than a macro-mapping of this media ecology. In a similar vein, while I have interviewed a cursory number of followers to contextualize my understanding of Influencer commerce, my primary focus is on Influencers’ perspectives as opposed to audience research. Although the ethnographic material is situated in a particular cultural climate and time frame, the analytical concepts and arguments derived through grounded theory can be mapped onto creative industries and digital ecologies elsewhere.

Following this Introduction chapter, chapters two, three, and four provide the context, methodology, and review of current literature respectively that have led to my research on Influencers. Chapters five to nine each develop one key tenet (personae, femininities, tastes, intimacies, attention) of Influencer posturing, before I end with the Conclusion chapter.

Chapter two, “You Blogger?: Contextualizing the Influencer industry in Singapore”, provides a detailed historical background and contextual analysis of the

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phenomenon I investigate. The chapter highlights a combination of unique cultural traits and structures in Singapore, namely consumption and consumerism, hyper-competitiveness, high IT penetration, and the state press as fertile grounds for the development of Influencer commerce. The manifestation and extent of Influencer success presented is enabled by Singapore's cultural setting, a historical relationship to an older form of DIY blog commerce known as "blogshops", and the structure of the industry in Singapore. The chapter also maps out the crucial infrastructure of the industry in terms of Influencer management firms and subcategories of followers, and closes with a discussion on Influencers' multimedia impact across various industries.

Chapter three, "CyaIRL: Negotiating Digital and Physical Fieldwork", formulates a reflexive account of my fieldwork using some of the qualitative research methods that form the research foundation in sociocultural anthropology, namely participant observation, personal interviews, and web archaeology, and media studies methods including archival research and content analysis of media. All three methodological approaches were used across physical and digital spaces (i.e. physically embedding into Influencer management agencies, digitally embedding into Influencer social networks and follower communities); various social media platforms (i.e. blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, AskFM, Formspring, forums); and nuanced parlance (i.e. emoji and emoticons, Singlish and homosocial slang, jargon and lingo). While primarily a methodology chapter, it also provides nuanced analyses of the delicate communicative norms necessary in assessing and accessing multi-sited field research, especially in regard to how I obtained consent from Influencers for research, managed their relationship with publicity and disclosure, and adopted a grounded theory approach in my analysis.

Chapter four, "Situating Influencer Commerce", presents a review of academic literature related to Influencer commerce in Singapore. Conceptually, I provide a



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brief history of the (micro-)celebrity including celebrity and stars, ordinary celebrity, reality TV celebrity, and Internet micro-celebrity. Thematically, I review the most relevant literature closest to my research comprising blog and social media advertorials in Singapore and elsewhere. Theoretically, I describe in depth my overarching framework, deriving in part from Goffman's (1956) theories of strategic interaction. In the next sections, I build on a trajectory of cornerstone work in the five key tenets I evaluate and cross-reference throughout chapters in the thesis: In "personae", public selves, and privacy and publicness; in "femininities", contemporary women's magazines, emphasized femininities, the gaze, girl talk, and women's entrepreneurship; in "taste", social mobility, consumption, habitus, and status symbols; in "intimacies", emotional labor; and finally in "attention", the attention economy and spectacles.

Chapter five, "I Am Me: Numbers, personae, and privacy", establishes the metrics culture and curation of publicness and privacy in Influencer commerce. I argue that Influencers' system of followers and numbers, and their negotiations of disclosure and exposure across different social media platforms all hinge upon a balance between being able to selectively package the public and the private as sellable commodities. Part one, "A numbers game", discusses the different categories of social relationships Influencers share with followers, and the social capital associated with their metrics culture. Part two, "Platform and personae congruence", investigates Influencers' strategies in curating a consistent image across their digital and physical assets. Part three, "Conceptualizing privacy and publicness", juxtaposes emic recounts of privacy and publicness against etic analyses of the lifecycle of commoditized privacy, as Influencers progress in status and rank in the industry.

Chapter six, "Heyyy Dearie: Cyber-femininities, Gender Repository, and Agentic Cute", documents Influencers' interrelated notions of gender performance and

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practices. It argues that the hyper-feminized portrayals of ideal femininities in digital spaces, and the hyper-visibility of usually obscured “backstage” practices of gender performance, are embroiled in a tension between feminine agency and vulnerability. Part one, “Cyber-femininities”, discusses Influencers’ framing of tropic femininities as a digital performance that can be achieved via various beauty, dressing, and technological mediations. I define “cyber-femininities” as the portrayal and performance of female gender as mediated via the Internet and digital technologies. Part two, “Gender repository”, demonstrates how this marketing is made to look more convincing and authentic when Influencers use their lifestyles and personae to model wares. Specifically, I introduce the system of “modeling”, “role-modeling”, and “role-playing”, which are three disparate, concurrent, and cyclical processes which Influencers use to remain relatable to followers. I also introduce how Influencers positioned themselves as emulatable feminine ideal types through six key ideal types that emerged in the early beginnings (mid- to late-2000s) when the “blogshop” trade was just on the cusp of transiting into the “commercial blogging” trade. Part three, “Agentic cute” presents a case study in which Influencers capitalize on one mode of cyber-femininity, cuteness, to solicit favors from their partners and followers and monetize their personae.

Chapter seven, “How To Look Expensive (but not so much): Taste Displays, Commerce Curation, and Instagram”, shows how Influencers are able to curate taste and class among their followers, focusing on Instagram as the most popular social media platform in Singapore at the time of writing. I argue that through hyper-visible displays featuring the integrated consumption of high-end luxury and low-end discount goods, and through calibrating advertorial disclosures to emphasize the aesthetic value of an Instagram image over overtly commercial markers, Influencers balance emulation and aspiration through a “perpetual transitional mobility”. I define perpetual transitional mobility as a gendered and

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classed social mobility that Influencers convey to followers by eliciting aspiration, affect, and envy, albeit one that is perpetually in transit and can never actually be attained in full, for there is no end-point to the excessive consumerism canvassed through Influencer lifestyles and personae. Part one, “Curating taste on Instagram”, shows how Influencers use the social media platform to perform taste displays. Part two, “Knockoffs and authentic replicas”, evaluates Influencers’ conscientious integration of luxury and discount goods in order for the social mobility scripts they perform to be accessible to followers. Part three, “Calibrating taste and advertorial disclosure on Instagram”, analyzes how Influencers signpost their advertorials on Instagram while retaining taste displays in congruence with the hegemonic aesthetic of Instagram. The chapter closes with a brief discussion on the role of Influencer managers in being intermediaries of taste displays and relatability between Influencers and clients.

Chapter eight, “Technologies of Intimacy <333: Perceived Interconnectedness, Cyber-BFFs, and Laboring Sociality”, demonstrates how Influencers use technologies to foster intimacies and affect with followers across a continuum of digital to physical spaces. I argue that through the visibilizing of usually obscured front-end and back-end emotional labor, Influencers toggle between displays of the personal and the commercial in order to elicit affect and desire among their followers. Part one, “Perceived Interconnectedness”, draws on “Parasocial relations” to show how Influencers establish a structure of communicative intimacy with followers, premised on selective disclosure and the strategic use of social media semiotics. Part two, “Cyber-BFFs”, reports on the under-visibilized emotional and intimacy labor in which Influencers engage behind-the-scenes between digital and physical spaces, and how these contradictions and constraints are managed for sustenance in the industry. Part three, “Laboring sociality”, captures how Influencers practice intimacy displays and experience tensions in their relationships with technology, followers, competitors, and back-end actors.

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Chapter nine, “Attention Please!: Influencer Wars, Shamelebrity Rituals, and Productive Disorder”, analyzes some controversial but common mechanisms of gaining viral attention in the social media landscape in Singapore, and analyzes this strategic manipulation of attention management practices. I argue that Influencers’ selective spectacularization of the mundane and mundanization of the spectacular is paramount in baiting their followers, sustaining attention, and remaining relevant in the industry. Part one, “Influencer wars”, reveals how Influencers disrupt competitors for self-publicity. Specifically, it demonstrates the orchestration of controversy and manufacturing of disorder through three short case studies on status claims, authenticating appearance, and “tell all” exposés, in relation to disorder and equilibrium in social media commerce. Part two, “Shamelebrity rituals”, demonstrates how a segment of Influencers often deliberately engages in self-shaming practices to provoke negative attention as a publicity strategy. This forced propulsion into the limelight is discussed in short case studies of three Influencers and their brief biographies with self-shaming, in which I assess their success in enacting shamelebrity. Part three, “Productive disorder”, discusses the types of hating discourse that usually emerge from “Influencer wars” and “Shamelebrity” practices, and closes with some organic mechanisms that Influencers have erected to manage this sense of disorder and the value of “web amnesia” in ensuring the longevity of Influencers in the industry.

Finally, the concluding chapter ten, “But Wait, There’s More!: The Expansion of Commodified Life”, provides a summary of key arguments in the thesis, and addresses some concerns and considerations about my current research in the emic Influencer format of “Frequently Asked Questions”. It pinpoints for the reader areas in need of future research in light of recent developments in regulation and law, and the structure of the Influencer industry.

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Influencers, their social media savvy, and their commodification of everyday life are of especially topical significance given their international prominence recently. Many accounts celebrated the overwhelming success of young Influencers. For instance, 21-year-old Australian YouTuber Troye Sivan, whose Internet fame has propelled him to star in Hollywood movies, Broadway plays, and clinch a recording contract with music label EMI Australia, was named by *Time Magazine* to be among the world's 25 most influential teenagers of 2014. However, other damaging reports revealed the pitfalls and shortcomings of this relatively new industry: In December 2014, 25-year-old British YouTuber Zoe Sugg, who broke records for being the fastest-selling debut novelist, selling over 78,000 copies in a week, was exposed for having used a ghost-writer. Later in April 2015, 23-year-old Australian health blogger Belle Gibson, who built a career on claims that she overcame terminal brain cancer through the wholesome food recipes and alternative therapies she was promoting, admitted that she never had the disease. What this thesis presents is a look behind-the-scenes, inside the everyday lives of relatively young, self-made, but highly impactful Influencers within the Singaporean context. Based on first-hand, original ethnographic material produced in interaction with Influencers themselves, it reveals how Influencers attract followers to Please Subscribe.

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*Chapter two: Context*

*You Blogger?: Contextualizing the Influencer Industry in Singapore*

## **CHAPTER TWO: CONTEXT**

### **You Blogger?: Contextualizing the Influencer Industry in Singapore**

As an undergraduate in Singapore in 2007, I always overheard fellow students chatting about “Beatrice”, “Velda”, and “Xiaxue” – “I saw her in Orchard Road last week!”, “Are you going to buy the dress she wore?”, “Did you read her latest post?”. I had at first assumed they must have been fellow undergraduates in the University who were perhaps more prolific or had outstanding achievements. I also frequently witnessed young women “camping out” in groups of 3 to 6 at the University benches near power sockets where their laptops could be plugged in to a power source. They seemed to be constantly refreshing webpages that appeared to be blogs hosted on LiveJournal and Blogspot (now Blogger), while loudly chatting about which items they were each “aiming” to purchase before they went “out of stock”.

I later learnt that Beatrice, Velda, and Xiaxue were bloggers – more specifically, Influencers who were making a living from selling apparel on “blogshops”, modeling for “blogshops”, or writing blogs. Despite only having known the Influencers through their web personae, the young women I frequently witnessed on campus conversed about these high-profile women as if they were intimate friends. Waiting in line in the canteen, it was common to overhear conversations about other Influencers and what they did over the weekend, the latest gifts their partners bought for them, or the newest apparel in which they were clad. I was very intrigued with the allure these web personae held over many followers who hardly knew anything about them apart from the presentation of their lives and lifestyles on blogs.

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Later on in 2012, I returned to my alma mater several times to give guest lectures. As I stood in line for lunch in the same canteen, surrounded by undergraduates much younger than I was, I noted the usual “camping out” and Influencer-related gossip. In addition, I also observed several young undergraduate women *and men* posing for “OOTD” (Outfit Of The Day) shots featuring full body photographs of what they wore (see chapter seven). On several occasions, I overheard these “models” being teased by their friends: “Eh why, you blogger? You also blogger?”. It became evident to me that within five years, the local Influencer practice of lifestyle depiction on social media had not only expanded and become widely taken up by followers; its popularity had even increased to the point that the commercial “blogger” became a sarcastic reference for someone who was appearance-conscious. What had become of vernacular understandings of the “commercial blogger” and how did they become “Influencers”?

Murphy & Kraidy (2003: 308) situate “media ethnography” as an approach with a “largely localized focus”, with particular attention to “the epistemological roots and geopolitical climates” of scholars who are shaping the field (i.e. dewesternization, expanding from Anglo American perspectives and languages, situatedness and contextual grounding, pluralism, temporality of phenomena studied, history). They emphasize the need for media ethnography to embark on “long-term investments” in making communities and keeping conversation to study the “practices of everyday life”. With this in mind, I felt the need to fully comprehend the socio-cultural and political climate in which my informants lived in order to illuminate contrasting or shared emic and etic understandings of their practices.

This chapter will provide the contextual background to the Influencer industry in Singapore. Firstly, I familiarize the reader with four major aspects of Singaporean life, that is, consumption and consumerism, hyper-competitiveness, the penetration of Information Technology (IT), and the state press. Secondly, I give an overview of



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the Influencer industry's history and setting by tracing its history to the blogshop industry, examining the commerce in lifestyle blogging, and drawing relationships between commercial blogs and other social media platforms. Lastly, I explore the structure of the Influencer industry with respect to management agencies, their following, and their multimedia impact on other industries.

## **Popular discourse**

The Influencer industry has been an explosive and lucrative phenomenon in Singapore since the mid-2000s, with an increasing number of young women putting tertiary education on hold and quitting their day jobs to pursue blogging full-time (Chiew 2009; Chung 2010a; Chung 2010b; Aw Yeong 2013). Influencers profit from selling advertising space, writing personalized editorial style advertisements known as “advertorials”, and hawking products to their following (Chiew 2009). In essence, they are displaying aspirational but accessible lifestyles to their followers, seemingly attainable through the goods and services marketed, thus driving “conspicuous consumption” (Veblen 1961).

Published information pertaining to the Influencer industry in Singapore is located principally in mainstream media publications, such as newspapers and magazines, although these are only widely circulated locally. Articles written for a public audience are brief and usually angled to cover the economic success and beauty of Influencers – seemingly the two most appealing aspect of their activity. For instance, my coding of mainstream press coverage between January 2007 and June 2013 in the top six English language newspapers<sup>1</sup> revealed five major themes: DIY practice (i.e. “From blog to riches”, Chiew 2009), entrepreneurship

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<sup>1</sup> *MyPaper*, *Straits Times*, *The Business Times*, *The New Paper*, *The New Paper on Sunday* (weekend edition of *The New Paper*), and *The Sunday Times* (weekend edition of *Straits Times*).

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(i.e. “Net Worth”, Chung 2010a), affluence (i.e. “Social selling”, Heng 2009), physical appearance (i.e. “Model owners”, Ng 2009), and appearance enhancement (i.e. “Plastic fantastic”, Chung 2010b), in addition to personal profiles on specific Influencers and their social impact, and miscellaneous articles on the blogshop trade (see appendix C). Following Kearney (2006: 15) who included the personal voices and involvement of girls in her study of girls’ media production, I personally involve Influencers in this thesis in hopes to broaden the discourse on Influencers in Singapore and Influencer practice in general, shifting away from public preoccupation with “fashion”, “fame”, “fad”, and “frivolity” (terms often mobilized in derogatory manner in public forums describing Influencers), towards a critical analysis of their everyday practices and productive sustenance of their industry.

Unlike news reports that profiled the *most renowned* Influencers, this thesis is based on material from Influencers *across the spectrum* – aspirational Influencers-to-be, early beginners, mid-career climbers, veterans, and even dropouts. Unlike news reports that emphasized Influencers’ achievements at the *peak* of their careers, this thesis focuses on the *process* of becoming an Influencer. Unlike news reports formulated from brief interviews or biographical information already publicly archived on the Internet, this thesis is grounded in original material obtained first-hand from Influencers and associated extended back-end actors through in-depth personal interviews, digital and physical participant observation, and web archaeology (see chapter three). My analysis is informed by early reflections on the industry as a young woman who has lived in Singapore during the emergence of Influencer commerce since 2005. The strong following of Influencers is reflected in the infocomm Development Authority’s (iDA) 2012 report that “Reading blogs that are created by others” was documented the third most popular activity after “Social Networking” and “Instant Messaging” (iDA 2012a).

*Chapter two: Context**You Blogger?: Contextualizing the Influencer Industry in Singapore***Cultural specificities of Singapore**

The Republic of Singapore is a city-state and island in Southeast Asia. Although there were Malay settlements that preceded this official account, Singapore formally was founded in 1819, but only gained independence after leaving the British Colony in 1963 as part of Malaysia, from which it separated in 1965 (YourSingapore 2013a). As of 2013, its population is estimated to be slightly over 5 million in a land area of about 710 square kilometers (YourSingapore 2013b). Since independence, the People's Action Party (PAP) has remained the ruling party of the government, which has been described as a representative democracy (although this is disputable) with a Westminster system of parliament (Tey 2008a). The country is also consistently rated among the least corrupt nations globally (Freedom House 2010; Reuters 2013; Transparency International 2013). With a multi-ethnic make up of Chinese, Malays, Indians, Eurasians, and other foreigners (YourSingapore 2013d), Singapore's official languages are English, Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil, although English is used the most and is the language of business used in formal settings, schools, and the work place (YourSingapore 2013d).

*Consumption and consumerism*

Singapore possesses one of the world's largest foreign reserves (Monetary Authority of Singapore 2014) and is among the wealthiest countries in the world (Choo 2012; Greenfield 2012). The country's hyper-consumerism has been discussed in the mainstream media and in academia (Chua 1998; Chua 2003). The nation boasts shopping as its national past-time, with the Official Singaporean Tourism Website listing the 30 newest shopping malls as recommended places of

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interest for tourists (YourSingapore 2013c), mostly concentrated in the Central Business District (CBD) area and specifically the designated shopping belt, Orchard Road. Dozens more centers are spread out around the island. The 1990 national census reported that window-shopping was the most preferred leisure activity outside one's home (Ho & Chua 1995: 40). Spending time in shopping malls, or "mallng", is exceedingly popular among locals, and even led the then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong to exclaim at the 1996 National Day Rally Speech that "Life is not complete without shopping" (Chua 2003: forward). In his study of consumerism in Singapore, Chua identifies "excessive materialism" (Chua 1998: 987) as one of the three ideological discourses of consumption in Singapore. He also posits that the period of youth allows for more unrestrained consumption and adornment of the self, as one has not yet inherited the financial responsibilities of "big ticket" items such as houses and cars, and thus, is more likely to have discretionary income. The body then naturally emerges as the primary locus of consumption (Chua 2002: 183) with bodily embellishments being most affordable.

### *Hyper-competitiveness*

As an island with no natural resources and very limited land, the state regularly mobilizes the image of Singapore as a vulnerable nation that is constantly in danger of failure or invasion. At state public addresses and parliamentary keynote speeches, ministers consistently emphasize that citizens are its only natural resource. Singaporeans are encouraged to better themselves through education and enrichment in a bid to climb up the rungs within institutions and remain competitive in the global market. In the education system, for example, schools have been classified into hierarchical bands for excelling in different areas such as Performance Arts, Sports, Fitness and Health, Academic Standing, and Academic Progress. Individuals have also been conditioned to constantly "upgrade" the status of their material possessions such as housing, vehicles, and luxury goods lest they

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fall behind their peers. This fear of losing out, or *Kiasuism* (see Ho et al. 1998), propels Singapore's "rat race" by constantly emphasizing the fear of failure (Sidhu et al. 2011). Singaporeans even seem to have a scripted life course dictated by the government's regulations on access to public education and affordable public housing – there is generally a single undergraduate entry period for locals, which is usually after Junior College or Polytechnic education for young women, and after mandatory military conscription for young men; the purchase of heavily subsidized public housing is only available to married couples or singles above the age of 35. In their study of global education institutions in Singapore, Sidhu et al. (2011: 31) reveal the shared sentiment among alumni, students, and staff that "Singapore is not a place to tolerate failure", thus pushing graduates towards risk-free career options with maximum job security.

In this context, Influencers – especially those who leave their day jobs or opt out of tertiary education in order to pursue their craft full-time – are in one sense counter-hegemonic for resisting Singapore's prevalent corporate culture, which places an overt focus on paper qualifications and prizes itself on meritocracy. In fact, some of the Influencers divulge that the impetus for pursuing an Influencer career was because they were not confident that the qualifications they had obtained in less recognized courses or less prestigious private universities could land them "proper jobs" in the corporate world. Others similarly lament not being "the studying type" and wanted a hands-on job. Despite their relative youth, Influencers' actions and decisions are informed by their cultural climate, which is particularly strong given the Singapore government's pervasive use of the state-controlled mass media to mobilize sentiments about the island's vulnerability.

Influencers have created an alternative economy that has barriers to entry and markers of success that are distinct from the corporate world. This is true to some extent, especially when social signifiers such as the performance of appropriate

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femininities and socio-economic status become markers of success. Ironically, however, the “rat race” continues in the commercial lifestyle blog industry, with many striving to outdo each other and earn accolades, such as having the highest number of followers on Instagram, being a trended topic on social media, or earning the highest revenue. The rhetoric of hyper-competitiveness has not been shed, but instead taken another form. In addition, almost all of the Influencers with whom I have been in contact have obtained, or at least desire to, at least a diploma or degree as a “fallback”, “security blanket”, or “safety net” in the event that their lucrative businesses become no longer viable<sup>2</sup>. This is also the case among the most successful and entrepreneurial Influencers, which highlights the insecurity young people feel about their job prospects in a nation that is constantly contesting to be the best.

### *IT penetration*

Singapore is at present a country with very extensive Information Technology (IT) penetration due to the government’s central role in making long-term concerted efforts to harness the potential of IT for national development (Wong 1992). The government’s vision has been to make Singapore an “Intelligent Island” (Mahizhnan 1999) by bringing citizens into the virtual world, given that the tiny nation state was lacking natural resources. The aim was to make Singapore an information economy at the forefront. The government embarked on several projects to establish and improve the state’s IT infrastructure over the last few decades. Many of these and the quasi-governmental organizations set up to carry them out have been written about extensively. These organizations include: the

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<sup>2</sup> While discussions on the long-term viability of Influencers are beyond the scope of this thesis, some aspects of this are discussed in Gwynne, Joel, and Crystal Abidin. (under review) “Entrepreneurial Selves, Feminine Corporeality, and Lifestyle Blogging in Singapore.”

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National Computer Board (NCB), which was set up to usher Singapore into the information age (Mahizhnan 1999); Singapore IT2000, which was the then NCB's strategic plan to convert Singapore into an Intelligent Island (Cordeiro & Al-Hawamdeh 2001); Singapore ONE (One Network for Everyone), which was a nationwide broadband network (Tan & Subramaniam 2000); and the implementation of Media Resource Libraries to revolutionize outdated libraries in Secondary Schools nationwide (Lim 2011a). Most recently, more than 800 Wireless@SG have been established all around the island enabling users to access free Wi-Fi connections in places ranging from fast-food outlets to outdoor parks (iDA 2012b). As of 1999, the NCB and the Telecommunication Authority of Singapore (TAS) have merged to form the Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore (IDA 2012c), which now manages Singapore's exceedingly penetrative IT use and maintains the state's competitive edge at the forefront of Internet usage.

Apart from infrastructure and software, the state also set out to inculcate generations of computer-literate citizens by institutionalizing computer skills into the state-regulated educational curriculum (see Tang & Ang 2002). Every educational institute in Singapore houses at least one computer laboratory and the Ministry of Education (MOE) has dedicated itself to training a pool of "ICT [Information and Communications Technology] specialist teachers" across schools (Ministry of Education 2008). Junior Colleges, for example, are provided with over 20 workstations wired up to a local area network (Wong 1992: 1820). Pupils are exposed to multimedia formats as early as Kindergarten, and taught basic computer skills in the early years of Primary School at the age of seven. This exposure includes interactive art programs used in Creative Art lessons, online trivia quizzes as enrichment activity, the use of word processing programs for writing, and the use of child-safe search engines to research information. In Secondary School and Junior College, all students have to undertake a subject, Project Work, which requires small groups to conduct independent research on the

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Internet and present their findings in interactive digital formats (Ministry of Education 2014). The MOE even stipulated that about 30% of curriculum time was to be set aside for “computer-based learning” (Mahizhnan 1999: 15).

As such, all my informants grew up in computer-mediated environments, and skillfully maneuvering the Internet was second nature to them. Their IT savvy enabled them to master website building quickly, with the help of user-friendly online interfaces, even though very few had actually taken formal classes to learn these skills. The uniformity of this IT education was felt when in our initial conversations, a vast majority of Influencers often assumed I shared this communal IT knowledge and glossed over technological details of their work (i.e. how to start a blog, how to Photoshop images). They also did not see the need to explain their tech-related lingo to me (i.e. servers, proxies, bandwidth). This was despite my never having explicitly identified as a part of their social group or cohort. My Singaporean upbringing and age (mid-20s during fieldwork) essentially led them to assume that I, too, must have acquired the minimum standard of tech savvy that they had.

### *State press*

Singapore has unswervingly been operated as a “soft authoritarian” or “semi-authoritarian” regime (Wang & Tan 2012) with a partly free media (Freedom House 2010) due to the ruling party’s draconian action against political opposition (Salimat 2013) and tight control over the state-controlled media (George 2007; Rodan 1998; Rodan 2003; The Guardian 2010; Sussman 2012). Freedom House (2010) lists Singapore’s “Freedom Rating” as 4.5 (with the score of 1 being the best and 7 being the worst) while Reporters Without Borders (2013) ranks Singapore’s “Press Freedom Index” 149 out of 179 countries.



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In addition to the mature IT infrastructure and a streamlined public education that has extensively inculcated the younger generation of Singaporeans in IT skills, Singapore's repressive political climate has also allowed the Internet as a space for some degree of self-expression. The Singapore government has oft been quoted as a "draconian" one (Jones 1998: 128; Rahim 2009: 104) given the ruling party's infamous rein control over non-hegemonic and contentious content. The mainstream media has been known to be partisan to the ruling political party, the People's Action Party (PAP), which has maintained dominance in the parliament since Singapore's independence (Chong 2012; Tan 2012b). In fact, a conglomerate of mainstream media publications including newspapers, magazines, print ads, radio channels, television channels, online forums, and most recently, online video networks, are housed under the Singapore Press Holdings, which holds a monopoly over several media outlets in the state (George 2002; Lee 2014; Seow 1998). Political figures have, on several occasions, won libel and defamation suits against local and international persons and publications for publishing allegedly defamatory content (Sussman 2012). Among the handful that have paid millions in damages are *The Far Eastern Economic Review* (BBC 2008), *Bloomberg* (Arnold 2002), *The Economist* (Timms 2004), *New York Times* (Kennedy 2010), and the *International Herald Tribune* (Glaberson 1995).

This climate of authoritarianism has been the breeding grounds for the emergence of political blogs (see Kluver 2004). Although the Internet, like other mainstream media, is not free from state policing and censorship (see Tey 2008b), it is afforded the freedom for more contentious expressions, as long as they are not prosecutable by the Sedition Act (see Rodan 1998; Velayutham 2004; Neo 2011; Tan 2011a). Online communities in forums like technology website Hardwarezone have also established satirical net lingo and subversive communicative norms in order engage in public dissidence in a casual tone (Tan & Tan 2005; Tan et al. 2008). Singaporeans are increasingly consuming alternative journalism from sites

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such as the Online Citizen, Temasek Review, and websites belonging to opposition political parties (Gomez 2008; Tan 2012b; Tan 2011c) hosted on the Internet, and conscientiously maintained by users (Hauben & Hauben 1997), alongside the mainstream media publications to gather a more holistic overview of current affairs, forming one of many shifts towards Internet-based consumption. In response to this, mainstream publishing houses have established a web presence via websites, online-based competitions, and smartphone applications that are revised and updated regularly (Singapore Press Holdings 2012). In open acknowledgement of its citizens' propensity to seek information primarily from the Internet, politicians have even begun to appropriate social media platforms to engage with IT savvy and younger voters (Skoric et al. 2012; Sriramesh & Rivera-Sanchez 2006), as witnessed in the most recent General Elections of 2011 (Chong 2012; Tan 2012b; Sreekumar & Vadrevu 2013). Some politicians have even begun to emulate Influencers' practices in order to foster relatability with young voters<sup>3</sup>.

Amidst contentious political content online, Influencers' web presence seems to occupy a liminal space that is less policed by the state. There has been increasing accounts of citizens being charged for apparently politically sensitive comments on blogs (CPJ 2008; *Straits Times* 2013), and Facebook (*Associated Foreign Press* 2010; Chen 2010), and even contentious search terms on YouTube (*AsiaOne* 2010; Ministry of Home Affairs 2010; Singh 2013). However, Influencer advertising has met with far fewer legal encounters despite controversial posts with racy sexual innuendos (*AsiaOne* 2011), illegal driving (*Stomp* 2011), and racism (*The New Paper* 2013) among recent topics. On closer reading, the state appears to be opportunistic in according liberal freedoms when they are profitable for the economy, but not if they threaten state hegemony. However, such state strategies fall outside the scope of this thesis, though they certainly warrant future research.

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<sup>3</sup> See Abidin, Crystal. (forthcoming) "Vote for my selfie: Politician selfies as charismatic leadership."

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Additionally, the liminality and affordances given to the Influencer industry could also be due to early impressions of such activity as a frivolous and mundane past-time for youth. I share in Banet-Weiser's (1999: 4) lament that scholars often "overlook" the "complicated production and articulation" of her research on beauty pageants, classifying her work as mere "fun". After all, as one academic casually lamented upon briefly hearing about my topic, "Aren't these just young, rich women doing vain things online?" Banet-Weiser (1999: 4) cautions that these are "dangerous dismissal[s], because [they] immediately and apparently unselfconsciously defin[e] particular cultural sites as worthy of intellectual attention and others... [as] junk." Perhaps it is exactly Influencers' ordinariness, accessibility, and non-threatening personae that have allowed the industry to prosper under a state whose media are otherwise tightly regulated. It is indeed for similar reasons that the impact of Influencers is frequently underestimated and glossed over as mere frivolity.

Taken together, Singapore's mature IT infrastructure, a public education curriculum that extensively incorporates IT skills, and a repressive political climate with limited opportunities for self-expression have resulted in the Internet as a convenient and natural site for Singaporeans, especially young people, to congregate informally. Lamenting Singapore's small and highly urbanized land space, several of my informants also view the Internet as a third place (Oldenburg 1991) outside the home and school to meet with others for leisurely activities. In addition, the country's technology fetish (Sussman 2012; George 2014: 11) for the newest mobile gadgets on the market (Bangkok Post 2013; Lin & Liu 2011: 5, Mun et al. 2011: 40) has engendered an IT savvy that is extensive, mobile, and penetrating.

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## **Historicizing the Influencer industry**

Despite its extensive success, the Influencer industry in Singapore is a phenomenon that has not yet attracted the attention of academia, and its history has not been formally documented. The field has no doubt been overshadowed by the nation's political blogging activity that is attractive to scholars (Barr 2012; Gomez 2010; Ho & Baildon 2013; Lee & Kan 2009; McDermott 2007; Skoric & Poor 2013; Soon & Cho 2011; Tan 2008), given the ruling party's infamous tight rein over non-hegemonic (and presumably contentious) political content. Even the blogshop industry, which is a sister economy to Influencer commerce, has only been investigated in three studies (Fletcher & Greenhill 2009; Greenhill & Fletcher 2011; Abidin & Thompson 2012); two of these studies were conducted offshore as content analyses of publicly available material, and the third co-authored by myself, was the first original ethnographic account. There are currently no formal statistics or references to the beginnings of the Influencer industry, and a large-scale historical study on this demographic warrants academic attention in the future. However, local newspaper and popular magazine articles speculate that the first commercial blogs and blogshops emerged in the mid-2000s. My personal interviews with veterans of the industry confirm that pioneers in their business began around 2005 with blogs primarily hosted on LiveJournal.com.

Although the first lifestyle blog to become commercial did so independently of the blogshop industry – Influencer Wendy Cheng, better known by her moniker Xiaxue, was engaged by the apparel company LocalBrand to be its first ambassador (Cheng 2005) – a vast majority of lifestyle blogs became commercialized in tandem with the blogshop business pertaining to blog advertising and the women who transit between both industries. The first (non-commercial) lifestyle blogs emerged around the same time as blogshops in the mid-2000s, but blogshops took off much more quickly and enjoyed earlier commercial success than the former.

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#### *From blogshops to commercial lifestyle blogs*

“Blogshops” – a Singaporean bricolage of the words “web blog” and “shop” – are online commercial businesses that manifest as web blogs (see Abidin & Thompson 2012). Web blogs are customizable websites primarily used to convey personal information. This is unlike other online shopping websites created entirely for purchases because of the bloggers’ personal narratives and photographs woven into every sale. This is also different from commercial lifestyle blogs that take the form of a diary while incorporating advertising outlets through advertorials and banner ads. Unlike blogshops whose primary purpose is to sell and whose apparel are systematically catalogued in blogposts for sale, commercial lifestyle blogs are primarily personal diaries and secondarily advertising outlets. Blogshops are one form of e-commerce but uniquely popular in Singapore, beginning as small home internet-based businesses with low start-up costs. While there are blogshops that sell beauty products, baby products and even food items (Ng 2009; Koh 2011), the vast majority markets ladies’ apparel and accessories such as shoes, bags and jewelry, by sourcing products from “various regional countries” (Chung 2010a; Chung 2010b), including Thailand, Indonesia, Taiwan, and China. The typical price range for blogshop apparel is between SGD20 and SGD30. Popular blogshops may even be able to fetch up to SGD45 for the same item simply because their marketing techniques are different. In the *Straits Times*’s National Day Special released on August 9, 2009, blogshopping was given a coveted spot in the “44 Reasons to Love Singapore” feature (Soh 2009). Other surveys report that nearly 2 out of 3 Singaporeans shop online (*Straits Times* 2011), while Singaporeans spent up to \$1.1 billion on online shopping in 2010 (Chee 2011).

Young women in Singapore quickly caught on to the blogshop craze not only as customers, but also as aspiring owners, no doubt encouraged by the string of accounts highlighting it as a lucrative business. The popularity and overwhelming

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commercial success of such small home-businesses have easily captured the attention of Singapore's mainstream media in recent years. Newspaper reports have featured young women as blogshop owners (Ng 2007; Lim 2008), blogshop models (Ng 2009; Chua 2010b; *The New Paper* 2010), blogshop forum reviewers (Cozycot 2011; Blogshopcity 2011), and blogshop customers (Chow 2008). Blogshops have been "booming" despite the economic downturn (Lim & Wong 2009), and articles educating the public to purchase from (Luo 2009) and set up their own blogshops (*Straits Times* 2008; *The Sunday Times* 2009a; Sia 2010) have been proliferating since the mid-2000s. A string of media reports began highlighting the success of blogshops; average blogshops can earn a few thousand monthly (Lim 2008; Lee 2009; *The Sunday Times* 2009b; Ng 2009, Chiew 2009) while more popular blogshops can bring in up to a million dollars annually (Chung 2010a; Chung 2010b). By 2009, up to 5,000 blogshops were catalogued in a myriad of online databases and fora entirely devoted to aggregating blogshops for the convenience of customers, with new additions daily. While budding blogshop settings have sprung up in neighboring country Malaysia (Shafie et al. 2011; Lim et al. 2013), blogshops have been a phenomenon unique to Singapore for almost a decade and have not taken off with such great success elsewhere (Fletcher & Greenhill 2009); these varying developments warrant future research.

Despite their different motivations for starting blogshops, all owners appear to have a keen sense of self-awareness in the crafting of their own and their models' personae and depicted lifestyles in order to lure in a constant crowd. It is for this reason that many owners have started their own blogs – several of which have evolved into commercial blogs – to entertain their customers' and followers' queries. Hyperlinks to these personal blogs are visibly put up under banners or icons on the blogshop's main page or under their "About Us" section. At times, captions on these banners such as "Click to view behind the scenes!" and "Get to know us better!" are included. While seldom openly acknowledged as a marketing

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tool, exposure to the supposedly “private” realm of blogshop models via their personal blogs efficiently humanizes an otherwise impersonal commercial exchange, which in turn sustains the blogshop economy. Eventually, many of these lifestyle blogs became monetized as blogshop owners and models began accepting advertorials. Thus, one segment of Influencers in Singapore began as blogshop owners and models who ran commercial lifestyle blogs.

Another segment of Influencers consists of bloggers whose initially non-commercial lifestyle blogs were hired to advertise blogshop wares. Several partnerships have been established between the blogshop sector and the commercial lifestyle blog sector. The most basic arrangement is the hire and placement of blogshop banner advertisements on commercial lifestyle blogs. Commercial lifestyle bloggers would also customize advertorials for blogshop advertisers. Each blogger tended to have her own standardized offering and price tag. The more photogenic commercial lifestyle bloggers were also invited to model apparel for blogshops in semi-professional photo shoots. Some bloggers are “free for hire” and model for several blogshops concurrently. Eunice Annabel, for example, has modeled for more than 50 blogshops as of 2010, and is easily one of the most recognizable faces within the blogshop industry. Other commercial bloggers are “exclusive” to one or at most, up to three blogshops, and are familiar to customers as ambassadors who are the “face” of the blogshop. One such ambassador is blogger Melissa Celestine Koh, who has been modeling “exclusively” for The Tinsel Rack and her own blogshop, LadyMojo, since 2010 and 2012 respectively.

Because blogshops make up a significantly large portion of advertisers on commercial lifestyle blogs, the latter have attracted many blogshop customers as regular followers. Some followers patronize blogshops in support of the models and owners, while other followers are keen followers of commercial lifestyle blogs

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because the writers are models and owners of famed blogshops. In other words, both the commercial lifestyle blog industry and the blogshop industry tend to share the same target audience. To summarize, as of the early 2010s, some common vernacular scripts to the origins of Influencer commerce have emerged: 1) owners of blogshops begin lifestyle blogs to entertain and maintain an intimacy with customers, eventually monetizing their blogs and becoming Influencers; 2) models of blogshops who become popular in the industry begin lifestyle blogs to engage with their fans, blogshop owners, and other advertisers, eventually monetizing their blogs and becoming Influencers; 3) young women begin lifestyle blogs and seek commercial work such as modeling and advertising from the blogshop industry to increase their viewership in order to become Influencers.

In addition, some young people who are popular on social media platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram have also begun lifestyle blogs in order to monetize their digital personae, given that blog advertorials tend to generate more income than social media advertisements, since the extended space allows for more detailed advertorials. Others women are scouted and groomed by Influencer managements; these are mostly young women who own personal blogs and social media accounts with modest followings, but have the looks and charisma to attract a larger following, and thus commercial business endorsements, under the honing of their blog managers. Two later sections demonstrate the use of blogs in tandem with social media platforms, and the organization of Influencer management agencies.

### *Influencer commerce*

Influencers are characterized by their intention to generate profit and their emphasis on portraying and promoting “lifestyle” choices, especially relating to appearance and the consumption of specific products such as clothing and



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cosmetics. In the initial stages, many Influencers volunteer to do product reviews for free in order to hone their writing, have some sample work to present to potential advertisers, or target followers who specifically follow blogs and social media for such recommendations and reviews. In essence, Influencers initially engage in this unpaid labor as a means to get noticed and break into the market. However, before they can begin attracting unpaid or paid sponsors and advertisers, Influencers need to gain a critical mass of followers that enables their digital presence to become viable advertising outlets.

Influencers are in the business of self-documentation. The main draw factor of Influencers' blogs and social media feeds is personal content about their daily lives "as lived", supplemented by advertorials. Followers have been known to abandon "sell-out" Influencers whose blogs contain more ads than personal content. Hence, it is critical for all budding and accomplished Influencers to maintain a consistent stream of attractive disclosure about their personal lives. They catalogue their day's doings and thoughts pictorially, usually accompanied by smaller portions of literary descriptive or engagingly pensive text. This high image to low text ratio is important because the former sustains followers' interest and is more engaging than text. This is evident to the extent that corporate sponsors have turned away Influencers for "not having an eye for good photos", which is thought to be a harder skill to teach and nurture than writing ability, which "can be easily trained" or "edited by someone else" (see chapter seven).

In general, Influencers earn revenue in three main ways. A primary mode of revenue is from advertorials. The more popularly advertised products and services are facial and beauty products and services, plastic surgery and cosmetic enhancements, apparel and fashion, food and beverage, and travel. As of the mid-2010s, Influencers can earn up to SGD\$100,000 per sponsorship (personal communication) although most "A-list" bloggers are able to earn at least

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SGD\$10,000 in profits monthly from their Influencer advertising business alone. Most Influencers are able to average a monthly income of SGD\$2,000 to \$5,000 (personal communication).

The second mode is to sell advertising space on their blogs and social media platforms. Influencers are contacted by clients to put up banners that link to their website in a bid to capture a share of these Influencers' immense followings. Each Influencer usually has her own rate and "package deal". For instance, one Influencer tells me a 300 pixel x 450 pixel space on her blog costs SGD320 per three-day slot, while another sells a 0.5cm x 0.5cm button for SGD200 per year. However, Influencers who are contracted to management agencies may have their advertising rates regulated by their managers.

A third mode of income is from selling wares. Influencers who have garnered overwhelming popularity have been known to hawk used personal items on their blogs and on Instagram. These "pre-loved" – a euphemism for second-hand – apparel, accessories, and knick-knacks are well received by followers, some of whom have expressed a desire to own "a piece of" the Influencers through their second-hand possessions. Occasionally, followers have even resorted to bidding to secure an item.

A distinctive feature of Influencers in Singapore is their extensive integration of face-to-face meet-ups with followers on a regular basis, in formal and informal settings. Formal events include those sponsored and organized by clients in conjunction with the launch of a new product or service, or parties (i.e. birthdays, anniversaries, festive occasions, meet & greet sessions, photo-taking sessions) organized by Influencers that are sponsored in kind by clients (i.e. venue, party favors, food & beverage, photography, make up, wardrobe) in exchange for advertorial publicity. Informal events include those casually organized by

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Influencers themselves, such as Christmas giveaways and lucky dips for selected followers, and impromptu coffee sessions in cafés where followers can take the opportunity to snap selfies with Influencers. These physical interactions usually incorporate a dedicated event hashtag that followers are encouraged to use while they “live Tweet” or “live Instagram” their activities. Such practices are also commonly incentivized through competitions such as giveaways to selected users on the hashtag, or prizes awarded to the best Tweet or Instagram post. These physical space interactions complement digital space engagements because Influencers are expected to perform their personae in congruence with depictions they have displayed on their blogs and social media. As such, the intimacies fostered and negotiated in digital platforms are transferred to physical settings, in a feedback loop that amplifies the relatability followers feel towards Influencers.

*From commercial blogs to social media platforms*

Influencers use social media platforms to remain connected with followers when they are not engaging on blogs. They may set up a “Fan Page” on Facebook or dedicate a Facebook account to accepting friend requests from followers. Twitter and Instagram are complements to blogs, with the former predominantly publishing bite-sized status updates, and the latter functioning as a platform to display taste practices (see chapter seven) by publishing photographs from Influencers’ daily happenings (Aw Yeong 2013). A smaller number of Influencers also publish homemade videos on YouTube, usually in the comedy or fashion and cosmetics genres while others engage with fans in a Question-and-Answer (Q&A) format on AskFM or Formspring. Additionally, Influencers usually redirect followers to their various digital platforms in order to maximize publicity – some Influencers happen to be more popular on blogs or YouTube, while others are more famed on Instagram, Twitter, or Facebook. Thus, advertising each of their social media platforms increases the exposure for each platform’s content.

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Integrating social media feeds with their lifestyle blog also enables Influencers to maintain communication with followers more frequently and efficiently, given that blogposts are substantially longer and require more time and effort to produce than bite-sized updates. This is also observed in an upcoming trend where Influencers simply aggregate already published Instagram photos and Twitter updates into a blogpost for followers who are “not following” them on those social media platforms. Because social media platforms are already very much embedded into the social lives of young women in Singapore (Aw Yeong 2013), Influencers’ posts become seamlessly inserted into the feeds and updates from a follower’s personal friends, thus inevitably immersing the Influencer into the social milieu of young followers (Abidin 2013). Furthermore, young people are increasingly reliant on smartphones as a device to leisurely connect to the Internet (Galambos & Abrahamson 2002), while desktop and laptop usage has dropped and become limited to the more formal spheres of school and work life. Research indicates a 87% smartphone penetration (Media Research Asia 2013), and 123%<sup>4</sup> mobile Internet penetration (Singh 2014) in Singapore. Similarly, informants reported preferring smartphones due to their portability. Hence, social media platforms are deemed to be more user-friendly, intuitive, and accessible than blogs that are best read on a desktop or laptop. In 2013, Influencers managed by Influencer agency, Nuffnang, began promoting the newly emerged smartphone-based blog interface, Dayre, in response to the increasing number of followers opting to use smartphones over desktops and laptops.

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<sup>4</sup> This was measured by the “Total number of subscriptions” divided by the “Total Population”, meaning that on the average, each person owned more than one form of access to mobile Internet.

*Chapter two: Context**You Blogger?: Contextualizing the Influencer Industry in Singapore***Structure of the Influencer industry**

As discussed earlier, public interest and the commercial success of Influencers was stimulated, in part, by sensational reports by the mainstream media in which successful Influencers were taken as exemplars for young people and enterprising Singaporeans. However, the swift uptake, rapid maturity, and extensive impact of the industry on Singapore society would not have been possible without formal organization.

*Management agencies and managers*

With the Influencer industry in Singapore expanding so quickly, two Influencer management agencies, Nuffnang and Gushcloud, were launched in 2007 (Nuffnang 2013) and 2011 (Gushcloud 2013) respectively to manage Influencers, and function as an intermediary between Influencers and clients. Some smaller companies, such as My Fat Pocket, Street Directory, and The Influencer Network, also manage contracted Influencers who are exclusive to their firm, as well as freelance Influencers. Influencer managements aggregate Influencers across genres, and pitch them to clients seeking Internet personae for endorsements, sponsorships, and social media marketing campaigns. Signed Influencers are exclusive to the company and agree to relinquish advertising rights on all their social media platforms to the firm. There are a few exceptions not governed by the management company, such as advertising for blogshops, hair salons, and nail parlors, because these predate Influencer managements, and are usually informal arrangements between Influencers and their sponsors with minimal financial benefits. Between 20-50% of advertising revenue is apportioned as the management's commission (personal communication 2013), which, in exchange, negotiates fair work conditions and timely payment for Influencers, and quality and timely work for clients.

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One of the key actors in Influencer agencies are “Blogger Specialists”, “Influencer PR Managers”, or “Talent Managers”, whom I collectively term “Influencer managers”. As staff members who work the most closely with Influencers, they play multiple roles (cf. Malefyt & Morais (2012: 20) on account managers in advertising agencies). Conceptually, Influencer managers curate the agency’s portfolio of Influencers and keep them in line with clients’ expectations. They are gatekeepers of the Influencer industry who maintain valuable connections with the Public Relations (PR) and marketing departments of several industries, thus providing access to highly sought after events and exclusive networks.

Operationally, Influencer managers identify potential Influencers, groom them, and pitch them to clients at face-to-face screening sessions or through an “Influencer deck” – a digital repository of available “assets” that is most commonly a PowerPoint presentation or online database featuring portfolios of available Influencers. They also chaperone Influencers at events, ensure Influencers deliver the work stipulated in the advertorial contract, and build unity and mediate conflict among contracted Influencers.

Industries that engage Influencers most frequently are beauty and fashion, food and beverage, travel, and the civil service. This shift towards new forms of advertising is noted by anthropologists Malefyt & Morais (2012: 8), who argue that traditional advertising agencies are facing “technologically driven media fragmentation”, including the increased use of mobile devices and the increased access to digital content, such as online videos and social media; Influencers have a firm grasp of both platforms and media. The importance of Influencers to these corporate advertisers is evidenced in their rising number of staff and ad hoc manifestos dedicated to “blogger relations” and “social media communications”, relaying PR guidelines such as “Establish and grow relationships with key influencers in the digital space, such as bloggers, highly followed personalities,

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influential YouTube reviewers...” (Tuten & Solomon 2013: 22) and “Never mass email bloggers, or mail merge, or copy and paste emails – bloggers talk to each other, and they will find out and then laugh at you (and probably publicly)” (Hallam 2013: 87-88).

Influencer managers also oversee the career trajectory of their Influencers, providing consultation regarding the digital curation of their content in tandem with their subgenre and their current endorsement campaigns. For instance, 19-year-old Influencer, Lisa, was advised by her managers not to publish photographs of her clubbing and night partying escapades online and to cut down on such activity. This was to maintain her image as a role model to young 15- to 18-year-old followers to whom she frequently markets fashionable clothing and affordable cosmetics. This conceptualization of self-image and status symbols will be discussed more in depth in chapter seven. In general, Influencer managers need to be versatile and have a firm understanding of all their Influencers in order to make pitches to clients. One Influencer manager, for example, even monitors the brand of cameras, mobile phones, and cosmetics her Influencers personally prefer to use in order to ensure that they are only pitched to clients in whom the Influencers themselves firmly believe. She explains that this is in part to maintain a level of authenticity in Influencers’ endorsements and to minimize conflict among competing clients.

Unsigned Influencers are not exclusive to any management and are less likely to be pitched to clients unless they are sought after. Unsigned Influencers usually belong to one of three categories. The first category is Influencers who are able to operate independently to attract and negotiate with clients because they are exceedingly popular and command strong bargaining power. As independent Influencers, they do not have to pay a broker’s commission and can increase their overall revenue, although this may mean a less regular stream of work. The

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second category is Influencers whose daytime jobs do not allow them to be under other contractual agreements. These are usually women in civil service who are unable to receive monetary payment for their advertising services, and so attend exclusive events and receive products in kind. The third category is fairly new and upcoming Influencers, or those who have not yet garnered a sustainable following despite being in the industry for some time. These Influencers do not yet command the attention of a sizable following on the web and are not as sought after as other Influencers. They will have to market themselves and rely on personal networks to be noticed by Influencer managers. In general, most Influencers, especially in the lifestyle genre, aim to be signed to an Influencer management, as it is a mark of prestige; as well, the Influencer management oversees their career trajectories, brings them more publicity via corporate-wide campaigns, and increases their pool of available work.

*Followers*

Followers are Internet users who subscribe to Influencers' blogs or social media platforms. In her book *Bloggerati, Twitterati: How Blogs and Twitter are Transforming Popular Culture*, Mary Cross (2011: 123-124) pinpoints that "[t]he whole status game is about how many people are in your camp, listed as a friend or follower", aptly summarizing "numbers" as a mark of Influencers' status in the industry. A manager once recounted her dilemma when an Influencer she was trying to pitch, or in industry jargon, "push" to clients "has the looks but doesn't have the numbers". Even though the Influencer was gorgeous with model-like features that would have made her a suitable ambassador for the cosmetic brand, the clients wanted to settle for a different Influencer simply because "her numbers are higher". Another Influencer manager explained that in this business "your numbers are everything". In this sense, an Influencers' "numbers" become an indication of her competence. Whereas other studies have focused on social



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compensatory friending for a deficiency in self-esteem (Lee et al. 2012), Influencers look towards friending and followers with a largely commercial intent. Even Influencers who have gained advertisers and sponsors have been known to lose followers when they fail to maintain their intimacies with followers. Hence, followers of blogs – be they “readers” or “haters” – are a crucial segment of the Influencer industry. The emic understandings of this metrics culture and categories of followers will be investigated in chapter five.

Followers generally share the same demographic as Influencers themselves, being Singaporean women between the ages of 15 to 35. However, the phenomenon has since the early 2010s garnered attention from young teenagers from the age of 12 and middle-aged women in the “OL” or “Office Lady” age range of 30- to 45-years-old. Many Influencers to whom I spoke report that “up to 30%” of their regular followers are men, although my general observations are that followers are 80% women and 20% men. In response to and in acknowledgement of their male followers, Influencers have been known to begin blog entries with gender-specific salutations, especially when the advertorials are for feminine products such as sanitary napkins, waxing services, personal hygiene, and bust enhancement. In her advertorial for swimwear in which there are several photographs of her clad in a bikini, Influencer Melissa Celestine Koh begins her entry with “Hi Girls. :)”, unlike the majority of her entries that do not specify the target gender of her readership. Influencer ms\_rach similarly begins her feminine hygiene advertorial with “This post is meant for the ladies, and ladies only ;)”.

Followers of Influencers are more disparate than aggregated. Many followers have been observed repeatedly visiting Influencers’ blogs and social media platforms for updates, pleading for new blogposts and sometimes even expressing anger over the lack of new blogposts for consumption. These tensions will be addressed in chapter eight.

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### *Multimedia impact*

Owing to their capacity to shape public opinion and purchase decisions, the sponsorships and advertorials in which Influencers are engaged have progressed from blogshop previews to blue-chip advertisements for companies, including Canon, Gucci, and KLM. The immense success and extensive popularity of the Influencer industry have garnered widespread attention from several other realms, including private and multinational corporations (MNCs), politics, education, social and humanitarian organizations, and mainstream media productions. Riding on their extensive popularity and consistent following, these sectors often invite Influencers to make special appearances to bring publicity to the project or special cause. Influencers are invited to events as special guests and VIPs in acknowledgement of their unique status and the social prestige they have earned. The Young Women's Leadership Connection (YWLC) invited Influencer Rachel Lim as a keynote speaker at the "Get Inspired" workshops (Lim 2012; Young Women's Leadership Connection 2013), while Viola Tan was asked to speak to students at Ngee Ann Polytechnic (Tan n.d.). Beatrice Tan was the poster girl for the Open House of the National University of Singapore, of which she is an alumna, as part of their "Dream Big Campaign" (Tan 2012a), and Tammy Tay was invited to be a guest judge at several fashion and beauty contests. Within the television and film industries, Wendy Cheng had a short stint co-hosting the television program *Girls Out Loud*, while Bong Qiuting gave a cameo performance in the local top grossing movie, *Ah Boys To Men*.

In the Singapore General Elections of 2011 (GE2011), Singapore's top Influencers, Wendy Cheng, Viola Tan, Velda Tan, and Rachel Lim were invited to a private lunch with the then Minister for Foreign Affairs, George Yeo (Lim 2011b; Tan 2011b). While images capturing their interactions were circulated on social media, the actual content of their discussions was not disclosed. Wendy and Viola were

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also part of an interviewer panel for a television forum organized by Clicknetwork.tv, an online video network, where they shared their views regarding Singapore's political sphere (clicknetwork.tv 2011).

Several blog award ceremonies have also emerged since the late 2000s, the most renowned being the Singapore Blog Awards (SBA) first launched in 2008 (omy.sg 2010), and the Nuffnang Asia-Pacific Blog Awards (NAPBAS) (Nuffnang 2009), which has included nominees from Malaysia, Singapore, China, Thailand, the Philippines, Australia, Hong Kong, and the United Kingdom since its launch in 2009<sup>5</sup>. More recently in 2013, London-based social media analytics firm, Starcount, launched its inaugural Social Star Awards in Singapore at the Marina Bay Sands. The ceremony was streamed live on YouTube and honored the most popular personalities on the web from the sporting, gaming, music, film, and television industry. Over 280 winners were “decided by the activities of 1.7 billion Internet users around the world who use 11 major social media sites including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Sina and Weibo from China and VK from Russia” (STcommunities 2013). The Awards also saw performances and guest appearances by the most popular Internet personalities of the year, such as Internet memes “Star Trek helmsman” George Takei and “Overly Attached Girlfriend” Laina Walker, and popular musicians Psy and Carly Rae Jepsen, who went viral for their songs *Gangnam Style* and *Call Me Baby* respectively.

Several Influencers in Singapore were invited to walk the red carpet alongside international celebrities in the film, television, music, sporting, and social media industries. A Harlem Shake parody vlog (video blog) by local Influencers Sim Pei Shi, Tan Jian Hao, and Bancho The Matrep was also included in the Awards'

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<sup>5</sup> However, nominees are usually Influencers contracted to Nuffnang or those who do freelance work with them, and exclude Influencers contracted to rival management firms.

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pastiche of popular trends of the year. Since the event was screened live on YouTube, and later archived on Starcount's official YouTube channel, much international publicity and exposure were accorded to the Singaporean Influencers featured. In addition, some exclusive invitations were given out to prolific Singaporean Influencers. Even though the "Most popular social media show" was awarded to Swedish YouTuber, Pewdiepie, this event was monumental for the Influencer industry in Singapore; despite Singapore's relatively small population and thus small social media user population, the country's work in the Influencer industry was internationally recognized among other strong contenders from the United States of America and larger Asian countries.

More recently, the international YouTube Fan Fest (YTFF), which celebrates and awards the most popular YouTubers in the region was also held in Singapore in 2014 and 2015, where Influencers such as Naomi Neo and Tan Jian Hao were honored for their craft.

## **Conclusion**

Despite its relative youth of 10 years, the Influencer industry in Singapore has rapidly matured since its early beginnings in the blogshop and commercial lifestyle blogging industries, no doubt supported by unique aspects of Singaporean life, including high consumption and consumerism, a culture of hyper-competitiveness, the high penetration of Information Technology, and its accommodation by an otherwise highly regulated state press. Influencer commerce has been increasingly viable through the sale of advertorials, advertising space, and used wares directed towards young women followers, on blogs and social media platforms that complement each other. As the business grew viable and more women became Influencers, the organization of the industry became more formalized with management agencies stepping in to broker deals between Influencers and clients.

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The impact of the Influencer industry on Singapore society has been extensive, spanning across multimedia platforms and several industries including F&B, retail, education, mass media, and politics.

Given that little to no research has been done on this phenomenon, the context provided here is especially crucial for explaining some of the development of Influencers' practices, which I conceptualize in terms of the appropriation of the five key tenets (personae, femininities, tastes, intimacies, attention) to establish relatability with followers. The historical trajectory of this industry is also specific to pioneer cohorts of Influencers (mid-2000s to mid-2010s), which is crucial for explaining why the model described in this thesis may be similar to that of other cultural settings, yet not completely mappable. My substantive understanding of the Influencer industry, its operations, and its cultural practices enabled me to fine tune my methodologies throughout fieldwork. My research design and recounting of fieldwork are detailed in the following chapter.

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*Chapter three: Methodologies*  
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## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGIES**

### **Cya IRL: Negotiating Digital and Physical Fieldwork**

At the very beginning of my PhD research, I expected that sending out officious invitation emails with the University letterhead (in color, no less), my supervisor's signature and contact details (a clearly non-Singaporean, foreign-sounding name with the status-elevating designation, "Dr"), and documentation of my ethics clearance (in bureaucratic legalese peppered with strings of numbers) would surely signpost my legitimacy as an academic researcher and grant me access into the field I had intended to study.

I could not have been more wrong.

During fieldwork, I realized that much the social currency I needed to access my field was tied to performing a very particular type of femininity. Growing up, I had only ever put on makeup twice in my life, at ages 11 and 12, as part of a choir group in my primary school during major competitions. The makeup was borrowed from my mother, and slabbed onto my face by our choir mistress. In my second week of fieldwork in Singapore, I voluntarily acquired my first ever cosmetic product: A color-correcting liquid-like paste known as a "concealer", that was meant to help cover up my blemishes and smoothen my overall facial skin tone. I was catching up with three old friends who took it upon themselves to take me "makeup shopping". So momentous was the event that the girls also snapped photographs of me maneuvering through a pharmacy with a basket full of feminine face-care products. Later that evening, I spent two agonizing hours at an ice-cream parlor attempting to negotiate a truly horrifying device known as an "eyelash curler". I was convinced it was going to take my eye out. The girls took turns trying to hold my chin still while clamping down delicately on my eyelashes. I flinched every single

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time. It was quite a disaster. Nevertheless, my three fashionable friends were under the belief that learning to look as glamorous and stylish as my informants would earn me their favor.

They could not have been more wrong.

As fieldwork progressed, it became clear to me that my very lack of feminine “beautifying” skills endeared me to the women I was studying. I was always candidly honest about my lack of cosmetic expertise, and my informants almost always subconsciously took me under their wing and educated me about the wonders of makeup and dress up. Live demonstrations took place in the privacy of their homes and offices, as well as in not-so-private cafés and food courts. I also bought my first pair of high heels during fieldwork, under the coaxing of an informant who had let me try on hers. With very clear hand gestures, she bent down to my knees and explained how the high heels straightened my posture, gave my leg muscles “more definition”, and made my body more “proportionate”. I felt much like an inept prepubescent girl, attempting to master the basics of femininity before I could graduate into glamorous womanhood.

Feeling “exotic” was a consistent mode for me throughout fieldwork, which was equal parts bewildering and contentious, given that I had lived in Singapore for twenty years. I was in the same age cohort as my informants, had received the same public schooling they did, and spoke the same language. As a young anthropologist, I thought I had ticked most of the boxes on the “insider” card. Yet, in retrospect, I now see that it was my acceptance of the process of being exoticised, my positive response during these exchanges, and my later performed emphasis on the small “exotic” differences that warmed my informants up to me on most occasions. These also proved to be important conversation starters as I was introduced to friends and friends of friends as part of snowball sampling.



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For starters, I was remembered as a “mixed blood”. While biracial persons are not uncommon in Singapore, a vast majority of my informants were Singaporean Chinese by descent. Juxtaposed against the norm, my Malay-Chinese-Christian heritage was often signposted in conversations. I first noticed this when the women showered me with courteous comments about my “big eyes”, “thick eyebrows”, “long eyelashes”, and “double eyelids”; many of them felt it was my “eyes” that signposted my mixed heritage:

“This is Crystal. She’s mixed blood! She doesn’t look pure Chinese, right?”

I had also immigrated to Australia a couple of years prior to fieldwork, and was often asked about my experiences about having left Singapore. We spoke about where our lives diverged, despite having undergone the same mainstream national education system. The women were also curious about the myths of my newfound “work-life balance”, “quality of life”, and “relaxed pace”, which made for easy conversation starters:

“This is Crystal. She lives in Australia! That’s why her Mandarin is so lousy...”

As fieldwork progressed, most of us had slowly but surely adapted to integrating “work talk” with “girl talk”, and “girl talk” often featured “the boys”. My informants grew increasingly curious about my living arrangements abroad, and I revealed that I had emigrated with my partner. We were cohabiting and had been in a relationship for almost ten years when I first started fieldwork. I soon noticed that this “fairy tale” romance easily gained traction and solicited much affective intimacy, whenever the women asked about my “lifestyle”. After all, it was rare for unmarried couples to be able to move in together because of the extremely

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expensive rental market and because the heavily subsidized public housing was only available to married couples or singles above the age of 35:

“This is Crystal. She lives with her boyfriend! They’ve been together for almost ten years... that’s so romantic!”

From mobilizing pompous letterheads to learning about makeup; from affiliating with status-elevating persons to feeding into the myth of “the better life”; from highlighting authoritative paper markers to partaking in frivolous “girl talk”: I was learning that unabashedly displaying my fringed femininity and engaging in homosocial intimacy accumulated more currency for me than academic posturing. While I did not set out to emphasize my demographic distinction, I found myself following in the footsteps of many anthropologists who “not only can present themselves as different but can use the difference as a way of stimulating discussion” (Abu-Lughod 1985: 18). In the metanarrative of hyper-reflexivity, I had become my fieldwork, by exoticizing the mundane and brandishing the ordinary. Paying homage to the title of this thesis, I was commodifying *my* everyday life.

While anthropology has been looking at people’s relationships with social media, Internet cultures, and devices, technology appears to be evolving more quickly than scholarship. In her survey of research utilizing ethnographic approaches to digital media, Coleman (2010) identifies three emergent “categories of scholarship”: digital media and the politics of cultural representation, digital media vernaculars, and the prosaic<sup>6</sup> of digital media. While my study can approach Influencers as a digital media vernacular, my focus is on their overall digital and

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<sup>6</sup> Coleman (2010:494-495) defines the “prosaic of digital media” as “the lived experience of language, the contexts in which it is uttered and reuttered (church versus market), the multiplicity of speech genres, and the ideological and material conditions that sustain not only dominant languages, but also the heteroglossic and polyphonic formations...”

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physical practice, as opposed to being confined to a digital or “virtual community” (Burnett 2000; Hagel & Armstrong 1997; Jones 1997; Rheingold 1993). As little attention has been paid to the phenomenon of Influencer commerce in Singapore, this empirical ethnographic work is relatively new. As outlined in chapter two, because Influencer commerce manifests in physical and digital spaces, I draw on collaborative mixed methods in my research to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the platforms in which my informants engage.

More crucially, these mixed methods enabled me to fully immerse myself in and experience my field site, such that “the knowledge gained is not mere data” but “provides a sense of the self as the other” (Malefyt & Morais 2012: 5). My methodological practice allowed me to etically textualize what the Influencers themselves emically found to be unarticulated and inarticulable, or the “tacit knowledge” (Polanyi 1958) established “in and through the self” (Malefyt & Morais 2012: 5) that produces and interprets knowledge as it is experienced first-hand. While one example is the notion of “relatability” I discussed in chapter one, this chapter continues to document communicative norms as embodied knowledge that Influencers practice, at times even subconsciously. With hindsight, I realized that my grasp of this communicative praxis and its importance facilitated my access to and understanding of the five key tenets I lay out in chapters five to nine – for instance, how emic casual verbal references to “privacy” and “publicness” related to personae (chapter five), or how the use of emoji and emoticons related to intimacy (chapter eight).

While it has been noted that anthropologists usually regard ritual as being distinct and distanced from everyday occurrences (Hughes-Freeland 1998: 1; Malefyt & Morais 2012: 45) – a heritage of the Durkheimian opposition of “sacred” and “profane” – being immersed in my field across various spaces highlighted to me the ritualized aspects of everyday life both exotic and ordinary (Goffman 1956). I was

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able to observe “ritual in relation to the operations of everyday business” (Malefyt & Morais 2012: 45) and investigate how seemingly mundane everyday practices were in fact crucial processes that structured the performance of Influencers – for instance, how the cross-platform announcement of new blogposts on Twitter and Instagram was a reaction to declining blog readership and became a common script among Influencers (chapter seven), or how writing about fellow Influencers’ controversies was not mere gossip mongering, but an intentional collective act to redirect followers’ attention (chapter nine).

I begin by detailing my access into the industry, focusing on how I situated my field site and secured my informants. I recount my digital and physical fieldwork experiences, and highlight some key communicative norms in the industry, such as the use of text and emoticons/emoji to convey emotion, and the use of multiple platforms. Additionally, I highlight some observations when I transitioned from digital to physical fieldwork, and close with a discussion of ethical concerns and data coding.

## **Access**

From the onset, my end goal was to produce an anthropologically grounded ethnographic monograph, but I was unsure of my methodological approach. Early attempts to conceptually articulate my mode of enquiry left me lost in a lexicon of terms that felt much like an exercise in academic branding. Ethnographic research of, on, and with Internet culture was variously termed “media anthropology” (Coman & Rothenbuhler 2005; Murphy & Kraidy 2003; Postill 2009), “digital

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anthropology” (Horst & Miller 2012), and “virtual anthropology”<sup>7</sup> (Reid 2012; Weber et al. 2011; Weber 2015; Wong 1998).

Coman & Rothenbuhler (2005: 1) position “media anthropology” at the intersection of “anthropology of modern societies” and “the cultural turn in media studies”, but posit that it is not simply “mechanically applying anthropologists’ concepts and techniques to media phenomena” (cf. Askew & Wilk 2002; Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002). Instead, it is a “distinct conceptual sphere” that articulates its own “objects of study according to that specific conceptual lexicon”. While still maintaining the “methodological and conceptual assets of earlier anthropological tradition”, media anthropology aims to shift away from the “exotic” and “indigenous” towards the “mundane” and “manufactured”. The authors posit that ethnography is a key method in media anthropology (i.e. media ethnography), and that this “[m]edia ethnography attempts to tease out layers of meaning through observation of and engagement with the everyday situations in which media are consumed, the practices by which media are interpreted, and the uses to which media are put”.

“Digital anthropology” is a subset of media anthropology, complementing other anthropological inquiries that look into non-digital media such as mass communication print (i.e. newspapers, magazines, etc.). Situating the “digital” in “digital anthropology”, Horst & Miller (2012: 3) define “digital” as:

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<sup>7</sup> Digital anthropology can be further broken down into “virtual anthropology”, Internet-related research, and others. Although the lexicon “virtual anthropology” sounds appropriate, its conceptual definition bears little relation to the mode of inquiry I am undertaking, as the term has largely remained in the domain of physical and biological anthropology. Gerhard W. Weber (2015: 22) posits that it was coined in the mid-1990s, and refers to the use of digital technologies and expertise from the fields of “anthropology, paleontology, primatology, medicine, mathematics, statistics, computer science, and engineering” to conduct “comparative morphology” and address “biological questions concerning recent and fossil hominoids”.

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that which can be ultimately reduced to a binary code but which produces a further proliferation of particularity and difference. The dialectic refers to the relationship between growth in universality and particularity and the intrinsic connections between their positive and negative effects.

Seeking to emphasize continuity with previous anthropological research, they outline six key principles of digital anthropology including: “the digital intensifies the dialectical nature of culture”; “humanity is not one iota more mediated by the rise of the digital”; “[the] anthropologist focuses upon life as lived and all the mess of relevant factors that comes with that”; “the importance of cultural relativism and the global nature of our encounter with the digital, negating assumptions that the digital is necessarily homogenizing and giving voice and visibility to those who are peripheralized by modernist and similar perspectives”; “the essential ambiguity of digital culture with regard to its increasing openness and closure”; and lastly, “the materiality of digital worlds, which are neither more nor less material than the worlds that preceded them”.

Additionally, methods and contested principles of digital anthropology were variously compiled as “media ethnography” (Horst et al. 2012; Murphy 2011; Murphy & Kraidy 2003), “digital ethnography” (Murthy 2008; Underberg & Zorn 2013), “netnography” (Kozinets 1997, 1998, 2002, 2006), “virtual ethnography” (Hine 2000), “cyber-ethnography” (Hallett & Barber 2014; Keeley-Browne 2010), “web archaeology” (Foot & Schneider 2007; Leung et al. 2001), “technobiography” (Kennedy 2003), “virtual world ethnography” (Boellstorff et al. 2012), “virtual world research” (Rak 2009; Martey & Shiflett 2012), and “social media ethnography” (Postill & Pink 2012).

Christine Hine (2000: 30-33) established ten key principles of what she calls “virtual ethnography” that continue to impact later exercises of digital anthropology.

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She describes virtual ethnography as a method that includes “the sustained presence of an ethnographer in the field setting” to understand the “Internet as problematic” and to be “interpreted and reinterpreted” (2000: 31); investigations into the “site of interaction” that encompasses both “cyberspace” and its interconnectedness to “real life” and “face-to-face interaction” (2000: 31); studies of “the making and remaking of space through mediated interactions” as “mobile” as opposed to “multi-sited” (2000: 31); enquiry that can be “reshaped by concentrating on flow and connectivity rather than location and boundary” (2000: 31); explorations into boundaries of the “virtual” and the “real” and the making of such demarcations (2000: 32); engagement with “spatial” and “temporal dislocation” where an ethnographer’s “immersion in the setting is only intermittently achieved” (2000: 32); an acknowledgement that all perspectives are “necessarily partial” where a “holistic description of any informant, location, or culture is impossible to achieve” (2000: 32); the ethnographer’s experiential “engagement with the medium is a valuable source of insight” in shaping reflexive interactions with informants (2000: 32); the use of technology to render ethnographers both “present” and “absent” to informants via technological and “face-to-face” interactions as an “ethnography *in, of and through* the virtual” (2000: 32); and lastly, an approach that is not “methodologically purist” but “adaptive” to “suit itself to the conditions in which” the ethnographers find themselves (2000: 33).

Elsewhere, cultural anthropological methods and especially ethnography have been (partially) adopted in disciplines, including consumer research, marketing, advertising, media studies, cultural studies, and Internet studies. One early example is in the field of consumer research, within which Kozinets (1997, 1998, 2002, 2006) pioneered the term “netnography”. Kozinets (1997: 471) describes netnography as “the textual output of Internet-related field work”, usually a “written account of on-line cyberculture, informed by the methods of cultural anthropology”. It is tailored towards the study of “consumer behavior of cultures and communities

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present on the Internet” that emerge from “on-line, computer mediated, or Internet-based communications” (Kozinets 1998: 366), such as in “blogs, networked gamespaces, instant messaging chat windows, and mobile technologies” (Kozinets 2006: 281). The strength of netnography is that it is “faster, simpler, and less expensive than traditional ethnography and more naturalistic and unobtrusive than focus groups or interviews” (Kozinets 2002: 61). In addition, netnography can be adopted as a “purely observational method” or integrate “a high degree of participation” (Kozinets 2006: 281). Keeley-Browne (2010: 331-333) highlighted the need to rethink “traditional notion[s]” of the field, and argued for “cyber-ethnography” to in which researchers are “involve[d in] becoming immersed in virtual culture and observing on interactive websites and in virtual communities as issues are discussed”.

My background reading prior to fieldwork had armed me with theoretical knowledge I could potentially mobilize during fieldwork. However, I was unsure of how Influencers would respond to an in-depth academic study on their craft, or whether they would be willing to allow me access into their everyday lives. After all, the only existing reportage on their work was the mainstream press coverage that was generally celebratory and only transient. Under the pressure of a tight candidature timeline and a strict research budget, I felt the need to minimize the risk that I might end up with no willing informants. On a hunch, I decided to plan short-term preliminary fieldwork to gather information before deciding on my research design.

### *Preliminary fieldwork*

I initially emailed twenty Influencers who could be prospective informants and secured consent from six of them to carry out preliminary interviews. I then scheduled a pre-fieldwork reconnaissance to Singapore in December 2011 and January 2012 to gauge interest in my project and assess the extent of access I



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could confidently negotiate during my extended fieldwork. Of the six interviews, three of took place in person, while the other three took place via Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) such as voice chats and video chats. These interviews were a combination of formal and informal questions, as the situation demanded. I explained my research and detailed my proposed method of study to my informants, and allowed them the opportunity to clarify their doubts. Their feedback and suggestions helped to refine the structure of my fieldwork that would take place a year later.

During this time, aspects of the industry to which I was not formally privy were also revealed to me, perhaps because of a more intimate connection when communicating in a private dyad digitally or in the flesh. These six women introduced me to personal friends who were fellow Influencers, thus broadening my pool of informants. In addition, I conducted several one-off interviews with other actors in the blogshop industry, including consumers, designers, wholesale suppliers, and import agents, to obtain background information. With these new insights, I was able to further develop my research questions and read more widely during my pre-field stage back in the University.

At that point, I had not yet developed my etic understandings of digital and physical spaces of communication, but the question that garnered the most insightful responses was, "Would you prefer me to conduct my research entirely online or offline?" The majority felt that while it was possible to develop "real", "genuine", and "meaningful" relationships via CMC, communication in physical settings was still preferred for "the human touch", "personal connection", and "closeness". This came as a surprise to me considering how constantly connected to the "online world" these women were with mobile devices in their hands 24/7, and the frequency with which they shared extensively their personal lives through text and images. Most crucially, these women still desired face-to-face contact despite the fact that they

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had successfully eked out highly lucrative careers based almost entirely on desktop publishing and Internet broadcasting to fans and consumers.

In conducting my research with informants in a physical setting, I could easily draw on established tried-and-tested interview techniques that allowed me to pick up on non-verbal cues, such as body language, facial expressions, and emotional tone in voice, that would enrich the interpretation of my data. This was less possible when conducting fieldwork and interviews digitally, unless my informants were willing to engage in video chats. In physical spaces with our bodies in proximity, there would be more room to personalize our exchanges and receive focused individual attention, as opposed to the Computer-mediated communication where users were increasingly likely to multitask (Kenyon 2008). However, as such a significant portion of this industry's activity is based digitally, conducting my research solely in physical spaces would decontextualize the phenomenon and obscure meaning-making activity that was exclusively conducted on the Internet. I, too, did not subscribe to the notion that "online" research is less valued than its "offline" counterpart or that there was a hierarchy between the two (Boellstorff et al. 2012: 1-12, 65-91). In fact, it was necessary for me to pursue both angles given the scope of my fieldwork and my research design.

In one interview that I had conducted to test out my proposed methodology, one informant's revelations reassured me about my budding preferences towards a dual-pronged approach in studying this industry:

Who I am online is who I am offline. I won't lie online. But I can't possibly post every single thing about myself on my blog too, so if you don't know me personally, you won't know my true personality.

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With particular attention to the (imaginary) online/offline, physical/digital divide and the relationship between and across each side, several scholars called for more nuanced understandings of doing ethnography of, on, and with various Internet cultures. Hallett & Barber (2014: 308) argued that framings such as cyber-ethnography tended to look primarily at “online life” as represented by “blogs, chat rooms, and other online interactions” and required more nuanced approaches to Internet culture. In what they term “digital ethnography”, Underberg & Zorn (2013: 10) call for “a method for representing real-life cultures through combining the characteristic features of digital media with the elements of story”. They posit that this engagement be done through an anthropologist’s “interactivity and immersion” with the group (cf. Burrell 2009). Similarly, Murthy (2008: 839) argues that digital ethnography’s prominent research instruments include online questionnaires, digital video, social networking websites, and blogs, but posits that these methods seem to be “covert”. He thus argues for “a balanced combination of physical and digital ethnography” to enable researchers “a larger and more exciting array of methods to tell social stories” and to “demarginalize the voice of respondents in these accounts”.

Looking at “virtual worlds” such as Second Life and other MMORPGs (Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games) and “virtual research”, Rak (2009: 148) describes “virtual worlds” as “having additional ‘language’ and customs which their participants adopt”, where “identity can be translated from the physical world to the virtual, resulting in a self which occupies a rhetorical third space, where virtual identities have real effects, and real identities operate virtually”.

Kennedy (2003: 120-139) astutely encapsulates this study of how technology use influences daily lives in the term “technobiography:

[i]f we want to understand lived experiences of the Internet, we need to study

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not only online, virtual representations of selves, but also lives and selves situated within the social relations of the consumption and production of information and communication technologies (Kennedy 2003: 120).

Helen Kennedy (2003: 120-121) describes “technobiography” as “individual experience stories” based on the “subtle and nuanced differences in each individual’s techno-experiences” as a method to study “the relationship between online and offline lives in particular”. Technobiography “makes it possible to examine online lives in offline contexts, and so facilitates moving beyond a focus merely on virtual representations of lives and selves, to a fuller understanding of the social relations of the production and consumption of Information and Communication Technologies”. She supports this with Rob Shields’ argument that boundaries are increasingly being transcended in “virtual identity”:

The Internet creates a *crisis of boundaries* between the real and the virtual, between time zones and between spaces, near and distant. Above all, boundaries between bodies and technologies, between our sense of our self and our sense of our changing roles: the personae we may play or the “hats we wear” in different situations are altered (Shields 1996: 7).

Postill & Pink’s (2012: 3) work on “social media ethnography” looked at “‘intensities’ of social media activity and sociality that span online and offline and also have repercussions in other web and face-to-face contexts”. This is also referred to as “internet-related ethnography” as opposed to “internet ethnography”, since “social media practices cannot be defined as phenomena that take place exclusively online” (2012: 3), and is the closest to my ethnographic practice. As an ethnography grounded in anthropological pursuits of understanding everyday systems of practice and beliefs, I situate myself as conducting research into Influencers’ relationships with social media, technology, and devices.

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Like Postill & Pink (2012), I wanted to study Influencers' Internet-related and Internet-based practices that overlap between physical and digital spaces, and decided to structure fieldwork in *both* digital and physical settings. Given that I was interested in these Influencers' practices and understandings of their commodified personae as experienced and lived, I chose to design a collaborative approach comprising participant observation, personal interviews, and web archaeology in digital settings, and participant observation, personal interviews, and archival research in physical settings.

*Informants*

Murphy (2011: 385) notes that most media ethnographies are typically classified as audience ethnography (i.e. media reception ethnographies, media use, fan studies) or media production ethnographies (i.e. media professionals in cultural industries, creative personnel involved in alternative media, non-commercial citizens' media). More specifically, Horst et al. (2012: 86) assert that media ethnography focuses on the audience, whereas broader "ethnographic approaches to digital media" focus on "the affordances and constraints implicated in digital media technologies". With my primary focus on Influencers and their everyday practices, audience ethnography concentrating on followers falls outside the scope of this study and warrants future research.

In response to the growing intersection of Internet cultures and phenomena occupying physical and digital spaces, Postill (2015) outlines six ways of doing digital ethnography, by following: "the viral contents", "the digital technologies", "the digital technologists", "a single field of contention", "a series of fields of contention", and "the protest temporalities" (cf. Burrell 2009). As discussed in chapter two, I conceptualize the blogshop, commercial lifestyle blog, and Influencer commerce

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industries as related but distinctive economies that can be conceptualized as “a series of fields of contention”. I have also followed “viral contents” in my discussion of attention in chapter nine, although my approach principally follows “the digital technologists”, who are Influencers.

To assemble potential informants, I sieved through blog directories and local Internet databases, as well as online forums where users gather to discuss Influencers. In my initial shortlist, I briefly relied on metrics, selecting Influencers based on the popularity and/or success of their websites, measured by a combination of: 1) the number of visitor counts; 2) the number of users who subscribed to them; 3) the frequency of mentions and strength of presence on the Internet and/or mainstream media; and 4) recommendations or mentions by individuals in the industry with whom I have been in contact.

The most convenient and inexpensive way for me to make initial contact with potential informants was via email correspondence, given that it was an industry practice to advertise one’s email address on social media platforms to facilitate business enquiries. On some occasions, I left queries in the comments section of blogs and social media feeds. I often suspected my comments were lost among the thousands of others from followers. However, commenting on social media seemed to be effective, as Influencers would reply to my email soon after. While seemingly the least officious avenue for initiating contact, this proved to be efficient. This also established the fact that the Influencers I approached did indeed read every single comment from followers across multiple platforms. I gave brief explanations of my research and sent them a detailed Participant Information Form (PIF), specified the level of commitment envisioned in this project, and answered their queries electronically. Influencers who were interested in participating in this research were then sent a Participant Consent Form (PCF) that stated our mutual responsibilities and rights as researcher and informant. The bulk of the Influencers I interviewed

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eventually negotiated these forms and clarified their queries with me in person when we met in the flesh.

Initially, my snowball sampling was slow but steady. By endorsing their interview/observation experience with others, many Influencers became my gatekeepers to other Influencers, many of whom turned out to be prospective Influencers I had initially emailed to no avail. Upon making my acquaintance, they often apologized for not having responded. They variously explained that they had been doubtful of my intentions, that they were not interested, or that they had simply forgotten about it.

Interestingly, at the midway mark of my physical fieldwork, my snowball sampling had shifted from “personal endorsement” to “friendly competition” – a surge of Influencers approached me and offered to be interviewed. I later learnt that word had spread among small factions of the industry that some Influencers had been interviewed by an academic researcher, while others had not. At that time, I was selectively documenting (non-confidential) snippets of interviews and observations with high-profile Influencers (with their permission) on my blog throughout fieldwork, and this archive turned out to be a useful reference for potential informants to gauge their interest in my project (cf. Sanjek & Tratner 2015). Additionally, after each interview I would add my informants as “friends” on my research Facebook account, and prospective informants could trace these digital networks to ascertain my credibility. I found myself in a favorable position because the small but friendly competition that broke out among my (potential) informants meant that many of them did not want to be left out of this experience. Senft (2008: 100-101) notes that

[o]nline and off, we are more likely to trust, for instance, a ‘friend of a friend,’ for reasons both rational and irrational – when we meet someone offline who

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has the imprimatur of another friendship, we are likely to extend ourselves to that person without much deliberation. This impulsive, instinctive quality of trust is one reason why the act of befriending people in online social networks causes angst and consternation. When someone asks me to acknowledge her as a member of one of my online social networks, she is requesting explicit affirmation – a conscious, overt decision of a kind that I usually leave to my social autopilot. If I grant that acknowledgement, I am not just extending trust, I am *announcing* that I am extending trust, and implicitly encouraging others in my network to do so as well.

I certainly experienced such “extensions” of trust and “affirmations” of my membership in the presence of Influencers whom I had already interviewed or with whom I had spent some time in the field. In group settings, especially in casual contexts such as informal dinners, some Influencers would playfully ask each other if I had interviewed them. On one occasion, one particular Influencer was the only person in the group of six that I had not yet had the chance to interview. I asked if she would like to set up a time to meet the week after, but she immediately responded that she would prefer to speak to me right then, among her peers. Despite being in a rather noisy food court, cumbersomely navigating dinner utensils, I seized the opportunity and recorded our conversation on my iPhone. This turned out to be an exciting insight for me, as I observed the other Influencers eavesdropping and comparing their experiences to our interview, my questions, and their answers, in an adhoc approximate focus group (i.e. “Hey, I also said the same thing *leh!*”, “Oh shucks! I forgot to say that.”; “You see, she is like acting so professional, damn funny!”). Towards the end of my fieldwork, I learnt to leverage on the allure of this “group experience” when I wanted to persuade friends of fellow Influencers to be included in my study.



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This thesis contains information from 190 informants collected intermittently between December 2011 and October 2014. While I had direct, personal contact with 173 of these informants, I felt it necessary to include publicly-accessible material from an additional 17 Influencers' blogs and social media feeds; these individuals were either constantly brought up by my existing informants, were embedded into specific phenomena I was investigating with my existing informants, or were simply too prolific and important in the local industry to ignore. As earlier mentioned, the blogshop and Influencer industry are closely related, thus resulting in several overlapping roles among my informants. As such, the numbers I present below include some overlaps in roles (i.e. Influencers who personally own blogshops, but are also photographers for other Influencers). Of the 190 informants, 78 belong to the blogshop industry and 125 to the Influencer industry. I also note the extent (in-depth or brief) and mode (interviews or Participant Observation) of my engagement with these informants.

Among the 78 informants in the blogshop industry, 13 were blogshop owners (in-depth interviews/PO) from 11 different blogshops because 2 pairs were co-owners. 5 of these blogshop owners were also prolific Influencers. 43 informants were suppliers from 5 different venues in Singapore and Bangkok, among whom brief interviews were conducted. (11 from Platinum Mall in Bangkok, 8 from Far East Plaza in Singapore, 8 from City Plaza in Singapore, 15 from Bugis Village Shopping Centre in Singapore, 1 from Harbourfront Shopping Center in Singapore). 51 informants across 6 different venues in Singapore were owners, organizers, or staff members of collaborative blogshop stores or flea markets in which blogshop owners could rent a rack to display their wares (9 from Haji Lane, 3 from Vivocity Shopping Centre, 3 from Plaza Singapura, 1 from Raffles City Shopping Centre, 2 from Far East Plaza, 6 from a flea market in Sentosa).

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Among the 125 informants in the Influencer industry, 54 were Influencers (22 in-depth interviews and PO, 15 brief interviews and PO, 17 web observation only), and 20 were family and friends of Influencers (in-depth and brief interviews/PO). 4 different Influencer agencies were included in this study to various extents. 34 informants were back-end staff members (5 managers with in-depth interviews/PO, 9 management staff members with in-depth and brief interviews/PO, 8 personal staff of Influencers with brief interviews/PO, 6 photographers with in-depth and brief interviews/PO, and 6 clients with in-depth and brief interviews). 20 informants were followers (12 with in-depth interviews, 8 with brief PO).

Although this thesis is primarily focused on the Influencers' perspectives, the material from informants in the blogshop industry enabled me to piece together the history and setting of the Influencer industry. Informants from the back-end of the Influencer industry and Influencers' personal family and friend circles also enabled me to paint a clearer picture of how Influencers operate on a daily basis. My interactions with Influencers' followers also supplemented my analyses of Influencers' relatability practices.

*Digital fieldwork*

Immersing myself in the Influencer industry was not simply a matter of "liking" a Facebook fan page to get news feeds or joining mailing lists for notifications. As Doheny-Farina (1996: 37) writes, "[y]ou can't subscribe to a community as you subscribe to a discussion group on the net. It must be lived. It is entwined, contradictory, and involves all our senses". In order to access and be socialized into my informants' world, I had to "live" within their shared social space and "perform" as they would. This included adopting communicative and behavioral norms (Martey & Shiflett 2012; Turkle 1995), just as any anthropologist entering a physical field site would. Additionally, being less constricted by geography and

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time, I could explore an updated form of multi-sited ethnography (Banks 2009) where all is required is a desktop and Internet connection in order for me to “travel”. Digital research was also a pragmatic approach to my textual analysis of Influencers’ web presence, where large volumes of data were being added and updated daily.

In “virtual world” platforms such as Second Life, the avatar takes the form of a pixelated body that stands for the person appropriating it for interactions (Boellstorff 2008; Chandler & Roberts-Young 1998). Sherry Turkle (2007) similarly refers to avatars as objects with which to think. Additionally, in the sharing industry (Jarvis 2011) one’s social media accounts become the vehicle for entry into digital communities and interactions with other users. Since Influencers convey their personae and interact with others through social media, I correspondingly embedded myself in some of these spaces.

I diligently kept up-to-date with Influencers’ posts, very occasionally traded comments, compliments, and criticism of their publicized life choices, participated in follower-initiated discussions and polls, and made occasional purchases, just as any member of the Influencer industry in Singapore would have. Depending on their preference, I also maintained contact with Influencers and a handful of newfound industry friends through emails, instant messaging, video chats, or text messages. A few of my interviews occurred innovatively on “digital” platforms: 1) One informant preferred to be interviewed over a span of a week in the form of conversations on WhatsApp, a smartphone messaging app; 2) One informant preferred to type her responses to me using Skype’s chat log function despite being connected to me via video chat; 3) A handful of informants responded to me via Facebook messenger, Twitter direct messaging, and mobile text message, depending on their preference.

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I set up a new Facebook account to interact with fellow industry members and relaunched my academic blog to host the more intimate insights into my research life. On this Facebook account, I added informants as “friends” and subscribed to their Fan Pages for live feeds. I shaped the blog as a chronicle of my research journey and experiences as a postgraduate student so that informants could keep up-to-date with the progress of my research and keep in touch through a medium less formal than email correspondence. The blog also archived all my publications and media mentions about these Influencers and their work. I would send links of my latest blogposts to some of these women and received useful feedback and reflexive commentaries from them occasionally. Some time in late 2011, a very helpful informant introduced me to Instagram and suggested I sign up for an account to connect with Influencers. She earmarked Instagram as the next “social media craze” in Singapore with burgeoning interest from Influencers in her social circle, and told me to “watch out for it”. When I eventually set up my own account among early adopters in Singapore, she was among the first Influencers to “follow” me, and that helped to put me on the radar of other Influencers in the industry.

While I primarily utilize ethnographic methods, a relevant non-ethnographic method I adopt in this thesis is “web archaeology”. While there are contrasting understandings of web archaeology (Harper & Chen 2012: 67), I draw on the broad definition from Leung et al. (2001: 1) that it is the study of the “content of the World Wide Web” as an “artifact”, and from (Rauber et al. 2002) that the method “uses a variety of content representations to study how the Web evolves over time”. Specifically, I adopt the definition of web archaeology from Foot & Schneider (2007), defined as an approach to “infe[r] web practices from artifacts” such as web applications and objects, including “websites”, “virtual billboards”, and “brochureware” (Foot & Schneider 2006: 8-9). For instance, among several web features, Leung et al. (2001: 3) studied “links” that “capture connectivity between websites”.

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Although the authors have mainly focused on large data sets using crawlers to look at algorithmic features, I adopt, modify, and scale down their practice by conducting small-scale (i.e. 190 informants), localized (i.e. Singapore-based) qualitative web archaeology in two areas: firstly, through uncovering and archiving an Influencer's old (discarded) and current blogs and social media platforms, I understand the evolution of their personae and the trajectory of their web presence; secondly, through comparative analyses across several Influencers' blogs and social media platforms, I am able to trace "genealogies of microcelebrity" in which the following, popularity, and status of more prominent Influencers can be rubbed off onto other less prominent Influencers through highly-visible techniques of amping up each others' web exposure and presence (see chapter five).

*Physical fieldwork*

The overall duration of my physical fieldwork spanned between August 2011 and December 2014. As earlier mentioned, my preliminary physical fieldwork took place in December 2011 and January 2012, which prepared me for my extended stretch of physical fieldwork from December 2012 to July 2013. Additionally, I made several returns in December 2013, January, June, and December 2014 for between two and five weeks each time. It was during these periods that I got to observe first hand the front- and back-end of Influencer operations and follower reactions in the wake of a string of controversies (see chapter ten). These return visits to the physical field site gave me a retrospective insight into how quickly yet subtly the industry has changed since my initial inquiry in 2007, and since I embarked on digital fieldwork in August 2011.

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During my extended physical fieldwork, I served as an intern at two major blogshops, a shadow manager<sup>8</sup> at an Influencer management firm, and a personal assistant (PA) to three of the country's most prolific Influencers. My work at the Influencer management firm enabled access to a stable of Influencers on a daily basis. I was also allowed access to some client pitches, various exclusive Influencer-only functions and parties, and on different occasions, accompanied up to four Influencer managers who chaperoned Influencers on various assignments. On a daily basis, I was involved in administrative work in the blogshop and Influencer industries, including inventory taking, the packing and mailing out of parcels, attending meetings with prospective business partners and clients, the sourcing and management of models, the photo-taking process, business marketing, and maintenance of the webpage. I also convened with several other blogshop, models, manufacturers, and followers from the Influencer industry at mass meet-ups, flea markets, and warehouse sales in various capacities. At Influencer events, I participated as a shadow manager, an Influencer's personal assistant, a management's staffer, an academic researcher, and a follower. These roles allowed me close and frequent access to members of the Influencer industry and fostered trusting relationships that eventually made me privy to the inner workings of the Influencer industry in Singapore. Although my schedule was highly flexible to accommodate Influencers' events, I generally spent half a week stationed with the Influencer management firm, and half the week with the Influencers for whom I was a PA or blogshop assistant. This included weekends and public holidays, and my work hours varied with the shortest being a 0800-1300hrs Saturday, and the longest a 0700-0200hrs Friday.

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<sup>8</sup> I was allowed to accompany and assist or "shadow" Influencer managers at events and in the office, in a capacity similar to that of an intern, under the guidance of at least one Influencer manager most of the time.

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Much like Abu-Lughod's (1985: 20) experience as a guest and daughter of a Bedouin household, there were moments where I experienced a sense of "us versus them", in which being acknowledged as an "us" by different groups of people brought me a sense of comfort and accomplishment. Despite extending hospitality to me as a guest in our daily interactions, the Influencer agencies and Influencers with whom I worked would introduce me as a staff member (my official titles included "Research Scientist", "Intern", "Customer Service Assistant", and "Marketing Assistant") whenever we met with clients. On occasion at public events, Influencer managers would put Influencers under my care and assign me with important duties, such as safekeeping their valuables or speaking to clients on their behalf. At other instances, some Influencers would relay to me personal grievances about their agencies about which they did not feel comfortable speaking to their managers. By clearly identifying myself as an academic researcher (as opposed to a prospective agency employee or Influencer) from the beginning, I found myself favorably situated as an intermediary among clients, agencies/managers, and Influencers, and earned access to various types of "inside" information. Having clinched access to the Influencer industry, I next had to familiarize myself with the tacit communicative norms Influencers shared.

### **Communicative norms**

Looking at "virtual world ethnography", Boellstorff et al. (2012) detail five considerations for ethnographers to reflexively maintain their researcher persona within and out of the field. In brief, these include fine-tuning the physical work environment (2012: 72), pre-empting technological issues (2012: 72–73), obtaining proficiency in the necessary software (2012: 73–75), constructing an effective avatar that reflects one's "social life inworld" identity (2012: 75), and determining one's degree of participation and presence in the virtual worlds (2012: 76). The authors also caution against the propensity for some researchers to engage in

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experimentalism, or a “faux experimental ploy, with neither the rigor of genuine controlled experimentation nor the contextualized knowledge of ethnographic study” (2012: 90). Instead, they highlight the need for ethnographers to deliberately engage within their field sites, while simultaneously observing the potential consequences of their social interaction.

The analyses of communicative norms that I present here were crucial for the shaping of my methodologies. These initial findings allowed me to better frame how communication with my informants was having an impact on my methods, and the type of responses and material to which I would be privy. This is a necessary background to specific aspects of interactions among Influencers and their following per se (see chapter eight). Thus, I feel the need to present these observations in order to clarify some of my own strategies of communication throughout fieldwork, and my etic understandings of the functions they served. In my attempt to adopt the language of my informants, I observed interactions across their blogshops, blogs, and social media feeds for three months before engaging in such “blog speak” during my digital and physical exchanges with them.

### *Language*

Influencers have crafted their own unique language over time, drawing from Singlish<sup>9</sup> and Internet conventions such as abbreviations, acronyms, bricolage, emoticons/emoji, keyboard symbols, leetspeak<sup>10</sup>, and onomatopoeic spellings. Singapore is a multicultural society whose citizens use a wide range of languages and dialects, such as Malay, Tamil, Mandarin, Cantonese, Hokkien, Teochew, and

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<sup>9</sup> A creole of Singaporean colloquial English.

<sup>10</sup> Also known as “1337” or “l33t”, leetspeak is a stylized web-writing alphabet that appropriates a combination of upper and lower case letters and numerals to replace Latin letters. See Blashki & Nichol (2005), and Ross (2006).



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Hakka. As such, Influencers commonly intersperse English — the national business language that is dominantly used — with words from these other languages. Expressive interjections such as “*lah*<sup>11</sup>”, “*leh*”, “*mah*”, and “*meh*”, among others, are also distinctive features of Singlish (Forbes 1993), and usually served as conversation softeners or to convey emotions.

In order to effectively communicate with Influencers, I learnt and adopted their language from the onset. I was well versed in Singlish, although their Internet slang required some learning. However, I soon discovered many words that were ambiguous in usage and bore no communal, consensual, or consistent meaning throughout the industry. For example, in some settings, the term “real” in the catch phrase “in real life” denoted an “offline” experience, while in others “real” referred to some measure of genuineness or authenticity. Without a go-to glossary list, I found the need to clarify individual users’ meanings of ambiguous terms through further questioning, and kept up with newly created and evolving neologisms.

*Textual intimacy*

Influencers crafted and conveyed intimacy via text in a number of ways. Most often, they tended to heavily use terms of endearment in their conversations. My informants freely adopted personal referents such as “babe”/“baby”, “dear”/“dearie”, “honey”/“hunny”/“hunn”, “sweet”/“sweetie”/“sweetie pie”, and “girl”/“gal”/“gurl” in their exchanges. Such “girl talk” (Currie 1999) appears to be a strategy to stimulate a sense of closeness and friendship despite these women never having met in person, and at times even being complete strangers on the Internet.

They also adopted informal modifiers to emphasize their emotions, such as “super

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<sup>11</sup> In Malay and Indonesian, “*lah*” is used as a suffix. However, as informed by my interactions throughout fieldwork, it is used as an interjection in Singlish.

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duper”, “hyper”, “mega”, and “to the max” which is often abbreviated to “ttm”. Recently added to this list is the use of “x” followed by an intentionally long string of numbers representing a “multiplication” and thus exaggeration of a particular feeling. For example, “smile x7439528475” would imply that the user is exceedingly happy, while “ate x839585 cupcakes” would imply that the user has consumed a large number of cupcakes. This informalization of language tended to portray Influencers as more casual and approachable.

### *Emoticons/emoji as signifiers*

Emoticons are “graphological realizations of facial expressions” (Zappavigna 2012: 71) using keyboard characters, while emoji are small digital icons used to express ideas and emotion. Both feature prominently among Influencers. The methodology I developed needs to account for particular formations that emerge from social media-based/informed communication, particularly since paralinguistic indicators such as like emoticons and emoji operate within networks of power and knowledge, as “linguistic currency” (Herring & Zelenkauskaitė 2009: 3) that clearly differentiate members from outsiders. For instance, one memorable incident was when a Influencer asked if I was upset with her because I had responded to her text message with a mere “k.”. She had found it difficult to situate my emotional state (i.e. “I didn’t know if you were angry or if you just don’t use smileys”) because I had not included any emoticons to signal my mood. She also explained to me that “k.” with a period appeared curt and less palatable than its variants, “ok”, “okay”, “ok.”, and “okay.”. It would have been preferred if I had responded with an emoticon, such as in “okay :)”, but better still if I had taken the effort to scroll through my keyboard to insert an emoji instead, as in “okay 😊”. My texting *faux pas* underscored the tacit communicative norms Influencers seemed to collectively enact, but to which I was not (yet) privy. Despite having previously established good rapport with my informants, this incident caused me to lapse into a temporary

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frame of unfamiliarity and strangeness. I became even more aware of how anthropologists “make the familiar strange by their presence and questioning” (Malefyt & Morais 2012: 75), and how my accidental disruption of an otherwise mundane routine uncovered implicit communicative norms and rituals that facilitated social relations among my informants. From then, I was careful to construct my textual responses conscientiously, noting that they signify “affective discourse” (Zappavigna 2012: 71), beginning with an emoji keyboard app I immediately downloaded to my smartphone.

As observed by Stark & Crawford (2014), emoticons and emoji can be employed to either substitute or add to text, and bear many functions as “discourse markers” that “aid interpersonal negotiation” (Zappavigna 2012: 72). Emoticons mostly featured in blogposts and their associated comments section, since these platforms are less likely to accommodate emoji, unlike mobile apps such as Twitter and Instagram. The most common emoticons were heart shapes, smiley faces, and sad faces.

:) or :D – happy

:( or D: – sad

:’( – crying

>:( – frown, connoting anger

>.< – embarrassed

<3 – heart, connoting love

</3 – broken heart, connoting disappointment or sorrow

/\*(‘\_\_\_\_’)\* – shaking a pompom, connoting celebrations

\\_(ツ)\_/ – shrug, connoting “I don’t know” or “whatever”

(ノ °□° ) ノ ㇿ ( ——— ) – flipping a table, connoting frustration

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Like the use of terms of endearment, emoticons/emoji could serve to foster closeness among Influencers and followers. Informants mentioned that they “made everything cheery” or “made things less serious” between users. As creative and sometimes colorful emblems, they livened up conversations and lubricated exchanges.

Emoticons/emoji were also used as euphemisms or mild substitutes for expressions that were otherwise offensive. The most frequent ones were sad faces to indicate negative words and dollar signs to represent expensiveness:

don't buy from [name of blogshop]! quality is so ☹ ☹ ☹ !!!!!

i don't understand why ppl [people] think she is pretty. her looks are so ☹

hey babe! i really wanna buy the [name of item] but it's so \$\$\$!

Emoticons/emoji were also used to water down or negate harsh comments, in a bid to diffuse tension (Zappavigna 2012: 77). This is done in two ways. Firstly, an emoticon/emoji supporting the contents or mood of a sentence is added to emphasize one's intent, elicit sympathy and thus deflect potentially negative responses:

sorry hunn it's all sold out ☹ ☹ ☹ not bringing in anymore stock!!

*hola*<sup>12</sup> readers! sorry for not posting >.< i've been so so so stressed out at school </3 ☹ !!!

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<sup>12</sup> Simple foreign terms were often mobilized in these exchanges as a mark of cultural capital and out of playfulness.

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Secondly, an emoticon/emoji contrasting the contents or mood of a sentence is deployed to diffuse pre-empted backlash or negative responses. In addition to diffusing tension, this served the function of signifying followers' solidarity (Zappavigna 2012: 77) with Influencers despite the gentle critique:

hey girl, you state that your new model is uk6 but she looks much larger. i've seen her in real life and i don't think she is that small? no offense yah :)

why are your recent posts all advertorials? what happened to all your personal posts? hope you're not just concerned with the money now <3

In terms of use, emoticons/emoji could substitute for text, such as "I <3 you" to stand for "I love you", or add to text such as "I'm upset :(". In general, and as demonstrated in my inappropriate text reply "k.", emoticons/emoji have been extensively entrenched into the daily language of the Influencer industry to the extent that conversing online without the use of any emoticons would come across as being "rude", "too serious", or "unfriendly".

In another memorable incident, I found myself as a co-chaperone for three Influencers at the Social Star Awards (see chapter two). Prior to their red carpet debut, the Influencers were moving between changing rooms and waiting venues in Marina Bay Sands, in full view of followers who had gathered in designated barricaded areas with placards and banners in support of their favorite Influencer. Soon, the Influencers began receiving Tweets from these followers, many of whom were showering compliments and praise for their red carpet attire, although a handful of haters had begun to broadcast mean comments. One Influencer received a Tweet from a follower and could not tell if they were a supportive reader or a hater. The Tweet mentioned that the Influencer's dress was far too long for her short frame, and that the tail end of the gown must have been "sweeping the floor".

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However, there were no other indications to suggest if the Tweeter meant this maliciously or was simply stating an observation. The Influencer decided to talk this out with me, and was deciding between a curt response or a cheeky one. We eventually decided on the coy response, “Did I sweep you off your feet?”, which the Influencer felt displayed her confidence. However, concerned that this may also come off as being “arrogant” or “cocky”, she spent a significant amount of time deliberating over which “smiley face” emoji with which to end the Tweet, indicating her tacit knowledge that the emoji would lubricate the delivery of her potentially “snarky” response.

On platforms that support the use of emoji, these small digital icons are so critical as conversation softeners and marks of friendliness that a regular textual conversation between my informants and I would be peppered with emoji (Figure 3.1):

Hello! 😊  
**Hi Elaine** 😊 **Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule for this online interview. Would you like to begin our Skype chat? I could give you a call whenever you are ready.**  
 Oh! so its done through voice call? 😊  
**Hopefully, since it would be easier for you to convey your ideas** 😊 If you are uncomfortable with that, we could always communicate via text like this.  
 Cause I thought it'd be better for me to reply to you via text as I can do stuffs while answering you! Really sorry about it.  
**No problem at all** 😊 Shall I begin?  
 Yes dear no problem 😊 Thanks for accommodating!  
**No worries**

Figure 3. 1

## **Transitioning from the digital to the physical**

Given that my initial contact with women in the industry was via the Internet, meeting them in person for the first time was a fascinating experience that required much flexibility and adaptation on my part. This section illuminates three aspects of shifting communication from the digital to the physical, specifically, the transference of intimacy, verbalizing cyber lingo, and the presence of devices and technology.

### *Intimacy transference*

After having conversed with Influencers digitally, I was to meet with them in person. Like them, I had learnt to adopt terms of endearment in a bid to reciprocate the intimacy and friendliness they had shown me through the months. Apart from issues specific to my research that we had been discussing, my informants had also come to talk to me about their personal lives, especially about romantic relationships and their personal ambition. Unlike followers with whom Influencers met regularly but only for brief periods, my relationship with these women was to be long-term. Unlike adoring followers, I was approaching them as a peer, attempting to understand their worldview. I generally felt welcomed and trusted, as reflected in the numerous instances where these women revealed sensitive facts and figures to me, reiterating the confidentiality of issues to which the general public would not be privy.

To be honest, some of my initial physical meetings were uncomfortable and even “awkward”, in the words of one Influencer when we were reminiscing about becoming friends. We had established intimacy within the spaces we shared digitally, and many of them had spent weeks referring to me with a host of terms of endearment. Yet, meeting for the first time, we could not figure out how these

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textual intimacies mapped onto physical intimacies. I never knew when a first-time physical introduction called for a formal handshake, a friendly smile, a cheeky wink, or a prolonged hug, and got the impression that the Influencers themselves were attempting to work this out. Some Influencers continued where we left off and spoke to me with great ease; it felt as if we had been personal friends for a long time. Others were unable to obscure their discomfort and felt distant, as if we were starting over as strangers, despite already having been acquainted digitally. The intimacy established through digital communications was not always immediately or wholly transferred into physical settings. Maneuvering this initial extent of bodily contact required a quick assessment of my informants' body language and an equal reciprocal response from me.

On other occasions in the later stage of my fieldwork, I realize that some information to which I was privy and informed via digital media such as emails, text messages, or messaging apps was not to be mentioned during conversations in the flesh. I quickly learnt that there were particular topics that were confined to digital platforms because the Influencers felt more comfortable and at ease with mediated technology, whereas negotiations in the flesh required too much emotional labor and impression management. For this reason, there were several occasions where I pursued follow-up questions via text message or messaging apps only after the Influencer and I had departed and gone home for the day.

*Verbal Internet lingo*

My informants frequently verbalized acronyms and emoticons/emoji usually only adopted in digital media. In the case of the former, some women would spell out "LOL" meaning to "laugh out loud" in place of actually laughing at a witty remark or funny scene. It was ironic that some said it in a deadpan tone with a straight face. Some other abbreviations voiced were "BRB" for "be right back", "TTFN" for "tata



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for now”, and “TTYL” for “talk to you later”.

A handful of informants also articulated with words emoticons/emoji in our verbal exchanges:

Me: ... So were you offended?

Influencer: Huh, no *lah* ... *smiley face* ...

Me: Haha, I see you really love floral prints

Influencer: Yah! I super *heart* them!

Expressive interjections, such as “haha” which denotes laughter, and “sigh” which denotes exasperation were also adopted in verbal exchanges in place of non-verbal paralinguistic cues:

*Sigh*, actually I’m very tired.

She’s quite witty *lah*, *haha*.

Verbally, many of these acronyms, emoticons/emoji, and expressive interjections contained the same or an even greater number of syllables as the phrases they replaced. Expressing conventional non-verbal cues through these articulated thoughts also required more effort than actually conveying one’s thoughts through body language. The verbalizing of Internet-based neologisms and slang thus did not appear to be utilized for convenience; perhaps they had bled into everyday conversations out of habit, given the time my informants spent on digital media.

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### *Devices and technology*

A vast majority of my informants depended on digital media and portable devices during our conversations in physical settings. They would browse the Internet on their smartphones, iPads, and laptops to show me images of the people or objects to which they were referring. A handful also referenced blogposts they had published on their devices, as opposed to spontaneously responding to me verbally. For instance, when asked why she began blogging, one Influencer pulled up an old blogpost in which she recounted the beginnings of her career, handed me her laptop, and said that I could read it off the screen before continuing the conversation. Another Influencer whipped out her smartphone to show me the Instagram profiles of Influencers about whom she was talking, while yet another Influencer showed me her Twitter stream to demonstrate her engagement with followers.

Additionally, a couple of informants have on occasion typed out their responses on smartphones and handed them to me for viewing. This was because the issue discussed was delicate, and they did not feel comfortable verbalizing some sensitive information aloud, or because they were simply more comfortable communicating textually during some portions of the interview. Hence, even though the mode of our communication in “real life” exchanges was in a physical space and our interactions took place in physical settings, communicative conventions from digital media often bled through seamlessly.

I had also obtained a digital camera and voice recorder to use throughout fieldwork. However, I quickly realized that these instruments were not only cumbersome, but also affected my informants' composure. Some appeared slightly inhibited in the presence of the voice recorder, stealing glances at it during our

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conversations or shifting their bodies further away from the microphone as our conversation progressed. At various events where I accompanied Influencers, the digital camera tended to encourage others to wonder if I was a (prospective) Influencer. In those instances, I felt my “managerial”, “personal assistant”, or “intern” back-end position was not clearly marked at events because I appeared as if I was an aspiring Influencer of whom no one had heard, and prospective informants seemed hesitant to divulge much when I approached them for interviews.

As soon as I learnt that lugging around a high-quality digital camera was a status symbol among Influencers, I decided to switch to using my portable and nondescript iPhone 5 for audio recordings and to take photographs. This was not only convenient, but also allowed me to blend in with young followers in Singapore, among whom there is a high smartphone penetration rate (Media Research Asia 2013; Singh 2014). In other words, despite carrying out the same recording activities, doing so with an iPhone was more acceptable and less attention-grabbing than if I had used my “high-tech” devices.

## **Ethical considerations**

Influencers are intentionally public with their blogposts and social media feeds. Since an increase in readership corresponds with an increase in revenue, Influencers publish to reach the widest following possible. Given the highly public nature of Influencers’ work, consent and attribution were my key concerns. As I had anticipated, many Influencers requested to have interview quotes and references attributed and linked to their blogs and other social media feeds. Some Influencers mentioned either explicitly or in passing that my research would most certainly generate publicity for their platforms. Many others did not feel the need to give me consent to do research on them, citing the fact that the material I could publicly

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access was simultaneously available to millions of Internet users. In this section, I outline these deliberations and the decisions I have made in carrying out this research.

### *Negotiating consent*

The 22 Influencers with whom I conducted in-depth interviews and extended participant observation (PO) endorsed the Participant Information Form (PIF) and Participant Consent Form (PCF) (see appendix E) when I solicited their participation in my research. The 15 Influencers with whom I conducted brief interviews/PO were transient actors I met in one-off settings. As such, I was unable to obtain written consent from them. However, as a rule of thumb, in all our introductions I ensured that my researcher role and project were made explicit to them, and that they were comfortable speaking to me in that context. Additionally, 17 Influencers whose industry presence was too prolific, embedded, or important for me to ignore are included peripherally in this study. While I was unable to obtain written consent from them, I ensured that I made the effort to reach each of them at least twice either via their blogs and social media feeds, through fellow Influencers, or through their managers. As a compromise, I ensured that they were indeed prolific Influencers whose digital presence was publicly disseminated to a large audience of more than 50,000 followers, as an adaptation from media scholar Marwick (2015: 145) who assessed popular and public Instagram accounts as having more than 10,000 followers. In addition, I only included publicly accessible material from their blogs and social media platforms. All other informants in the blogshop and Influencer industries spoke to me in my capacity as an academic researcher and were given the option to retract any statements they did not want to be included or made public.

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In seeking formal consent, I was surprised at how casual and blasé a handful of the Influencers were. Some did not bother to read the documents I handed them, but understood that I needed their formal consent and simply asked where they had to put their signature. Others only skimmed through the text very quickly and asked me if there was any thing crucial they absolutely “needed to know”. A few said they “trusted” me, or that they believed I would not be malicious since my inquiries were “for school” or for “research purposes”. Obtaining consent from my informants in person was generally a painless and easy task.

In other instances, consent had to be obtained via CMC, such as via video chat, instant messaging, or email. In a majority of these instances, Influencers were found to address and give consent even more candidly. I began my Skype chat with Collette in my usual routine, by sending her electronic copies of the PIF and PCF, and allowing her as much time as she needed with them. I said that we could formally begin the interview any time she desired. When she gave me the signal, I asked if she consented to the terms listed on the documents. Wearing a perplexed look, Collette responded, “Okay... what do I say?”, trailing off in giggles. I was caught off guard by her question and replied that she could simply give me her consent. “Yah, I consent?” she responded, half-questioningly and still trailing off in giggles at the awkwardness of our verbal exchange negotiating consent.

In a related incident, Jayne went through the consent documents and asked, “Do you need me to sign the form? No need right?” She implied that coming on to Skype to chat with me was already indicative of her consent to our interview, and did not feel the need for a formal document. I suggested that she give me her verbal consent to proceed with the interview, and send the initialed forms back to me at her convenience. I experienced a similar situation with Elaine who, upon reading the two documents, asked if it was “possible for [me] to help [her] key in

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[her consent] instead". She felt that simply listing her full name was sufficient and official enough to pass as formal consent.

All these instances suggested to me that while I was focused on the technical procedure of obtaining formal consent for my study, the Influencers I approached were largely unconcerned about sharing their personal lives with me through participant observation and personal interviews, much less the publicly accessible data on their blogs and social media platforms. Therefore, I paid close attention to these issues, eventually culminating in an analysis of the lifecycle of commoditized privacy I present in chapter five.

*Identity disclosure*

Although I had offered my informants anonymity and pseudonymity in all instances, almost all of them were happy to be identified. Influencers said they "didn't mind" being revealed, that publishing their attributable identities "didn't matter", that there was "no difference" whether or not I employed pseudonyms or used their legal names or Influencer monikers given the publicness of their personae. However, no one objected to being anonymized or referred to by a pseudonym, and generally left these decisions to my good judgment. Only a handful of Influencers indicated explicitly when particular conversations or information they related to me had to be non-attributable, mostly because it implicated other Influencers in the industry or dealt with sensitive "insider" information. As a compromise, I acknowledge my informants by their Influencer monikers wherever possible, but adopt pseudonyms in instances where I feel their identity ought to be protected.

There were instances where I have chosen to attribute quotes and recounts from the same informant to more than one pseudonym, in order to prevent savvy insiders from piecing together a coherent life history and outing my informants. This

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did not affect my analysis or the presentation of my data, as I was less interested in a coherent life history of particular Influencers, as opposed to studying their everyday practices as a collective. In instances where I rely more on web archaeology and content analysis of images (see chapter eight), I have preserved the Internet handles of Influencers in all instances where the information and analyses are not detrimental in any way in the foreseeable future, and to honor my informants' earlier wishes to be recognized for their craft.

There were other instances of high profile controversies involving Influencers that were difficult to anonymize or refer to without potentially identifying the Influencers in question. This was because these issues were highly specific, and received extensive publicity and attention from mainstream media coverage at the national scale, and even trended on Facebook or Twitter for a period of time. In these cases, I draw on publicly accessible commentaries and news reports wherever significant to my discussion and employ pseudonyms for non-key actors (see chapter nine). To the best of my abilities, quotes previously obtained directly from publicly accessible blogs and social media feeds, but have (at the time of writing) been deleted were paraphrased to prevent traceable data from being found via backtracking or a simple Internet search.

I also realized that not all the information Influencers shared with me could be explicitly mentioned in my thesis. Having developed close relationships with several of them, some snippets were revealed to me in the capacity of a personal friend, and others when the Influencers were in particularly vulnerable states, such as being inebriated or sorrowful from a breakup. As such, I have chosen to omit from my thesis the information offered to me under comprising conditions, out of respect for my informants.

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## **Qualitative analysis**

I adopt Glaser's (1978) Grounded Theory to methodically analyze and evaluate my findings. Glaser states, "Grounded Theory is based on the systematic generating of theory from data, that itself is systematically obtained from social research" (1978: 2). It allows for an organic and rigorous development of theory that is true to the data gathered. I was sensitive to all the data I was collecting and avoided filtering out any information during fieldwork (Glaser 1978: 2-3). As I grew more familiar with my field and had formulated a number of categories for open coding – which entailed developing labels for broad categories of insights that emerged organically from the data – I became more focused and conscientiously sampled my data along the core themes of my research question (Glaser 1978: 46).

Post-fieldwork, I began analyzing my data with open codes including "identity", "gender", "class", "relationships", and "technology", which later developed into the five facets I detail in this thesis: personae, femininities, taste, intimacies, and attention. Eventually, my codes became higher ordered and more specific through axial coding, where I attempted to identify the relationship between my open codes. Lastly, I progressed to selective coding, where I further refined and developed the emergent concepts to formulate empirically grounded theory. For instance, "gender" was broken down into "gender performance face-to-face", "gender portrayal on social media", and "gendered practices of consumption", to list a few, before I eventually conceptualized "cyber-femininities" and the three enactments of "agentic cute" (see chapter six). I follow Glaser (1978: 55) in utilizing "substantive codes" to "conceptualize the empirical" data, and "theoretical codes" to abstract the relationships among these substantive codes in relation to my research question.



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## **Conclusion**

Having noted the cultural specificities in Singapore and the organization of the Influencer industry, in this chapter I have detailed my research design, employing a combination of digital and physical fieldwork comprising participant observation, personal interviews, web archaeology, and archival research. As the first in-depth study into Influencer commerce in Singapore, I felt it necessary to choose methodologies that mirror the activities of my informants and illuminate my understandings of their cultural practices. For instance, I noted reactions from my informants when I transited from digital to physical fieldwork, and learnt that language, textual intimacies, emoticons/emoji, and the use of devices and technology were inseparable from the construction of Influencer personae. These initial findings allowed me to better frame how communication with my informants was having an impact on my method (such as my “k.” *faux pas*), and the type of responses and material to which I would be privy (such as texting each other despite being physically seated together). I felt the need to present these observations in order to clarify some of my own strategies of communication throughout fieldwork, and my etic understandings of the function of these norms in the industry. I also outlined some key ethical considerations in negotiating consent and managing the identity disclosure of my informants, and explained the formulation of theory in this thesis. While my ethnography of Influencer commerce is unique to Singapore, the next chapter outlines key academic work in related fields elsewhere, in which I ground my analyses.

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*Chapter four: Theoretical inspirations*  
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**CHAPTER FOUR: THEORETICAL INSPIRATIONS**

**Situating Influencer Commerce**

In this thesis, I argue that Influencers make themselves “relatable” through the vernacular of five key tenets: personae, femininities, taste, intimacies, and attention. More precisely, I argue that Influencers calibrate extremes within each tenet: between the privacy and publicness with regards to personae (chapter five); between agency and vulnerability with regards to femininities (chapter six); between aspiration and emulation with regards to taste (chapter seven); between the personal and the commercial with regards to intimacies (chapter eight); and finally, between the mundane and the spectacular with regards to attention (chapter nine).

This thesis does not claim to be a holistic documentation of Influencer “culture”. Instead, by focusing on the practices of one segment of Influencer commerce – specifically that of Singaporean Influencers originating from the lifestyle blogging industry between the mid-2000s to mid-2010s – this thesis offers insight into the micropolitics of everyday life in Influence commerce. As earlier noted, much of what is written textualizes the usually unarticulated and indeed inarticulable aspects of Influencer practice deemed to be collective tacit knowledge (see chapter three). As Abu-Lughod writes, “[w]hether conceived as a set of behaviors, customs, traditions, rules, plans, recipes, instructions or programs... culture is learned and can change” (1991: 144). The practices analyzed here are similarly a product of their time, situated in a transient period where Influencer commerce is rapidly diversifying, professionalizing, and gaining mainstream attention internationally.

The importance of this ethnography is therefore two-fold: 1) by locating itself in the decade marking the genesis and current peak of Influencer commerce, this ethnography crucially historicizes the sociocultural and political contexts –

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consumption and consumerism, hyper-competitiveness, high IT penetration, and state press (see chapter two) – that enabled the Influencer commerce to flourish; 2) by situating itself within Influencer commerce in Singapore, a relatively small (approx. 5 million) and young nation (est. 1965) with a highly regulated media ecology populated by mostly youthful Internet users (see chapter two), this ethnography may serve as a template for further studies on Influencer commerce and culture elsewhere.

This chapter presents a review of academic literature related to Influencer commerce in Singapore in four broad categories: 1) I begin with brief history of a key concept I utilize – “microcelebrity” – tracing the genealogy of the notion to earlier work on celebrity and stars, ordinary celebrity, reality TV celebrity, and celebrity relations; 2) I continue with an overview of examples of academic work most closely related to my original research, looking at blogs and social media advertorials in Singapore and elsewhere; 3) I next present the main theory I use throughout my arguments – Goffman’s (1956) theory of strategic interaction, highlighting such notions as decorum and staging; 4) I end the chapter with a summary of key theories I draw on in my analysis of Influencers’ key tenets of self-presentation – *Personae*, featuring summaries on public selves, and privacy and publicness; *Femininities*, featuring summaries on contemporary women’s magazines, emphasized femininities, the gaze, girl talk, and women’s entrepreneurship; *Taste*, featuring summaries on social mobility, consumption, habitus, and status symbols; *Intimacies*, featuring summaries on emotional labor; and *Attention*, featuring summaries on the attention economy, and spectacles.

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## **A brief history of (micro)celebrity**

### *Celebrity and stars*

In his various works, Turner (2004: 3) has long asserted that the fame bestowed upon mainstream celebrity is not always hinged upon “the position or achievements that gave them their prominence in the first instance”, but, rather, that once past their initial instigation of fame, many celebrities continue to “claim no special achievements other than the attraction of public attention”. For Turner (2004: 4), celebrity can be approached in three ways: as a *symptom* of a “cultural shift” that “privileges the momentary, the visual and the sensational over the enduring, the written, and the rational”; as an innate *quality* gifted to “extraordinary individuals”; and as a *product* of identity commodification in the industry through “representational processes employed by the media” in framing particular persons.

In *Understanding Celebrity* (2004, 2014), Turner presents an in-depth overview of the existing scholarship in celebrities studies, highlighting how fellow cultural studies scholars like Chris Rojek (2001) have similarly theorized fame as “the ‘attribution’ of qualities to a particular individual through the mass media” and as a “‘process’ [and] a consequence of the way individuals are treated by the media” (Turner 2004: 7) respectively. In underscoring the salience of a “celebrity industry” in producing notions of “celebrity”, Turner and others (Turner et al. 2000: 11) remind us that celebrity is not “a property of specific individuals”. Rather, “it is constituted discursively, by the way in which the individual is represented”, through the co-ordination of “seven contributing ‘sub-industries’” including Entertainment, Communications, Publicity, Representation, Appearance, Coaching, and Endorsement (Rein et al. 1997: 42-58, in Turner 2004: 42). While it is clear that Turner (2004: 8) views celebrification as a discursive process as opposed to a simplistic assigning of status, he specifically argues that the transformation of a

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“public figure” into a “celebrity” occurs “the point at which media interest in their activities is transferred from reporting on their public role (such as their specific achievement in politics or sport) to investigating the details of their private lives”. Geraghty (2007: 100-101) has similarly noted this form of “star-as-celebrity” in which attention is focused on an individual’s “private life” irrespective of their actual career or public personae.

In *Promotional Culture*, Wernick (1991) has earlier underscored the discursive and symbolic mediations of fame in the entertainment industries in his definition of the “star” as “anyone whose name and fame has been built up to the point where reference to them, via mention, mediatized representation or live appearance, can serve as a promotional booster in itself” (1991: 106). Turner (2004: 13) says that as a result of this, celebrities have the ability to establish connections with their audience independently of the industry productions that first popularized them, and may formulate a persona that is constituted via the mechanisms of the media. The ability to commodify and market their personae accorded celebrities “a new kind of power” (2004: 13) that through mechanisms such as product endorsements and sponsorships (Dyer 1986: 2-3, in Turner 2004: 17) bring forth “a wedding of consumer culture with democratic aspirations” (Marshall 1997: 9). Drawing on this, Turner (2004: 9) specifically defines celebrity as a “genre of representation and a discursive effect; it is a commodity traded by the promotions, publicity, and media industries that produce these representations and their effects; and it is a cultural formation that has a social function we can better understand”.

In *Fame Games* (2000), Turner et al. investigate the celebrity industry in Australia via the mechanisms of managers, agents, publicists, promoters, and magazine editors; they respond to Alberoni’s claims that celebrities are essentially “a powerless elite”. In his essay, Alberoni defines a type of celebrity he calls “stars” as those for whom “activities are not mainly evaluated according to the consequences

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which they involve for the collectivity” and who “do not occupy institutional positions of power” (2007: 65), despite having great charisma (2007: 66-68) and being perceived as elite (2007: 68). He argues that members of the elite social class tend to interact more within their own strata secluded from others, observe the rules and norms of the group with high regard without compromising those in the lower strata, and are less observable with a higher degree of secrecy (2007: 68-69). Alberoni (2007: 69-71) points out that stars, however, especially those who frequently come under the scrutiny of the public eye, come across as being in “close interaction” with their audiences, are “not objects of envy”, and are “not in general perceived as a privileged class”. Turner et al. (2000: 12), however, frame this increased accessibility to celebrity as a “sacrifice” of privacy in achieving their status and as a way to mark their success in various industries. They remind us that the “legitimacy of celebrity is always radically provisional” (2000: 13), given that it can be subversively framed as empty, transient success without any association to actual work. This is especially so since much of the “self-promotional” work in which celebrities engage is actively masked (2000: 13) for a more personable, less overtly commercial script.

*Ordinary celebrity*

On the note of being more personable, Turner turns his focus to ordinary people as celebrity. In his 2014 edition of *Understanding Celebrity*, Turner addresses in greater depth the notion of a “micro-celebrity”, as coined by Theresa Senft (2008), in tandem with the increasing use of digital technology and social media platforms as sites for self-branding, especially since users can now “bypass” typical corporate layers and structures previously pertinent to manufacturing fame and celebrity (Turner 2014: 75). While I will explain this concept in my subsequent treatment of Senft and Alice Marwick’s (2013) work on “micro-celebrity”, what I wish to highlight is Turner’s use of the term “DIY celebrity” in describing such forms

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of personae management. P. David Marshall (2010: 45) has similarly described this shift towards social media use as transiting from “representational” to “presentational” culture and media, in that users are now capitalizing on the increasing ability to negotiate and control their public personae online. Turner also highlights James Bennett’s assertion that while everyday users’ pursuit of fame is becoming more mainstream, these aspirations are also increasingly being supported by “tools with which to become famous” (Bennett 2011: 179, in Turner 2014: 71-72). In the long run, however, Turner – like Bennett (2011), Marwick and boyd (2011), and Marwick (2015) – observes that once established, such “micro-celebrity” practices come to borrow from and resemble mainstream celebrity structures in the more traditional entertainment industries (Turner 2004: 72).

Turner also notes that media industries have enabled celebrity to be increasingly “ordinary”, although not necessarily increasingly “democratic”, in what he terms “the demotic turn”. By this, he means that representations in the media are increasingly tending towards the “lived experience of ‘the ordinary’” (2014: 92), such as in the television genres of confession talk shows *a la* The Jerry Springer Show. He calls this “explosion of the ordinary” the “media’s mining of the ordinary”, in which seemingly authentic and dedicated representations of everyday life “as lived” is but a calculated production of entertainment in the guise of democratic access, which is a mere illusion given that “celebrity remains an hierarchical and exclusive phenomenon, no matter how much it proliferates” (2014: 92-93).

However, one productive outcome is that the “demotic turn” offers viewers scripts and rituals through which they may re-evaluate and reframe their perceptions of the “real” and the constructed, the “everyday” and the spectacle.

Elsewhere, scholars have argued that the increasing prevalence of “real lives” and “ordinary people” in the media has: enhanced the construction of a self-reflexive “simulated self” or the “self-as-brand” (Thomas & Round 2014); allowed viewers to



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identify with other people's stories through "emotioneering", or the structure of emotion that pedagogically allows for reflection and empathy (Batty 2014); and engaged viewers in a voyeuristic gaze, and even that of a "clinical gaze" in the case of "beauty" and "body transformation" Reality TV programs (Bradley 2014). Turner draws on the example of Reality TV to argue that despite its making of everyday life into a spectacle to entice audiences, the increase in these productions only marks "increased commodification" that ultimately disproportionately benefits producers. It is on this note that I turn to a brief overview of related literature in studies of "ordinary" celebrity in the genre of Reality TV.

*Reality TV celebrity*

Hill (2005: 178) writes that audiences are engaged in "viewing strategies" when consuming what she terms "popular factual television", a genre of television in which "real people" perform in (at least) partially staged settings. She notes that audiences tend to "assess the authenticity" of these narratives against their contextual knowledge of popular factual television as being particularly performative. Some audiences are more critical towards the "truth claims" of such programs, while others rely on the belief that all artifice will eventually be exposed. She writes that these audiences have an "expectation that reality programming will dramatize real people's stories and their situations" while simultaneously acknowledging that this "will enhance the viewing experience" (2005: 178). Drawing from Winston (1995), Hill (2005: 178) highlights that this system of trust and interpretation is contingent on program makers' transparent signposting of "truth claims" to their audience, such that there develops an "unwritten contract" about the expected staging involved in this genre of programming. In addition, Hill (2005: 186) introduces the concept of "critical viewing" to encapsulate audience members' nuanced interpretations and evaluations of media, such as reality

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programs, depending on the (sub-)genre of reality TV and the “critical frameworks” they choose to adopt in their approach.

In a similar vein, Ouellette & Hay (2008: 101) note that viewers of “body makeover” reality TV programs often criticize the subgenre’s blurring of “content” and “commerce”, such that these programs inevitably become simply “advertorials” for the industries being advertised. They add that as a medium, television is “more in sync with the rhythms of everyday life than other media”, especially since it is a constantly accessible and consistent mode of entertainment that is available for both “casual observation” and “appointment viewing” (2008: 102). The authors argue that television is thus primed for “normalizing the makeover” as accessible, everyday practice, more so than media such as “books, magazines, [and] the internet” (2008: 102). What I demonstrate in this thesis, however, is that through the personae performed in the genre of “lifestyle” updates across several integrated social media platforms, Influencers are, in fact, performing facets of the “reality TV” genre on the Internet that are more relatable and intimate than media such as television, conveyed through the device of “Perceived Interconnectedness” that I will discuss in chapter eight on intimacy.

Turning their analysis to the gendered undertones of “body makeover” reality TV Ouellette & Hay draw from feminist scholars such as Kathy Peiss (1996) to highlight that women often strategize with techniques of “self-improvement” to achieve social mobility and stability in the job market and dating market (Ouelette & Hay 2008: 119), having been historically denied more lawful and permissible routes to success in the formal economy. This “art of assembling a marketable self in relation to paid labor” thus becomes an informal “self-fashioning” that accords women a degree of empowerment and control to circumvent the systemic prejudices they may face in the workplace (2008: 119-120).

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Transiting to the subgenre of talk shows, Grindstaff (2002: 18-19) contends that the “ordinary” does not signpost content as being “average”, “typical”, or “representative of the population in general”, but instead merely conveys that the “guests are not experts or celebrities in the conventional sense of those terms”, and that their “claim to stardom and expertise is rooted in different criteria”. These “criteria” are usually founded upon these actors’ “first hand experience” and the “airing” of this “backstage” of their lives (2002: 19). Grindstaff also argues that the primary directive in these actors’ expression of their personal stories is performing “the money shot”, or a display of human emotionality and volatility to the audience so as to signpost their performance as “real”, “ordinary”, and “authentic” (2002: 19-20). These emotional conditions – usually comprising “joy, sorrow, rage, or remorse” – are emphasized visually through a corporeal embodiment of emotions (2002: 19-20). Thus, although “ordinary” in the sense of not being “celebrities” in the traditional ecologies of the entertainment and sporting industries, the “everyday” and “reality” that “ordinary” actors perform in the reality TV genre are conveyed through the lens of commodifiable personae.

*Celebrity relations*

Despite Grindstaff’s (2002) treatment of Reality TV celebrities as separate from traditional mainstream celebrities, both categories ultimately relate to viewers through mass media technology. In their work on “parasocial relations”, Horton & Wohl (1956) discuss popular characters on television and radio who develop one-sided interpersonal relationships with individual members of their audience, producing an “illusion of intimacy” through informal conversational style casualness, responsive small talk, projecting supporting casts as close intimates, blending and mingling with the audience, and the use of technical devices of the media – all of which result in the audience’s extensive knowing of the persona with little actual reciprocity. These relationships are backed through a “general

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propaganda” which flows from the persona and the media in a bid to sustain the illusion of “reciprocity and rapport” between a sincere persona and a loyal audience.

Cohen (2009: 224) adds that it is the “performer... [who] is seen as a partner in a relationship with the audience”, in which the “relational aspects of the media experience” and exchange form the crux of the attraction. Cohen also distinguishes between a “parasocial interaction” and “parasocial relationship”; “parasocial interaction” is defined as “the emotions, thoughts, and actions (e.g. speech) that occur during exposure to a media performer and that are geared toward that performer”, whereas a “parasocial relationship” only develops when interaction “become[s] patterned and routinized”, as “routines form relationships” from “repeated interactions” (2009: 227). One example of this routinization involves “repeated references” to content mentioned in the past in order to foster the impression of a “shared history” of “unique knowledge” between performer and viewer (2009: 227).

Mapping “parasocial relations” onto his study of contemporary celebrity, Chris Rojek (2001: 52) refers to this mode of communication as a “second order intimacy”, or “relations of intimacy constructed through the mass media rather than direct experience and face-to-face meetings”. In my analysis of Influencers, however, it is the somewhat “direct” contact afforded by the more interactive and democratizing model of *social* media – as opposed to *mass* media – that affords Influencers and their followers the opportunity to co-create, invest in, and intensify their feelings of intimacy and affect. Additionally and as established in chapter two, Influencers do frequently meet with followers in the flesh in various setups. In his later work on celebrity, Rojek formulates the notion of “para-social conversations” in which celebrities posture themselves as “life coaches” who dispense “free advice about grooming, impression management, self-promotion and even “correct” social,

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political, cultural and environmental values” (2012: 139), which has come to be epitomized among the Influencers I study, given that their careers are exactly focused on such “modeling”, “role-modeling” and “role-playing” lifestyle choices to followers (see chapter six).

*Microcelebrity*

Continuing from Parasocial Relations and celebrity interactions, Internet celebrities tend to engage more intently with their audience than do traditional mainstream celebrities. In *Camgirls* (2008), Theresa Senft produced an ethnographic study of a generation of camgirls and their audience between 2000 and 2004. She defines camgirls as “women who broadcast themselves over the Web for the general public, while trying to cultivate a measure of celebrity in the process” (2008: 1), including those who broadcast footage of engaging in sex with their partner live (2008: 15); others who conducted “mediated sex work” independently, through companies, or in “porn houses” where houses were rigged with exhibitionist webcams throughout (2008: 81-84); one who broadcast the flushing of her used tampon in the bathroom (2008: 86-87); and one with bipolar disorder who had attempted suicide live on webcam twice (2008: 67-75).

The primary concept Senft theorized in her ethnography is that of “micro-celebrity” to describe “a new style of online performance that involves people ‘amping up’ their popularity over the Web using technologies like video, blogs and social networking sites” (2008: 25). According to Senft, microcelebrities<sup>13</sup> – or “web stars”

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<sup>13</sup> While Senft – and later, Marwick (2013) – use the hyphenated compound “micro-celebrity”, throughout this thesis I strategically adopt the unhyphenated “microcelebrity” as a closed compound. In its initial coinage as “micro-celebrity”, “micro-” served as a prefix ascribing the extent, type, and mode of celebrification in two demographics (Senft with camgirls and Marwick with tech workers), where “celebrity” was still the taxonomy root term and object of analysis in which the

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– appear similar to “conventional celebrity” but “pale in comparison to even ‘D list’ performers in the film, television and music industries” (2008: 25). She argues that through the employment of “theatrical authenticity”, “self-branding”, and “celebrity” as forms of publicity (2008: 116), microcelebrities subvert traditional notions of “celebrity” and “publicity” through their “responsiveness to, rather than distancing from, one’s community” (2008: 116), in real time, with real issues, as real persons with whom there are real chances of meeting (2008: 116). Of particular interest to this thesis in her ethnography, Senft asserts that viewers are unlikely to take an interest in “purchasing products endorsed by Web stars”, instead taking an “ethical turn” to guess the “Web personalities” actual personae and their duties towards the viewers who have helped to construct their Web fame (2008: 25-26). Unlike mainstream celebrities in the more traditional film and television industries, the popularity of microcelebrities is premised on one’s “connection” to their audience rather than an “enforced separation” away from them, therefore arousing in camgirls an “anxiety” due to the tensions of being unlike mainstream celebrities but unlike “ordinary” persons either (2008: 26).

Senft methodologically approaches the subculture by immersing herself and being “sympathetically allied” (2008: 1) with them through her own experiences of being a camgirl at her site “Terricam”. Demographically, Senft describes her informants as being “white, able-bodied, straight or bisexual, and less than forty years old” (2008: 7), between their mid-twenties and thirties (2008: 11), hailing from “wealthier, high-teledensity areas such as North America, Europe, and the Southern Cone region of

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“micro-” indicated but one derivative in a larger subset of fame. The investigation of Influencers in this thesis, however, shifts away from a preoccupation with definitions of celebrity per se to underscore the processes through which microcelebrification specifically occur. In addition, the shift from “micro-celebrity” to “microcelebrity” as a single-word compound noun and adjective is a nod to the increasing prevalence of use and scholarship around the concept since it was first coined seven years ago, just as how the hyphen modifying “mail” as “electric” in “e-mail” has been dropped for the more widely used “email”.

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South America, and Australia” where all the camgirls had “access to a private room for broadcasting” (2008: 7). Senft frames the camgirls she studied in the early 2000s as “beta testers” in the range of sociality techniques being widely adopted across social media platforms in the late 2000s to early 2010s, and argues that camgirls’ three main techniques include “the generation of celebrity”, “building of self as brand”, and “engagement in a specific form of emotional labor” (2008: 8).

Senft typologized camgirls in her sample into five major groups: “Real-life” camgirls who portray everyday life “as lived”; “Artist” camgirls who play with aesthetics to convey their individuality; “Porn” camgirls who perform variants of adult sexually-explicit private shows; “Cam-community” camgirls who are hosted on user-friendly aggregate sites; and “Cam-house” camgirls who stream live on sponsored sites in the aesthetic of the “fly on the wall” camera managed by corporations or private clients (2008: 38-42). Senft also differentiates camgirls and actresses in film and reality TV in four ways: Camgirls produce their own material and are often not subject to direction from an industry; Camgirls broadcast in a many-to-many model that supports camgirl-viewer and viewer-viewer interaction; Camgirls are able to multi-task across online and offline spaces; and Camgirls use webcams that largely stream unedited live footage (2008: 45-46). Senft argues that camgirls “combine branding and celebrity on their own terms” and can be appropriated or disavowed as “commodity fetishes” by their viewers. She observes that many viewers act as “brand loyalists” seeking to alter the image of their favorite camgirl rather than switching allegiance to another, and that in response, many camgirls have been known to edit their self-presentation to adapt to viewer preferences (2008: 47-48).

While Senft focused on camgirls who videocammed as a hobby, Marwick focused on workers in the early-2000s San Francisco tech industry who utilized social media as a networking tool to complement their businesses. Despite the different demographic, Marwick significantly builds on Senft’s notion of the “microcelebrity”.

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Senft's definition (2008: 25) emphasized the *tools* through which microcelebrity was produced, by "'amping up' their popularity over the Web using technologies like video, blogs and social networking sites"; in contrast, Marwick's definition (2013: 114) emphasized the *condition* of microcelebrity, that is, "a state of being famous to a niche group of people" through the curation of a persona that feels "authentic" to readers, and "the presentation of oneself as a celebrity regardless of who is paying attention". This "authenticity" is similar to what Senft (2008: 26) earlier termed a "connection" to their audience. More specifically, Marwick (2013: 15-16) expands on the *condition* of microcelebrity as "a mindset and set of techniques in which the subject views his or her friends or followers as an audience or following, maintains popularity through ongoing follower engagement, and carefully constructs and alters his or her online self-presentation to appeal to others". While Senft (2008: 25) argues that it is the *popularity* of microcelebrities that "pale[s] in comparison to even 'D list' performers in the film, television and music industries", Marwick further qualifies this to highlight that it is the *size* of their following that is relatively smaller as compared to mainstream entertainment industry celebrities, who are public icons with large-scale followings.

Marwick argues that microcelebrity in the tech industry is generated through the techniques of "lifestreaming", "self-branding", and "micro-celebrity" (2013: 18). "Lifestreaming" is the act of seeing oneself "through the gaze of others" and editing this "behavior as needed to maintain [one's] desired self-presentation" (2013: 207), mainly expressed via the selective revealing of private information to an audience in order to curate one's persona online (2013: 208). It problematizes traditional notions of "privacy" and "publicness" because such reflexive impression management highlights the nuanced distinctions between "making information public" and "publicizing" information – it is the extent of the intentional *dissemination* as opposed to simply being in the *public domain* that determines a potential audience's access to the information (2013: 223-231, emphasis mine).



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“Self-branding” is “the strategic creation of an identity to be promoted and sold to others” (2013: 166), which among the tech workers in Marwick’s ethnography was dependent on the affordances of social media to enable “self-promotion on a wide scale” (2013: 166). This may be quantified by the number of “followers”, “likes”, “comments”, or “references” on a one’s social media platforms including Facebook and Twitter, that serve as an indication of one’s ability to “provoke the awareness of others” (2013: 188). I examine these structures of recognition and reputation as a valuable metrics culture in chapter five on personae.

Becoming a “micro-celebrity”, Marwick (2013: 117) argues, “requires a degree of self-commodification to create a ‘publicizable personality’” comprising “interacting with fans” where microcelebrities foster intimacy and a sense of duty to their audience (2013: 118-119); “chasing the authentic” where microcelebrities strategically and consistently “reveal intimate information” to engage with their audience (2013: 119-121); and “aspirational production” where microcelebrities posture themselves in “high status light”, emulating mainstream celebrity culture (2013: 121-123). Marwick further distinguishes between two types of microcelebrity: “ascribed microcelebrity”, where the online personality is made recognizable through the “production of celebrity media”, such as paparazzi shots and online memes (2013: 116), or “achieved microcelebrity”, where users engage in “self-presentation strateg[ies]”, such as fostering the illusion of intimacy with fans, maintaining a persona, and selective disclosure about oneself (2013: 117). She marks ascribed microcelebrity as *being constructed* by a watchful audience, and being assigned a “high level of status” and “treated with the celebrity-fan relationship of distance and aggrandizement” (2013: 116). In contrast, achieved microcelebrity is *self-constructed* through “acknowledging an audience and identifying them as fans, and strategically revealing information to increase or maintain this audience” (2013: 117). In short, ascribed microcelebrities are noted for their accomplishments, while achieved microcelebrities are made recognizable

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via their practices (2013: 134). The Influencers in this ethnography usually debut as “achieved microcelebrity”, but eventually shift between both “achieved” and “ascribed” microcelebrity when their impact extends beyond social media into multi-media markets, including television, radio, cinema, theatre, and print ads.

In her fieldwork, Marwick (2013: 135) found that workers in the tech scene tended to have a “distaste” towards achieved microcelebrities who courted fame without having any actual accomplishments in the industry – also known as “famewhoring” and “fameballing”. She points out that “successful micro-celebrity practioner[s] must walk an extremely thin line between maintaining high status in the community through achievements and self-promotion, and going overboard to the point where he or she is mocked or ridiculed” (2013: 135). In her case study of popular media blog *Valleywag*, which ran controversial stories of microcelebrities who were intentionally seeking attention while simultaneously exposing some who were not, Marwick (2013: 133-148) cautions that while the culture of microcelebrities appears similar to that of mainstream celebrities, self-preservation strategies and defensive structures at the disposal of the latter are not available to the former.

Where Senft has analyzed the *tools* and Marwick the *conditions* of microcelebrity production, this thesis looks at the *process* of how microcelebrity is successfully produced among a category increasingly being labeled as “Influencers”. Where Senft has differentiated microcelebrities and mainstream celebrities by their *popularity* and Marwick via the *size*<sup>14</sup> of their following, this thesis is focused on the *relatability* of microcelebrity performance through the key tenets of personae, femininities, taste, intimacies, and attention. Where Senft (2008) and Marwick (2013) investigated microcelebrity situated in specific *Internet* spaces, this thesis is

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<sup>14</sup> I use size of following as a criterion for those I included in my initial sample, but eventually broadened my scope to include Influencers at various stages of their career, including those at the very early stages without yet acquiring a critical mass of followers (see chapter two).

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focused on Influencers as a type of *multimedia* microcelebrity across platforms. Finally, Senft (2008: 8) framed camgirls' techniques of *self-presentation* as "the generation of celebrity", "building of self as brand", and "engagement in a specific form of emotional labor", while Marwick (2013: 18) framed tech workers' techniques of *self-promotion* as "lifestreaming", "self-branding", and "micro-celebrity". In response, this thesis specifically investigates Influencers as *self-commerce*, specifically the process through which they posture their personal lives and depiction of lifestyles to become relatable, accumulate a sizable following, and become commodifiable canvases for advertorials.

## **Blogs, social media, and commerce**

Advertorials are a key tool among the Influencers investigated in this thesis. Turning to look at the anthropology of advertising, Malefyt & Morais (2012) outline a few key anthropological investigations into the advertising industry in their preface to *Advertising and Anthropology*. Based on fieldwork done in an advertising agency in Japan, Moeran (1996) claims to have produced the first sociological account of daily work in the business. His follow-up research (2006) focused on how advertising companies prepare campaigns in order to win bids from rival firms, and how ethnography can be applied to industry work practices. Miller's (1997) study on capitalism in Trinidad included a section about the local advertising industry, while Kemper (2001) and Mazzarella (2003) looked at advertising industries in Sri Lanka and India respectively. In addition, Malefyt & Moeran (2003) and Malefyt & Morais (2012: 9) focused on "organizational issues" rather than "the larger meaning or function of advertising per se". Unlike these foci, this thesis is neither focused on corporations and agencies nor their corporate culture and organizational structures. Instead, it looks at everyday people, everyday practices, and everyday meanings on a micro level. Specifically, I concentrate on Influencers as loosely organized but disparate individuals who

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share a common practice, and demonstrate how the five key tenets (personae, femininities, taste, intimacies, and attention) enable them to become commodifiable canvases.

I approach commerce among Influencers not from the standpoint of e-commerce on web 2.0 (Rayna & Striukova 2010), business models for monetizing Internet platforms (Clemons 2009), the media market of websites of independent platforms (Christian 2012), companies' use of social media platforms for marketing (Mohammadian & Mohammadreza 2012; Pöyry et al. 2013), how social media platforms are monetizing themselves (Kim 2012), or the structure and design of platforms and websites that allow for such commercial activity to occur (Curty & Zhang 2013; Huang & Benyoucef 2013). As an anthropological study focused on the everyday practices and meaning making of Influencers, this review maintains a different focus from literature focused on the history and structure of the Internet, and of blogs (Barlow 2007) and various social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube (Burgess & Green 2009; Jarrett 2008), and Instagram.

While recent debates on algorithmic features (boyd 2014; boyd et al. 2014; Kramer et al. 2013), privacy issues (Abril et al. 2012; Ellison et al. 2011; Madden 2012; Madden et al. 2013; Nissenbaum 2010), work surveillance (Gregg 2011), and corporate ownership of digital technology (Hill 2012; Netessine 2014), the Internet, and social media entities are important concerns for Internet users, these rarely feature in the everyday consciousness of Influencers (i.e. "I heard about it, but it doesn't really bother me"; "I don't think it affects me"; "This type of things, maybe [we're] not so conscious [about]"), as they appear more focused on curating their personae for followers. For this reason, this thesis is not focused on platform affordances and structures, but concentrates on Influencers' everyday practices and gives importance to their vernacular meanings.

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*Blogshops and social media advertorials in Singapore*

One early type of vernacular commerce among Internet users in Singapore are blogshops. To the best of my knowledge, Greenhill & Fletcher (2009) presented the first published study on blog-related commerce in Singapore. The authors focused on “blogshops” – online shopping sites built on freely available blog platforms, such as LiveJournal, Blogger, and WordPress – that are a sister economy to commercial lifestyle blogging in Singapore. In their subsequent 2011 study, Fletcher & Greenhill adopted a business-oriented approach to study the web design of blogshops as organic “grassroots ecosystem management” (Greenhill & Fletcher 2009: 2) projects. They posit that the online design of blogshops reflects the interests of their owners, and focus specifically on how young Singaporean women are appropriating blogging platforms to acquire conspicuous “brand name” (Fletcher & Greenhill 2011: 2) fashion commodities via petty trade and swaps. On a deeper level, Fletcher & Greenhill argue that such “technologically mediated exchanges” (2011: 21) resist the Singaporean capitalist hegemony of mainstream shopping because the quick circulation and exchange of goods via sales and swaps is premised on acquiring these products only temporarily, in order to produce symbolic visual and technological prestige in each cycle (2011: 23). However, this argument seems to also apply to mainline shopping, which emphasizes similar qualities.

Subsequently, Abidin & Thompson (2012) published the first study on blog commerce in Singapore, which distinctly differed from Fletcher & Greenhill’s two earlier studies (2009, 2011) in that we had direct access to commercial bloggers (earlier forms of Influencers) as informants. Thus, unlike the earlier studies that were premised on content analysis, we incorporated personal interviews, participant observation, and content analysis in our research. We defined “blogshops” as “online sites in which young women model and sell apparel via

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social media” (2012: 467) based on “commercial intimacies”, “value (co-)creation”, and a practice we term “persona intimacy”. Drawing on Roberts’ (2004) concept of “Lovemarks”, wherein brands build positive feelings and loyalty with customers, we shifted away from “product intimacy” towards “persona intimacy” through which blogshops “cultivat[e] an emotional attachment not to the products per se but to the online personas of the models via their blogs” (2012: 468).

Through content analysis, Sinanan et al. (2014) later investigated “lifestyle blogs” through the lens of consumerism and citizenship, arguing that their aesthetic is both “parochial” for regional appeal and “global” in focusing on “particular globally circulated consumer products” (2014: 201). For instance, the consumption Influencers express on their blogs embodies the normative aspirational consumerism prevalent in the country (2014: 209). The authors posit that such blogs are an “assemblage”, as “carefully selected aspects are put on display by Influencers, yet what is not on display is often as informative as what is included” (2014: 201). Focusing on the visuality of these blogs, they illuminate how the blogs bear a “cosmopolitan-influenced aesthetic with high visual impact” due to their “highly varied colors”, “intense media usage”, and “assembled” description of the Influencers’ lives (2014: 209). This is primarily used to convey an impression that these Influencers “embody better-informed consumers who make good consumer choices as well as affluence”, when directing followers towards products and services (2014: 209).

*Blogs and social media advertorials elsewhere*

Although commercial blogs and social media advertorials are highly popular in Singapore, they are a transnational phenomenon, albeit executed differently. Gunter notes that blogs are increasingly used by various organizations, including commercial ones, for “information exchange, debating, promotional and support

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purposes” (2009: 120-121). While they may be “personal in their perspective”, such blogs are “deliberately targeted at mass audiences online and have as their purpose self-promotion...” (2009: 124). Mommyblogs, where mothers document their parenting experience through personal narratives, are one popularly monetized genre of blogs in the United States. May Friedman (2010: 200) writes that they have “become a platform for advertising by marketing companies focused on parent-centered products”. Out of this arose a tension between “the raw authenticity of nonmonetized blogging” and Influencers who use mommyblogs “primarily as a source of extra income rather than as a site for memoir” (2010: 200). For many women, the “unglamorous minutiae” (2010: 200) of their daily lives and a “more authentic view of motherhood” (2010: 201) has also resonated with a watchful audience, among whom the narratives of mothering shape the Influencer’s “authority” as an “expert” who is “constantly judged and critiqued” (2010: 200).

Kozinets et al. (2010) calls this mode of marketing “networked narratives”, wherein online communities learn about new products and services through “word-of-mouth”. What I term Influencers’ “personae” in chapter five, the authors refer to as “character narratives” or “enduring personal stories or accounts that we may understand as being related to particular expressed character types” (2010: 74). They argue that “character narratives” are one of four factors that affect the impact of “word-of-mouth” marketing, the others being the type of forum being used, the “communal norms that govern the expression, transmission, and reception” of the message, and the type of product and service being marketed and the ways it is being represented (2010: 74). Presenting four blogs as case studies, the authors posit that some Influencers are “seeking social connection and offering explanation” (2010: 74-77), some partake in marketing with “honesty and humility” (2010: 77-79), some express “ostensible exhibitionism” by “deriding” others and portraying sponsored gifts as an “entitlement” arising from their “successful, high-status, attention-seeking activities” (2010: 79-81), and some write about “personal

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life cris[es]” while honestly sharing their need to “surviv[e] and mak[e] money where [they] can”, such as through “selling advertising space” or “product reviews” (2010: 81-82).

Looking at the phenomenon I previously termed “blogshops”, Lim et al. (2013) explore case studies in Southeast Asia, although the authors appear to draw largely from the Malaysian context. They note that when Facebook was taken up in the region, blogshops adopted the platform as “online retailing entities” in the form of “Facebook stores”, “Facebook boutiques”, or “Facebook blogshops” (2013: 1). Blogshops aside, the authors recognize that some Influencers use their “fashion-themed” blogs to make “occasional ‘blog sales’” where owners market their “personal belongings” (2013: 3). The authors also point out that while there are some blogs whose commercial revenue is generated through “affiliate marketing”, “advertising programs such as Google’s AdSense”, or “paid posts”, this commercial activity remains secondary to the actual blogging content (2013: 3). The Influencers I look at in Singapore, however, leverage on their blogging content as the space and canvas through which products are marketed through advertorials. While some Influencers also incorporate “side bar ads” or “advertising programs” from Google or Yahoo, many have moved away from such commercial forms in order to prevent their blogs from appearing “crowded” or “too commercial”.

Julian Hopkins, a pioneer scholar on commercial blogging in Malaysia, investigates the “monetizing of personal blogging through the introduction of advertising” (2015: 2). Focusing on the “basic” and “emergent” affordances of blogs through the lens of assemblage (Hopkins 2015: 7-8), Hopkins writes that despite the publicness and commerce, “personal bloggers” typically have a close relationship with their blog, and see it as an extension of their self” (2015: 10). Elsewhere, Hopkins & Thomas (2011: 141-142) draw on their informants’ emic understandings to distinguish between the “personal blog” and the “lifestyle blog”. Whereas the “personal blog”



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encompasses more about what one thinks, “family”, and “relationships”, the “lifestyle blog” includes other snippets from “travels”, “events”, “opinions”, and trends. However, among the Influencers in Singapore whom I investigate, such elements of “personal blogging” are not only intertwined and at times indistinguishable from the genre of “lifestyle blogging”, but, in fact, form the core canvas that Influencers utilize to display personal narratives and weave in “advertorials”.

Looking at the genre of “lifestyle” blogging specifically, Hopkins & Thomas (2011: 139) note that “class” is “something constituted, or to be done, via networks and discursive activity”, and that “successfully monetizing a Lifestyle blog is a realized strategy for the distribution of both economic and symbolic capital” (2011: 140). Further distinguishing between “class” as practice and as a commodity, Hopkins & Thomas (2011: 148) write:

We are concerned here with the “class” of bloggers, whose “practical knowledge of the relationships between distinctive signs and positions” (Bourdieu 1984: 175)... enable them to form a framework for the composition of blog posts, while the blog itself accumulates an inscribed structure that represents a given person’s taste over time.

Drawing from Actor Network Theory, Hopkins & Thomas (2011: 141) examine a specific “‘blog advertising network’ company” known as BlogAdNet and how it “influences the interaction of other key actants in the relative stabilization of Malaysian blog networks”. In contrast, this thesis is not focused on large-scale media ecologies, but rather, the everyday practices and vernacular of Influencers in Singapore and the ways in which they personally present themselves in the industry. Clients in Malaysia appear to be turning to blog advertising especially because of “the migration of younger affluent consumers away from traditional

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media forms” (Hopkins & Thomas 2011: 143). In response to “advertiser interest in connecting with the audiences of the personal blogs” (Hopkins 2015: 11), Hopkins notes the emergence of “advertorials” and “banner advertisements” (2015: 11).

Similar to Singaporean Influencers’ concerns about being too “hard-sell”, Hopkins & Thomas write that Malaysian bloggers have expressed concern over “becoming too commercialized” (2011: 145). These Malaysian bloggers are also entangled in the politics of disclosure, as there is great uncertainty over whether to overtly signpost an advertorial. From their personal interviews, Hopkins & Thomas (2011: 145) note that bloggers rationalize that “disclosure is not legally required”, that they have earmarked their advertorials “by using a tag”, by asserting that “[e]veryone can do what they want with their blog”, or that they “will never say something they don’t believe in”. In other words, being “genuinely sincere in their posts” is crucial to retaining a blogger’s audience (2011: 145). This thesis addresses similar concerns from Singaporean Influencers regarding the maintenance of their Instagram feed and aesthetic (see chapter seven), although concerns regarding the ethical and legal disclosure of advertorials is not within the scope of this thesis.

## **Decorum and staging**

Class, taste, and aesthetics are chiefly performed by Influencers through strategic interactions, in which Influencers shift between multiple personae and tailor their self-presentation to the qualities from which they wish to elicit from their audience. Most prominent in this field of study is Goffman’s theories of strategic interaction, specifically his notions of decorum and staging, which I adopt as the primary framework to illuminate the work that Influencers do. In *The presentation of self in everyday life*, Goffman (1956: 10) distinguishes between a “sincere” performer and a “cynical” performer. A sincere performer is one who is “convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality” and is able to persuade his

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audience that his presentation is genuine, whereas a cynical performer is one who “may be moved to guide the conviction of this audience only as a means to other ends, having no ultimate concern in the conception that they have of him or of the situation”. Cynical performances may be utilized for “self-interest”, “private gain”, or for what the performer perceives to be for “the good of the community” (1956: 11). Goffman defines the “personal front” (1956: 13-14) or “front region” (1956: 66-68) or “front stage” (1956: 78) as the portion of a person’s performance that is displayed publicly for an audience. It comprises an “appearance”, which marks the performer’s social status during the exchange, and a “manner”, which marks “the interaction role the performer will expect to play in the on-coming situation” (1956: 15). Audiences naturally expect congruence between the performer’s “appearance” and “manner”, and the interaction that results between audience and performer usually requires both to signpost their status through “symbols” (1956: 15), which I will discuss in a later section on taste.

Elsewhere (2003), Goffman further analyses one aspect of the “front stage” performance known as “face-work”. He introduces the concept of the “line” as “a pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts by which [a performer] expresses his view of the situation and through this his evaluation of the participants, especially himself” (2003: 7). Drawing from this, “face” is defined as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact” (2003: 7). A performer would normatively preserve his face and that of his audience in a transient contract or “mutual acceptance”, based not on “heart-felt evaluations” but on “temporary lip service” (2003: 7). Goffman terms “face-work” as the labor in which a performer engages to make congruent his “action” (1956: 21) and his “face” (2003: 8)

In contrast, the “back region” or “backstage” (Goffman 1956: 69-70) is where the unseen “action” (1956: 21) and “suppressed facts make an appearance” (1956: 69-

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70). The “backstage” features performers “out of character”, and for this reason it is usually obscured from the audience as a form of “impression management” (1956: 70). In the “backstage”, performers are very likely to “correct” or “conceal” their “errors”, “mistakes”, and failures before presenting their act to an audience, thus giving the impression of their “infallibility” (1956: 27). They are also likely to conceal any “dirty work” mobilized to sustain their performance or conceal the fact that the actual “action” required to produce the “expression” is severely overrated by the audience concealed from the “backstage” by the performance (1956: 28). To paint the illusion of relatability, performers may engage in “scheduling” (1956: 84) to segregate different audiences from each other, such that only one aspect of a persona is presented as required (1956: 30-31, 84-85). Performers may also obscure the “routine character” of their act and stress its spontaneity so as to foster the impression that this act is unique and specially tailored to whoever is watching (1956: 31-32). In instances where several performers occupy the “backstage” together as a team, there may be some “informalit[ies]” and “limitations” in “decorum”, which Goffman (1956: 67) defines as “the way in which the performer comports himself while in visual or aural range of the audience but not necessarily engaged in talk with them”.

Goffman (1956: 79-82) lists four of these motives behind impression management even in the “backstage”: Firstly, performers would want to solicit trust within the team; secondly, performers may have to “sustain one another’s morale”; thirdly, performers have to be considerate of social divisions across demographic differences in the team; lastly, performers may feel the need to demonstrate their “familiarity” with the team by actively expressing and displaying their comfort and intimacy with each other (1956: 78-82). However, Goffman suggests that in most instances, “the surest sign of backstage solidarity is to feel that it is safe to lapse into an associable mood of sullen, silent irritability”, where performers can “appreciate the unsavory ‘unperformed’ aspects of [their] own backstage behavior”

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(1956: 80).

In the interstitial space between the “frontstage” and the “backstage”, Goffman notes that some performers are required to dramatize their act to “portray confirmatory facts that might otherwise remain unapparent or obscure”, such as in the case of a baseball umpire who despite actually being unsure of a decision has to display confidence in the “personal front” so that the audience will be convinced by his judgment and authority (1956: 19-20). In other instances, such as the service industry, some performers may find it difficult to dramatize their act because “clients cannot ‘see’ the overhead costs of the service rendered them” (1956: 20-21). Other merchants dramatize their act by “charg[ing] high prices for things that look intrinsically expensive in order to compensate the establishment for” other expensive overhead costs unseen by customers (1956: 20-21). Using the example of a model, Goffman differentiates between “expression” and “action” wherein a model’s pose may *appear* effortless and easy to the audience (expression), and thus conceal the actual physical effort and training needed to portray such effortlessness (action) (1956: 21).

## **Personae**

### *Public selves*

While Goffman (1956) has focused on the individual performer to conceptualize strategic interaction and self-presentation in terms of the “backstage” and “frontstage”, contemporary authors have focused on uses of digital media to adopt similar frameworks of “public” and “private” selves. In his article, “Persona studies: Mapping the proliferation of the public self” (2014), P. David Marshall called to develop “persona studies” as a study of how the larger populace’s engagement

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with traditional representational media, and presentational media, and their intercommunication, has resulted in an increasingly generalized publicization of the self. Tracing this to the normalization of celebrity news in traditional print media, he terms the politics of such small displays of the personal in the public sphere “micropublics” (2014: 161) and argues that it supports individualism and individualization in the advertising industry through expressive and customized forms of consumption.

Marshall (2014) goes on to argue that the individualization and personalization of celebrity culture has permeated the wider populace via three frameworks. Firstly, he outlines the “transformation of contemporary labor and employment” (2014: 158) that now heavily relies on contract work that is largely awarded based on applicants’ profiles built through portfolios and their work personae. Secondly, he discusses the “impact of social networking’s reorganization of society” (2014: 158), in which “representational media” traditionally controlled by media conglomerates to reflect cultures are being displaced by “presentational media” performed by individuals via social networking tools to express individuality. Marshall terms the intersection of representational and presentational media forms “intercommunication” (2014: 160) as it allows for an interpersonal and highly engaging mode of communication. Thirdly, he explains the “theoretical frame of affect and affect clusters” (2014: 158) in which the populace congeals around similar interests and sentiments on social networking sites that foster social interaction and interpersonal communication. Marshall (2014: 164) argues that the “micropublics” arising out of these three frameworks operate such that there are “the followers and friends that are connected to a range of content via a particular individual that is simultaneously a ‘private’ network, but regularly and publicly updated and responded to in the tradition of broadcast and print media forms that makes it a quasi-public network”.

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*Privacy and publicness*

Alongside *personal* privacy and publicness are *platform* privacy and publicness. Scholars have long debated definitions of “privacy” and “publicness” on the Internet. Some claim that the very medium of the Internet – an open-access database with few restrictions – is by default a shared communal space (Jones 1994), and are skeptical that “privacy” on the Internet is even possible (Gurak and Silker 1997). Proponents of Internet “publicness” advocate the free circulation and use of information since what is publicly available is not sensitive information (Wilkins 1991, Bruckman 2002). In *Public Parts: How Sharing in the Digital Age Improves the Way We Work and Live*, Jarvis (2011) has even expounded on the benefits of “publicness”, including the ability to organize (2011: 58), enabling the wisdom of the crowd (2011: 49), facilitating open-source collaboration (2011: 47), and building trust among users (2011: 43-46).

Others have claimed that certain modes of information on the Internet are private and require permission for use. For instance, though freely accessible on the Internet, Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) would traditionally be deemed the private property of users (Gajjala and Mamidipudi 1999) who do not expect others to tune in on their conversations. Personal web pages, such as blogs, may also be regarded as private property given the extent of personalization and potentially sensitive information published (Chandler 1998). In addition, Eysenbach and Till (2001) assert that online participants of Internet-based communities or services do not expect to be research subjects, highlighting the need for participant consent to be sought even if one is studying a publicly accessible group. In the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Warner (2002: 414, emphasis in original) acknowledges that there are generally three types of “publics”: “*the* public” as in “people in general”; “*a* public” as in an audience bounded by a “physical space”; and a “public that comes into being” upon being disseminated and circulated.

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In her study of mobile social networks and surveillance among users of the geolocative mobile phone app, Dodgeball, Humphreys (2013) presents users' perspectives of privacy concerns. She outlines three kinds of surveillance to situate her ethnographic material: the "voluntary panopticon" where people voluntarily "submit to corporate surveillance" for the convenience it affords them in the consumer society; "lateral surveillance" where fellow citizens observe each other without each others' formal knowledge; and "self-surveillance" record themselves for archival or sharing purposes. Humphreys found that users "all implicitly defined privacy as privacy from other users or people and not privacy from state, corporate or bureaucratic entities" (2013: 6). They were largely unconcerned about privacy, as they "felt they had control over their information and to whom it was sent" (2013: 6), and because "they believed themselves to be experienced and savvy Internet users" (2013: 6).

## **Femininities**

### *Contemporary women's magazines*

Despite largely debuting on digital spaces on the Internet, Influencers' lifestyle blogs and social media feeds examined in this thesis seem to be one successor of contemporary women's magazines. Kim & Ward (2004: 49) define contemporary women's magazines as "mainstream adult magazines that are geared toward an adolescent or young adult female followers and that express the clear intention of providing followers with advice, scripts, and information about dating and sexual relationships". They also feature product placements (Frith 2009) and concealed ads (McCracken 1993). Commercial lifestyle blogs bear similar offerings, but with an underlying rhetoric of personalizing "advertorials" to followers engaged in



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aspirational consumption. Both contemporary women's magazines and commercial lifestyle blogs offer lessons to followers on how to perform in their private lives (Ferguson 1983), albeit largely through highly feminized (Basnyat & Chang 2014), domestic (Pugsley 2007), and sexual scripts (Kim & Ward 2004). Kim & Ward (2004: 49) highlight that sexual scripts provided by contemporary women's magazines specifically target female followers via "intimate" address, and are "accessible", "private", "inexpensive", "available for multiple readings", and "sexually explicit". All these characteristics are similarly demonstrated through commercial lifestyle blogs.

Unlike contemporary women's magazines that are aggregates of articles by an assemblage of contributors, lifestyle blogs and their associated social media platforms are usually curated by a single Influencer who has more control over the congruence of the personae she portrays on these outlets. The "narrative" is also a cornerstone literary device utilized among Influencers. Narrativity, or the presentation of a coherent account, has been increasingly used as a technique for self-disclosure and follower engagement, while showcasing sponsored products and services through "storytelling". Personal blogging has long been thought to allow writers a personal voice for a public following at a scale that print media could not afford. Among small communities, narrativity in non-fictional blogging has been poised as an archipelago of disparate but shared experiences, especially among disadvantaged groups. Narrativity on blogs as a stylistic device and communicative tool has been appropriated by Iranian women to express transgressive narratives on veiling and sexuality (Amir-Ebrahimi 2008), to share intimate writing and develop self-identity among Spanish women (Andrews 2009), and as emotional support and naturalistic medical inquiry among cancer patients (Keim-Maplass et al. 2012).

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### *Emphasized femininities*

While digital media has enabled various demographics of women an outlet on which they may share their stories, not all narratives of femininity are accorded equal value. Connell (1987) and later Connell & Messerschmidt (2005) describe “hegemonic masculinity” (1987: 183) as a “pattern of practice” (2005: 832) that is distinguished from the fringed “subordinated masculinities” (1987: 183) as being the “most honored way of being a man” (2005: 832). While ideologically normative, it is statistically only enacted by a minority of men (2005: 832). Hegemonic masculinity “allowed men’s dominance over women to continue” through “culture, institutions, and persuasion” (2005: 832). In recognition of the “asymmetrical position of masculinities and femininities in a patriarchal gender order” (2005: 848), Connell formulated the notion of “emphasized femininities” to describe the most preferred and rewarded performances of the female gender, given that “[g]ender is always relational” (2005: 832). Emphasized femininities are “oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men” through the display of sociability rather than technical competence, fragility in mating scenes, compliance with men’s desires for titillation and ego-stroking in office relationships, acceptance of marriage and child care as a response to labor-market discrimination against women (Connell 1987: 183-187).

As a companion to Connell’s notion of “hegemonic/subordinate” masculinities, Schippers (2007: 95) conceptualizes “hegemonic/pariah” femininities, since these fringed feminine performances are “not so much inferior, as contaminating to the relationship between masculinity and femininity”. Some categories of “pariah femininities” include “lesbians” for having desire for women as opposed to men; “bitches” for exercising authority as opposed to being subordinate; “badasses” for exhibiting violence as opposed to fragility; and “bitches”, “cock-teasers”, and “sluts” for being in control and aggressive instead of being compliant (2007:95).

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*The gaze*

The evaluation and signification of hegemonic, subordinate, and pariah gender performances (Schipper 2007) ultimately depend on policing and appraisal. Assessing the “uncritical celebration” of agency and identity, Currie (1999: 95-96) makes three observations. Firstly, drawing from Angela McRobbie, she points out that “equating consumption with leisure... obscures consumption as reproductive labor”. Secondly, prizing consumption as “an expression of identity or an act of resistance” obscures the fact that women’s wages still remain unequal to men’s, thus “depoliticizing” the “material importance of class differences in the lived experiences of women”. Lastly, viewing “consumption as pure pleasure” ignores the fact that the fashion and beauty industry often fortifies women’s felt insufficiencies and insecurities.

Moving from consumption to the policing of gender and sexual identity, in *Girls*, Driscoll (2002: 156-157) similarly points out that girls’ magazines tended to maintain “dominant conventions” of gender and sexual identity, pitching to the idealized following of a “normative” girl regardless of the actual readership. She adds that the “self-help discourse” in many workshops for adolescents is “intrinsically middle-class” and “premised on social mobility”, wherein girls are presumed to be heterosexual in spite of the diverse experiences of “girlhood” (2002: 160). Girls’ magazines often encourage self-policing (2002: 240) and mutual body-policing (2002: 246) that is premised on continual surveillance for the purpose of self-improvement. As a result, followers are “looking at each other as desirable” (2002: 246) in a “girlfriend gaze” that leads to submission for a sense of “intimacy, normativity and belonging” (Winch 2013: 4), by assessing facets of femininity among each other as role-modeled by the gendered scripts demonstrated in the magazines, and constituted via the products and services advertised.

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Driscoll asserts that images in girls' magazines are "partial" in that one's body becomes "fragmented" and highlighted for the pursuit of "perfection", and "situational" in that one is taught how the "perfectible body" ought to be postured and utilized (Driscoll 2002: 247). She ties this to Naomi Wolf's notion of "beauty pornography" (Wolf 1991: 132), resembling "light pornography" in men's magazines wherein the body is "fetishized" and fantasy "externalized" (Driscoll 2002: 247). As a result, distinctions between girls' bodies become framed as "beauty problems" that fester insecurities (2002: 247) and encourage self-improvement and consumption. In shaping the scripts of what "girls can do, be, have, and make", girls' magazines' "circulation of things" or "economy of girl culture" continually reinforces the strain between "agency" and "conformity" (2002: 278).

In her studies of cinema, Laura Mulvey (1999:835) develops the notion of "the gaze", based on the practice of "scopophilia" in which "looking itself is a source of pleasure". Drawing from Freud, she explains that he "associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze" (1999: 835), wherein pleasure is elicited either through watching a person for "sexual stimulation" (1999: 836) or for constituting one's own "ego" through relating to the image being watched (1999: 837). Mulvey also notes that the image of women on screen tended to function as "erotic object" either for "the characters within the screen story" or for "the spectator within the auditorium" with a "shifting tension" between the two (1999: 838). In film, the gaze tended to be "male" in that it was men as lead characters and audience members who were casting a watchful "phantasmic" eye upon the female characters, especially since films tended to be framed through the point of view of the male protagonist with whom the following is meant to identify (1999: 838).

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Furthering this notion of “the gaze”, Abidin & Thompson (2012) develop the concept of a “refracted (fe)male gaze” where women discursively shape each others’ practices and discipline each others’ bodies “on the basis of presumed heterosexual masculine desires”, in spite of the physical absence of men in the homosocial space (2012: 468), such as in the case of blogshop owners, models, and customers. We assert that this mode of “internalized ‘male gaze’” tended to be more intense than the “male gaze” as women increasingly “socialize each other into internalizing” an ideal body for a heterosexual, masculine audience. Alison Winch later similarly terms this the “girlfriend gaze”, wherein women police each other into submitting to the group for a sense of “intimacy, normativity and belonging” (2013: 4). She also coins “gynaeopticon” as a “gendered, neoliberal variation on Bentham’s panopticon” wherein women in a homosocial context watch and police each other, or as she phrases it, “where the many girlfriends watch the many girlfriends” (2013: 4). Similar to cosmetic industry discourse on “how women should look” (Scott 1998: 137), Abidin & Thompson (2012: 475), in our work on blogshop models and owners, assert that only women who reproduce emphasized femininities and objectify their own bodies tended to receive “economic benefits and social mobility” (see also Scott 1998: 138) given that “the reality of beauty as power” (Scott 1998: 140) only rewards women who are compliant to androcentric performances of gender performativity and the patriarchal order (Abidin & Thompson 2012: 475-476).

*Girl talk*

One common form of how women enact and practice “the gaze” is through girl talk. Recounting her interviews with 91 girls regarding adolescent magazines, Currie (1999) observes that the girls tended to draw from what Elizabeth Frazer terms “discourse registers”, or “institutionalized, situationally specific, culturally familiar, public, way[s] of talking” (1987: 420) which were selectively enacted out of “peer

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pressure” or to “avoid conflict” (Currie 1999: 105). The actual content of “girl talk” covered in the feature articles and regular columns included “beauty & fashion”; “relationships” (heterosexual romance, peers, family); “success topics” (stardom and celebrities, female success stories); “self” (self-discovery, psychological well-being, body and health, sexuality, work and career, education); “social issues” and “personal testimonial”; “entertainment” (books, movies, music reviews); and “miscellaneous” (sports, recipes, shopping, other) (1999: 48-51).

### *Women’s entrepreneurship*

As earlier noted, “girl talk” usually originates among girls from a young age, which is a demographic that has been investigated in depth by girlhood scholars. While I acknowledge the importance of feminist media studies scholarship that highlight the importance of girls’ cultures and relationships with media (Gilligan 1982; McRobbie & Garber 1976; McRobbie 2000), girls and women as media producers (Kearney 2006), disproportionate representation of sexed, classed, and raced girls in celebrity culture (Projansky 2014), textual analyses of women in media (McCracken 1993; McRobbie 1991), and alternative forms of femininity and gender representation (Halberstam 1998, 1999), I omit these studies in this review. As my focus is on how Influencers as women curate their personal lives and depict their lifestyles, I concentrate on studies of how women in industries related to Influencer commerce have postured themselves and the labor they produce.

Foo et al. (2006) write that in Singapore, women are becoming entrepreneurs in increasing numbers as they develop technological competencies at a quicker rate than before, arising in a proliferation of “technopreneuress” (2006: 175). They define successful women in Singapore as those who are in “executive” and “managerial” positions, as well as those who are “self-starting entrepreneurs”

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(2006: 177). The authors found that such technopreneuresses in Singapore tended to be above the age of 40, married, “less educated” as non-degrees holders, had working experience above 10 years, and working above the “statutory 44 hours per week” (2006: 178).

Turning to creative entrepreneurship, Duffy looks at what she terms “highly feminized sites of digital cultural production” in the fashion, beauty, and retail industries and their engagement with “aspirational labor” (2015: 2). She defines “aspirational labor” as a “highly gendered, forward-looking and entrepreneurial enactment of creativity” (2015: 3) wherein young women “hold the promise of social and economic capital” despite a reward system that is “highly uneven” (2015: 3). More crucially, Duffy asserts that “despite the rhetoric of creative *production*, the aspirational labor system ensures that female participants remain immersed in the highly feminized *consumption* of branded goods” (2015: 3, emphasis in original). Her study was based on in-depth interviews with “creative workers” in the above listed industries, and who “did not have full-time, long-term positions in these industries”, whom she thus frames as “amateur or non-professional producers” (2015: 5). Duffy found that the aspirational labors shared three motivations: “authenticity” and the celebration of “realness”, where they position themselves to represent “real women” who are “ordinary” and “accessible” (2015: 7-9); “the instrumentality of affective relationships” to maintain a sense of “sociality” and “affect” as “emotional labor” with their community (2015: 9-10); and “entrepreneurial brand devotion” as a “self-branding” technique, where “digital content creators visibly align themselves with certain commercial brands in the hope of riding on their coattails” (2015: 11-12).

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## **Taste**

### *Social mobility*

Like Duffy's (2015) creative entrepreneurs, Influencers in this thesis rely on highly visible displays of taste in order to curate a desirable image. Turning his focus to social mobility, Goffman (1956: 23) posits "in most stratified societies there is an idealization of the higher strata and some aspiration on the part of those in low places to move to higher ones". He highlights that this is not only mobility towards a class of more prestige, but also towards one that is considered "sacred" and a "common valu[e] of the society" (1956: 23). Social mobility is largely negotiated in the "personal front" and demonstrated by "status symbols", which, depending on the society and its values, are expressed through "material wealth" or "non-material values" (1956: 24). In *Theory of the leisure class*, Veblen (1961: 13) asserts that "[t]he end of acquisition and accumulation is conventionally held to be the consumption of the goods accumulated" to fulfill the consumer's "physical wants", such as physical comfort, or "higher wants", such as the "spiritual", "aesthetic", and "intellectual". He adds that consuming "more excellent goods is an evidence of wealth" (1961: 36) and becomes a "canon of reputability" (1961: 35) when conspicuous consumption becomes "honorific", and when "conversely, the failure to consume in due quantity and quality becomes a mark of inferiority and demerit" (1961: 36). Similarly, with Influencers, as I will later demonstrate in chapter seven, the end goal of consumption is the conspicuous display of their acquisitions to stimulate desire and emulation among their audience, as opposed to the actual usage of their goods. Indeed, many Influencers are fond of using a piece of apparel just once "without repeating" for fear of being spotted or photographed using the same wares again.



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*Consumption*

Building on the notion of “conspicuous consumption”, which Veblen (1961: 36) defines as consumption of “valuable goods [as] a means of reputability to [a person] of leisure”, a consumer must learn to “cultivate his tastes” and “discriminate with nicety between the noble and the ignoble in consumable goods” (1961: 36). This “cultivation of aesthetic faculty requires time and application”, but is the means through which a consumer learns to “consume freely and of the right kind of goods” (1961: 36) in order to signify their “status symbols” (Goffman 1951: 294), a concept that will be expanded on later. Veblen introduces the notion of “pecuniary beauty” (Veblen 1961: 62), in which the “rarity” and “price” of an object bestow on it exclusivity and honor, such that despite being “items of conspicuous waste”, their “aesthetic serviceability” is greatly valued. As such, expensive objects are perceived as more desirable and beautiful because people increasingly value wealth (Veblen 1961: 60-61). In contrast to “pecuniary beauty”, most people also possess the notion of a more natural beauty (1961: 61-62) that is “inborn” and feels more “genuine” (Gronow 1997: 39-41). However, Veblen argues that “[b]y further habituation to an appreciative perception of the marks of expensiveness in goods, and by habitually identifying beauty with reputability, it comes about that a beautiful article which is not expensive is accounted not beautiful” (Veblen 1961: 61).

*Habitus*

On the topic of this “habituation” that Veblen (1961: 61) brings up, and in the vein of the processes through which a consumer is taught to value and display particular symbols to signify their class, Bourdieu (1990: 53) develops the concept of the “habitus”, which is “[t]he conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence” which “generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without

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presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them". The habitus is "a system of cognitive and motivating structures", "a world of already realized ends", a set of "procedures to follow [and] paths to take" because they appear "natural" to the person who has been familiarized (1990: 53-54). As an internalized archive of past experiences and exposure to particular "social conditions" (1990: 56), or in other words, as a "product of history", the habitus is more "constan[t] over time" and "more reliabl[e] than all formal rules and explicit norms" (1990: 54). The habitus operates on the level of the "unconscious" (1990: 56), such that people's actions are "objectively harmonized without any calculation or conscious reference to a norm and mutually adjusted in the absence of any direct interaction" (1990: 58).

Veblen (1961: 20) also notes that "the characteristic feature of leisure class life is a conspicuous exemption from all useful employment", which many Influencers appear to enact by way of their "expression" (Goffman 1956: 21). However, it is their performance or "action" (1956: 21) of such a leisurely life that forms the actual bread-and-butter of their trade on which their advertorials and earnings are based, and sustains this performance. Hence, while they appear to occupy the "leisure class", Influencers are merely skilled performers of the "status symbols" (1956: 23-24) of the class.

### *Status symbols*

Goffman (1951: 294) writes that "[t]he terms status, position, and role have been used interchangeably to refer to the set of rights and obligations which governs the behavior of persons acting in a given social capacity". Status can be "enforced" by "public opinion" and by "internalized sanctions... built into a conception of self and give rise to guilt, remorse, and shame" (1951: 294). To avoid misrepresentation and to ensure continuity of the "rights and obligations" associated with one's status,

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one has to demonstrate to others their position through “sign-vehicles” that Goffman terms “status symbols” (1951: 294). As a result, status symbols have the impact to “maintain solidarity within a category and hostility between different categories” (1951: 294). However, status symbols only demarcate one’s rank, but not how well one’s duties are performed. Goffman thus marks the difference with the notion of “esteem symbols” to stand for “the degree to which a person performs the duties of his position in accordance with ideal standards, regardless of the particular rank of his position” (1951: 295). Status symbols thus express both “categorical significance” through which one’s rank is identified, and “expressive significance” through which one’s lifestyle, beliefs, and values are signified (1951: 295).

Goffman’s strategic interaction perspective is consistent with Bourdieu’s practice theory. In assessing status symbols, Goffman distinguishes between “occupation symbols” and “class symbols”. Occupation symbols may “tak[e] the form of credentials which testify with presumed authority to a person’s training and work history” or through the “prestige and power” one accumulates from “work relation[s]” established within a “formal organization” (1951: 296), resonating with Bourdieu’s treatment of cultural capital. On the other hand, class symbols are “less clearly controlled by authority” because they are “based upon a configuration of sources” so that a person can “manipulat[e] symbols in what appears to be a fraudulent way” (1951: 296), echoing Bourdieu’s treatment of symbolic capital. Because the audience is required to assess “the person’s favorable social qualifications against his less favorable ones”, the person’s “self-representations” are difficult to validate and may constitute “misrepresentation” (1951: 296).

In the same vein, Bourdieu (1998: 431) posits that “taste” can function as a marker of “class”, since “[t]o the socially recognized hierarchy of the arts, and within each of them, of genres, schools or periods, corresponds a social hierarchy of the

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consumers". The "ideology of charisma regards taste in legitimate culture as a gift of nature" (1998: 431), or as discussed earlier, what Veblen (1961) and Gronow (1997) term the preference of an "inborn beauty". This taste is a "product of upbringing and education", and is closely related to a person's "home background" and "formal education" (Bourdieu 1998: 431) since it is their "habitus" that shapes their practices (Bourdieu 1990: 53).

Goffman (1951: 297-301) posits that class symbols embody six types of restrictions: Moral (with regard for the opinion of one's class group and those of other class groups), Intrinsic (with regard for commodities that are both scarce and command high market value), Natural (with regard for the limited supply and scarcity of some resources), Socialization (with regard to demonstrating one's class membership when interacting with others), Cultivation (with regard to the prestige lended to "non-remunerative", "avocation pursuits"), and Organic (with regard to one's corporeal development taken as a signpost for particular classes – for instance, that having fair skin in a society in which avoiding hard labor outdoors is the norm demarcates one's privilege). As mentioned earlier, Veblen (1961: 36) posits that consumers of what are perceived to be "valuable goods" must continually distinguish between "the noble" and "the ignoble" through the cultivation of "tastes" towards the "right kind" of goods. In the same vein, Goffman also points out this very inefficacy of interaction in his model of status symbols, in that as symbols circulate, "the objective structure of the sign-vehicle always becomes altered" (1951: 303-304). As such, some symbols may be "vulgariz[ed]", therefore requiring members of the original class group to seek out new symbols that have not yet been "contaminated" (1951: 303-304). In addition, a symbol that may demarcate a person's class in one particular setting may not hold currency among a different demographic in a different setting (1951: 304). Thus, the very crux of good taste and visible status symbols is premised on frequently changing perceptions of value, in order to "maintain solidarity" within one's class and its

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practices, while asserting “hostility” towards others (1951: 294), much like the ever changing trends in fashion that dictate hegemonic taste.

## **Intimacies**

### *Emotional labor*

Calibrating solidarity and hostility within and among social groups requires a high commitment of emotional labor. Unlike business and advertising literature that looks at the psychology of consumers (Hansen & Christensen 2007; Holbrook & Batra 1987; Olney et al. 1991) or how marketing to consumer emotions distinguishes products (Malefyt & Morais 2012: 60), this thesis is focused on the emotional labor done by Influencers for whom this is their primary job in their line of work, in the vein of Hochschild’s (1979, 2002, 2003, 2012) study of staff in the service industry and Constable’s (1999) study of migrant domestic, care, and sex workers.

Shouse (2005) distinguishes among “feeling”, “emotion”, and “affect”. To him, feelings are “personal and biographical”, emotions are “social”, and affects are “prepersonal” (2005). Specifically, a feeling is “a sensation that has been checked against previous experiences and labeled”; an emotion is “the projection/display of a feeling”; and an affect is a “non-conscious experience of intensity; it is a moment of unformed and unstructured potential” (2005).

Hochschild (1979: 555) approaches emotion “‘between’ the Goffmanian focus on consciously designed appearances on the one hand and the Freudian focus on unconscious intrapsychic events on the other”, and calls this “emotion work”. She states that Goffman looks at “social patterns in emotive experience” and argues

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that despite “actively negotiating a course of action... in the long run, all the action seems like passive acquiescence to social convention” (1979: 555-556). By focusing on “situations, episodes, [and] encounters”, otherwise known as “situationism”, the individual assessed is placed “‘between’ social structure and personality”; every “interactional episode takes on the character of a minigovernment” (1979: 556).

In *The Commercialization of Intimate Life* (2003), Hochschild describes three types of “emotion work”: cognitive, bodily, and expressive. “Cognitive” emotion work is when we “change images, ideas, or thoughts” in order to alter our feelings; “Bodily” emotion work is when we “change somatic or other physical symptoms of emotion” in order to alter our feelings; “Expressive” emotion work is when we “change expressive gestures” in order to alter our feelings (2003: 96). Distinguishing between “work” and “labor”, she introduces “emotion labor” (Hochschild 2003), “emotion management” (Hochschild 2003), and “deep acting” (Hochschild 1979) to refer to the management of feelings when they are done in private with “use value”. When this management is “sold for a wage” and has “exchange value” (2012: 7), Hochschild terms this “emotional labor”. Emotional labor is “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display” (2012: 7), in which a person has to incite or quell different feelings and synchronize feelings and corporeal performances to remain agreeable with others. Later on, in looking at nannies, maids, and sex workers, Hochschild (2002) writes that while love is a “renewable resource”, a domestic worker is only able to care for her employer’s child in the First World with a “surfeit of affection” at the expense of an “emotional deprivation” to her own child in the Third World. Thus, love becomes transformed into a commodity that is “scarce”, “limited”, and “distributable” (2002: 22-23).

In a similar vein, Nicole Constable (1999) has investigated what she terms as “the commodification of intimacy” in the labor produced in “cross-border marriages,

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migrant domestic workers and care workers, and migrant sex workers” (1999: 50). Elsewhere, Zelizer (2005) has termed this exchange “the purchase of intimacy”. Returning to Marx, Constable (1999: 50) reminds us that “commodification refers to the process of assigning market value to goods or services that previously existed outside of the market”. In her broad overview of research comprising the exchange of money or some form of currency for care or sex labor, she focuses on social relationships “that are – or give the impression of being – physically and/or emotionally close, personal, sexually intimate, private, caring, or loving” and how they have been “bought or sold”, “packaged and advertised”, “fetishized, commercialized, or objectified”, and “consumed or assigned value and prices” (1999: 50), mostly in the realm of care or entertainment work. She brings up Brennan’s (2004, 2007) work on Dominican women and their relationships – and marriages – with foreign men as “‘performances’ in which sex workers feign love to mask the economic exchange and the benefits they receive” (Constable 1999: 55). This is a nuanced variant of the “counterfeit intimacy” discussed in Barton’s (2002, 2007) work on exotic dancers, or the “bounded authenticity” in Bernstein’s (2007a, 2007b) study of sex work in European and American contexts where “authentic relationships” can be sold and bought in the market (2007b: 7).

Expanding on the notion of intimacy, Zelizer (2005: 16) writes that intimacy should be conceptualized as “a continuum from impersonal to intimate” to avoid “common, morally tinged confusions” when intimacy is normatively framed as “emotion”, “caring attention”, “authenticity”, and as “intrinsic good”. Rather, intimacy is but the systematic expression or inhibition of emotions, and may encompass positive feelings of “attention” and “care” as well as negative feelings of “anger, despair, and shame” (2005: 16-17). In response to scholars who posit that the “routinization of emotional expression” in jobs in the service industry “deprives the social relations in question of their meaning and damages the inner lives of the people involved” (2005: 17), Zelizer debunks the thought that “truly intimate relationships

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[must] rest on authentic expressions of feeling” (2005: 17). She argues that “feelings and meanings” are not contained within a person’s body, but instead fluctuate depending on the “interpersonal relationship” being negotiated.

Furthermore, the enactment of such “feelings and meanings” has the propensity to become obligatory services when routinized over time in particular relationships, such as caring for the aged or ill out of responsibility (2005: 17).

## **Attention**

### *Attention economy*

While intimacy and emotional labor is an attractive way to maintain positive relations with others, a highly saturated economy such as the Influencer industry requires more captive modes of engaging the audience to counter attention fatigue. In his 1997 article, “The Attention Economy and the Net”, Michael Goldhaber asserts that since “attention” is now the most “scarce” commodity, it has created a “new kind of economy” he terms “the attention economy”. He argues that “economies are governed by what is scarce” yet we are moving into an age of “abundant”, “overflowing” information “drowning” us, thus bringing about the ever important need to distinguish oneself from the crowd. In their work on the attention economy from the business perspective, Davenport & Beck later added that while “capital, labor, information, and knowledge are all in plentiful supply”, it is “human attention” that is in shortage (2001: 2). Goldhaber reminds us that as with any other economy, “[t]he attention economy brings with it its own kind of wealth, its own class divisions – stars vs. fans – and its own forms of property” (2001: abstract). He offers that attention is not “momentary”, but rather a “stock” one builds on as a form of “enduring wealth... that puts you in a preferred position to get anything this new economy offers” (2001: Wealth and property take new forms, too, para. 1).



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Goldhaber adds that to command attention, one must practice originality, transparency, and the ability to convert attention into other resources and currencies.

Davenport & Beck further distinguished between “awareness” and “attention”, the former as a precursor of the latter, whereby “vague, general information, [that] doesn’t by itself catalyze any action” becomes “targeted and specific [to get] people moving” (2001: 21-22). The authors later developed three pairs of attention parameters: “voluntary” and “captive”, wherein one gives attention out of choice or not; “attractive” and “aversive”, wherein one gives attention for gains or to avoid loss; and “front-of-mind” and “back-of-mind”, wherein one gives attention explicitly and consciously or out of a familiar muscle memory (2001: 22-24). On a regular basis, Influencers command a passive form of voluntary, attractive, and back-of-mind attention from their stable stream of followers. However, Influencers may engage in spectacle-like practices to generate an active form of captive, aversive, and front-of-mind attention to recapture the foci of existing followers and attract new ones.

### *Spectacles*

Beeman (1993: 380) describes the spectacle as “a public display of a society’s central meaningful elements” such as parades and festivals that “occur at regular intervals and are frequently deeply meaningful for a society”, with the power to “elicit strong positive emotional responses from the observing public”. However, the spectacles I observe in chapter nine follow the pattern of what Boorstin (1961: 9-12) terms “pseudo-events”, in that the event is not spontaneous but staged as “synthetic novelty” (1961: 9) executed for the mere purpose of creating “newsworthy” content. The pseudo-event bears an ambiguous representation of the reality of events, and most crucially, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy (1961:

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11-12). In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord similarly asserts contrary to Beeman's usage, that the spectacle "aims at nothing other than itself" (2002: 7) and occupies "the domain of delusion and false consciousness" (2002: 6). Despite this, spectacles function as a "means of unification" because they serve as "the focal point of all vision and consciousness" (2002: 6).

Anthropologically, Turner (1974: 33, 37) has similarly studied unifying spectacle-like events he terms "social dramas" – "public episodes of tensional irruption" in which conflict arises from "aharmonic" or "disharmonic" processes. Social dramas are concerned with the cohesion and conflict within a social group (1974: 45-46). They can be productive to a group when the conflict generated thrusts into prominence the conventional negligible and taken-for-granted "customs and habits of daily intercourse", causing people to "take sides in terms of deeply entrenched moral imperatives and constraints, often against their own personal preferences" (1974: 35). MacAloon (1984: 243) adds that "[s]pectacles give primacy to visual sensory and symbolic codes; they are things to be seen" and are to be "of a certain size and grandeur", and indeed the spectacles I observe are premised on the use of enticing visual images. Debord (2002: 6) asserts that spectacles are not just "a collection of images", but rather, "a social relation between people that is mediated by images".

One form of spectacle is the scandal. In *The Audience in Everyday Life*, Bird (2003: 21) expounds on people's attraction to scandals and personality-driven interest stories, thus leading to mainstream and non-mainstream news publication's inclination towards entertaining and engaging the audience with "trivial" issues alongside the information of hard news. She argues that personalizing stories allows the audience to better understand and remember these issues, or what Sparks and Tulloch (2000) call the "tabloidization" of news. Bird details five ways in which scandals "gain momentum" from the audience.

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Stories that are circulated for longer periods: dramatize morality and police the boundaries of societal acceptance with celebrities taken as “melodramatic personifications of correct or illicit behavior” (Bird 2003: 33); invite speculation for people to pass a moral judgment; allow people to personalize the issue and engage in dialogue; identify with people’s emotions with human interest; and enable a distancing of audience from actor via “melodrama [and] excess” (2003: 46).

Additionally, given the increasing saturation of content online, users are engaging in creative ways to wrestle for attention. One example of this is the use of “click bait”, a “stylistic and narrative luring device [that] induce[s] anticipation and curiosity” among followers, capturing their attention and thus inviting them to click on a link to “read on” (Blom & Hansen 2015: 87). Popularized by commercialization and tabloidization in journalism, Blom & Hansen (2015: 87) also refer to click bait as a “forward-referring technique” that teases readers, utilizes “emotional wording”, and creates “suspense”.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have outlined the key concepts I will utilize in my analysis throughout this thesis. Conceptually, I began with an overview of “microcelebrity”, looking at its brief history as situated in earlier work on celebrity and stars, ordinary celebrity, and reality TV celebrity. Thematically, I provided an overview of research most closely related to my original research, comprising blogs and social media advertorials in Singapore and elsewhere. Theoretically, I laid out in detail Goffman’s (1956) interactional theories of decorum and staging, as well as demonstrating their relations with Bourdieu’s (1984) practice theory, which I utilize in my coding of emic data for etic analyses in my subsequent chapters. Finally, in five categories organized according to the key tenets (personae, femininities, taste,

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intimacies, and attention) I formulate in this thesis, I discussed cornerstone work that has informed my etic analyses of emic data gathered during fieldwork. Having laid the contextual, historical, conceptual and theoretical groundwork of this thesis in the first four chapters, I continue with five core chapters, each investigating one of the key tenets mentioned above. I begin with the tenet of “personae”, as its metrics culture and entanglements of privacy and publicness are at the forefront of Influencer decorum.

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## CHAPTER FIVE: PERSONAE

### **I Am Me: Numbers, Persona, and Privacy**

Although we had some initial email and text exchanges, the first time I met with Influencer Naomi in person was in the Gushcloud office. I had just returned from my lunch break and found the 17-year-old plaiting her manager's hair. As one of the youngest Influencers signed to the company – despite multiple offers, she was poached by them at the age of 15 – Naomi seemed to receive special attention from her managers, who often jested that they “*sayang*” (a term of Malay origin colloquially used as an affectionate verb i.e. “to love, dote on, or care for”) her a lot. The rest of the lunch crowd straggling into the office spot the Influencer and exchange excited greetings, hugs, and high fives. This crowd breaks the usually quiet and serious atmosphere of the office. The managers – all three of them women – take turns to stroke Naomi's hair and even playfully slap each other on the buttocks in a display of affection. Age aside, Naomi also happens to be one of Gushcloud's most prized assets, being the most popular under-18 Influencer across all genres in Singapore.

One of the managers takes Naomi to me and formally introduces us; the Influencer shifts into a more ceremonial composure, extending her arm for a handshake accompanied by verbal niceties: “*Nice to meet you, Crystal. I'm Naomi. Where would you like to go?*” As the two of us make our way to a café down the road for our scheduled interview, it becomes clear to me that I would need to earn the intimacy Naomi reserves for Gushcloud staff. Our short exchanges are polite and courteous, although I know from several previous introductions and interactions with other Gushcloud Influencers that these formalities would soon give way to more warm and unbridled interactions.

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In the five minutes between the office and the café, Naomi is stopped three times by giggly uniform-clad youngsters. Deranged yelps echo from across the street and within the mall: *“Oh my god, Naomi Neo!”*; *“Eh look, look, look!”* Fans are requesting to have photographs taken with her. Informed by my months of interaction with other Influencers, I immediately step in to mediate the exchange, offering to be the camerawoman while negotiating the small crowd that has begun to gather around her. The Influencer is poised and quietly confident – clearly no stranger to such public attention. She greets each follower with a huge grin and alternates among a selection of mentally rehearsed responses: *“A photo? Sure!”*; *“That’s real sweet of you!”*; *“Aww, I would love to!”*. She positions her body close to each follower and allows them to lean in towards her. There are a few subtle body adjustments she seamlessly makes as soon as the camera is pointed at her – a downward tilt of the chin, raised shoulders, a slight tip toe, an extended smile to reveal her dimples. Some fans ask if they may sling an arm over her shoulder. *“Okay!”*; *“No problem!”*; *“Sure!”*, she chimes. The photograph is taken and cameras are returned to their respective owners, but she extends her friendly exchange: *“How is the photo?”*; *“Is it okay?”*; *“Does it look good?”* Her fans are almost ecstatic over their idol’s investment in their brief exchange. Her parting salutations reveal her routinized public relations practices: *“Tag me on Instagram, okay?”*; *“Send me the photo!”*; *“Okay I will share the picture!”* Squealing fans leave in glee.

As we sit down – not before the Influencer entertains two of the baristas who are also fans of hers – she slouches over the table, fiddles with her phone, and gives her eyes a rub. We go through the first few introductory questions that she answers in a now contemplative and hushed tone – a sharp break in frame (Goffman 1974) from her previously animated self. It suddenly dawns upon me that in the last ten minutes, I have just witnessed Naomi in three different frames: the baby of the company among doting staff, the accommodating popular Influencer among enthusiastic fans, and the conscientious entrepreneur among professionals in the

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industry. This is not to say, however, that any of these projections of Naomi is more “authentic” than the other. On the contrary, Naomi has exhibited how relatable her various personae can be.

In this chapter, I discuss how Influencers like Naomi negotiate projected impressions of themselves in digital and physical worlds in order to maintain personae that convey relatability. More crucially, because Influencers attract their following by being premised as young, feminine, commercially successful women who are showcasing what is “behind-the-scenes” of their “personal” lives for others to model, this persona has to inhabit an interstitial space that engages in boundary work between what the following perceives to be “private” and “public”. Marshall (2014: 161) refers to such small displays in the public sphere as “micropublics”, in relation to the normalization of celebrity news in traditional print media. Generally, the relatability of Influencers’ personae largely depends on their abilities to successfully convey “sincerity” in their performance, whether or not this sincerity is actual or contrived (Goffman 1959: 70-71), as conveyed through “presentational media” (Marshall 2014: 160) or “automedial” technologies (Maguire 2014), such as blogs and social media platforms, that allow users to present themselves autobiographically.

This chapter comprises three sections. Part one discusses the different categories of social relationships Influencers share with followers, and the social capital associated with their metrics culture. Part two investigates Influencers’ strategies in curating a consistent image across their personae. Part three juxtaposes emic recounting of privacy and publicness against etic analyses of the lifecycle of commoditized privacy, as Influencers progress in status and rank in the industry. The chapter argues that Influencers’ system of followers and numbers, and their negotiations of disclosure and exposure across different social media platforms all

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hinge upon a balance between being able to selectively package the public and the private as sellable commodities.

## **Part I – A numbers game**

It's simple math. The higher the number of followers, friends, or fans on your social media feeds, the wider your advertising reach. Since an Influencer's "numbers" denote a positive feedback in her reputation economy (Tuten & Solomon 2013: 10), those with larger followings command higher pay from clients. Influencers are often reduced to their "numbers". In her book *Influencerati, Twitterati: How Blogs and Twitter are Transforming Popular Culture*, Mary Cross (2011: 123-124) pinpoints that "[t]he whole status game is about how many people are in your camp, listed as a friend or follower", aptly summarizing follower count as a mark of one's reputation in the industry.

### **Numbers and relationships**

The make-up of an Influencer's following comprises fellow Influencers (cliques, alliances) and followers (readers, fans, haters, bots). While it is the latter category that forms the core in numbers, the former is important in building up one's social standing. Both social groups are examples of "selective bridging" (Faris 2012) or tightly linked closed networks that increase an Influencer's exposure, and thus status and value.

#### *Cliques and Alliances*

In the vernacular, "cliques" are usually small groups of Influencers who share similar interests and thus spend time together, excluding others as a result. As an



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exclusive unit, these Influencers often preserve personal, intimate friendships even outside of the Influencer scene, with some cliques being more prominent than others. These groups have been referred to in terms of their similar appearances, by the genre of their blogs, or by the most prominent Influencer in the circle:

... that group of small, skinny, *xiao mei mei* [little girls]<sup>15</sup>...

... yeah all those Influencers who also own shops...

... and I bumped into Tina that gang...

Readership among Influencers in cliques tends to circulate when Influencers hyperlink each other in blogposts, or mention each other on social media platforms, such as Twitter and Instagram. While usually presented as natural and subtle mentions – “Just had a fabulous dinner with Yvette [hyperlinked]!” – these hyperlinks invite followers to explore the social world of another Influencer with a simple click, thus generating more publicity and exposure for the latter.

“Alliances” are similar to cliques in the ways they share their pool of followers, but a handful of Influencers explained that these were less based on genuine friendship, and more intentional and interest-driven. A conversation I had with one Influencer was especially telling. I mentioned that a couple of other Influencers “looked like great friends” with her because I always see them together in photographs. She surprisingly admitted:

Oh, we’re not really friends *lah*... It’s mutual benefits – I tag you, you tag me, our readers will check each [Influencer] out... everyone does it *loh*, you think

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<sup>15</sup> Usually used in jest by veteran Influencers to refer to younger cohorts of Influencers.

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they are all really good friends? Not everyone... At events only... It's a business...

Influencer Geraldine reveals that some Influencers are astutely capitalizing on each other's fame and following to expand their readership, and thus "follow" each other on blogs and social media feeds for mutual benefit, bonded by their affinity in self-interest. Citing research on Twitter users from Wu et al. (2011), Zappavigna (2012: 9) similarly notes that high profile or "elite" users share a "highly homophilous structure" of attention and follow each other on social media. As an act of reciprocity, mutual hyperlinking itself has become a system of digital gifting through which social relations between Influencers are illuminated (see Komter 2007).

*Readers, Fans, and Haters*

Influencers in Singapore generally categorise their followers as "readers" (neutral or supportive towards Influencers), "haters" (disavow Influencers and have been known to denigrate their craft), and "bots" (dummy, purchased accounts that some Influencers have been accused of using to boost their numbers). Although a handful of Influencers do refer to some followers as "fans" (Marwick & boyd 2011), this term is the least used in rejection of the status elevation and sense of distance this hierarchical naming implies. As noted by Influencer Bernice:

I don't really see them as fans, cos it sounds like I'm very big or like a celebrity... but I'm don't think I'm like very 'high up'... I'm normal and just like everyone...

Influencer Michelle similarly notes:

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I call them readers... readers and haters... not fans *lah* please, don't make it sound like I [am] very *duapai* [colloquial Hokkien for "big shot"]

In addition, Influencer Linda feels that branding her followers as "fans" may come across as demeaning:

I think if you call them fans then they might feel like you think you are very great... like better than them [such that] you deserve fans... but I'm not... I'm very ordinary, and I hope I don't give the impression that I am 'above' all of them

In their attempt to retain an impression of relatability and to bridge the distance between themselves and followers, Influencers in Singapore tend to emphasise personae that are ordinary and everyday, and premise their communication on a "responsiveness to, rather than distancing from, one's community" (Senft 2008:116).

Some followers have set up "fan accounts" for various Influencers, in which they repost content from Influencers or catalogue news and gossip related to the Influencer. Influencers also receive a fair share of digital and physical "fan mail" from followers, especially those who also run blogshops in tandem with their lifestyle blogs. In a similar vein, many Influencers also have "hate accounts" dedicated to them.

Burgess & Green (2009: 96) define haters as "negative and often personally offensive commenters". While the Influencers and followers I have interviewed largely agree with this definition, there was a unanimous emphasis on hating "just for the sake of it" and a sense that these comments were not merely "harsh criticism", but deliberately unproductive, hostile, and malicious in order to incite

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conflict. There are similar allusions to “trolls” and “flamers”, but “haters” is the preferred term among the Influencers interviewed.

While most Influencers do not intentionally provoke haters, almost all of them have experienced haters and hating in one form or the other. Some Influencers have been known to intentionally provoke haters to direct attention to themselves, or ride on the wave of other Influencers’ controversies in order to attract competitors’ haters to themselves. Thus, despite the negative publicity and related emotional labor required to manage them, haters and “hating” are functional for Influencers and valued in the industry. This will be further discussed in chapter nine.

*Bots and The Instagram purge*

In a desperate bid to expand their readership and increase their social currency, some dishonest Influencers have even been accused of “buying” followers. Known to Internet users as “bots”, these dummy accounts click through multiple blogs and follow various social media accounts but are not actually owned or manned by a person. For instance, one public advertisement on the Internet offers 10,000 new Instagram followers for USD25 (ibuyinstagramfollowers.com 2013), while another offers 1,000 new Twitter followers for USD15 (fastfollowerz.com 2013). A handful of Influencers have been called out by colleagues for such deceit, usually noted by a sudden unprovoked increase of followers overnight, or by a very large but inactive following (i.e. inconsistent number of “likes” across posts, few comments across posts).

In fact, in response to the growing number of such bots and spam, on 18 December 2014, Instagram took to a platform-wide removal of bot accounts in an event now memorialized as “The Instagram Purge”. On popular news websites, this event was also neologized as “the Instagram rapture”, “the Instagram cleanup”,

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and “the Instagram sweep”. International news outlets such as *The New York Times*, *International Business Times*, and *Huffington Post* covered The Purge with chaos-inducing headlines, mostly focusing on celebrities such as Kim Kardashian and Justin Bieber losing millions of followers, as well as outrage from everyday users.

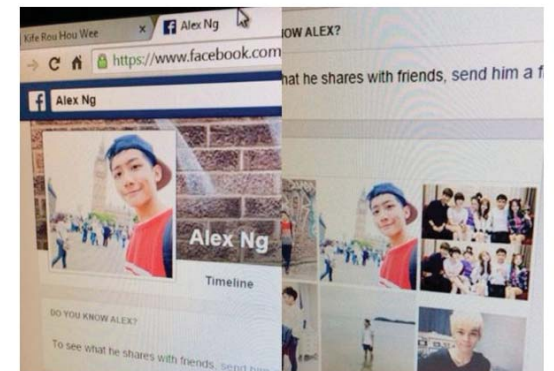
Amidst this furor, Influencers were probably the most affected group, considering that the repercussions of their dwindling Instagram followers not only discounted their reputation, but also the credibility of their work ethic and thus their earnings. However, many Influencers vocalized their support for The Purge for removing duplicate accounts and imposters who were “cashing in” on their fame. Influencers TylerHikaru and jamietyj – better known as Tyler and Jamie – are among the many local Influencers who have to address identity theft on various platforms regularly.

In a Tweet in October 2014, Tyler revealed that an unknown person impersonating as his friend had been using images of Tyler’s brother, “Alex Ng”, on his Facebook profile. Tyler posted a screenshot bearing the fake Facebook profile of an imposter juxtaposed against the genuine Facebook profile belonging to Alex Ng. The imposter had long been copying and re-posting images of Alex Ng as himself, but this time accidentally cross-posted an image of Tyler instead. Tyler took to this discovery candidly with a Tweet (Figure 5.1):

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The awkward moment when an imposter of your friend uses your brother's name and mixes us up LOL



**Figure 5.1**

His follow-up Tweet (Figure 5.2) revealed that such imposters are no unusual affair:



I've lots of Imposters from Malaysia, china, Philippines, Australia, US, Indonesia and I'm okay with that...

10/1/14, 12:38

1 FAVORITE



**Figure 5.2**

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He later clarified that he sometimes monitors these “fakes”, and does not mind their presence as long as they are not making a profit from posing as the Influencer or harming others. A month later, Jamie posted a similar gripe on Twitter, exposing an Instagram imposter. She Tweeted a screenshot of the imposter’s Instagram stream, clearly featuring photos lifted from Jamie’s Instagram account. A series of Tweets (Figures 5.3 & 5.4) detailed the Influencer’s efforts at formally removing the imposter:



**Figure 5.3**



**Figure 5.4**

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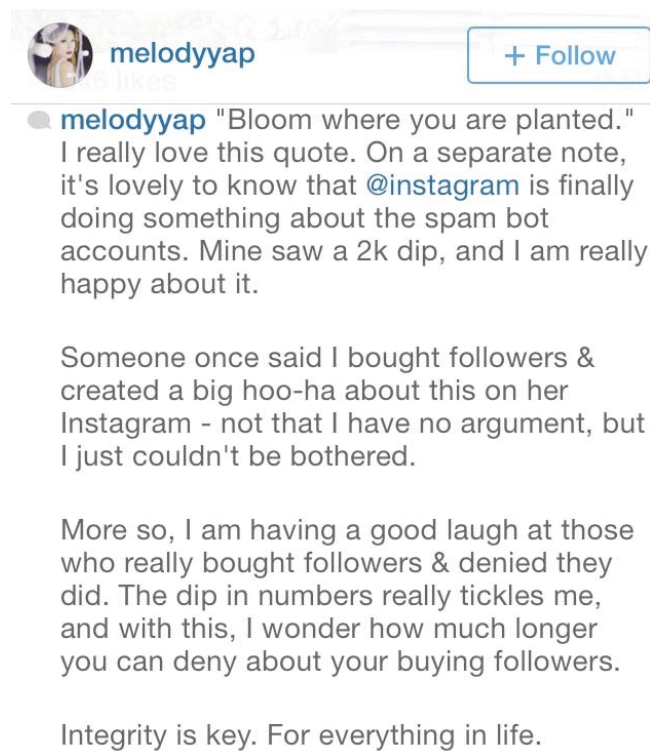
Evidently, Influencers embroiled in identity theft on social media platforms welcomed The Purge. Veteran Influencers who emerged relatively unscathed (i.e. only losing up to 3,000 followers which is considered a low number, most likely comprising bot accounts who “mass follow” high-profile users without explicitly being paid to do so) presumably because they did not buy fake followers but have genuine followers and fans, also used this opportunity to encourage colleagues to preserve their work ethic. Influencer melodyyap posted a lengthy caption (Figure 5.5 & 5.6) on her Instagram account, citing “evidence” from The Purge to refute earlier claims that she had bought followers:



Figure 5. 5



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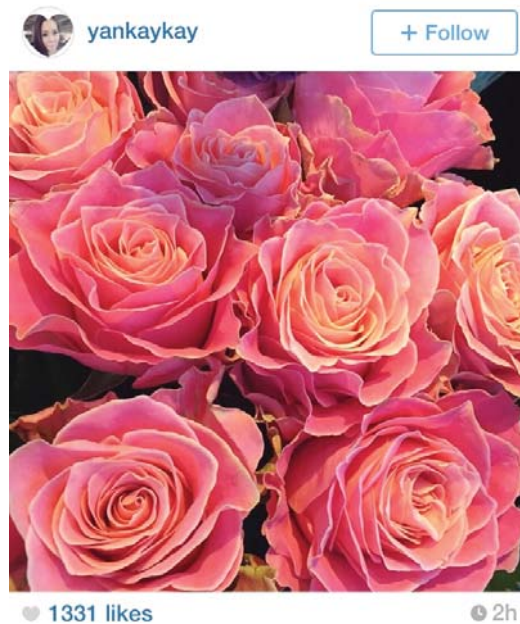


**Figure 5. 6**

Another Influencer, yankaykay, who boasts over 81,300 followers as of February 2015, echoed melodyyap's sentiments (Figures 5.7, 5.8, & 5.9):

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**Figure 5.7**

- yankaykay Some pretty flowers from Tokyo to cushion my wordy post.  
 So last night, I found that I had an approximately 3k drop in my followers. My first thought: "Was the last selfie that ugly?" Hahaha. And I went to sleep.  
 This morning, I saw [@melodyyap](#)'s post on how [@instagram](#) has been deleting inactive/bot/bought accounts and realized the reason for the drop.  
 To clarify, I've never bought any followers on any of my social media platforms. I'm guessing the drop is from inactive accounts. Think everyone dropped by a bit right?  
 To be completely honest though, I have been tempted to buy followers. It's SO competitive here and clients always look at numbers and this is where I earn a significant part of my income from. I'd be lying if I said numbers don't matter to me. BUT I'm super glad I didn't. Cos now I'm looking at these accounts that have 50k or more drops(I hear some people dropped 80-90%??) and I'm thinking how embarrassing it is for them.

**Figure 5.8**

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**Figure 5. 9<sup>16</sup>**

In general, most Influencers supported the Instagram Purge for reasons varying from defending their reputation and rendering visible their integrity to stamping out competitors and subtly shaming other Influencers who had bought followers.

## **Numbers and value**

Whereas studies in Psychology have focused on social compensatory friending for a deficiency in self-esteem (Lee et al. 2012), Influencers look towards friending and followers with a largely commercial intent. I discuss vernacular understandings of Influencers' "numbers" as defined by competence, quality, professionalism, and rank.

### *Competence*

An Influencer manager once recounted her dilemma when an Influencer she was trying to market or, in industry jargon, "push" to clients "has the looks but doesn't have the numbers". Even though one particular Influencer was gorgeous with model features and would have made a suitable ambassador for the cosmetic brand – the demographic of her followers fit perfectly into the brand's target

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<sup>16</sup> "*paiseh*" is colloquial Hokkien for "embarrassing".

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audience – the clients wanted to settle for a different Influencer whose demographic reach was not entirely congruent with their target group, simply because “her numbers are higher”. She explained that in this business:

...your numbers are everything. You can be damn good, but if your numbers are not high also no point because that’s all clients want to see.

Thus, in this sense an Influencers’ follower count becomes an indication of her competence to clients, connoting the degree of attention she commands in the market.

### *Quality*

Among followers and fans, an Influencer’s “numbers” are taken as a marker of their distinguished taste and reputation in the industry. On one level, a strong following indicates that an Influencer’s publicized and curated personal lifestyle choices have earned the approval of a collective, to the extent that they follow her posts as endorsements of distinction. In the words of one follower, “if so many people follow her then surely she must be good”. Another follower adds,

...why do I read her blog? Because everybody reads her blog, they believe in the things she believes in... and so many people can’t be wrong, right?

Hence, an Influencer’s follower count can be interpreted as the quality of her taste and lifestyle choices, to the extent that a strong following envies and desires to keep up-to-date with her.

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*Professionalism*

On another level, followers take an Influencer's "numbers" as her relative reputation in the industry, which correlates to her responsibility to her followers – the better one's reputation, the greater her responsibility to her followers. Such Influencers are assumed to be trusted reviewers and gatekeepers of quality products and services. Similar to findings from Trammell & Keshelashvili (2005: 969), such Influencers have even been approached by the mainstream media and various corporations as independent experts. One self-professed fan of an Influencer explains,

everything she posts, we are already assured that it is of a certain standard, [because] she has so many readers... she has to make sure that she only posts the best things, to be responsible to us.

Another loyal follower rationalizes that high follower counts encourage Influencer responsibility:

last time when she wasn't so [popular] her photos were okay only and very normal, like the ones we take everyday. But now that she has like 50k followers, surely she must feel very watched, so naturally all the posts are better now.

This follower believes there is a co-relation between Influencers' public fame and the pressure to maintain responsible broadcasts and endorsements. It works in the reverse as well – Influencers believed to be more responsible to their readership naturally draw in an increasing crowd over time.

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In early 2013, Influencer Angela had endorsed and blogged about her experience with a bust enhancement service. She even included a special discount voucher that they could use by simply quoting her name. Within a few weeks, throngs of angry followers were leaving her publicly visible, nasty comments critiquing her ethics (see also Champoux et al. 2012) because the beauty service was not as effective as she had claimed and the discount codes were rejected by the store. They were indignant that she was not “using [her] fame responsibly, especially when so many people read [her] blog”. They expected a higher level of “service” from her given her reputation and felt her work did not match up to her high following. Hence, an Influencer’s “numbers” can also be perceived as indicating her degree of responsibility and thus professionalism in the industry.

*Rank*

Among fellow Influencers, one’s follower count is sometimes discussed as an Influencer’s relative rank within the industry. Similar to Hollywood’s Ulmer Scale of A- to D-listers, Influencers tend to distinguish their status with markers ranging from “low hundreds” to “mid 10ks”. One Influencer with readership in the low thousands recounted an occasion when she felt uneasy mingling with another whose following was into the mid-10ks:

... compared to her I was a nobody, it would be weird if we hung out cos I’m not as popular, she has like 20k hits [followers], I think.

Similarly, throughout my conversations with Influencers individually or in a group, a common query whenever an unfamiliar Influencer was mentioned was the strength of her readership. Hence, an Influencer’s “numbers” can also connote her relative rank in the industry.

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## **Part II – Platform and personae congruence**

In this section, I will discuss Influencers' understandings and management of their various social media platforms, the congruence of their personae, and their conceptualizations of privacy and publicness. Specifically, Influencers' vernacular perceptions of what constitutes the public are located in the mass and demographic of their followers, the normative boundaries of what acceptable conversational topics are, and the reputation and status Influencers have built for themselves in order to establish candor even with contentious topics. This section also demonstrates how Influencers partake in privacy play as a way of soliciting relatability with followers, and the lifecycle of commoditized privacy among low-, mid-, and high-status Influencers.

### **Platform congruence**

As mentioned in chapter two, while Influencers in Singapore debut on blogs, they have since expanded into other social media platforms. Many of them assign different use values and meanings to these platforms and thus vary the curation of their personae on them. For instance, several Influencers own "personal" Facebook accounts using their legal names in the format "first name - last name", while concurrently maintaining "Influencer" Facebook accounts or Pages that are more conscientiously framed for their followers. To distinguish between their personal, non-work accounts and their professional, media accounts, many Influencers name the latter a variant of their names, such as "last name - first name" or "first name - ethnic name<sup>17</sup> - last name". Some adopt their blog URL and social media monikers as the name of their "Influencer" Facebook account or page. For instance, while

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<sup>17</sup> As mentioned earlier, Influencers in Singapore are primarily Chinese. As such, many Influencers have both English language first names (i.e. "Jamie") and Chinese language ethnic names (i.e. "Yi Jing").

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Jamie's blog URL, Twitter, and Instagram handles are "jamietyj", the handle for her personal Facebook account is "tan.yijing", while her Influencer Facebook page remains as "jamietyj".

Leading from the nuanced nomenclatures of personal and professional branding across different social media platforms and accounts, some Influencers do indeed have "private" or "secret" accounts unbeknownst to their followers. As these "private" accounts are hardly publicized or, if ever, only cursorily mentioned on the rare occasion, their use is not to cultivate the illusion of exclusivity, but instead is a practice of the narrative archiving of thoughts that are not curated for their commercial personae. Rachel says she has a "secret blog" in which she documents personal reflections that only she reads whenever she visits her archives. "Some things I really don't wanna share," she tells me and adds that she prefers blogging online to penning analogue diary entries because she "does not like to write". Both Junying and Audrey similarly mention that they know some Influencers who "also have private accounts". Audrey adds:

It's private... not like nude photos... but private accounts that are not very *private*... like pictures of food...

Audrey points out a crucial conceptualization of privacy among Influencers who regularly commoditize it, as will be discussed later in this section, to bait attention and sustain their following. Her nuanced distinction underscores one understanding of privacy framed as an inhibited access to the material, or a lack of a critical follower mass in the viewing of the material. This is unlike more popular notions of privacy referring to material that is controversial, personal, or traditionally hidden away from the public eye.



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While they juggle several different social media platforms all at once, Influencers often highlight specific strengths of each medium. Jacqueline first began as an Influencer when a “PR person” contacted her via her personal Facebook account. She tells me that apart from Facebook, they also considered her other social media platforms, including Pinterest, Instagram, Twitter, and her blog, before deciding to engage her for an advertorial. However, Jacqueline’s “viral” blogposts were mostly publicized and shared by friends and strangers on Facebook. Facebook links to a few blogposts of hers have even trended<sup>18</sup> locally.

Similarly, Naomi says that her “hype” (frenzied interest generated within a very short span of time) first started on Facebook where her posts were often liked and shared over 2,000 times within a couple of hours. She says she is now “inactive” on Facebook because “it has died down, and a lot of people don’t use it anymore”. Naomi tells me that Twitter and Instagram are “more of the *in thing*” now, and she has turned her focus to those platforms as well as her YouTube channel. She says she now updates her Facebook once or twice a month, but continues to blog at least three times a week with a minimum of one personal, non-sponsored post. Like most other Influencers, Naomi is also aware of and receptive to the nuances in her follower demographic across different social media platforms. She claims to have more “girl readers” on her blog, but more “guy followers” on Twitter and Instagram. While she observes that her “likers and comments” on Twitter and Instagram are mostly “guys... who sometimes say perverted stuff” [sic], like asking to be her boyfriend or other “sexual things”, she feels her blogposts are “more relatable to girls” and receive more overt positive feedback.

In her discussion of fellow Influencers’ social media platforms, Junying tells me that “people” view Audrey’s blog as “more Tumblr”. She explains that the aesthetic

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<sup>18</sup> To be among the most searched or most talked about content on a particular social media platform within a short period of time.

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framing of Audrey's blog and her focus on artistic photography were more in the style of popular Tumblr sites rather than the staple "lifestyle" blogs in their industry. For this reason, she feels Audrey's blog is "worth to see" and would recommend it to her own followers. Junying's perception of the incongruence of Audrey's *Tumblr*-esque style with her *blog* platform further highlights the implicit performative norms and expectations Influencers place on their various social media.

During the duration of my research, the branding of Instagram among my informants, in particular, has evolved from being "upcoming", "the latest", and "the most potential", to being "the most popular", "the most effective", and "the most monetized". Tricia highlights "the power of Instagram" when a picture of a dress for her blogshop-turned-webstore, "vaingloriousyou", resulted in so many queries and reservations that the dress was sold out before it was even published or launched on the website. For this reason, she also curates her Instagram persona more conscientiously than her other social media platforms to emphasize the image of her webstore, and to harness the critical mass of followers there. Reiee similarly tells me that "there is more focus on Instagram now", and adds that "Instagram is like Twitter... and everyone is using it now... to give shoutouts<sup>19</sup>".

Harnessing Instagram's popularity, Influencers use the platform in a handful of novel ways. For instance, many users adopt Instagram-stylized hashtags to redirect traffic from their Instagram feeds to their blogs. Some popular hashtags are "#ontheblog", "#blogged", "#blogupdated", and "#newblogpost". This redirection of web traffic is especially important to sustain Influencers' incomes. After they debuted around 2005, Singaporean Influencers began facing a decrease in blog readership by mid-2013, when Instagram became the most popular social media app in the country. This was detrimental, as blogs are more effective than

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<sup>19</sup> Publicizing another user's content on your own feed that usually has a much higher follower count, and thus much higher exposure.

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Instagram in terms of selling power, because they allow space for lengthy, detailed advertorials.

Many Influencers are focused on improving their Instagram posts in order to “lure readers back” to their blog. These self-promotion hashtags, while appearing like creative wordplay, are in fact deliberate efforts to steer readership towards avenues that are more profitable for Influencers. In acknowledgement of the decline of blog viewership and the rising popularity of Instagram use, Xiaxue coined “Instablogging”, where short text-based pictorial posts are primed to replace blogging. While her first mention of “Instablogging” was made in June 2013, the Influencer has since stopped this practice and returned to aesthetically stylized selfies and photographs of her toddler. On this notion, I now turn to a discussion of how Influencers construct and situate the congruence of their personae across multiple social media platforms.

### **Personae congruence**

To followers, many Influencers are interchangeably known by their social media monikers and their legal names. However, the Influencers themselves may personally distinguish between the two. Tammy uses her legal name, “Tammy Tay”, on her personal Facebook page, but adopts her Influencer moniker “ohsofickle” for her monetized blog URL, and Twitter and Instagram handles. She also owns a blogshop by the same name, but hosts her shop’s URL on a different domain to distinguish between her blog (ohsofickle.blogspot.com) and her shop (ohsofickle.com.sg). The social media handles for her shop are a variant of her Influencer moniker, “@shopohsofickle”. Tammy feels that it is important for her to “keep up [her] brand image” on her blog and social media feeds in order to “maintain the popularity of [her] blogshop”. She believes that naming her blogshop and commercial Twitter and Instagram feeds after her popular blog easily signals

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to readers that these platforms are an extension of herself (Hopkins 2015: 10), and that the reputation she has built on one platform will have a halo effect (Dittmar 2008; Nisbett & Wilson 1977) on the others, thus giving her customers “security and trust”.

In the same vein, Mae uses her legal name “Mae Tan” on her personal Facebook account, but her commercial persona “marxmae” on her monetized blog, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. However, unlike Tammy, who wants to be congruently known as “ohsofickle” so that her newer platforms can latch on the reputations of her more established ones, Mae prefers to separate herself from her social media enterprises:

I feel that marxmae is a brand but not me... I actually don't like people to call me marxmae... it's like so lame *lah*... I just got over it... like why should I become marxmae when my name is Mae Tan...

Mae implies that her master status is “Mae Tan”, the legal name she was given at birth, whereas “marxmae” is the commercial persona she has developed on social media. What Mae’s preference signposts is the emic distinction between the “commercial” and “personal” personae that Influencers adopt. However, her gripe over being called “marxmae” even when meeting with people in person emphasizes the undeniable connection between the personal and the commercial.

Although both Tammy and Mae refer to their Influencer monikers “ohsofickle” and “marxmae” as “brands”, deeper conversations during our interviews clarify that what they emically mean is brand *name*, as opposed to brand *identity* or brand *image*. Brand *identity* comprises producers’ constructions and encodings of meanings and values, while brand *image* comprises consumers’ receptions and evaluations of these encoded meanings and values (Malefyt & Morais 2012: 100).

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Brand *name*, however, refers to the trademark designation by which a product is known. That is, the Influencers were more concerned with the congruence and uniformity of their primary Internet handle, other web pseudonyms they may own, and their legal name. This is underscored by the fact that many Influencers who initially held varying user handles across their social media platforms eventually made them congruent. For example, jamietyj (mentioned above), who started off with a range of handles including “Jamie TYJ”, “Jamie Tan”, “Tan Yi Jing”, and “Jamie Tan Yi Jing”, is now uniformly known as “jamietyj” on all her commercial social media platforms.

Brand naming aside, Influencers are also concerned with the congruence of the types of products and services they advertise, as this remains one of their clients’ primary interests. An Influencer who is known for marketing “authentic replicas” or “knock-offs” is unlikely to be hired by clients selling the genuine product, although this does not mean an Influencer cannot simultaneously display counterfeit and genuine products when curating their personae (see chapter seven). An Influencer who has recently advertised for a competitor is unlikely to be hired by other clients in the same industry. In other words, Influencers carry the baggage of past personae curations and advertorials whenever they are being considered for a new contract.

While fashion models are best promoted to clients as blank canvases with the allowance to *embody* the products advertised, Influencers differ slightly by *projecting* facets of their personae onto the advertised product. It has been noted that advertisers are shifting from promoting “rational public decision making” to marketing “personal sensations”, using sentiment that is “more private, personal, and individually interpreted” (Malefyt & Morais 2012: 62). Being situated between advertisers and consumers, Influencers aptly become intermediaries of these “personal sensations” when they embed products for sale into their personal lives

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and depiction of lifestyles through the device of the advertorial. Their highly personalized approach makes ambiguous the distinction between private and public portrayals, such that they are able to harness the relatability they have established with followers to exercise impact upon purchasing decisions.

However, this not to say that Influencers have the freedom to take up any or as many engagement or sponsorship deals as they wish. Because the best Influencers are able to project their persona onto any product marketed, many brands include clauses in their contracts stipulating that an engaged Influencer is not to advertise for competitors within the same industry for a period of time. This usually varies between three months and a year, depending on the type of engagement. In the back-end, Influencer managers curate conscientious charts for their Influencers to prevent an overlap of competing engagements. Influencers who use more than one brand of a product will be careful not to reveal this incongruence in their candid – that is personal and non-sponsored – shots on social media. During my fieldwork, such slips occurred only very occasionally<sup>20</sup>, and Influencer managers would quickly rectify the situation by calling upon Influencers to remove or edit their original social media posts.

The testament to the effectiveness of Influencers' relatability is manifested in the ways countless brands and companies attempt to associate their product with Influencers in their advertising efforts. Overt promotional material tends to privilege an Influencer's endorsement of the product over its actual benefits and uses. In chapter seven, I return to this notion of the transmission of cultural and symbolic capital and value.

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<sup>20</sup> See Abidin, Crystal, and Mart Ots. (forthcoming) "The Influencer's dilemma: The shaping of new brand professions between credibility and commerce."

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### **Part III – Conceptualizing privacy and publicness**

As emphasized earlier, the crux of Influencers' personae is in being grounded in various states of privacy play. Essentially, successful Influencer personae are hinged on a calibrated performance between the traditionally "private" – that is unseen by others and usually kept to oneself or, at the very most, a small group of people with whom one is intimate – and the traditionally "public", that is, usually a performance of the self that most individuals are comfortable showcasing to others on a regular basis. However, given that Influencers capture their following by being premised as young, feminine, commercially successful women showcasing their "private" lives *as lived*, their personae have to inhabit a liminal/interstitial space that engages in boundary work between the public and the private, and usually involves some visibilization of a staged "private". Various forms, integrations, and creative commercial appropriations of this staged "privacy" will be discussed in two later chapters: Chapter eight considers the management of staged "privacy" and intimacies, while chapter nine considers how "privacy" can be mobilized as a commodity for attention. The rest of this section, however, will set the groundwork for these later deliberations by illustrating emic conceptualizations of "privacy" and "publicness", and an etic analysis of the lifecycle of commoditized privacy.

Influencers in my study appear aware of the controversies over the privacy and publicness of their blogs, and illustrate unique conceptions of the two. At least three anecdotes abstracted from Influencers' dialogues attempt to define the loci of publicness. Warner (2002: 414, emphasis in original) argues that there are generally three types of "publics": "*the public*" as in "people in general"; "*a public*" as in an audience bounded by a "physical space"; and that which "comes into being" through being disseminated as content. The three vernacular perceptions of publicness framed by Influencers fall under Warner's (2002: 414) third category of a public that is formulated through the *process* of being broadcast, circulated, and

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publicized; they are the size of one's viewership, the composite of one's following, and the extent of one's social influence over their following.

### *Locating follower mass*

For Influencers, one defining feature constituting the "publicness" of their blogs is the size of their following. As excerpted in my conversation with 19-year-old part-time Influencer, whom I interviewed at a very early point in her career, "publicness" is often measured by one's mass of followers:

Me: Would you consider yourself a public figure?

Collette: (laughs) I don't know... um, I'm not that famous so I don't know... I'm... I'm not like uh, public figure or anything...

Me: You don't feel you're a public figure?

Collette: No...

Me: Even though 1200 people watch you everyday?

Collette: (laughs) no! (whines) that's not a lot... so...

Me: Oh, that's not a lot?

Collette: No, that's not a lot (whines)

Me: Then what is "a lot"?



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Collette: I think a decent like, “a lot” would be 7000? Yah... (sigh)

Despite being watched by over 1,200 unique viewers daily, this upcoming Influencer feels that her open-access blog has not yet garnered “public” status given her small viewership. While maintaining her blogging style and type of content posted, she aspires to acquire “public” status by enlarging her following size in the new future. For some, “publicness” is demarcated by their popularity – in sum, a numbers game.

*Locating follower demographic*

For some Influencers, publicness is a matter of who comprises their online following. In general, Influencers are seldom conscious of or worried over their public status until a close family member or relative begins to read their blogs. Jayne and Collette share:

Actually I was pretty okay with [blogging openly about my private life]... but then my older brother found my blog, and he was like, quite upset with some things I said [about my parents]... so since then if it's stuff about family then I will either don't blog it... or lock it... [sic]

Um, my mom doesn't read my blog actually, so I don't think she even knows what I blog about, hahaha... but definitely yah, if she starts reading it one day I might have to reconsider what I post...

It seems that an anonymous and unfamiliar following, despite being considerable, cushions Influencers from the reality of their “publicness”, although they conduct regular, personalized, and even intimate interactions with many followers. In contrast, having close family members read their blogs causes Influencers to feel

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vulnerable and exposed. For instance, one Influencer commented that she “feels safe” because her parents are not “computer savvy” and are unlikely to read her blog.

It is likely that Influencers feel a greater pressure to self-censor their public posts when their close family members – and parents in particular – are reading, as if the truly private is that which may cause them to be judged harshly by someone they know intimately. While Influencers did not appear to be fazed by “airing their dirty laundry in public”, many made references to their parents being “less open-minded”, “of a different time”, and from a “more conservative generation”, and cited the need to play down or omit certain content from their blogs to prevent upsetting their parents. In sum, Influencers also survey the composition of their following when measuring “publicness”.

*Locating reputation and status*

Another extent of Influencers’ publicness is a measure of their online-mediated influence, or social clout. A handful of Influencers asserted that one becomes “public” when “people care about what you think”, when one can “blog anything you want” and still maintain a strong readership, and when one is “expected [to] create controversy”. In other words, followers become so loyal to the point that they are dedicated to the Influencer as a relatable personae regardless of the content they post.

Almost all Influencers made references to Xiaxue, one of Singapore’s pioneer Influencers, aspiring to achieve the stardom and commercial success she has garnered. Avid Influencer follower, Cyrene cites Xiaxue’s ability to command a following regardless of the content of her blogposts:

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If you're someone big like Xiaxue, you can basically blog anything, people will still read... cos you have established yourself... even if it's like, controversial stuff, she can pull it off... If you're a nobody, no one cares... your blog [though public] is just there...

From the above, Influencers' degree of "publicness" is evidently also assessed by their social influence, quantified by one's ability to sustain the interest of a large following regardless of the quality of their blog posts. Additionally, any contentious controversy stirred up is neutralized by their popularity and thus accepted or negated (but seldom contested) by a watchful following. All three vernacular perceptions of publicness – as measured through the size of one's viewership, the composite of one's following, and the extent of one's social influence over their following – also reveal the way Influencers conceptualize privacy as that "from other users or people and not privacy from state, corporate or bureaucratic entities" (Humphreys 2013: 6), since my informants were specifically focused on followers and family, making no reference to concerns over platform-specific data retention or surveillance.

### **Lifecycle of commoditized privacy**

As mentioned earlier, the personae of Influencers are premised upon sharing selected aspects of their lives that are usually personal and publicly inaccessible. Therefore, privacy becomes a commodity that is manipulated and performed to advance their careers. In this section, through a study of how Influencers manipulate privacy throughout their careers, I analyze the progress from lesser-known, low-status Influencers to well-known, high-status Influencers. At low-status, privacy is thought as a necessary sacrifice for career growth until it is distinguished as "Influencer persona" privacy and "non-Influencer persona" privacy. At mid-

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status, persona privacy is a calibrated performance to increase readership. At high-status, all privacy becomes a privilege with intrinsic value, as it entices followers.

### *Low-status*

In the early stages, Influencers have not yet developed Influencer personae nor distinguished them from non-Influencer identities. They conceptualize privacy as a personal quality based on their most private, non-commercial identities, and desire to preserve it. However, success in the Influencer industry is measured by the volume of one's viewer traffic; higher traffic translates into greater potential earning power. Therefore, Influencers struggle between preserving their privacy but settling for low readership, or sacrificing their privacy and acquiring high readership.

Collette, who had 1,200 daily blog views when I interviewed her at a very early point of her career, is unwilling to sacrifice too much privacy. She perceives 5,000 to 7,000 daily blog views as a "breaking point" at which she will lose privacy. Collette has stalled her career by intentionally remaining "low profile", and only blogs about things she feels "will not attract too much attention". In contrast, Naomi, who blogged about her underage sex to 30,000 viewers, feels she no longer "owns privacy". She attributes this not to the subject matter of her blogposts, but to her extensive popularity in the industry. A high-status Influencer, Naomi deems this a "trade off" for her career. However, trading off between privacy and readership is confined primarily to early stages of careers when Influencers have low-status. As they distinguish Influencer personae from their more private, non-Influencer identities, this insecurity diminishes because privacy is conceptualized as two distinctive layers: one for the commercial persona, and one for the personal identity. Therefore, commercial persona privacy is sacrificed, while personal identity eventually remains intact.

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*Mid-status*

After developing an Influencer persona, mid-status Influencers are concerned with increasing their readership quickly. Many capture attention by turning usually private events into a public performance. Privacy is manipulated into a public staging, in order to captivate an audience “in search of spectacles” (Kitzmann 2004). As the most taboo, sex captures the largest audience. “Leaked” sex videos, “staged” domestic violence, and breakup “tell-all” exposés are intentionally produced to bait attention (see chapter nine). Holly states on her blog that her “leaked” sex video “needed the chance to get your attention and sink in”. Like many Influencers, she intentionally stages intimate moments from her private life for voyeuristic consumption as a business strategy.

Mid-status Influencers worry about nuclear family members reading their blogs when they are staging “privacy”. Since Influencers are generally comfortable with personal friends and romantic partners reading their blogs, the insecurity is not because followers know Influencers in the flesh. Rather, nuclear family members are regarded as holding intimate knowledge of an Influencer’s most private personal identity, and their presence thus potentially threatens the congruence of the narratives Influencers construct for their persona (Daniel & Knudsen 1995). For instance, Jayne was “pretty okay” about blogging her “private life” until her older brother found her blog. He disagreed with some of her self-presentation and began to police her blog content, causing her much frustration. Belinda, however, “feels safe” because her mother is “not computer savvy” and unlikely to read her blog. The presence of family and their intimate knowledge means Influencers have less freedom to stage “privacy” without being exposed. For established Influencers, however, family becomes less of a concern; they no longer need to stage “privacy” to sustain followers’ attention.

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### *High-status*

Once Influencers have captured a sizable following and become successful, withholding information about their private lives acquires the same value as publicizing it. This is because the mystique over what is not displayed in their persona makes followers curious; the less revealed, the more enticed followers are. Marianne notes that Anna can “afford to be private about her life now [because] she is more successful”. While Anna used to publish raw pictures about life “behind-the-scenes”, her blogposts are now infrequent and more polished. On her social media feeds, followers leave hundreds of comments asking about her relationship. Tammy remarks that high-status Influencers do not need to “push themselves all the time, [because] people will still want to know about [them]”. She sees high-status Influencers as “classy Influencers”, because they no longer blog about distasteful topics, unlike their low- and mid-status colleagues. Hence for high-status Influencers, privacy no longer needs to be staged, since withholding information has intrinsic value.

Alberoni (2007) notes that the elite class experiences less observability and more secrecy. I have conceptualized privacy as a similarly privileged commodity only among high-status Influencers, whose non-disclosure solicits as much attention as their disclosure of information. Progressing towards selective disclosure and privacy is a move accorded only to those of high-status because they have attained a particular standard and traction among their followers, and they can now play with privacy as attention bait to stimulate desire and excitement. It is crucial to emphasize that Influencers also pride themselves on being “ordinary people”; they are accessible to followers, and more relatable than mainstream celebrities (Turner 2010). Influencers cannot afford to lose this status because it jeopardizes their credibility. Therefore, it is paramount that high-status Influencers carefully negotiate

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a balance between revealing their private lives to attract followers, and withholding some of it to entice and create anticipation.

Turner (2004: 8) argues that “public figures” become “celebrities” at “the point at which media interest in their activities is transferred from reporting on their public role... to investigating the details of their private lives”. Geraghty (2007: 100-101) similarly notes that this form of “star-as-celebrity” comprises attention focused on an individual’s “private life” irrespective of their actual career or public personae. For Influencers, however, the “private” and the “public” are not clearly demarcated, often overlapping ambiguously and strategically masquerading as the other in order to bait followers’ attention. As a form of “lifestreaming” – the act of seeing oneself “through the gaze of others” and editing this “behavior as needed to maintain [one’s] desired self-presentation” (Marwick 2013: 207) – Influencers’ conceptions of the “private” and the “public” underscore Warner’s (2002: 414) third category of “publics” as a status that “comes into being” through being broadcast, circulated, and widely publicized. Marwick (2013: 223-231, emphasis mine) reiterates Warner’s argument by clarifying that it is the extent of the *intentional dissemination* of information as opposed to it simply being in the *public domain* that constitutes the publicness to which Influencers refer.

In fact, it is their very private lives that constitute their public personae, as navigated via mechanisms of “presentational culture” (Marshall 2010: 45) afforded by social media technologies. In other words, privacy is no longer personal seclusion in which one is free from public attention. Rather, it is manipulated into a commodity for profitable gain from low-status to high-status careers. Privacy evolves from a personal good sacrificed for career progression, to being distinguished into commercial persona and personal identity privacies. Then, it is staged to lure followers, while family is excluded for threatening the congruence of persona with personal identity. Finally, privacy becomes a privilege when

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withholding information is valuable to entice followers, but this has to be done in moderation to sustain the accessibility of Influencer personae.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter established the metrics culture and curation of publicness and privacy in Influencer commerce. I argued that Influencers' system of followers and numbers, and their negotiations of disclosure and exposure across different social media platforms all hinge upon a balance between being able to selectively package the public and the private as sellable commodities. Part one, "A numbers game", discussed the different categories of social relationships Influencers share with followers, and the social capital associated with their metrics culture. Part two, "Platform and personae congruence", investigated Influencers' strategies in curating a consistent image across their digital and physical assets. Part three, "Conceptualizing privacy and publicness", juxtaposed emic recounts of privacy and publicness against etic analyses of the lifecycle of commoditized privacy, as Influencers progress in status and rank in the industry. Despite having mastered their management of various code-switching personae, Influencers still have to engage in dyad, group, and broadcast models of intimate exchange with followers, in order to personalize their interactions and elicit in followers a feeling of attachment. This notion of intimacy labor is the focus of the next chapter.



*Chapter six: Femininities*

*Heyyy Dearie: Cyber-femininities, Gender Repository, and Agentic Cute*

## **CHAPTER SIX: FEMININITIES**

### **Heyyy Dearie: Cyber-femininities, Gender Repository, and Agentic Cute**

“Okay, girls! Angles and lighting. Smile. Be conscious of your facial expressions. And speak gently but confidently... but not too loudly. And don’t be arrogant. People don’t like speaking to arrogant people... If you need to touch up your makeup, your hair, your bra straps, do it now.” I am shadowing an Influencer manager at an event where she is chaperoning two female Influencers. She speaks these final words to the two women at their waiting area, where I have been tasked to care for their belongings, before the Influencers take off into the arena of a mall to interact with their followers. As these parting instructions on how best to perform femininity roll off her tongue, I reach out to tuck in the falling bra strap of one of the Influencers.

Over the months in the field, I realized that Influencers and their managers seemed to be drawing from a repository of past experiences – both success and failures – of fellow Influencers. For instance, the reference to “angles and lighting” was most probably informed by the most recent laments from an Influencer of a rival company, who commented that the widely circulated photograph of her in a prolific women’s magazine unfortunately emphasized her “square jaw”. On her blog, she apologized for the “bad photo” and explained that she had not been “concentrating” on her “angles and the studio lighting”.

The Influencer manager’s advice to speak “gently but confidently” was likely induced by her meeting with a prospective Influencer she was considering contracting to the company earlier that month. Returning from her tea session, the manager casually told me that while the prospective Influencer “looks pretty in

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photos”, she could barely hold a conversation and “would not survive at events” where Influencers had to socialize with clients and followers in congruence with their web personae. When queried if she would sign on the Influencer, the manager simply quipped, “The good thing is being sociable can be trained, but good looks and taste cannot. Luckily, it is not the other way around.” I understood it to mean she would be procuring the Influencer for the company. In performing femininities, the repository of advice only seems to be growing, with Influencers constantly paving new ground, learning along the way, and co-creating a gender habitus.

Performing an ideal posture of a feminine, young, and desirable woman often requires more work than is apparent. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir (1973: 301) writes that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” to explain that femininity is neither rooted in the corporeal body nor in inherent psychology. Instead, women *learn* how to perform femininity through socialization and through distinguishing themselves from men and masculinity. Likewise, Influencers who often look glamorous and desirable train themselves to appear as if effortlessly exuding femininity – they are alert and “camera-ready” when in public and at events, and candidly tell me how they have practiced their “best angles” and “best smiles” with selfies at home. Many Influencers have a “preferred side” from which they prefer to be photographed, and negotiations over poses and angles when Influencers take group selfies are a common sight.

This chapter comprises three sections. Part one discusses Influencers’ framing of ideal femininities as a digital performance that can be achieved via various beauty, dressing, and technological mediations. I define “cyber-femininities” as the portrayal and performance of female gender as mediated via the Internet and digital technologies. Part two demonstrates how this marketing is made to look more convincing and authentic when Influencers use their lifestyles and personae to model wares. Specifically, I introduce the system of “modeling”, “role-modeling”,

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and “role-playing”, which are three complementary, concurrent, and cyclical processes which Influencers use to remain relatable to followers. I also introduce how Influencers positioned themselves as emulatable feminine ideal types through six key ideal types that emerged in the early beginnings (mid- to late-2000s), when the “blogshop” trade was just on the cusp of transiting into the “commercial blogging” trade. Part three presents a case study in which Influencers capitalize on one mode of cyber-femininity, cuteness, to solicit favor from their partners and followers and monetize their personae. The chapter argues that the hyper-feminized portrayals of ideal femininities in digital spaces, as well as the hyper-visibility of usually obscured “backstage” practices of gender performance, are embroiled in a tension between feminine agency and vulnerability.

**Part I – Cyber-femininities: Performing femininities in digital spaces**

While Influencers appear to offer “multiple modes of becoming woman” (Burns-Ardolino 2003: 43), there still exists an “emphasized femininity” (Connell 1987; Connell & Messerschmidt 2005), a performance of femininity that is compliant to hegemonic masculinity, which dominates social discourse on the confines of gender. Emphasized femininities are the most preferred and rewarded performance of the female gender, and are usually “oriented towards the interests and desires of men... [through] the display of sociability rather than technical competence, fragility in mating scenes, compliance with men’s desires for titillation and ego-stroking in office relationships, acceptance of marriage and child care as a response to labor-market discrimination” (Connell 1987: 183-187).

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Turning to digital performances of emphasized femininity, I define “cyber-femininities”<sup>21</sup> as the portrayal and performance of femininity as mediated via social media digital technologies, in order to highlight the role of the Internet as a “cyborg” technology fusing human and machine through which femininity is constructed. Kearney (2006: 13) calls such actors “young female media producers [who] are the newest generation of cyborgs, the interfaced human/machine organisms” armed with tools for digital production. As the selling point for Influencers, followers can embody cyber-femininities through the purchase of products and services infused with homosocial desire to emulate role model Influencers.

As signifiers of gender performativity, emphasized femininities are only significant when framed as oppositions to hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987; Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). Through Influencers’ performances of how to posture the body, women are socialized and their bodies disciplined in line with hegemonic expectations of femininity. However, there is a fraction of Influencers who display alternative modes of femininity, such as being covered with tattoos or piercings, as will be discussed in the six key ideal types in what I term a “gender repository”. Thus, it is in such blogs and social media platforms that emphasized femininity is reproduced and affirmed, “legitimated and negotiated, or contested and rejected” (Andrews & Talbot 2000: 1), as their bodies are self-policed (Driscoll 2002: 240) and mutually-policed (2002: 246) within homosocial groups among whom continual surveillance encourages self-improvement. There are three main ways in which Influencers engage with artifacts, devices, and technology to craft their cyber-femininities: makeup and dressing, lighting and posturing, and apps and artifice.

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<sup>21</sup> In this thesis, I developed the notion of ‘cyber-femininities’ based on feminist media scholars’ early concepts of ‘cyber-feminism’. Thus, the focus was not on the modifier prefix ‘cyber-’ but on engagements of feminism and femininities with digital technology. I adapt the “cyber” in “cyber-femininities” more specifically from “cyberfeminism”, coined by Wilding (undated), Gajjala & Mamidipudi (1999), and Gajjala & Oh (2012), as opposed to the more generic theory of “cyberculture”, popularized by Escobar et al. (1994) and Budka (2011) among others.

*Chapter six: Femininities**Heyyy Dearie: Cyber-femininities, Gender Repository, and Agentive Cute**Makeup and dressing*

While accompanying Influencers on photo shoots, I have had the privilege to witness their makeup regime behind-the-scenes. They tell me of the need to practice “contouring” with two different shades of foundation on their faces, where a liquid version of the cosmetic is preferred to the powdered version, as it enables Influencers to “blend” lighter and darker patches on their face. Done correctly, this “basic makeup technique” can give the illusion of fuller foreheads, higher nose bridges, rounder cheeks, and sharper chins, to name a few effects. Most Influencers also had two or three sets of cosmetic products for different occasions. Most had a basic makeup kit for more “natural” and “neutral” tones that they wear on a daily basis. The second kit comprised more cosmetic items for a fuller face of makeup that they used when attending events to meet with followers, clients, and fellow Influencers. The third kit usually contained the highest number of cosmetic items for a more dramatically made-up face, and was only used when Influencers were going for professional photo shoots under “harsh studio lighting”, or when “professional high resolution cameras” would pick up even the smallest of details on their faces. This is especially crucial because, while Influencers are often able to make digital edits to their photographs and selfies to omit blemishes before posting them on social media, professional studio shoots are largely curated by in-house magazine or client photographers who are very unlikely to accede to such requests. Instead, any minor tweaks to these photographs are completely at the discretion of the client.

Taking eye makeup as an example, Influencer Ellen once gave me a sneak peek into her makeup kit, and demonstrated the three levels of makeup intensity she would use: on normal days, she usually only relied on double eyelid tape – a thin translucent double-sided sticky tape that creased the folds of eyelids to give the impression of double eyelids – and eyeliner – a dark pencil that is used to outline

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one's eyes for more definition. If she were attending events, she would apply "falsies" or false eyelashes, which were synthetic eyelashes that one could stick on. On days where she had photo shoots in professional studios, Ellen would consider doubling up on her falsies, using a darker eyeliner that she would draw on more thickly, and perhaps also use iris-enlarging contact lenses to give the impression of larger eyes.

In terms of dressing, I learnt that heels were often the most important apparel item. Many Influencers would bring along extra pairs of heels of different heights in their cars, or if they were at events with dressing rooms, in their dressing bag. They explained how heels gave the illusion of longer, slimmer legs, and how heels that were thinner like stilettos, as opposed to wedges which were chunky heels, also drew the illusion of having more defined calf muscles. Influencers who knew their "body shape" and "proportions" well enough often had a favorite way of dressing. Yvette, who is often complimented for her protruding collar bones and defined shoulder blades, is fond of wearing off-shoulder tops to flaunt her slender frame, while Marianne, who sports washboard abs is often spotted in crop tops and low-waist pants to accentuate her muscles. Playing with fabrics, colors, and patterns, Brittany tells me that striped pants help to elongate her frame, Irene tells me that pastel colors help her skin to appear more milky and fair in photographs, and Angela explains that "flowy" materials like polyester-silk blends and chiffon fall off her chest and hips nicely to give the impression that she has a more shapely, feminine figure. I often expressed doubt and would mention that such "dressing tips" were simply regurgitations from women's magazines. However, many Influencers assured me that while they used to share my mindset, seeing someone with the naked eye and gazing at them through a photographed image were two distinct practices, and that these were skills and "tricks" they had learnt from trial-and-error and emulating fellow Influencers. Jacqueline once mentioned that the makeup and dressing tips that Influencers talked about were simply "tips to trick

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the camera into making you look better than you really are". Similarly, Jamie insisted that while we "probably see no difference" in the flesh, these "beauty illusions" would be much more prominent when photographed.

*Lighting and posturing*

At most "meet the Influencer" events, photo taking is always a highlight, with followers requesting photographs, especially selfies, to be taken with their favorite Influencers. The Influencers, ever obliging in the presence of followers, also seem to have mastered the practice of displaying their "camera-ready" face: head slightly tilted to emphasize one's chin and elongate the face; eyebrows slightly raised and eyelids lifted to give the illusion of larger, rounder eyes; pursed lips and a tightening of the cheek muscles to accentuate one's cheekbones; shoulders slightly raised so that one's collarbones are given more prominence; tummies sucked in with a hand pinched to one side of the waist to highlight a slim but hour-glass figure; one foot shifted slightly to the front with heels off the floor and a slight tiptoe, so the body leads forward to lengthen one's frame – all this intricate transitory bodily emotion work in a matter of a couple of seconds, all in a bid to conscientiously curate their self-presentation. Having spent a good portion of my fieldwork taking photographs on behalf of Influencers, I also learnt that holding the camera at my waist level was the most ideal angle, since it tended to produce the illusion of an elongated frame and longer, slenderer legs.

Good "background lighting" for these photographs was also key. While natural morning sunlight, around 9am-11am outdoors, was the most preferred background lighting, in indoor situations Influencers tended to prefer white lights to warmer, orange hues, since the former tended to "cast better shadows" and reflect the "true color" of their makeup and outfits more accurately. In the privacy of their own homes and offices, many Influencers own professional "ring lights". These were

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doughnut-shaped white bulbs that came with a portable stand that Influencers would place on the camera lens when taking selfies or camera-time shots. They enabled Influencers to take brighter, clearer, high-resolution photographs in the comfort of their houses, and the “even” lighting did not cast unsightly shadows on their faces and bodies, as regularly lighting would. This smooth lighting made it easier for Influencers to edit out blemishes or smoothen their skin tones with photo-editing apps that I will discuss in the next segment.

For months, I watched Influencers take selfies with each other. As I was approaching the end of fieldwork and began winding down on my activities with these Influencers, I approached several of them for memento selfies to commemorate our time together. It was in this process that I learnt, by chance, that posturing oneself in group photos is in itself a complex craft. On many occasions, not only did Influencers occupy their “preferred side” (i.e. “I look better from this angle”; “my dimple is here”; “need to see my [side-swept] fringe; if not, my forehead will look very big”), they also tended to gently hold my shoulder and nudge me closer to the camera, such that their faces would appear smaller in comparison. In these examples, Influencers’ bodies are framed as “beauty problems” that fester insecurities – bodies become “partial” in that they are “fragmented” for the pursuit of perfection, and “situational” in that those individual bodies can be disciplined into proper posturing through self-improvement and consumption (Driscoll 2002: 247).

Influencers who wanted to accentuate their smaller frame – relative to mine – also angled their bodies to the side to occupy less of the photographic frame, which is a similar technique I later discuss in section three. As if second nature to their job, almost every Influencer I encountered was fond of taking multiple shots of the same scene or selfie, at times with only very small changes in their facial expressions on body angles. They would then pick the photograph in which they looked the most photogenic for their social media feeds. I also learnt that when



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group shots or selfies were taken, it was basic etiquette for each Influencer to view a preview of the image on the camera or phone screen, often zooming in and enlarging their faces and bodies to “approve” of the photo. It was common practice for Influencers to request that “unglamorous” or badly taken photographs be deleted off each other’s cameras. It was also not unusual for each Influencer to snap the photograph or selfie with their own devices despite the group being in the same stances and postures, as every Influencer had her own preferred way of editing and processing the image before publishing on her own social media feed.

#### *Apps and artifice*

Using image-enhancing and photo-editing applications to tweak one’s photographs is a widely acceptable practice in the industry. There are a few common practices among Influencers who use smartphone apps to enhance their images, such as editing away blemishes and moles, whitening their complexion, widening their eyes, elongating their faces, sharpening their noses, smoothing creases and wrinkles, and lengthening one’s frame. In this sense, looking at one’s “edited self” constitutes the practice of “gazing”, wherein Influencers constitute their own ego through relating to the image of themselves being watched (Mulvey 1999: 837). In fact, in response to these usual practices, many photo-editing apps now come with in-built options that will automatically do these at the click of a button. At present, the most popular of these apps is “Meitu Xiuxiu”, which is fuss-free and easy to negotiate, although users will require a basic command of Mandarin, as that is the app’s default setting. On personal computers, Adobe Photoshop is the most preferred program, especially since it allows users to store their preferred settings and apply edits to multiple photos at once.

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## **Part II – Gender repository: Visibilizing the making of ideal femininities**

In this section, I will introduce the cycle of “modeling, role-modeling, role-playing” where Influencers position themselves as emulatable feminine ideal types, and list six key ideal types that emerged in the early beginnings when the “blogshop” trade was just on the crux of transiting into the “commercial blogging” trade.

### *Modeling, role-modeling, role-playing*

Modeling, role-modeling and role-playing are simultaneous steps of a staging, though not isolated nor discrete, in stimulating desire. Firstly, in modeling, the Influencer displays both herself and the product in question in an aesthetic yet relatable manner to followers. Secondly, in role-modeling, Influencers aim to set standards and impart to their followers skills of “gender competence” (Connell 2002: 81), such as through suggesting that there is one preferred type of body size or way of dressing. Finally, in role-playing, Influencers continuously keep up their display of gender competencies and sustain this by engaging followers in commercial intimacies, and by attempting to bridge and make congruent their digital and physical performances of the self.

In modeling, Influencers pose for photographs of themselves, exhibiting the apparel for sale, and post these photographs to the blog. The photographs are accompanied by simple descriptions of the apparel, including the fabric used, color, measurements and a price tag. We can observe several “bodily practices” (Turner 1984) in modeling, all of which become “spectacles” (Richards 1990) through the hyper-visual nature of blogs seeking to entice and hook followers. Influencers carve out niche appearances to differentiate themselves from competitors. These

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distinctive elements vary from hairstyles and makeup varieties to highlighting distinguishing bodily characteristics to poses and facial expressions.

Claire, for example, is known for styling her hair up in a “bump” and for her defined collarbones; Jolene is known for her polished smile and “crisscross” leg poses; and Dawn is known for her fair complexion and pouty lips. Repeated emphasis of these body parts helps Influencers to distinguish their appearance in the market. In addition to their niche appearance, Influencers deck themselves in luxury brand shoes, bags or accessories to complement the cheaper apparel, which is the only item actually up for sale. Blending high-end branded goods with cheap mass-produced clothing flatters and lends some prestige to the latter, persuading buyers to look beyond its often potentially cheaper quality.

Influencers also trade on mass media celebrity to stimulate desire in followers. Here, it is Hollywood or other mass media celebrities who are role-models, while Influencers act as a conduit of cultural taste between international celebrities and customers. Influencers pick out trends and styles from well-known celebrities and produce similar mock-ups for sale, creating a middle ground between seemingly unobtainable celebrity “high-life” and mass culture. This practice results in a wide array of “inspired products” — the industry’s euphemism for imitation goods (see chapter seven). Influencers afford customers the opportunity to own a garment “as seen on” a particular celebrity.

Practices of modeling in the mainstream catalogue and runway industry are largely subject to creative directors and photographers. However, with the body of the Influencer acting as the site of display or conduit of desire, Influencers take on more active practices in role-modeling and role-playing. In practices of role-modeling, Influencers aim to set bodily, beauty and behavioral standards for their followers. Among all Influencers performing different cyber-femininities, the women

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are predominantly tall (above 1.65 m), slender (under 50 kg and UK size 6 to 8), fair-skinned (either of Chinese, Eurasian or European descent) and have long hair (beyond shoulder length).

Influencers subtly shift from modeling to role-modeling by setting the core benchmarks of body image across cyber-femininities. Alternative body sizes such as shorter, plumper, dark-skinned, short-haired Influencers are seldom seen, and even when evident, are not as popular among followers, judging by their visibility and lifespan in the scene. It is a norm for Influencers and blogshops to include their “model stats” (short for model’s body statistics) in their blogposts, with these figures closely conforming to a largely tacit culture, or what Influencers refer to as an “unspoken industry standard”. Most of the blogshop apparel Influencers advertise, although tagged “free size”, is actually tailored to fit body proportions of Influencers. Interestingly, weight is not a given and is seldom mentioned:

[name], 1.67 m tall, uk size 6–8

[name] stands 165 cm, uk 6–8

Model [name] is a UK6–8, 166 cm

Influencers are objectified when their attributes come to be detached and perceived as “objects of exchange” (Radin 1996: 156). Certain Influencers utilize this strategy most often by overtly showing off their curves in skin-tight apparel, implying that customers who purchase and don these outfits can likewise channel the same sensual vibe. Influencers also play role-models by offering beauty tips and fashion advice to followers. Through the “halo effect” (Dittmar 2008; Nisbett & Wilson 1977), followers perceive the Influencer’s choices and guidance as coming from women “in the know”, having successfully achieved the unusual merging of “beauty

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and brains”, as evidenced by their economic success in Influencer advertising, blogshops and feminine attractiveness (cf. Fletcher & Greenhill 2009; Perrin 1921; Prather 1971).

In addition to setting body-standards and fashion trends, Influencers role-model the performance of their (hetero-)sexuality by giving followers relationship advice. Advice meted out is usually framed in terms of the Influencers’ own personal experience and supposedly private relationships. They give detailed descriptions of dates with their boyfriends before branching out into discussions on how girlfriends and boyfriends ought to be treated. Anna mentions in her blog:

These 5 days without him [her boyfriend] I managed to successfully get lost in the area around office a couple of times (boo)... the space has made me realize how I sometimes take his presence for granted... he is truly the entertainer of my life. That my life would be entirely boring without him and his antics. and that is why I'm glad I made the choice to spend the rest of my life with him :) \*okay, mushy part over\*

Role-modeling is accompanied by role-playing, in which Influencers perform their femininities in a variety of ways to kindle desire among followers. One aspect of role-play and performance are instances in which Influencers engage in playing dress-up to draw out social scripts of femininity (Laws & Schwartz 1977; Wiederman 2005). They suggest appropriate occasions for different types of attire; adjectives connoting particular features of the Influencers’ projected cyber-femininities are found in text accompanying photographs of feminine performance.

For example, “power blazers” are intended for the workplace and channel the look of “strong” and “independent” women; tight-fitting “bodycon” dresses are meant for clubbing and portray “sexy chic;” and maxi dresses are great for relaxing days at

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the beach and intended to conceal tummy bulges on “fat days.” When blogshop apparel is personified and marketed as the dominant modes of adornment socially accepted by other women, the message is that followers' bodies too should conform to performances of appropriately emphasized feminine attributes.

Role-play by Influencers blurs the distinction between their Influencer personae and more personal and private non-commercial Influencer identities. At times, Influencers' activities in physical spaces are directed to manufacturing blogposts for followers on digital platforms. In other words, Influencers appear to be “on stage” all the time (Goffman 1956) in order to produce something to blog about. As role-models, the lifestyles of Influencers are objectified for followers' consumption when the Influencers market apparel in theme with their private lives. Life in physical spaces, at least as it is reflected on the blog, becomes a stage for performing (role-playing) the Influencer's persona, such that the digital personae as work/physical personae as non-work distinction blurs or seemingly disappears.

For Influencers, “online” or digital reality is not a simulation of “offline” or physical reality (cf. Baudrillard 1994). Rather a model's role-play in physical spaces, motivated by digital representations of her persona, produce a reality in which the online/offline and digital/physical personae of the Influencers appear fused, one-in-the same, and therefore congruent and authentic. For instance, planned face-to-face meet-ups and random encounters between Influencers and followers are often fed back into social media through photographs and blog posts. As mentioned earlier, these interactions are framed as egalitarian friendships as opposed to hierarchal and distant celebrity–fan relationships in order for Influencers to come off as being more relatable, accessible, and emulatable. In addition, Influencers' portrayals of their digital personae are crafted through the narrative accounts of their everyday lives, in contrast to celebrity models' staged performances on the runway or at media appearances. Authenticity, in turn, is an important element of

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the commercial transaction. To create anticipation, followers are told to “stay tuned” or “check back” if they wish to purchase the outfit the Influencer wore on her birthday, to a certain party, or during festivities such as Christmas or the Lunar New Year. In essence, the Influencers openly acknowledge that fans want “a piece of them,” and exploit the followers’ desire to emulate them in the closest possible way.

*Six key ideal types*

In the early years when blogshop commerce was transiting to commercial blogging, six key ideal types of cyber-femininities emerged among Influencers. These cyber-femininities are neither uniform nor mutually exclusive, meaning that followers can choose to identify with a variety displayed and that different elements belonging to each type may co-exist in a single personal blog(post) or commercial blogger/Influencer. The ideal types that these Influencers present are not constricting, but instead represent the most prominent type of gendered performances. I offer six possible modes through which femininity is objectified and stylized through the body via a “sustained set of acts” (Butler 1999: xv) as a “condition under construction” (Connell 2002: 4). These six key types that emerged in the mid-2000s and were popular until greater diversity in the late-2000s include: the “family girl”, the “material girl”, the “globetrotter”, the “fashionista”, the “party girl”, and the “rebel”. Although an Influencer can embody any and even all of these types at different points of time, in the discussion that follows, I show how they are epitomized by one of six top blogshop owners/models-turned-Influencers who were popularly recognized among followers for that type.

Firstly, the typical “family girl” positions herself as a loving daughter, stresses the importance of approval from her tightly knit family, and acknowledges their emotional providence for her. Hannah writes:

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We designed this superbly gorgeous gown (in my opinion) for our [wedding] photo shoot in Prague and i was initially thinking of wearing it on the actual day as well but my mom isn't too keen on it... Making my mom happy is number one priority for me so here we are again... searching for the perfect gown to walk down the aisle in!

Enjoyed my CNY thoroughly with my family & friends.. the people whom i hold dear to. So much feasting & fellowshiping & loving :)

She also emphasizes her dependence on her boyfriend by documenting his countless acts of service and gushes about their love and devotion, as evidenced in Hannah's post.

My (early) Valentine's Day gift from [name of boyfriend] :) I say early because he got it for me 1 mth before V day! Carried it out for the first time and i looveeeeeee it!

In addition, the bulk of her photographs feature herself and her boyfriend to accompany descriptions of their dates. The "family girl" also accentuates her fragile vulnerability through complaints resembling cries from a "damsel in distress". This solicits followers' understanding and concern for her difficult situations that often appear trivial, as if seeking a sense of security and protection. Occasionally, reference to a higher religious being is made, impressing upon followers her decency and conservative nature. Here, Hannah ends her paragraph with a quote from the Bible:

It's gonna be one helluva crazy week ahead! Gotta be in school (aka the other end of SG) by 6:45am everyday, truckload of assignments to hand in



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(some overdue), 4 tests, graduation dinner, models' fitting&rehearsal, more to be settled for the bday bash, meetingsmeetingsmeetings. God, please expand my capacity... "Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit"

In sum, the dependent "family girl" frames femininity as submission and approval-seeking, as well as vulnerability and fragility in order to rely on a male figure (including God) for support.

Secondly, the "material girl" pictorially catalogues her luxury possessions, among a host of other commodities. Dominating her blog, as described below, are images of herself in outfits worn for particular events or occasions, complete with details of the brand and product specifications. Similar to the "family girl", she may at times mention the presence of a male partner who provides her with such luxury items. Anna writes:

Outfit of the Day: Tiered Chiffon Toga Top from [name of blogshop], high-waist denim shorts from MNG, crochet head band from BKK, leather bangles from MiuMiu & Prada, sunnies from DITA los angeles, espadrilles from Louis Vuitton

He [her boyfriend] knew how much I wanted the neon leather bracelets after seeing them on Kathy Perry and The Kardashians... and made his first ever purchase online to get them for me. Plus, he added a surprise and included a python skin one, and I love it to death!

She directs attention to the origin of her possessions especially if from a high-end boutique or foreign country, seemingly to hint at its exoticism or distinction. She also includes the prices of only her expensive purchases, but appears to

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demonstrate that while brand-conscious, she is also purchase-savvy in being able to get a great deal. Anna details:

The above flap bag in caviar leather was purchased at approximately SGD3,000 [in Paris] after tax rebate, compared to the list price of SGD4,800 (according to May's pricing) in Singapore boutiques... The day before I flew off, the Singapore boutique called to ask if I wanted a newly flown-in piece. This bag in caviar leather + silver hardware is rare though the beige flap bag is considered a classic piece.

The “material girl” draws parallels between herself and well-known celebrities in their conspicuous consumption, suggesting the prestige of such a material lifestyle. This creates further desire in followers to whom expensive luxury goods, “as seen on” celebrities, now appear more accessible and normalized. As noted in Anna’s blogpost:

Like my YSL Tribute Platform Pumps I got for only SGD \$300+ when they're retailing for about SGD\$1200++ on nordstorm.com! Best part is, I have the same damn shoes as Victoria Beckham & Kate Moss!! VB really wears hers all the time & she's my ultimate style icon...

She also lists socialite experiences and generates excitement about the exclusivity of certain experiences of consumption:

Anyone knows how I can order this? Hee & what's a birthday without some Chanel, moreover a customized one...

I WANT THIS EDIBLE ;) CHECKED. [name of boyfriend] managed to find someone to bake it within a day, can't wait to see how it turns out! Basically,

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I'm left with getting myself the iPad..

Dinner at Empress Jade @ The Jewel Box, Mount Faber. Really overpriced Chinese cuisine but with one of the best shark fin's soup (whoops).

In sum, the “material girl” frames femininity as materialism and pleasure-seeking through the consumption of luxury goods, often purchased at smart prices, and a posh lifestyle.

Thirdly, the “fashionista” bombards followers with pictures of herself in the latest fashion trends, marking her role as a style headliner. She is commonly sponsored by a host of blogshops and established clothing stores to showcase their products on her blog, and is even paid a fee to do so. In the mid- to late-2000s, the “fashionista” was the first feminine type to be successfully monetized as a canvas for advertorials. As blogshop commerce and commercial blogging progressed into Influencer advertising from the early 2010s, each of these types subsequently became monetized as well. One of Debra’s earliest advertorials describes:

Had a simple date a few days ago and decided to wear something comfortable on the skin and this dress does it all. The material is made of lycra/spandex, hence, the comfort... I particularly like the V-neck style, together with the cloth wrapping the waist, does wonders in enhancing...

She also plays ambassador for stores. Through hyperlinks conspicuously embedded in their posts, Debra directs followers to online stores with short teasers meant to offer a snapshot of what is on offer. However, most of these entries seem rather generic and repetitive, and Influencers began to professionalize their photographs by working with (often sponsored) professional photographers or traveling to exotic locations locally and abroad for different backdrops and settings.

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In a different advertorial blogpost, Debra is observed taking on the same tone as in the earlier example:

Effortless, convenient and dressed up, [name of a store] has a full wide range of various designed dresses for all sorts of occasions... Do join their mailing list to receive exclusive discounts and promotions in future, and quote "[name of Influencer]" in your comment to receive promotional discounts!

In addition, the “fashionista” personalizes beauty tips and advice for her dominantly female following. Debra writes:

realized though not all girls love pastel shades, but eye shadow in pastel shades definitely suit Asians and will make your eyes look fresher and livelier... we are supposed to apply the eye shadows by using the top right shade (eye base) first, followed by the bottom right shade (nuance color) and then the bottom left shade (shadow color). Lastly, apply the eye gloss at the bottom of eyelids for an anime effect!

In sum, the “fashionista” frames femininity as beauty and being fashionable, but takes this on in the discourse of comfort and personalization more so than the “material girl’s” expensive and conspicuous consumption. The “material girl’s” preoccupation was on the accumulation of branded goods, which occasionally came across as being tacky. The “fashionista”, on the other hand, brands the material pursuit as the honing of her personal style and taste, therefore veiling the materialistic undertones.

Fourthly, the “globetrotter” positions herself as a frequent traveller, pictorially documenting holidays in foreign settings and idyllic moments, supposedly highlighting her exotic experiences around the world. Laura writes:

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rue d'arthis, rue faubourg st honore, champs elysees all in the two hours after we touched down. till when its not so early in the morning, arc de triomphe, george v paris and avenue montaigne. t'was a magnificent breakaway =)

She plays up the exclusivity of her travels by reflexively recounting the cultures she has seen, making comparisons between “home” in Singapore as somewhat lacking and “away” in foreign countries as fulfilling and desirable. While the consumption-oriented femininity that requires up keeping and maintenance through material consumption is similar to that of the “material girl”, with the “globetrotter” a rhetoric of internationalization and being a cosmopolitan citizen is emphasized, as witnessed in another one of Laura’s blogposts:

tokyo left me part frustrated part overwhelmed... coz everyday is a battle having absorb the vibrancy, the immense and deeply rooted culture, most importantly, the respect strangers have for one another. the lessons these journeys bestowed upon, simply priceless.

In addition, the “globetrotter” contrasts the hectic city life in urban Singapore with far-flung laidback paradise islands and resorts she has visited, as if to signify her distinctive taste to stand out from the masses whose lives are more mundane. This sentiment seems to be successfully received and reflected by comments left by her blog followers, often expressed in envious comments and queries about the details of her trip. Laura’s endless line of beach dresses and bikinis are catalogued on her personal blog, and similar pieces are made available on her blogshop for followers to purchase as “a piece of” the idyllic life.

ive always dreamt of living in a stilt house in the middle of the indian ocean (yeah think maldives!) and jumping into the clear blue ocean anytime i want.

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hate that plans are always tentative but hopeful that they're realising albeit taking baby steps.

The "globetrotter" also indulges in poetic reminiscence and a sense of nostalgia when back home in Singapore, as if to signal the transience of her time at "home". Laura constantly yearns to "get away" and "re-live moments".

what to do? no time to go on another break so have to reminisce =( ... toward the end of the superb vacation and craving for one more sometime soooooooooon. neck very long already =/

In sum, the "globetrotter" frames femininity as exotic, constantly desiring a cosmopolitan lifestyle and international experience that is different from the norm.

Fifthly, the "party girl" overtly compiles a collage of photographs featuring her wild revelry and socializing events, including the grand openings of stores, product launches and private house parties that she attends on a regular basis. Winnie writes:

The star-studded event was graced by many local and regional celebrities... and guess which uber-fashionista super-Influencer I met?... Front row - score! Ticket states 8pm but as these things usually go.... we only headed over at around 9pm? They don't call it fashionably late for nuthin'!

She showcases her sensational and sensual nightlife with three activities almost always featured: clubbing, drinking, and dancing. Winnie is constantly pictured with different groups of people whom she says she "just met that night", an evocation that is meant to convey her outgoing personality and ability to make new friends easily. The "party girl" also confidently expresses her sensual femininity through

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provocative dressing, boldly flaunting her body through revealing apparel and costume play. She seems to direct attention to normatively sexualized body parts – breasts and buttocks – through suggestive poses even when she dresses down at home in plain clothes. In sum, the “party girl” frames femininity as confident (hetero)sexuality and exuding sex appeal.

Lastly, the “rebel” claims to reject emphasized ideas of “the body beautiful” (Reischer & Koo 2004) and does not adopt the pristine and clean look pictured in the other cyber-femininities. Unconventionally embracing loud body modifications such as multiple tattoos and piercings, she openly flaunts her grunge punk image. “Rebels” are the least common type because they seem to challenge some baseline similarities in the five earlier types, such as the pursuit of material pleasures and an overt concern with one’s body. However, the “rebel” represents an alternate mode of performing femininity by appropriating the female body and personality as a canvas for seemingly counter-hegemonic gender performances. Tina writes:

I love tattoos, i find tattoos cool I wish i did my cupcake, little pony, owl tattoos on my back :(

As noted in the following examples, “rebels” like Tina also seem to refuse the conventional slender female body by being open about her food cravings, weight issues and acceptance of “fat”. The “rebel’s” followers exclaim that they “love” her “bravery” and “honesty”, although it cannot be ascertained if they actually take after the “rebel’s” posturing of non-hegemonic femininity. Although they number fewer than Influencers from the other five types, the “rebel” has high visibility within the industry for being so distinctive and drastic, and thus still effectively circulates alternative femininity portrayals among her followership.

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i've gained so much weight and i look...different? I look bad. Still, not doing anything about the massive weight gain....yeah, still eating as much as ever....eating like there's no tomorrow. I don't know why i love food so much. I've to be eating ALL THE EFFING TIME...Oh well!! At least i'm happy lah! :)  
[sic]

ppl keep leaving comments telling me i'm very fat now...How can one not realize i gained weight?... I love to eat, i'm eating all the time and am too lazy to exercise....so yes of course gain weight...:( BUT IM HAPPY WITH THIS LIFESTYLE...

Such “fat talk” (Nichter 2000) appears to emphasize the “tyranny of slenderness” (Chernin 1981) in shaping bodily ideals. Communicative peer groups imagine an ideal body in the eyes of an invisible male following and socialize each other into internalizing these dominant sizes and shapes. They discipline each other’s bodies by highlighting discrepancies between their communal goal and one’s current state of the body. More often than not, however, the “rebel’s” apparent nonchalance regarding fat bears questioning, since most photographs still reveal the emphasized slim and slender body. When viewed in perspective, the incongruence between the “rebel’s” claim of being “fat and proud” and her apparent slim figure might in fact further perpetuate “fat policing” among her predominantly female readership, thus contradicting her initial rejections of a singular the body beautiful. Hence, her assertions and displays are not counter-hegemonic after all.

In addition, the “rebel” shows little self-control in taming her emotions by being openly defiant and wayward in the behavior and attitude she conveys. For example, she may blog about conflict between herself and her parents, with a liberal use of expletives and vulgar adjectives, such as in one of Tina’s rants:



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Wish my mom would fucking admit she's in the wrong and quit arguing with me. Am not gonna talk to her for a loooong time. Hate her!

She may also unabashedly discuss her willful behavior towards her partner, as evidenced in a different blogpost from Tina:

i'm the one who's always causing us to quarrel...I always piss him off by accident by being insensitive and discussing about the ex-boyfriend and bringing up things to piss myself off bout his ex-girlfriend. If i can just keep certain thoughts to myself it won't happen but fuck, WHY CAN'T I?!?!

Her emotional outbursts may also be directed to followers through maddening shout-outs and riling responses to their criticism and comments, conveyed via rampant use of uppercase letters. Tina writes:

[MALE NAME] ISN'T MY BOYFRIEND!!!! He is just a damn close guy friend! AND I'M NOT DENYING (some people go like "why you dont dare reveal that [male name] is your bf").....seriously lor....why some people so *gey kiang* [pretending to know it all] one - when you ASSUME you make an ASS OUT OF U & ME.

In sum, the “rebel” refutes other mainstream notions of emphasized femininity through a public display of emotional aggression and an open admission of being body-conscious over her body image, but apparently not caring enough to change indulgent habits.

Each of these instances of modeling on commercial blogs produces different presentations of cyber-femininities. In shaping the scripts of what women can “do, be, have, and make”, Influencers’ digital presences, like the girls’ magazines

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investigated by Driscoll (2012: 247), continually reinforce tensions between agency and conformity or vulnerability. The six types are attractive to followers because they play up certain aspects of emphasized femininity that are intended to increase their appeal to fellow women, as well as a(n imagined) male partner in a “refracted (fe)male gaze” where women discursively shape each others’ practices and discipline each others’ bodies “on the basis of presumed heterosexual masculine desires”, in spite of the physical absence of men in the homosocial space (Abidin & Thompson 2012: 468).

Additionally, although there are a handful of lesbian Influencers who have come out publicly and regularly feature their female partners on their social media feeds, many other lesbian female Influencers (and gay male Influencers) have chosen to selectively obscure or even deny their sexual orientation and relationship in public domains; it is speculated that this could be out of the fear of being deemed “pariah femininities” that are “contaminating to the relationship between masculinity and femininity” (Schippers 2007: 95) upon which many lucrative femininity scripts are based (see Appendix A for examples).

The six types have thus far demonstrated how Influencers convey ideal femininities using their lifestyles as a canvas through the medium of text and images, which is often directed towards their homosocial female following. To illustrate the enactment of feminine performances and their “use value” in relation to male partners, I next present a case study of how “cuteness” draws on a range of these six types, becomes curated through the earlier mentioned instruments of cyber-femininities (makeup and dressing, lighting and posturing, and apps and artifice), and is agentially used by three different Influencers in order to negotiate and sustain viewership, homosocial envy from followers, and sexualized desire from an imagined male partner.

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**Part III – Agentic cute: Appropriating cuteness as feminine agency**

Based on my close coding of Influencers' emic displays of femininities and cuteness, this case study examines how different modes of cuteness are used to enact three etic scripts of femininity: "The Doll", "The Darling" and "The Dear", in relation to sensual delight, romantic docility and homosocial desire respectively. While the six ideal types (idea constructs, cf. Weber 1978: 9) investigated in Part II resemble "role-modeling", in that Influencers are setting standards of "gender competence" (Connell 2002: 81), the three social scripts (internalized, culturally-specific) addressed in Part III resemble "role-playing", in that Influencers are more explicitly engaging with followers to sustain particular impressions and elicit commercial intimacies. A close analysis reveals the jarring nature of how an apparently angelic vision of cuteness is subtly controlled and curated to bring Influencers financial gain, through apparently inverting the power hierarchies initially inciting seemingly harmless, doe-eyed innocence.

Cuteness in relation to adult Singaporean women has been a relatively understudied topic<sup>22</sup>. When it is addressed, cuteness in Singapore is usually discussed in the context of the consumption of Sanrio's Hello Kitty and related Japanese commodities, which are popular among children and young women alike. More recently in 2013, a popular Korean children's tune popularly glossed "*gwiyomi*" was trending among local Influencers. In these videos, the usually adult vlogger is seen to portray himself/herself as an infantilized child who is learning to count with his fingers, complemented by playful winks and pouts (Soh 2013). Between January and May, many male and female Influencers recorded and

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<sup>22</sup> Even the iconic "Singapore girl" model for stewardesses of Singapore Airlines has been framed in the popular imagination as "sexualized", "erotic", and "subservient" (cf. Hudson 2013) instead of "cute".

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published cover versions on their blogs, aiming to outdo each other as measured by video viewership. In fact, The Official Singapore *Gwiyomi* Challenge was held in August at Chinatown Point, in which participants performed to a live audience (MODE Entertainment 2013). A male Influencer, Tyler Ng, won the competition.

Singapore has been argued to be “culturally a rather defensive space, constantly vigilant against ‘polluting’ influences from the ‘constitutive’ outside” (Chua 2000a: 135). Perhaps it is for this reason that the Singaporean cuteness in the Influencer industry that I analyze in this chapter does not draw singularly from Japanese or Korean pop culture (Jpop and Kpop respectively), or from Western standards of the Barbie doll culture. Instead, it emerges as a pastiche of somatic visual cues and behavioral patterns, informed by a combination of these transnational influences, albeit explicitly remixed and adapted by Influencers. In his study of Japanese-influenced consumption on Singapore, Chua (2000a) argues that while “‘cute’ may be a term of endearment... ‘cuteness’ in behavior and configured appearances... signal[s] immaturity” (2000: 138). It is indeed this “immaturity” (Chua 2000a: 138) or “fragile, helpless and playful” (Granot et al. 2014: 75) persona that some Influencers enact as a strategy for their business. Similar to Granot et al.’s (2014) study of *Kawaii* cute, the cuteness in which these Singaporean Influencers engage is thus “consumer-oriented, contrived, cultivated, artificial, bought and sold” (2014: 71) and can be understood as a script of femininity that is made coherent via “regulatory practice” and repetitious performance (Butler 1999). Of the three Influencers discussed, Sharon has been blogging since 2010, Amy since 2005, and Cara since 2011. They belong to the 16-19, 20-25, and 26-30 age groups respectively.

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*The Doll and sensual delight*

The Doll is characterized by her carnal attractiveness and visual cuteness.

Participants in a scientific study have previously defined cuteness as "pleasing to look at", with the ability to "receive pleasure from a cute person" (Alley 1981: 653). In the case of The Doll, however, this pleasure is derived from a persona that is cute and adorable, yet simultaneously sexually desirable. Cuteness in The Doll is attributed to a physical aesthetic that takes after Konrad Lorenz's *Kindchenschema* (1943). He describes this as an innate response of affectionate and caring behavior elicited by specific pedomorphic facial features. Golle et al. (2013: 1) describe these features as "a relatively large head compared to the size of the body, a relatively big cranium compared to the facial bones, large eyes that lie below the horizontal midline of the skull, a soft-elastic surface texture, and round and protruding cheeks".

As mentioned earlier, some of this cuteness is characterized by the "Jpop" wave of the 1990s to early 2000s, and the more recent "Kpop" wave of the 2010s. To achieve this cute look, The Doll adopts cosmetic and apparel fashions inspired by Jpop and Kpop singers and actresses, as popularized on the Internet. Sharon is known for her distinctive *ulzzang* (literally meaning "best face" in the Korean language) style eyebrows, which are shaped to be thicker than natural eyebrows, extend from her inner eyelid past the corner of her eyes, and colored in with a dark brown eyebrow pencil. She regularly puts on pupil-enlarging contact lenses that are ornamental rather than prescriptive (see also Qiu 2012: 234). Sharon is also fond of powdering on layers of baby pink blusher to give the illusion of rosy cheeks and a slimmer face. When she takes selfies, Sharon tilts her head downwards such that her forehead and eyes seem larger, her cheeks appear rounded, and her chin smaller, thus taking the form of the pedomorphic features described in Lorenz's *Kindchenschema*. She also frequently caresses her cheeks or chin – what Goffman

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(1979: 29) calls “the feminine touch” – in a bid to give the illusion of a smaller face, and to connote a sense of “being delicate and precious” (1979: 31).

Fashionwise, Cara unabashedly declares her love for “pastel” and “delicate” colors resonant of baby apparel. She often adorns herself in lilac, baby pink and mellow yellow tones in soft fabric with lace trimmings. More explicitly, Cara also dresses herself in “baby doll dresses” that trapeze from the shoulder and hide her feminine figure, and “rompers” that are similar to the jumpers toddlers wear. Taking The Doll to an extreme, Amy literally embellishes her physical appearance to take after a life-sized human doll. Professionally shot in a studio, her blog mast is a photograph of herself lying on the ground, wide-eyed with lips pouting and parted to reveal her front teeth. Her ankle, knee, wrist, elbow and neck joints are wrapped tightly with black rubber bands or plastic wires to simulate the rigid joints of a plastic Barbie doll. At first glance, she could easily pass as a real life doll.

It is crucial to note that in these three instances, the performance of the Influencer’s cute persona is meant to portray a romantic desirability to potential partners. She is, after all, enacting scripts of femininity in which heterosexual gender roles are being modeled for her followers. Hence, while The Doll portrays a cherubic and innocent childlikeness to solicit the follower’s affection and protective instincts, she also conveys a sexual desirability that is meant to appeal to hegemonically masculine men. Such a jarring juxtaposition of cherubic innocence and sexual desirability seems provocative in that it suggests some sense of a perverse sensuality inherent in The Doll. The persona of The Doll also extends beyond visual imagery to include her language. Ngai (2012: 60) asserts that cuteness has become attached to “a feminine and nationally specific way of using language” in which the cute object utilizes discourse to publicize her feelings. In her blog and social media feeds, The Doll does this by adopting a combination of font styles, tone and vocabulary to emphasize her angelic childlikeness.

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Amy does so by appropriating multiple font colors in a single blog post, and she steers towards more playful font types such as *Comic Sans*, *Rockwell*, and *Chalkduster*. Sharon once customized her blog's click arrow into a mini rainbow and shooting stars, so that a string of sparkly animation greeted followers who maneuvered her site. She also uses emoticons and a whimsical permutation of punctuation symbols to form cutesy expressive "faces" in her text (see chapter three). In addition, Amy tends towards cooing expressions – as if speaking to a baby – when speaking about herself or addressing followers. In a post in which she thanks followers for their support, Denise uses the expression "Awww..." to denote a sense of bashful appreciation (i.e. "Awww... thanks guys, *muacks!* [vernacular onomatopoeia for a kiss]"). She also frequently textualizes her inner thoughts to followers with interjections such as "Aoooh", "Mmmm" and "Hmmm". In describing her own physique when she tracks her weight loss and gain, Sharon uses "small sized adjectives and diminutive ejaculations" (Ngai 2012: 60) such as "precious", "tiny" and "delicate" to describe her body (i.e. "I look so tiny next to him!"). In addition, all three Influencers adopt playful pet names when referring to their partners using "diminutives and forms of baby-talk" (Morreall 1991: 44). Cara, in particular, uses terms of endearment such as "babe", "baby boy", "hunny" and "sugar".

*The Darling and romantic docility*

The Darling is characterized by her relative vulnerability and desire to be pampered by her romantic partner, and her delicateness and dependency complement her archetypal hegemonically masculine partner, who is strong, protective, and able to provide for her. She is a "darling" in the sense of being both beloved and important, and endearing enough to solicit the affection of others. In her study of Chinese urban female youth online, Qiu describes a similar cuteness as *sajiao*. To *sajiao* is

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“to deliberately act like a spoiled child in front of someone because of the awareness of the other person’s affection... [or] to incite tenderness by childishness in order to be coquettish” (Qiu 2012: 232). Qiu notes that most Chinese men respond favorably to *sajiao*. Singaporean Influencers similarly employ such strategies in their visual portrayals and narrative accounts. The first way The Darling performs romantic docility is by carefully crafting her photographs. On their feeds, Influencers often post “couple” photographs featuring themselves and their partner. While some of these are clearly professional photo-shoots in which Influencers are modeling for a product or advertising for a photographer, most of the photographs are candid shots. They are either taken by a third person, via a self-timed camera set up on a tripod, or selfies.

However, this is not to say that there is no staging involved in the image. After all, in his study of *Gender Advertisements* (1979), Goffman posits that photographic expressions are “not instinctive but socially learned and socially patterned” (1979: 7). This applies when photographs are “faked” or “realistically mocked-up” such that as actors, we “wordlessly choreograph[h] ourselves relative to others in social situations with the effect that interpretability of scenes is possible” (1979: 20-21), or when we are photographed in genuinely “caught” or “candid” images, which can be carefully angled, framed, photographed, and disseminated for a specific effect (1979: 13).

The Darling visually displays her relative smallness and vulnerability to complement her masculine partner by adopting various modeling stances. The most basic of these is the careful angling of the Influencer’s face and body to emphasize her relative physical smallness. Sharon, for instance, is fond of crossing her legs bended at the knee and holding her arms close to her torso when she poses for “couple” photographs with her partner. This gives the impression of her occupying a much smaller space within the photographic frame, especially since



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her partner usually positions himself closer to the camera to appear larger in build. Additionally, the posture of her legs – what Goffman refers to as the “bashful knee bend” – implies “a foregoing of full effort” in which Sharon gives the impression of “presuppose[ing] the goodwill of anyone in the surround who could offer harm” (1979: 45), thus signposting her “acceptance of subordination”, “submissiveness” or “appeasement” (1979: 46). This is unlike Sharon’s stand-alone photographs in which she prefers to tiptoe and extend her legs forward to give the illusion of extra height, and dramatically raise her shoulders and protrude her chest to emphasize her bust line.

Cara fancies standing with her back to her partner’s torso with his arms wrapping her in embrace, as if in a spooning position. She often angles the top of her head to touch his chin, and also crosses her legs at the knees in front of her partner, who stands with legs apart. Her wrists also hang loosely, as if to emphasize the delicateness of her small frame, especially through a shorter height (Goffman 1979: 28). The body language between both partners immediately suggests that her partner is strong and protective – what Goffman (1979: 28) refers to as a “superiority of status... expressible in his greater girth and height” – over her dependent and fragile demeanor, thus drawing attention to “an imbalance of power” (Ngai 2012: 54) between The Darling and her partner.

The second way The Darling performs romantic docility is via conscientious accounts of her partner’s acts of service. To underscore her feminine fragility and docility in relation to her masculine partner, The Darling publicizes vignettes that showcase her partner as a pampering provider and over-protective lover. A variant of this discourse is to pine after her partner who is temporarily absent from her, or what McIntyre (2014: 4) terms “a certain neediness and inability to stand alone”. Sharon routinely dramatizes her partner’s little acts of service for her, such as taking her out to her “favorite” restaurant – which she claims he had to save up for

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– or buying her a simple trinket that was “hard to find”, “out of stock”, or took “weeks of searching”. Her discourses obscure the fact that Sharon does dine at fine restaurants with her family – presumably paid for by her parents – and the relative cheapness and low quality of her mass-produced gift. On her Instagram and Twitter feeds, Sharon also catalogues the mundane routines by which her partner indulges her, such as blow-drying her hair for her as she lays on the bed playing on her phone, because “he knows I am tired”. In one instance, she even wrote about her “feeding time” in which her partner literally spoon-fed her dinner as a display of his pampering and affection. When her partner was temporarily away from her for a week, she ranted at length about “feeling so lost without him” and “counting down the hours” to his return. Allison (2010: 385) asserts that there is a sense of sweetness and gentleness associated with such dependence.

In her most recent relationship, Cara tells her followers that her partner has managed to “break down her walls” and “soften” her – something she claims her previous romantic interests have not done. In writing about his affectionate displays, she positions herself as voluntarily “allowing” her partner to elicit feelings of vulnerability and dependence in her, because of his overwhelming protectiveness. As a veteran in the Influencer industry who is among the oldest continuing Influencers, she ironically portrays a learned helplessness about herself when it comes to matters of romantic love. This is despite her being a rather successful entrepreneur with her own business and an independent Influencer who has managed to clinch advertorial deals without the help of an Influencer management firm or advertising broker – an independence, she has said on several occasions, in which she takes pride.

Amy is occasionally queried about the gifts from her partner that she conspicuously displays and the venues at which they dine. She unabashedly tells followers she “does not know” details about the gift, such as its commercial value and where it

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was bought, because it was a “surprise” from her partner. This is contrary to some of her social media posts in which she talks at length about desperately wanting particular material goods and has “done some research”, “wishing [she] could own them”. When followers ask for details of the dining places she blogs about, Amy sometimes says she “cannot remember” the address, booking arrangements, or average cost because her partner “took care of everything”. The discourse about her relationship is one of subservience and obedience in which she does not seem to question her partner’s decisions or take interest in the seemingly mundane details of her own lifestyle. She frames herself as being consciously wide-eyed and unaware most of the time, accentuating the couple’s power differential and her docility towards her partner.

On the flip side of her docile, dependent and fragile persona, The Darling seems to open up herself to bullying and exploitation by the very partner she claims is protective of her. Thus, the third way The Darling performs romantic docility is by highlighting her vulnerability as a result of this obedience. This behavior is what Ngai (2012: 3) refers to as “an eroticization of powerlessness [that] evok[es] tenderness” from the more powerful actor. During squabbles with her partner, Amy usually takes to writing about her “plight” in a melodramatic fashion, appealing to followers to take her side. She uses phrases like being “taken advantage of”, being “unknowingly” deceived, and being “too blind to see” the faults in her partner earlier. Amy positions herself as a subservient and compliant girlfriend whose trusting and dependent persona was misused and “abused” by her partner, who holds significantly more power in the relationship. While playing the “victim”, however, Amy’s passive-aggressive accounts are an attempt to buy herself some bargaining power by appealing for the “protection” and care of her followers and other potential suitors. She has been known to shame her previous partners for their misdeeds in explicit detail, complete with photographs of the couple’s time together and personal photos of her partner to complement her narrative.

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In the “tell all” blogposts of her last three break-ups, Amy even juxtaposed her victim narrative with old photographs of the couple in seemingly happier times. She tells followers that “no one understands”, that there is “pain hidden beneath her smiles”, and that “things are not what they seem”. At times, she claims that the praises she previously sung of her partner were “not always true”, and occasionally feels like she was “acting” in order to maintain the “façade” of a happy relationship. This is accentuated by the selfies she includes in the narrative, in which she wears a helpless and innocent expression – doe-eyed, staring into the camera, and pouting, or feebly lying in bed with a close-up on reddened eyes and tears running down her cheeks. In a similar vein, Cara writes about being thankful for close friends – female and implied platonic male – who “watch out for her” and “make sure” that her partner does not “make [her] unhappy”. Although Cara writes about her willing submission to a partner who has managed to tap into her most private emotions, she simultaneously reflexively describes this affectionate access as weakening her sense of independence and ability to fend for herself. In a cryptic blogpost that followers speculated was a signpost of her break-up, Cara writes of wanting her partner to “fight for [her]”, and laments his inability to interpret recent expressions of her desire to be cherished and loved in a manner for which she longs. She does not appear to tell this to him explicitly; instead, Cara implies that he has weakened her “defenses” and “walls”, and yet is now not adequately fulfilling the role of a dependable lover.

### *The Dear and homosocial desire*

The Dear is noted for the physical and emotional labor, and monetary costs involved in maintaining her persona. Through this, cuteness becomes a commodity one may purchase to consume and to nurture the self (Allison 2010: 385). For this reason, The Dear’s extravagant lifestyle makes her the envy of most women who

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yearn to emulate her high-maintenance consumption practices. By sharing her private knowledge of self-care not usually privy to other less successfully feminine women, she also gains the affection of followers.

Firstly, The Dear incites homosocial desire among women followers by depicting herself as a fragile body, requiring an intensive upkeep via the conspicuous consumption of “self-care” products. In this, she prizes herself as the epitome of a female consumer whose femininity is maintained by luxury products and leisurely services that are not always accessible or affordable for the average consumer. These consumption behaviors can take the form of: physiological maintenance, such as a quality diet and waxing; emotional rest, such as frequent holidays; and esteem-boosting physical adornment, with luxury goods and services. Cara “swears by” a monthly Brazilian wax, manicure service and expensive (but sponsored) facial dermatologist that she says she “cannot do without”. She speaks of these services as a basic necessity in her life to keep her body “young”, “supple” and “desirable”, and to care for her “sensitive skin”. On the rare occasion that she is unable to keep an appointment, Cara laments about feeling discomfort over her ungroomed and untamed body, and urges her followers to labor over their bodies in order to maintain and sustain their feminine appearance and desirability to men.

Amy documents largely travel experiences, citing her “need” to “get out of the country” regularly in order to “breathe” and have “more space”. She describes her travels (a mix of self-funded and client-sponsored) as a necessity rather than a leisurely luxury, in which her emotional and mental wellbeing is looked after and “recharged”. Amy also frequently plays up even her most banal destinations within Southeast Asia by attempting to exoticize her seemingly “exclusive” experiences, and tells followers that her body “requires” it in order to “de-stress” and unwind from the “suffocating” Singapore. In several selfies she posts on Twitter, Sharon is photographed in a car or taxi. She claims that her “weak body” is unable to cope

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with the “stress” of “rushing” and jostling for public buses and trains, and reserves exaggerated exhortations for her parents and partner who regularly chauffeur her around. Sharon seems to set herself apart from the average commuter – and indeed the average Singapore youngster – or what she refers to as “most other people”, and reflexively speaks of herself as a “pampered” child or girlfriend whose vulnerability requires extensive care and dedicated providence.

Secondly, *The Dear* encourages homosocial desire by appearing obliging to followers’ requests. In doing so, she draws their affection and becomes cherished by her followers. It is not always immediately clear if she is truly inconvenienced in accommodating her followers, or merely staging an imagined “sacrifice” to inflate the value of her gift. However, the focus is the Influencer’s astute ability to overstate her “giving in” to followers in order to reaffirm their upper hand in the relationship and solicit their approval. Although she spent months publicizing “couple” photographs depicting her and her (then) new partner on dates, Sharon did not explicitly share details on how her relationship started. She would divulge a few facts every few blogposts, as if hesitant to be intimate about her bliss; on a practical level, however, such snippets were a common strategy used in the Influencer industry as teasers to encourage followers to return as “click bait” (Blom & Hansen 2015). Sharon says she was “not ready” to talk about her relationship, but decided to “give in” after “many requests” accumulated from followers over the month. She briefly mentions having to overcome previous “bad experiences” in order to produce her post, signposting some level of sacrifice she is making so her followers will be “happy”. On a more material level, Cara was initially reluctant to reveal the source of some of her exclusive luxury leather bags, brushing followers off with an ambiguous answer that they are “vintage”, a vernacular euphemism for used second-hand goods. In another instance, she posted a picture of a trinket she had used to customize her luxury handbag on Instagram, and captioned a candid warning to followers not to “copy” her. Cara eventually yielded and revealed the

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source of her “vintage” bags on Instagram, telling followers it was “just for them” because she wanted to “share good things” with them.

Another way The Darling restates the importance of her followers is by highlighting her obvious dependence on them for maintaining her persona and livelihood. She thanks them for reading her blog and following her on social media feeds, for fulfilling her self-actualization needs through supportive encouragement and praise, and for validating her performance through “liking” her posts. Sharon likes to adopt a humble tone towards her followers to show her appreciation. She thanks them for “keeping [her] going” and “supporting her” in her career. She also says she “wouldn’t be here without you guys”, referring to the extent of her success in the Influencer industry, and also talks about how blogging has “changed her life”. Similar to the way she recounts her excessive dependence on her romantic partner, she adopts meek and subservient vocabulary to underscore her relative powerlessness if not for the engagement of her followers.

Through role-playing scripts of femininity and being the arbiter of gender performance knowledge to her followers, The Dear insidiously becomes capable of holding power over her followers (Ngai 2012: 64). This is despite her apparent reliance on followers for her livelihood. The Dear easily commands the attention and curiosity of followers when she chooses to withhold or extend much sought-after private knowledge. Many flaunt themselves as being gatekeepers of information when they employ teasers, reveal partial and incomplete information, or choose to divulge tips only to an exclusive segment of their following. In the long run, her “appeal of powerlessness” (Ngai 2012: 59) subtly disguises The Dear’s ability to influence and manipulate her following.

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### *(En)gendering cuteness*

The Doll, The Darling and The Dear are three variants of a cute femininity that some Influencers enact in their commercial personae. Through the narrative accounts and visual depictions published by Sharon, Amy, and Cara, this chapter has revealed and analyzed some strategies Influencers employ in order to successfully perform these cute femininities, in an attempt to better their chances in the dating market (Ouellette & Hay 2008: 119; Peiss 1996) through highly feminized (Basnyat & Chang 2014), domestic (Pugsley 2007), and sexual scripts (Kim & Ward 2004).

The Doll attempts to solicit affection through the somatic *Kindchenschema* as it is realized through cosmetic and apparel selections, and carefully curated language. However, this angelic innocence and appeal is ironically used to incite a sensual desirability found in The Doll's childlikeness. She is, in fact, a grown, mature adult playing the role of an infantile child in order to play up her delicateness. The Darling attempts to solicit protection through visual cues of her relative smallness, her inclination to be pampered, and her propensity to be exploited by others. However, the enactment of her cuteness is necessarily maintained by the ambiguity she occupies between demanding attention and playing the victim. The Dear attempts to solicit favor through an envious but necessarily extravagant conspicuous consumption for self-care, and her obliging nature in acceding to requests. However, her depicted sacrifice and powerlessness become a clever guise for the bargaining power and manipulative potential she subtly gains over followers. Be it The Doll, The Darling, or The Dear, performing cuteness has become an explicitly feminine strategy Influencers employ to achieve different gains. Above all, the sustained attention they manage to draw to themselves contributes to their blog viewership and thus advertising revenue over time. What is jarring is how an apparently angelic vision of cuteness is subtly controlled and



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curated to bring these women financial gain, quietly inverting the power hierarchies that seemingly elicit harmless, doe-eyed innocence.

The six key gendered types presented (“family girl”, “material girl”, “fashionista”, “globetrotter”, “party girl”, and “rebel”) and this case study on cuteness have shown how Influencers reinforce a display of femininity that is premised on fragility and vulnerability. However, for Influencers these are usually reflexive, lucid, and strategically employed tactics as opposed to an actual helplessness. As illustrated through *The Doll*, *The Darling*, and *The Dear*, the strategy of feminine docility is enacted by the reinforcement of social values that systematically undermine some of the socio-economic advancement of women’s position in society, through the necessary engagement of bodily routines and gendered practices that are both time-consuming and costly. These cyber-femininities appear to pander to a heterosexual male gaze between the women and their (imagined) male partners/gaze, and also between that of Influencers and their predominantly female following who look to them as role models in feminine displays. Although this strategy is highly effective, there are stringent barriers to entry, such as the emphasized feminine body required and the financial investment involved in consumption practices to maintain this feminine body.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter documented Influencers’ interrelated notions of gender performance and practices. It argued that the hyper-feminized portrayals of ideal femininities in digital spaces, and the hyper-visibility of usually obscured “backstage” practices of gender performance, are embroiled in a tension between feminine agency and vulnerability. Part one, “Cyber-femininities”, discussed Influencers’ framing of ideal femininities as a digital performance that can be achieved via various beauty, dressing, and technological mediations. I defined “cyber-femininities” as the

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portrayal and performance of female gender as mediated via the Internet and digital technologies. Part two, “Gender repository”, demonstrated how this marketing is made to look more convincing and authentic when Influencers use their lifestyles and personae to model wares. Specifically, I introduced the system of “modeling”, “role-modeling”, and “role-playing”, which are three complementary, simultaneous, and cyclical processes which Influencers use to remain relatable to followers. I also introduced how Influencers position themselves as emulatable feminine ideal types through six key ideal types that emerged in the early beginnings (mid- to late-2000s) when the “blogshop” trade was just on the cusp of transiting into the “commercial blogging” trade. Part three, “Agentic cute” presented a case study in which Influencers capitalize on one mode of cyber-femininity, cuteness, to solicit favor from their partners and followers and monetize their personae. Cultivating performances of femininities that elicit relatability from followers chiefly serves to secure their loyalty to Influencers. However, as a commercial endeavor, the primary objective is for Influencers to successfully prime themselves as desirable role-models, to whom followers can aspire to be and emulate. Such displays of taste are the focus of the next chapter.

*Chapter seven: Taste*

*How To Look Expensive (but not so much): Taste Displays, Commerce Curation, and Instagram*

## CHAPTER SEVEN: TASTE

### **How To Look Expensive (but not so much): Taste Displays, Commerce Curation, and Instagram**

A silver tray of finger food has finally arrived at our table during an Influencers-only launch party for a new candy. Almost immediately, cameras and smartphones are whipped out and aimed at the tray. Emma's boyfriend and I are the only non-Influencers at the table. He instinctively shifts our drinks away from his 24-year-old girlfriend's line of sight, then, before I can reach for the food, turns to me and says, "Wait for them to *Instagram* first".

Ryan and I are in a cab to dinner with several Influencers. Mid-sentence, the 18-year-old's mobile phone alarm blares, reminding him to publish an Instagram photo. "Sorry ah, I need to *Instagram* now", he says, cutting short our conversation as he flips through photograph filters on the app. The photo of him posing at a sponsored beverage event was shot some days earlier. Yet, he tells me that today (Friday) and this time (6pm) is the optimal slot to "get Instagram likes".

I watch as Linda extends her arm to position her iPhone over her head. Over and over again, she attempts to capture her designer handbag, new leather bracelet, and limited edition silver rings over her carefully angled "skinny" thighs. After all, crafting the perfect photograph for her 50,000 followers on Instagram is no easy feat. "I need natural light", the 19-year-old informs me, as she leans towards the window, "then my Instagram photo will be nice".

These three short vignettes illustrate Influencers' labor towards curating and performing a particular aesthetic of taste and class that is largely unseen by followers. For Bourdieu, "taste" is a system of preferences shaped by "habitus"

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(1990: 53), which is “a system of cognitive and motivating structures” that appear to be natural “procedures and paths to take” as a result of the “conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence” (1990: 53-54). Taste is signalled and performed through what Goffman terms “status symbols”, which are “sign vehicles” through which people indicate their preferred lifestyles, beliefs, and values to others (1951: 294-295). The “class” to which I refer borrows from the Veblenian notion of a “leisure class”, for whom the acquisition, accumulation, and consumption of goods feeds higher “aesthetic” wants such as to express material wealth as a “canon of reputability” (Veblen 1961: 35). As such, knowing how to perform one’s taste by “discriminat[ing] with nicety between the noble and the ignoble in consumable goods” (1961: 36), usually with preference for items that are exclusive or expensive for their “pecuniary beauty” (1961: 62), is an important practice for Influencers to establish themselves as leaders and role models in consumption choices.

This chapter comprises three sections. Part one shows how Influencers use the social media platform to perform taste displays. Part two evaluates Influencers’ conscientious integration of luxury and discount goods in order for the social mobility scripts they perform to be accessible to followers. Part three analyzes how Influencers signpost their advertorials on Instagram while retaining taste displays in congruence with the hegemonic aesthetic of Instagram. The chapter closes with a brief discussion on the role of Influencer managers in being intermediaries of taste displays and relatability between Influencers and clients. The chapter argues that through hyper-visible displays featuring the integrated consumption of high-end luxury and low-end discount goods, and through calibrating advertorial disclosures to emphasize the aesthetic value of an Instagram image over overtly commercial markers, Influencers balance emulation and aspiration through a “perpetual transitional mobility”. I define perpetual transitional mobility as a gendered and classed social mobility that Influencers convey to followers by eliciting aspiration,

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affect, and envy, albeit one that is perpetually in transit and can never actually be attained in full, for there is no end-point to the excessive consumerism canvassed through Influencer lifestyles and personae.

## **Instagram**

Instagram is a free photo-sharing smartphone app that requires an Internet connection. Users may tag their photos into searchable categories by adding hashtags in their captions. Popular hashtags in Singapore include #ootd, an acronym for Outfit Of The Day, and #igsg, indicating Instagram Singapore. Users may “like” and comment on each other’s photographs. Popular users on Instagram are likely to have high follower-to-following ratios, that is, having a large number of users subscribed to their account while themselves subscribing to only a small number of users. Instagram also features a “Popular Page” – officially named the “Explore Tab” (Instagram 2013b) – that, up till December 2013, showcased only 15 trending posts worldwide<sup>23</sup>. Featured users often gain a sizable number of new followers. Many Singaporean Influencers make it to Instagram’s “Popular Page” regularly, even writing “how to” guides on their blogs.

Since its creation in 2010, Instagram has become an aesthetically stylized site for photo sharing, microblogging, networking, and commercial exchange. Instagram’s philosophy is listed on its FAQ page:

What is Instagram?

Instagram is a fun and quirky way to share your life with friends through a series of pictures. Snap a photo with your mobile phone, then choose a filter

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<sup>23</sup> At present, the “Popular Page” has been renamed “Discover People”, and displays a limitless number of profiles with its in-built endless scrolling feature, making it even more challenging for users to appear on the page.

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to transform the image into a memory to keep around forever. We're building Instagram to allow you to experience moments in your friends' lives through pictures as they happen. We imagine a world more connected through photos (Instagram 2013a).

However, four of the platform's suggested uses have been subverted by some of Instagram's most popular users today: Instagram Influencers. Firstly, Instagram presupposes a *networked intimacy* in its adoption of the term "friends" to refer to one's followers and following. However, Instagram Influencers usually have high follower-to-following ratios, that is, having a *large number of (unknown) users* subscribed to their account, while themselves subscribing to only a small number of (known) users. Secondly, Instagram was intended to be a fuss-free "mobile phone" app that could be used on the go with a *smartphone camera*. However, Instagram Influencers are known to use *high-end digital cameras* to capture high-resolution photographs before transferring them to their smartphones for posting, so that the quality of the photograph is significantly improved. Thirdly, Instagram was crafted as a collection of "moments" for *"memory" keepsake*. However, Instagram Influencers are using the stream to *disseminate and circulate information* and imagery rather than as a personal nostalgic archive. Lastly, Instagram aims to capture life events *spontaneously*, "as they happen". However, Instagram Influencers are laboring over *purposefully staged* images to portray a particular persona and lifestyle aesthetic.

## **Perpetual transitional mobility**

For young people in Singapore, some status symbols and taste displays that represent a more leisurely, privileged, and desirable class include the ownership of branded goods at a relatively young age, the capacity to indulge in conspicuous leisurely activities such as café-hopping in the middle of a regular school/work day,

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or having access to events that are reserved exclusively for Influencers who have attained a level of success and repute in the industry. Being an Influencer per se is already a mark of a more privileged “upper class” among young people (Hopkins & Thomas 2011: 140), since these individuals are able to opt out of the more traditional and socially acceptable Singaporean structures of work<sup>24</sup>, and instead broker symbolic and cultural capital. As young creative entrepreneurs who engage in “aspirational labor” (Duffy 2015: 2), Influencers are unlike the more familiar figure of a female entrepreneur in Singapore as being middle-aged (above 40), working above 44 hours a week with 10 years’ of experience, being less-educated, and married (Foo et al. 2006: 175-177). Identifying oneself as an Influencer signals to others that one has more freedom in managing work hours, more leeway to build in personal leisurely pursuits, no supervisor or boss to report to directly, and one is highly sought after by clients in order to maintain stable earnings to sustain such a lifestyle.

As one successor of contemporary women’s magazines, Influencers’ digital feeds are similarly pitched to young women readers with “advice, scripts, and information” (Kim & Ward 2004: 49), feature product placements (Frith 2009) and concealed ads (McCracken 1993), and are oriented towards the middle-class and “premised on social mobility” (Driscoll 2002: 160). However, taste displays need to be a continuous practice in order to sustain the signaling of one’s class, and here I refer to “class” as a constituted practice of taste displays (cf. Hopkins & Thomas 2011: 139). Influencers cannot simply partake in these pursuits on a one-off basis, lest they are perceived to be has-beens whose status and popularity are wavering. Instead, taste practice has to be regularly performed and signaled on social media, and even increasing in intensity and prestige in order for Influencers to appear as if

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<sup>24</sup> The typical education-to-work trajectory of young Singaporeans comprises pursuing full-time education up to a university degree, before seeking a stable job in a 9am-5pm office setting in a formal corporation.

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they are continually achieving social mobility. As observed by Duffy in her study of creative aspirational labor in digital cultural production, “despite the rhetoric of creative *production*, the aspirational labour system ensures that female participants remain immersed in the highly feminized *consumption* of branded goods” (Duffy 2015: 3, emphasis in original).

Veblen (1961: 20) notes that “the characteristic feature of leisure class life is a conspicuous exemption from all useful employment”, which Influencers often appear to portray in their conscientious curation of lifestyles on social media. However, in reality, it is their very portrayal of such a leisurely life that forms the bread-and-butter of their careers and brings them their earnings through advertorials. This disjuncture is what Goffman (1956: 21) describes as “expression” and “action”: the former is the “frontstage” exposed to the following wherein the Influencer’s performance appears effortless, easy, and second nature (expression), while the “backstage” of impression management concealed from followers actually involves physical effort, emotional labor, and practice to convey the effortless front (action).

After all, followers on Instagram hardly ever catch a glimpse of Emma lugging a heavy camera to these exclusive events, or of Ryan laboring over a neat schedule to publish his Instagram photos, or of Linda repeatedly contorting her body in order to frame the perfect photograph. It is this very invisibility and intentional obscurity of “taste labor” that gives followers the impression that Influencers are effortlessly arbiters of taste and enviable role models in taste displays; in actual fact, this is sustained by Influencers’ “practical knowledge of the relationships between distinctive signs and positions” (Hopkins & Thomas 2011: 140) – such as colloquially well-known “status symbols” (Goffman 1956: 23-24) of the “upper class” and the desirable photographic aesthetics of Instagram – so that they may



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“inscrib[e] [a] structure” into their social media feeds that holistically represent their taste displays (Hopkins & Thomas 2011: 140).

While I develop the notions of “technologies of intimacy” and “intimacy labor” in greater detail in chapter eight, this chapter looks at how Influencers consciously produce among their followers a “perpetual transitional mobility”. This refers to the “backstage” (Goffman 1956) script for attaining class mobility – or at least an illusion or impression of such mobility – that Influencers perform and role-model for their followers through their coaching and selection of products, services, and lifestyle habits. Goffman (1956: 23) argues that “in most stratified societies there is an idealization of the higher strata and some aspiration on the part of those in low places to move to higher ones”. This “higher” class is associated with more prestige, is perceived to be more sacred, and is often treated as a “common valu[e] of the society”. Social mobility is largely negotiated visibly on the “front stage” and demonstrated by the acquisition and display of “status symbols” (Goffman 1956).

However, because the allure of Influencers is premised on their relatability, while eliciting aspiration and envy, Influencers must simultaneously remain accessible and emulatable to followers. Hence, what they present is not an actual mobility across classes in transit, but rather, a transition that is perpetually being striven for with no clear end goal or benchmark in sight. In other words, “perpetual transitional mobility” is a process of upgrading and grooming oneself up the class hierarchy of conspicuous consumption, but it is never actually attained in full, as the success of Influencers is predicated on consistently canvassing aspiration and consumerism among their followers.

A crucial point to remember is that because Influencers need to remain relatable to their followers, their social mobility slightly differs from Veblenian notions of class mobility. While Influencers strive to perform higher levels of social mobility, they

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simultaneously have to continue occupying the lower end of the mobility spectrum, and do so by documenting and hyper-visualizing their consumption of the more mundane products (such as street food, relatively cheap mass manufactured products from blogshops, and knock-offs of branded goods) in order for followers to identify with them. It is for this same reason that Influencers occasionally visualize the more unglamorous backstage of their lives, such as having to manage household chores, coping with pimples, or negotiating conflict with their partners. Thus, the spectrum of social mobility that Influencers occupy is increasingly broadening, but at the same time, they are toggling and shuttling up and down both ends of the spectrum to remain relatable and accessible to followers, while role-modeling aspirations and stimulating desire.

## **Part I – Curating taste on Instagram**

Influencers maintain their ongoing Instagram personae by publishing photographs deemed congruent with upper middle-class taste. One of Linda's attractions is her display of luxury items, which she claims incites followers' interest, seeing as how younger consumers with spending power are turning to advertising formats in digital media (cf. Hopkins & Thomas 2011: 143). One post reveals up to SGD\$6,000 of leather goods. Linda has a "megaphone effect", that is the potential to reach a large following with the affordances enabled by the web, in which only "a select few ordinary consumers are able to acquire a following without the institutional mediation historically required" (McQuarrie et al. 2013: 137). As an ordinary non-professional consumer herself, she is able to independently publicize her consumption practices, and accumulate a "mass audience of strangers" (2013: 137).

Linda rarely reveals her non-luxury items, despite their being the mainstay of her wardrobe "off Instagram", to channel a "pecuniary taste". This borrows from

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Veblen's (1961) notion of "pecuniary beauty", in which expensive objects are perceived as more desirable and beautiful because people increasingly value wealth. Other displays of public consumption and pecuniary taste include holidays to exotic destinations, exclusive dining experiences, or private events with mainstream television and film personalities who are not usually accessible to the public. Like many popular Influencers, however, Linda makes an exception for the low-end mass produced apparel that she models on her Instagram for a fee (discussed later in this chapter). Her labor to portray a luxurious Instagram persona obscures the fact that she is actually working for an income. Pecuniary taste also extends to displaying one's sociality and personal networks. Many Influencers only post group photographs with fellow Influencers or their romantic partners (see Appendix A), excluding personal friends<sup>25</sup> who are not familiar faces to Instagram followers. These boundary markers embed them within a particular class of successful Influencers, thus establishing the value and exclusivity of their social network. Evidently for Influencers, using Instagram is less about making "memor[ies] to keep around forever" (Instagram 2013a) and more about catering to a following. Ryan often makes quick evaluations of whether a photograph is "Instagram worthy" based on its projected number of likes. Taking Instagram photos thus becomes less of a leisurely pursuit when Influencers constantly deliberate over the value of an image.

As arbiters of taste, some women Influencers even cosmetically manipulate their bodies (see chapter six) to channel their perceptions of hegemonic beauty to earn "likes" and gain followers. For instance, coinciding with the K-Pop wave in Singapore in 2013, many Influencers adopted porcelain skin tones, enlarged dark

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<sup>25</sup> When queried if this was in order to protect the privacy of their less public "non-Influencer" friends, many Influencers responded that this issue was secondary to maintaining congruence on their feed especially since their "close friends" were already aware of the likelihood of appearing on Influencers' social media on the occasion.

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pupils, and blonde hair either through a conscious change in their beauty regimes, through makeup, or through photo-editing apps. Influencers thus reflexively critique and discipline their bodies to convey desirable Instagram personae. “Photo-taking skills” (the ability to snap good photos *and* the ability to pose well in front of the camera) are crucial in the industry, as Influencer managers refer to it as a talent that is “difficult to train” [sic], whereas other aspects of the business like “good writing skills” and “carrying yourself well” can be developed. This capacity to create aesthetically pleasing images is regarded as an “inborn taste”, to borrow from Veblen’s (1961) notion of “inborn beauty”.

Whereas “pecuniary taste” refers to the increased prestige and value bestowed upon status symbols and choices that are valued for being more exclusive and expensive, “inborn taste” is considered to be more “genuine” and natural because it is mostly shared by masses of people regardless of their habitus, such as perceiving flowers to be beautiful (Gronow 1997: 39-41). Gronow (1997) refers to this as a judgment power that is irrational and arbitrary, although widely agreed upon by most people, which is similar to what Veblen (1961: 36) described as the ability to “discriminate with nicety between the noble and the ignoble in consumable goods”. Both types of taste are alternative ladders for Influencers to accrue capital, instead of acquiring the traditionally more highly regarded business skills of good writing and networking. Instagram thus becomes a project of self-creation, where Influencers conscientiously hone their public personae as arbiters of taste.

However, what is excluded from Influencers’ Instagram feeds is as important as what is emphasized. For instance, Linda’s managers advised her not to publish photographs of her clubbing escapades. This was to maintain her “role model” image to her under-18 followers, to whom she frequently markets clothing and affordable cosmetics. Therefore, Influencers labor over maintaining the congruence of their persona to remain believable to followers. In summary, only Influencers

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whose Instagram feeds portray a desirable upper-middle class lifestyle, whose bodies channel hegemonic beauty, and whose persona is congruent with their following, attract a sizable number of followers, and thus, advertisers.

Instagram is a medium through which Influencers demonstrate their group membership in the industry, sell advertising space, and maintain viewer interest. While Instagram claims to enable users to share moments “as they happen”, the opening vignettes in this section demonstrate Influencers’ creative adaptations of Instagram that have arisen from its commercial appropriation. Be it Emma’s predisposition to photographing food, Ryan’s deliberations over prime time slots, or Linda’s labor over creating perfect (yet seemingly spontaneous) shots, performing commercial personae on Instagram is strenuous because considerable effort is needed to “manufacture” a persona that is desirable. In fact, this labor requires such a degree of calculated performance that it has evolved into a lifestyle. Influencers labor to portray a desirable upper-middle class lifestyle and channel hegemonic ideals of beauty through their bodies. This ability to curate taste displays that appear attractive and solicit aspiration from followers even extends to “discount” products that Influencers have managed to strategically frame in their Instagram advertorials.

**Part II – Knockoffs and authentic replicas: Performing taste displays at a discount**

Influencers who have garnered overwhelming popularity have been known to promote used personal items and blogshop wares on their blogs and social media, and one of the most popular outlet for these is Instagram. Used personal items are often “pre-loved” – a euphemism for secondhand – apparel, accessories, and knick-knacks that are well received by followers who admire their favorite Influencers, some of whom have expressed a desire to own “a piece of” their idol

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through their second-hand material goods. Occasionally, followers have even resorted to bidding to secure an item. As noted by Wernick (1991: 106), the discursive and symbolic mediations of fame allow “anyone whose name and fame has been built up to the point where reference to them... can serve as a promotional booster in itself”. Blogshop wares usually include “knockoffs”, “lookalikes” and “authentic replicas” of high-end luxury products that Influencers model in advertorials on behalf of blogshops who have engaged them. As a combination of both forms of commerce on Instagram, some Influencers have even organized “knockoff” sprees of their own, such as in the case of Influencer Sherry, who acquired more than a dozen Chanel look-alike ear studs during her travels and proceeded to sell them to followers for a profit. Thus, through mechanisms such as product endorsements and sponsorships (Dyer 1986: 2-3 in Turner 2004: 17), Influencers are able to bring forth “a wedding of consumer culture with democratic aspirations” (Marshall 1997: 9).

Other Influencers are sought by followers for their extensive knowledge of “suppliers”, “dealers”, and “brokers” who are able to “import” or “bring in” very high quality “knockoffs” of branded luxury goods, usually outsourced from abroad. Known to pursuers of branded goods as “authentic replicas”, these are considered to be the acme in the hierarchy of “knockoff” products because they most closely resemble “the real deal”. Influencer Collette, for instance, has produced advertorials for “authentic replica” Pandora charms that she claims are very difficult to distinguish from the actual product. In this sense, knock-offs and replicas come to be simulacra (Baudrillard 1994) that stand in for expensive conspicuous consumables, so much so that one no longer has to acquire and accumulate commodities to signify their leisurely class, but simply have the knowhow to simulate the “status symbols” (Goffman 1956) that have come to represent this leisurely class. Influencers who dabble in knockoffs thus become not just arbiters of taste, but also gatekeepers to acquiring discounted versions of coveted products

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such that one may at least perform the *illusion* of expensive taste displays should they be unable to afford “the real deal”.

This display of conspicuous consumption and taste practices becomes even more convoluted when Influencers like Sherry and Collette seamlessly display their consumption (and promotion) of “knockoffs” in tandem with “the real deal”, being owners of authentic Chanel and Pandora goods that they occasionally flaunt on their social media platforms as well. In other words, followers can never be sure if “luxury good” on display is a cheap “knockoff” or the expensive authentic product, unless the Influencer chooses to divulge the information as a strategy for demonstrating their accessibility and relatability for still willing to occupy the lower end of the social mobility and consumption spectrum. For instance, in many of her Instagram posts and conversations with followers, Sherry reveals that while her CÉLINE leather bag is authentic (she mentioned the price and origins of the product in her captions), at least one of her Prada bags is an “authentic replica” obtained from a supplier overseas; she revealed this in the comments section only when queried by followers, and many followers applauded her for her “honesty” and for introducing them to her network of authentic replica suppliers. This has led to some speculations or curious queries from followers as to whether the “branded” bags displayed in subsequent Instagram posts are genuine, especially since Sherry has not chosen to respond to every single query regarding the price/origin/authenticity of her various bags.

There appears to have emerged an approachable and inoffensive grammar for such queries, such as when followers ask *where* the bag was purchased, *how* the Influencer had obtained it, or *how much* it costs, rather than asking outrightly whether the bag is a replica or authentic. However, because she does occasionally signpost her “knockoffs” and even educates followers on how and where to procure similar replicas that are of better quality than others, Sherry has not only been able

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to sustain the trust of her followers whenever she indicates that a bag is genuine, she has also become a gatekeeper for accessing high quality imitations. In fact, many of the advertorials on her Instagram feed have promoted shops selling knockoffs for items including branded bags, Melissa designer shoes, and Pandora jewelry bracelets, where Sherry emphasizes how “similar” and “close” the replicas are to the originals that she also owns.

It is important to note that not all Influencers endorse the consumption of “knockoffs” – indeed, many view the practice with disdain, refusing to take on such advertorials – although many Influencers partake in such “discounted” taste practices, whether or not they are forthcoming in their exchanges with followers. On the whole, Influencers’ highly visible practice of unabashedly using “authentic replicas” without shame, and even acquiring fame and admiration as gatekeepers of this knowledge, has authoritatively “transform[ed] ordinary objects (products) into elevated symbolic vehicles (brands)” (Malefyt & Morais 2012: 37).

By garnering a cult following online, Influencers lend credibility and clout to the styles of apparel they don, which in turn increases the appeal of the products marketed in spite of their “discount” status. Blogshop profits and the increasing use of Instagram advertorials attest to the efficacy of persona intimacy generated by Influencers. These effects, both communicative and commercial, are not produced solely by the efforts of the blogshops and Influencers, but demonstrate the power of value (co-)creation. However, as maintained earlier, taste displays in the form of advertorials are only sustainable if they do not appear too overtly commercial and can retain Influencers’ relatability.



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**Part III – Calibrating taste and advertorial disclosure on Instagram**

To maintain viewer interest, Influencers appropriate creative strategies to obscure the commerciality of their Instagram posts. While popular Influencers are often engaged in advertorials and sponsorships, their paid ads are not always clearly signposted or disclosed on Instagram. It is a tricky balance. On the one hand, the Influencer has the responsibility to differentiate between “sponsored posts” and “personal posts”; understandably, like many other modes of advertising, most sponsored posts would hardly contain any criticism of the product or service being advertised. Earmarking an advertorial thus signals to followers the need to take the Instagram post with a grain of salt, and to take in the information at their own discretion, although this is not yet legally required in Singapore (as in Malaysia, cf. Hopkins & Thomas 2011: 145). It has also become a status symbol (Goffman 1956) in itself as earmarking advertorials informs the following that the products featured have been sponsored, and that the Influencer is therefore one who belongs to a class of successful Influencers. On the other hand, Influencers whose streams are overtly lined up with ads come off as being too “hard-sell”, and ad markers clutter and distract from the photographic aesthetic of Instagram photos that are meant to portray a leisurely class and exquisite taste. Those whose Instagram streams become overtly commercial run the risk of losing followers who no longer find them relatable (Hopkins & Thomas 2011: 145).

In my analysis, I formulate a continuum of commercial captures that details how different Influencers disclose (or not) their paid practices. There appear to be seven main styles, which I derived from a close coding of Instagram screengrabs. I align these on a spectrum from the most overt to the most covert signposting. I am focused on systematically documenting Influencers’ innovative practices in the curation of sponsored ads on Instagram. Some of this sponsorship may involve monetary transactions, while others may involve an exchange of goods and

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services. My analysis reveals that the most effective, believable, and relatable of these are Instagram posts that tend towards covert signposting, the most successful of which seamlessly melds into what I term the “Instagram aesthetic”.

*Promos*

The most obvious of Instagram advertorials are when Influencers publish overt promotional material. This is the least preferred by Influencers, since the captions are usually long and blatantly commercial, but are likely the most preferred by clients, since the vital information is displayed most overtly to followers. Some Influencers, such as @rchlwngxx, announce discount codes. With a selfie of her made-up face and a chunky necklace resting on her chest (Figure 7.1), she writes:

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Figure 7. 1

@behindthebasics tells followers that she “collaborated” with a sponsor. Her image of some ten beauty products arranged neatly on a gift box (Figure 7.2) is captioned:

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**Figure 7.2**

Another group of Influencers on Instagram, such as @belluspuera, announce contests and giveaways. She posts a picture (Figure 7.3) of slippers on a beach towel, along with a superimposed drawing of a sun:

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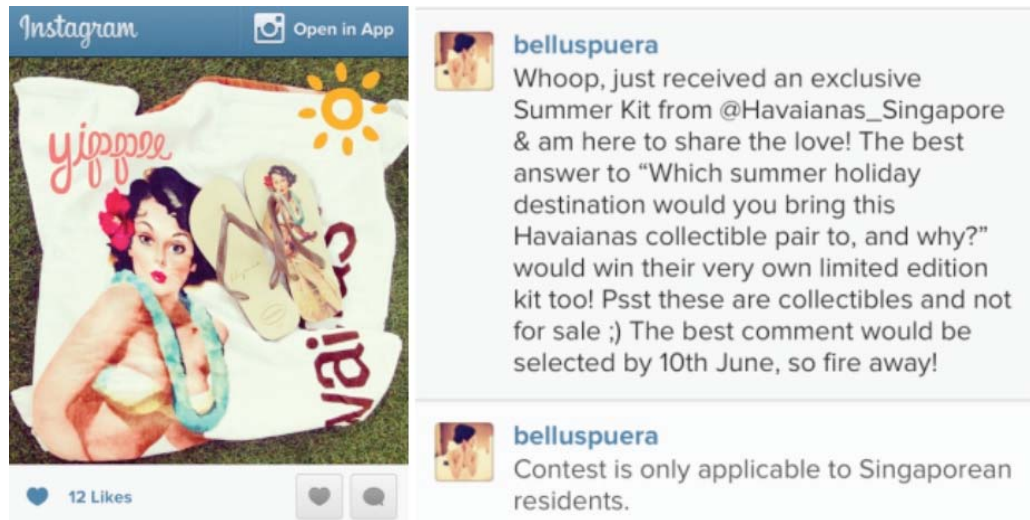


Figure 7.3

Another popular style is to capture oneself at a sponsored event and include the location on Instagram's geolocation tag, as in the case of @beatricesays. She first published an image of three arms (Figure 7.4, right), presumably of herself and two friends, holding up silver-glazed ice creams against a white Christmas tree. The Instagram photo is geotagged "ION Orchard", a popular shopping mall and one of the sponsors of her post. The next day, which is the day of the event she earlier advertised, @beatricesays posted a follow-up image (Figure 7.4, left) of herself at the mall, holding the limited edition ice cream to her face, surrounded by white-themed Christmas decorations. Again, this post was geotagged "ION Orchard". By the looks of both Instagram posts, the photographs were likely taken on the same day, although posted at different times. In her attempt to personalize this post, she mentions the outfit worn from the webstore she owns before segueing into the advertorial:

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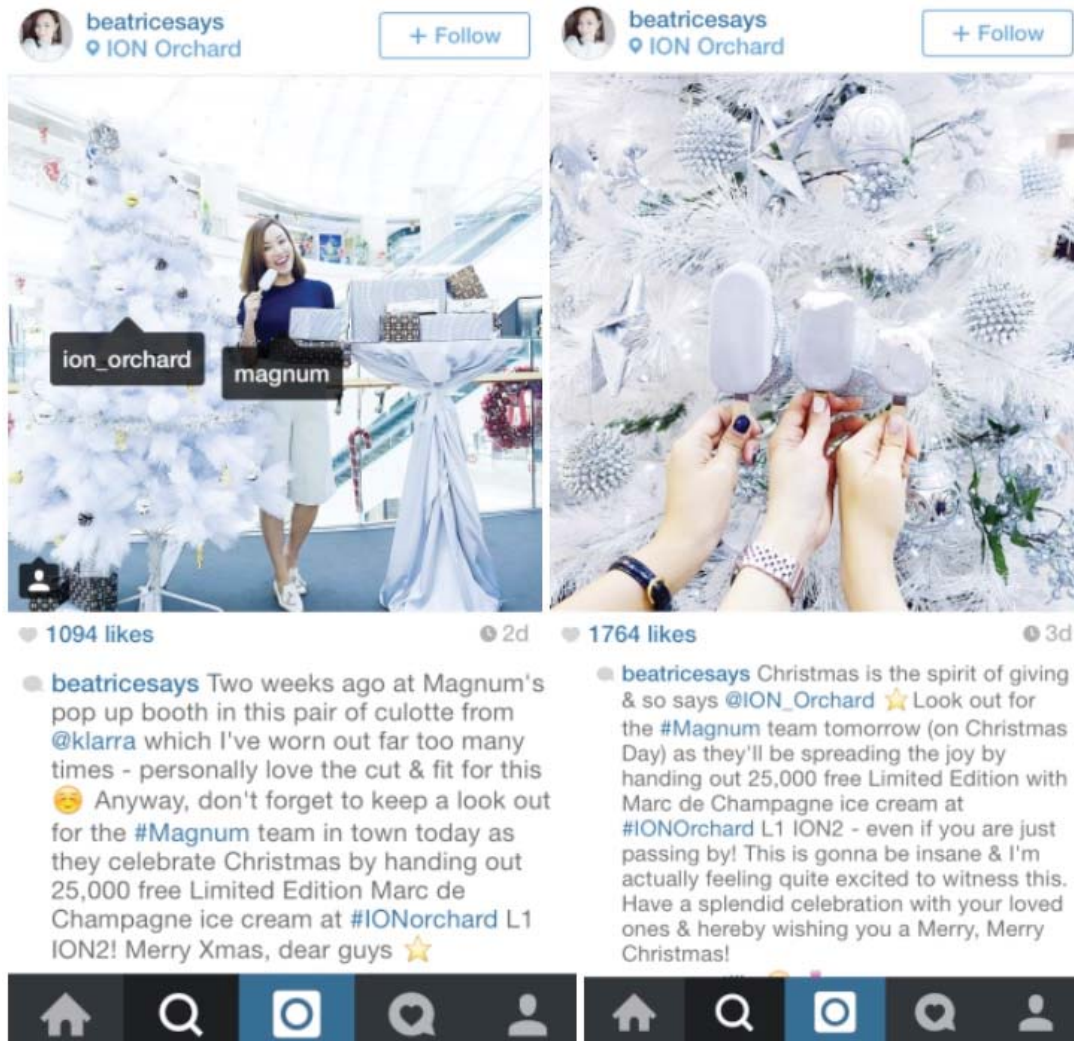


Figure 7.4

In other promos, Influencers like @ohsofickle redirect her followers to brick-and-mortar stores, usually using posts depicting selfies where she is holding products. A sampling of three examples is given in Figure 7.5:

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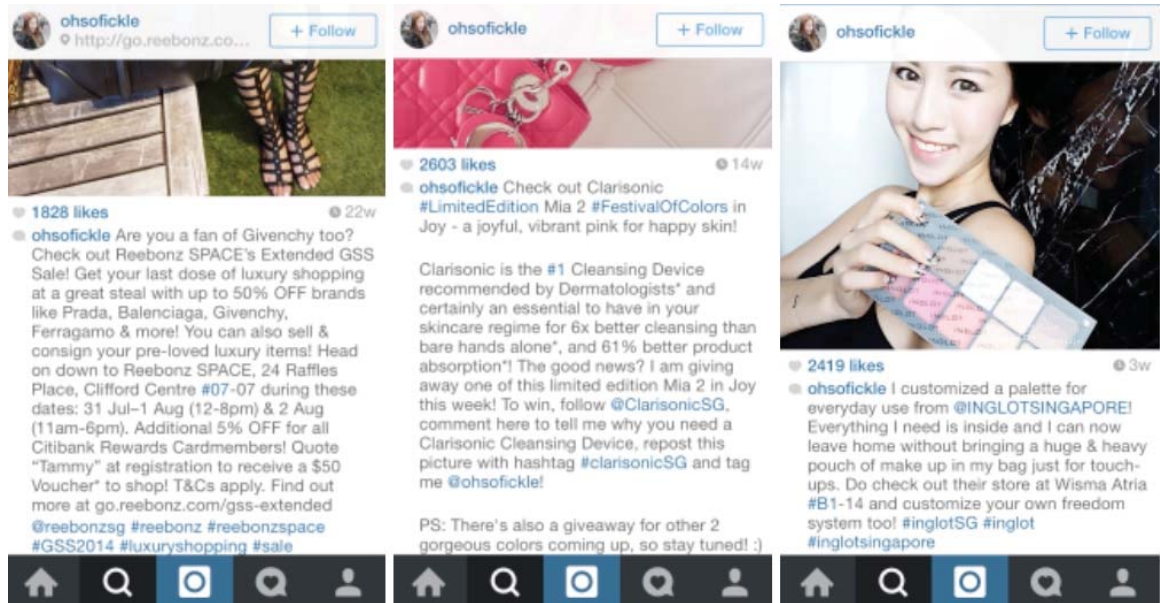


Figure 7.5

Other Influencers, like @Lucindazhou, may redirect followers to URLs or the sponsor's social media platforms. In one post (Figure 7.6, left), she poses, sitting on the edge of a chair, in an elaborately decorated room with print floor tiles and ornamental embellishments. In another (Figure 7.6, right), she holds a bottle of feminine wash in her sponsored selfie:

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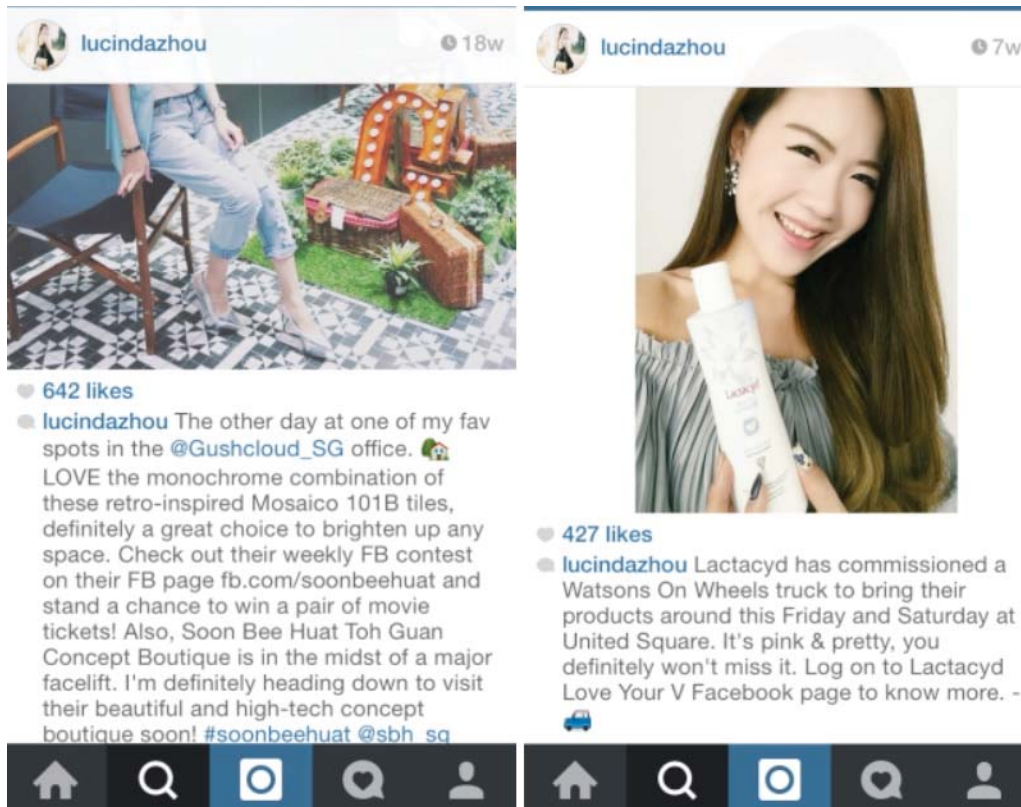


Figure 7.6

However, the most naturalized of these noticeable promos would be when Influencers are photographed using the product, especially if it is in the aesthetic of a “how to” tutorial, such as in the case of @ongxavier and @marxmae. Within the span of a week, @ongxavier uploads two Instagram images of himself with a facial wash product. In the first image (Figure 7.7, left), his face is off-focus in the background, clasped between his palms, as in washing in face. In the foreground are two bottles of facial wash in focus. The second image (Figure 7.7, right) is a collage of four separate images, each showing @ongxavier in the various stages of washing his face, such as an image of the bottle of facial wash, a close-up of a squirt of the wash in his palm, his hand spreading the wash all over his foam-clad face, and a fresh face with damp fringe staring at the bottle of facial wash:



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Figure 7.7

In a similar vein, @marxmae usually posts images of herself in the process of using a sponsored item or service. In various Instagram posts (Figure 7.8), she is pictured undergoing a facial treatment with close-ups of a device held against her lotion-clad cheek, applying eye-liner and eye-shadow on herself, using a hair straightener and hair clips, or sitting on a mattress while dressed in a robe just before her bust-enhancing massage.

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Figure 7.8

*Small markers*

In a different presentation style, small markers placed within the Instagram caption may be more discreet than the obvious promo. @rchlwnqxx uses “{AD}” (Figure 7.9) to start off her captions, as a short for “advertorial”:

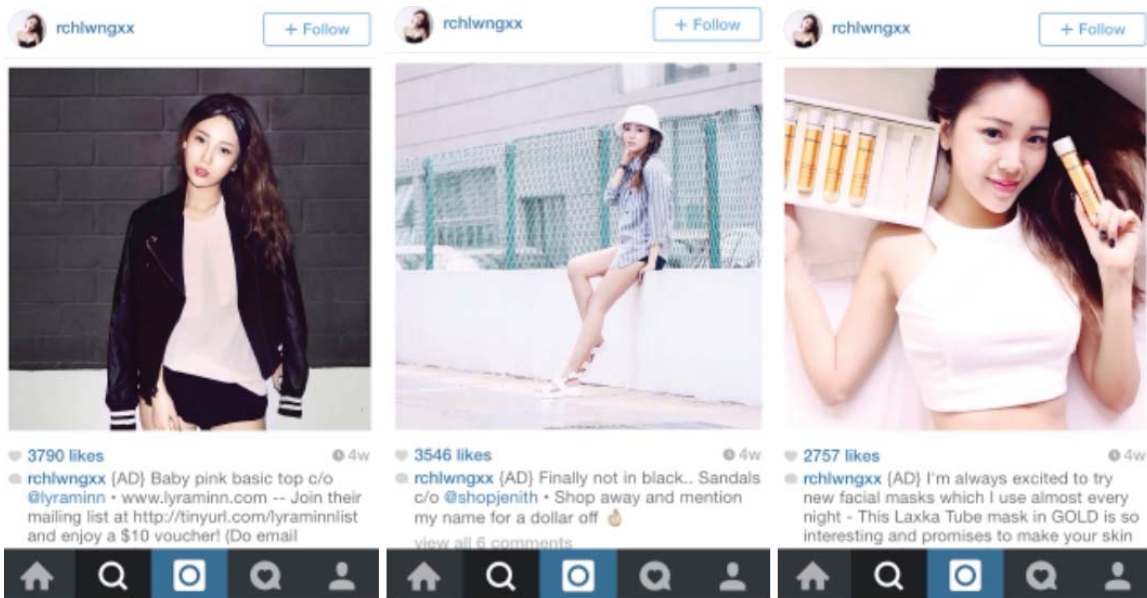


Figure 7.9

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@yankaykay ends her paid posts with “-sp” (Figure 7.10), which is an abbreviation for “sponsored post”:

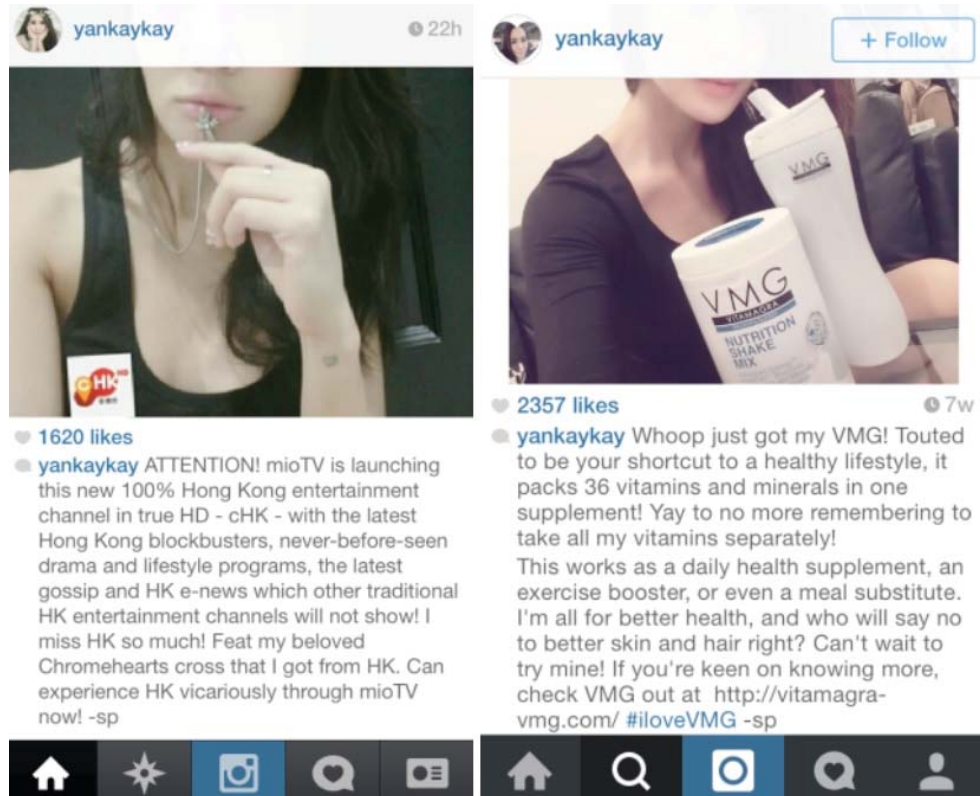


Figure 7. 10

@xiaxue hashtags “#sponsoredpost” (Figure 7.11) to earmark her ads:

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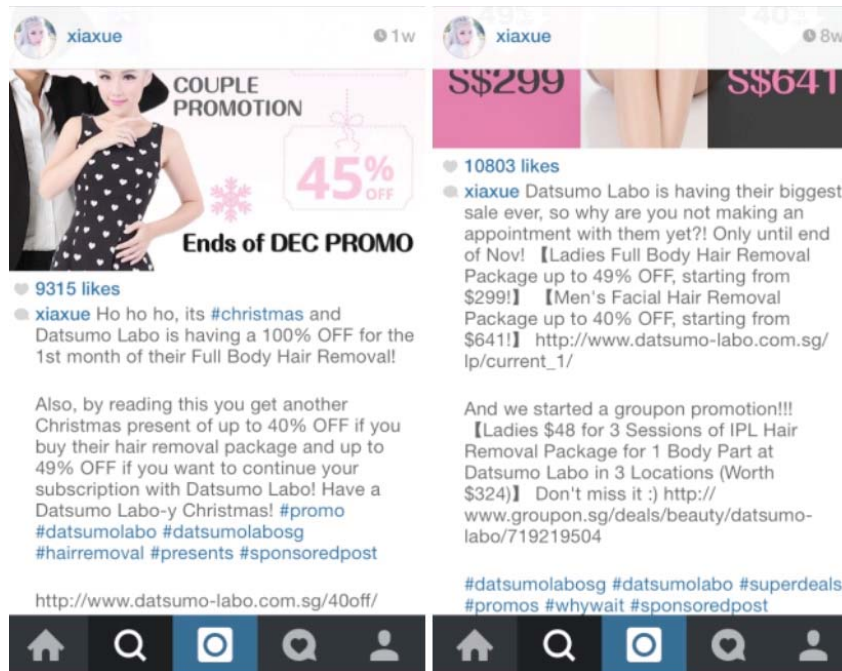


Figure 7. 11

In contrast, @sophiewillocq says in the caption that the products featured are “c/o” (Figure 7.12) a company, which is short for “courtesy of”:

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Figure 7.12

### Multi-influencer campaigns

Multi-influencer campaigns are when a select group of Influencers from a company are tasked to promote a brand or product on their individual Instagram streams within a designated period of time. Nuffnang Influencers @sophiewillocq and @bongqiuquiu have advertised for a company that sells smartphone casings, “@covermybagel”. In the same week, both Influencers post a group selfie of the both of them and a third male Influencer, although the photos are two different versions with slightly altered poses (Figure 7.13, images 1 & 2). The selfies show the Influencers using the exact same cartoon phone casing, which is clearly the focus of the photo. A few days later, @bongqiuquiu’s Instagram image was reposted on the company @covermybagel’s Instagram account (Figure 7.13, image 3), with an altered caption, followed by an additional selfie of the Influencer featuring the product again (Figure 7.13, image 4):

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Figure 7. 13 (L-R: Images 1, 2, 3, 4)

There are two advantages to this approach. Firstly, each Influencer is given the artistic freedom to design and personalize their Instagram ads in the aesthetic that would most appeal to their followers. To illustrate this, Influencers from a different company, Gushcloud, are seen promoting various products from Samsung. Instagram images (Figures 7.14 & 7.15) of @lucindazhou, @jolenezhou, @junyingdiva, @tippytoes, and @joannalhs featuring a variety of Samsung gadgets were posted across the span of seven weeks, all bearing campaign hashtags “#SamsungS5LTE” or “#SamsungGear2”:

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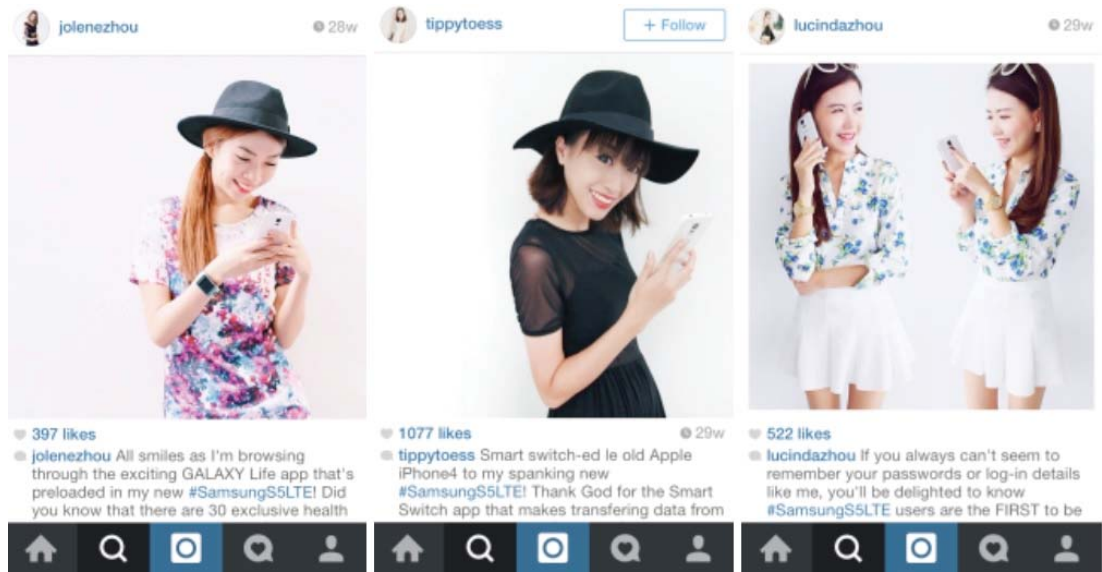


Figure 7. 14



Figure 7. 15

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In this case, each Influencer only has to post one Instagram ad and include a campaign hashtag. The campaign hashtag in turn redirects their followers to variations of the same ad published by other Influencers on Instagram. Samsung's #SAMSUNG5LTE marketed by the Influencers above reveals a hashtag stream (Figure 7.16) featuring engaged Influencers, as well as several everyday users photographed using their Samsung products:



Figure 7. 16

The second advantage is that the ad campaign is likely to remain in the imaginary of Instagram followers for a longer period of time. Since followers of Influencers are likely to follow those within the same genre, social group, or clique, these Instagram ads have the propensity to show up on followers' feeds prominently and repeatedly over the designated campaign period, unlike one-off advertorials. This strategy is also known in the industry as a "campaign blast".

For example, Influencers involved in the #someonelikeme campaign promoting safe sex practices published images of themselves holding up products from condom brand Durex, or white paper sheets with snippets of their thoughts on safe sex (Figure 7.17). These #someonelikemesg cardboard snippets adopted the style of a confession with the following text:



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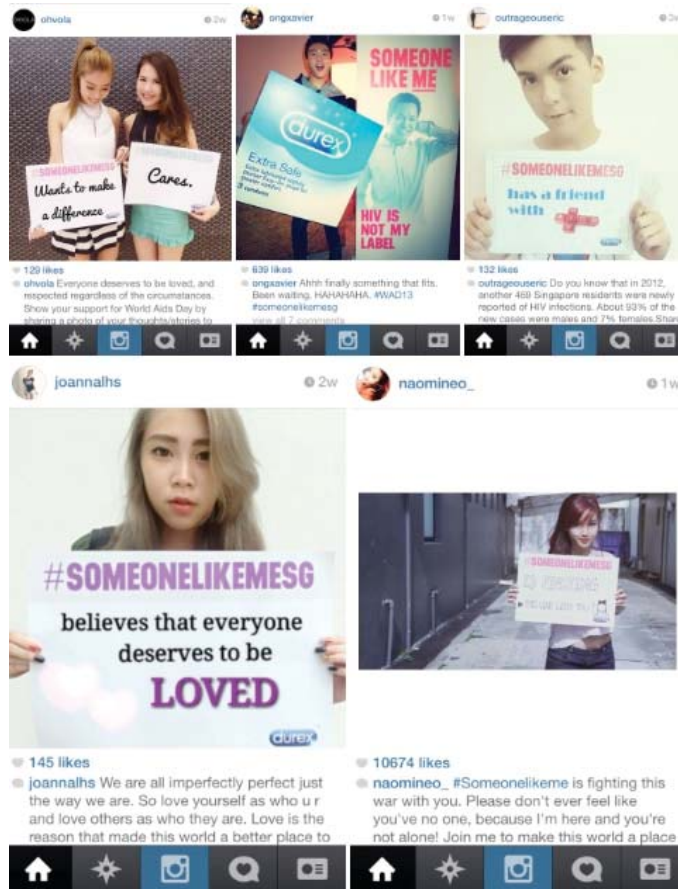


Figure 7.17

The hashtag stream (Figure 7.18) also features everyday users who were invited to document their experience or thoughts on the campaign:

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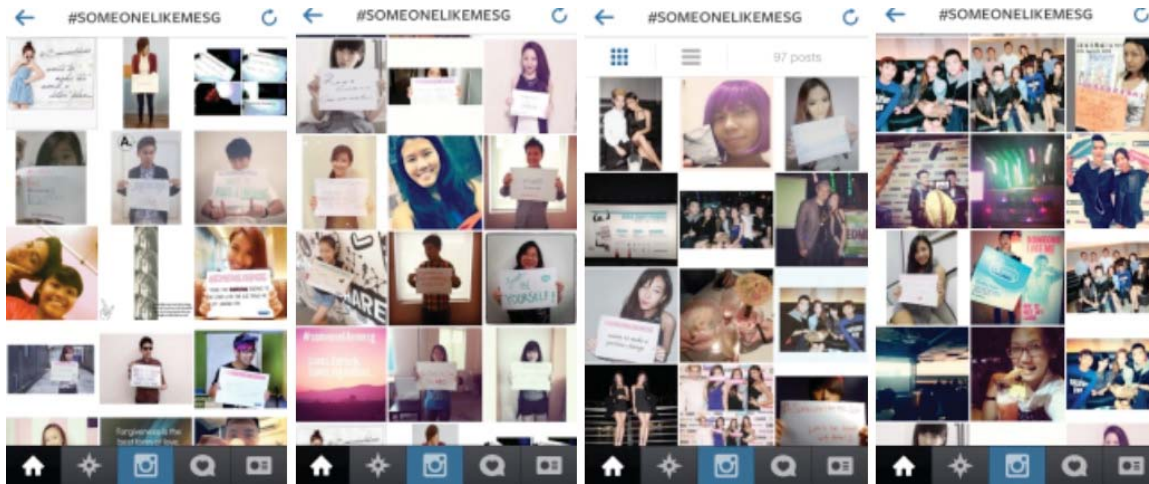


Figure 7. 18

*Shout outs and tags*

Influencers often receive freebies or exclusive services and experiences in exchange for “shout outs”. Shout outs are public thanks and acknowledgements that indirectly bring exposure to the party mentioned. Monetary compensation may or may not be involved depending on the contract negotiated. For Influencers, these credits may come in many forms. The first of these is the sponsor’s Instagram handle. An image from @bongquiqui (Figure 7.19, left) displays an array of sweet desserts with sponsors acknowledged, while one from @melissackoh (Figure 7.19, right) shows her partner and herself locked in embrace and kissing at the airport being photographed by the mentioned sponsor, “@multifolds”:

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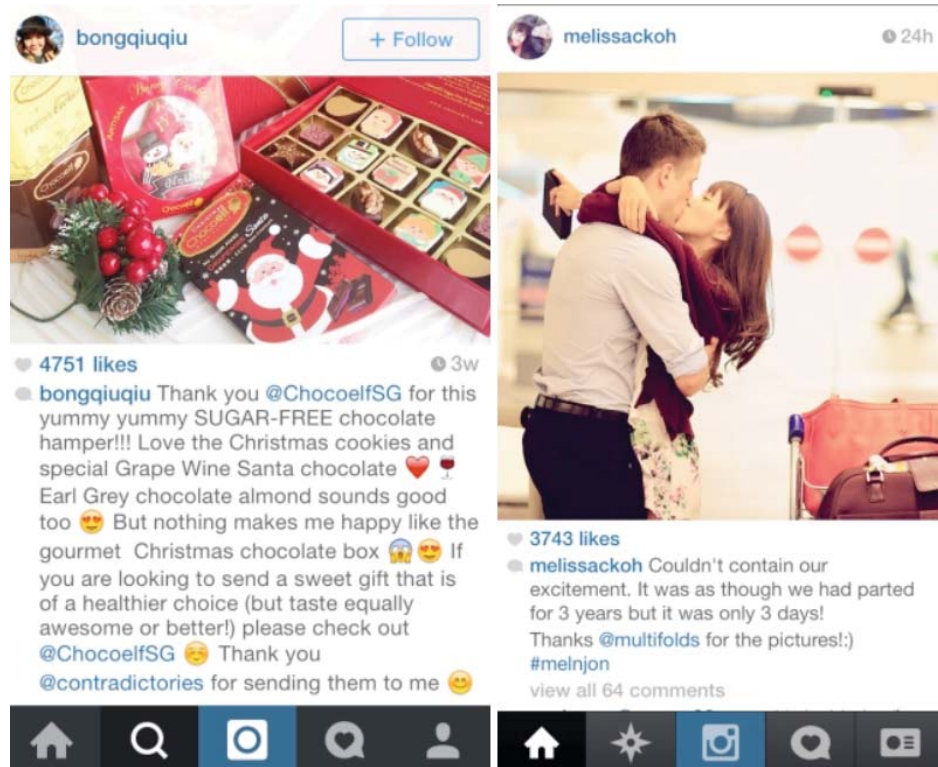


Figure 7. 19

The second type features a brand’s official hashtag. This could be in the form of a hashtag for a specific campaign, as seen in the “#SamsungS5LTE” (Figure 7.14 & 7.15) example earlier, or a brand’s hashtag as seen in @beatricesays’ image of a box of four cupcakes from “#bakinginthewoods” (Figure 7.20, left), or @jaynetham’s box of “#converse” shoes (Figure 7.20, right):

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Figure 7. 20

A third type is when the Influencer tags the brand's official Instagram account as a user in their image. For instance, @joannalhs' image (Figure 7.21, left) of her and fellow Influencer @junyingdiva lying on a sofa is user-tagged "@junyingdiva", their social media management company "@gushcloud\_sg", their travel sponsor "@klm", and their accommodation sponsor "@airbnb". Her second image (Figure 7.21, right) reveals @joannalhs exercising at "@amorefitnesssg" gym. This method of tagging is the cleanest or least crowded of the three, since Instagram users have to tap on the image for the tags to be revealed. The purpose of these tags is to subtly redirect follower traffic to the sponsors' Instagram feeds:

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Figure 7.21

*Relative others*

Some Influencers attempt to naturalize their ads by composing their post as if recounting a family event. With reference to a child, parent, or partner, they may muse or quip about a product being used or an experience being shared.

@bongqiuqiu often posts personal, non-sponsored pictures of her niece (who has her own hashtag, #HeYurou, on Twitter and Instagram) engaging in daily mundane activities. However, this is at times interspersed with commercial pictures of her niece holding on to products. At first glance, this might seem like any other adorable toddler picture the Influencer often posts. However, reading the caption with sponsor hashtags, tags, and campaign information reveals these to be sponsored advertorial posts. For instance, one image (Figure 7.22, left) is of her niece holding on to and staring at a burger. When read in tandem with @bongqiuqiu's numerous other KFC-related posts that adopt the same tone, it

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becomes clear that this is a sponsored post. Other similar advertorials include #HeYurou holding up DVDs from “#MyLittlePony” (Figure 7.22, center) and a shopping bag of presumably sponsored clothing from “#MangoKidsSG” (Figure 7.22, right):

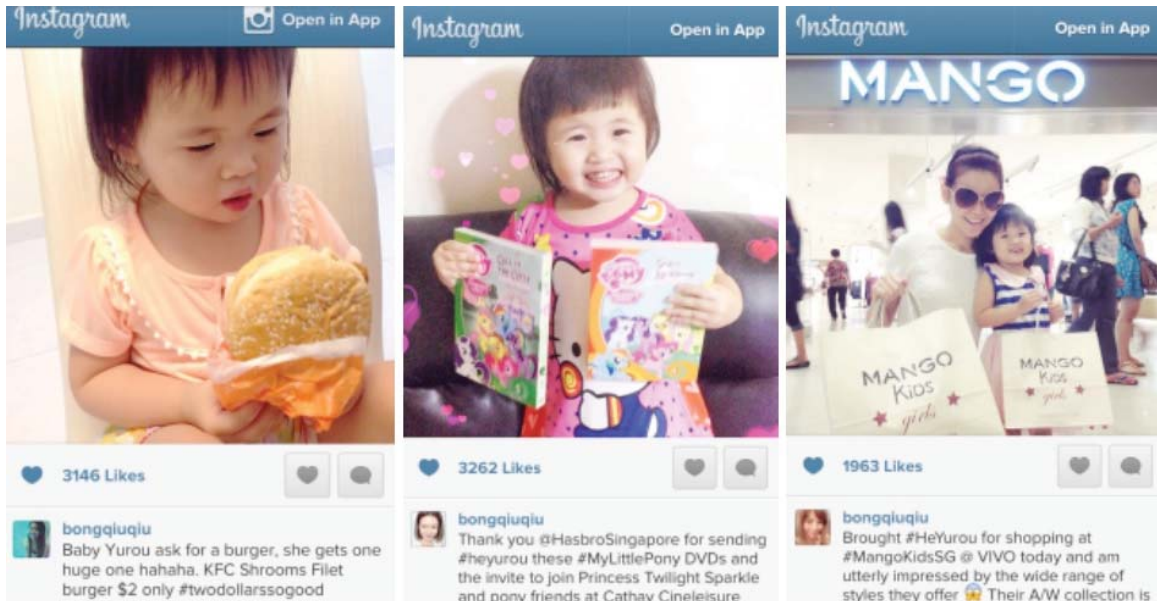


Figure 7. 22

In the same manner, @beatricesays usually gives followers small insights into her family life, such as her plans for festive occasions or events like birthdays and Mother’s Day. Some of these include recouting her “girls’ day out” to spas, eateries, and retail boutiques with her mother. However, some of these posts, while naturalized into diary-speak, are in fact sponsored posts, as evidenced by the content of the caption. In order for these not to come off as being too “hard sell”, this Influencer is seen spreading out her campaign posts across two months or so. A set of three Instagram images (Figure 7.23) depicts items from luxury brand, “Coach” and includes a combination of a user tag “@coach”, their official hashtag “#coachsg”, their campaign hashtags “#lovefromnewyork”, “#coachnewyorkstories”, and “#whatsinyourborough”, and/or a geotag of their

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physical store, “Coach”. @beatricesays uses three captions that attempt to insert her mother into the narrative for a more naturalized aesthetic:

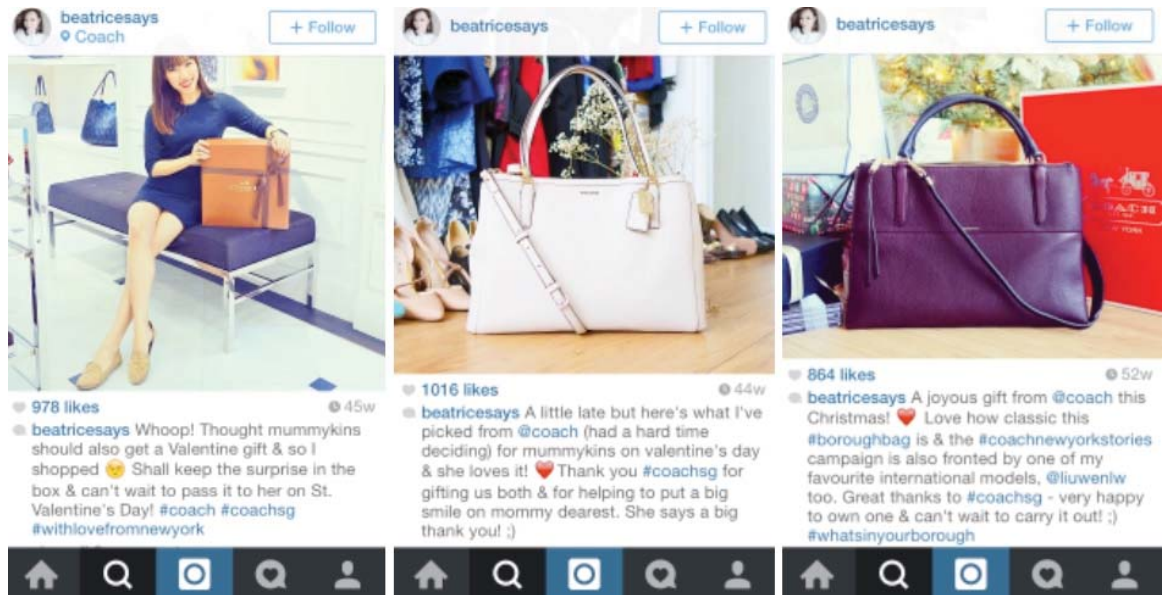


Figure 7.23

Both @belluspuera and @jaynetham are newly married Influencers whose relationships and weddings were catalogued on social media across several platforms. They have been known to muse about married life as young 20-something-year-old women. Both have also referenced their husbands in their “naturalized” Instagram posts. @belluspuera’s recount comes in the form of recommendations to followers regarding home appliances. She posted an image (Figure 7.24) of an air filter positioned in the corner of a room with miscellaneous ornamental paraphernalia. In another example, @jaynetham appears to hashtag and promote the “Christmas gift” from her husband. Her picture (Figure 7.25) of a Samsung smartphone featured a wallpaper of the couple, seemingly to emphasize the narrative of coupling and gifting over the probable sponsorship arrangement:

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Figure 7. 24



Figure 7. 25



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*Lifestyle showcase*

At times, a single Influencer may be engaged for a long-term campaign over a designated period. This approach requires more persona curation and thought from Influencers since it is paramount that they maintain the congruence of their Influencer persona and the aesthetic of their Instagram feeds, while weaving in advertorials and discreet sponsor hashtags. One example of this “lifestyle showcase” is the @vaingloriousyou and the SK-II/Clozette campaign. This Influencer is known on Instagram for posting #OOTD (Outfit Of The Day) shots from her own online store #vygstore, including those of her hair and makeup. Seven images from this campaign are detailed below. While the last two posts (Figure 7.26, Images 6 & 7) make heavy references to the product, the first five posts (Figure 7.26, Images 1-5) engage followers with some of her personal thoughts or life mantras.

The first image (Figure 7.26, Image 1) is of the Influencer on a yacht at sea. The second image (Figure 7.26, Image 2) is of a full-length shot of the Influencer leaning against a wall, truncated from her chin up, clad in a long print dress. The hashtag “#warehouse” is likely to be the brand of the dress. The third image (Figure 7.26, Image 3) is a selfie of the Influencer in light makeup, but heavily drawn eyebrows and accentuated lashes. The fourth image (Figure 7.26, Image 4) does not feature the Influencer, but is a close-up of a painting of a garden. The fifth image<sup>26</sup> (Figure 7.26, Image 5) shows the Influencer in a clothing store, holding her

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<sup>26</sup> In this particular post, @vaingloriousyou appears to have made a continuity error with the hashtag by including a dash, as in “#SK-II”, unlike the others used earlier, “#SKII”. While the luxury beauty brand is officially typified as “SK-II”, a workable hashtag has to be a single compound word omitting the dash in order for the platform algorithms to register the letters as a single search term. Therefore, “SKII” is the preferred variation for hashtags.

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wallet and a shopping bag while appearing to stand in line, presumably at the cashier. The sixth image (Figure 7.26, Image 6) does not feature the Influencer, but instead focuses on a stylized arrangement of five SK-II products and their distinctive deep red packaging, laid out on a grey fur carpet. Finally, the last image (Figure 7.26, Image 7) is the only one of the lot that features the Influencer and the advertised product in the same frame. This is also the only image to contain only the two official brand hashtags, “#SKII” and “#clozette”, without the other earlier utilized, popular hashtags in “Instagram speak” that served to “naturalize” the Influencer’s sponsored posts.

In this last image (Figure 7.26, Image 7), @vaingloriousyou is pictured sitting across a small table from a lady in uniform, presumably a beauty therapist or consultant. The therapist is referring to a laptop and appears to be explaining something to the Influencer. The Influencer’s personal artifacts, such as a camera, smartphone, notebook, and keychain, are placed on the desk, suggesting that this was a candid photograph of @vaingloriousyou “on the go”, as opposed to her other highly stylized and aesthetically staged images. However, it is likely that this “natural” framing was carefully calibrated to give the impression of “spontaneity”. Also on the desk is a small machine in SK-II’s signature deep red color, supposedly the device to which the Influencer refers in her caption:

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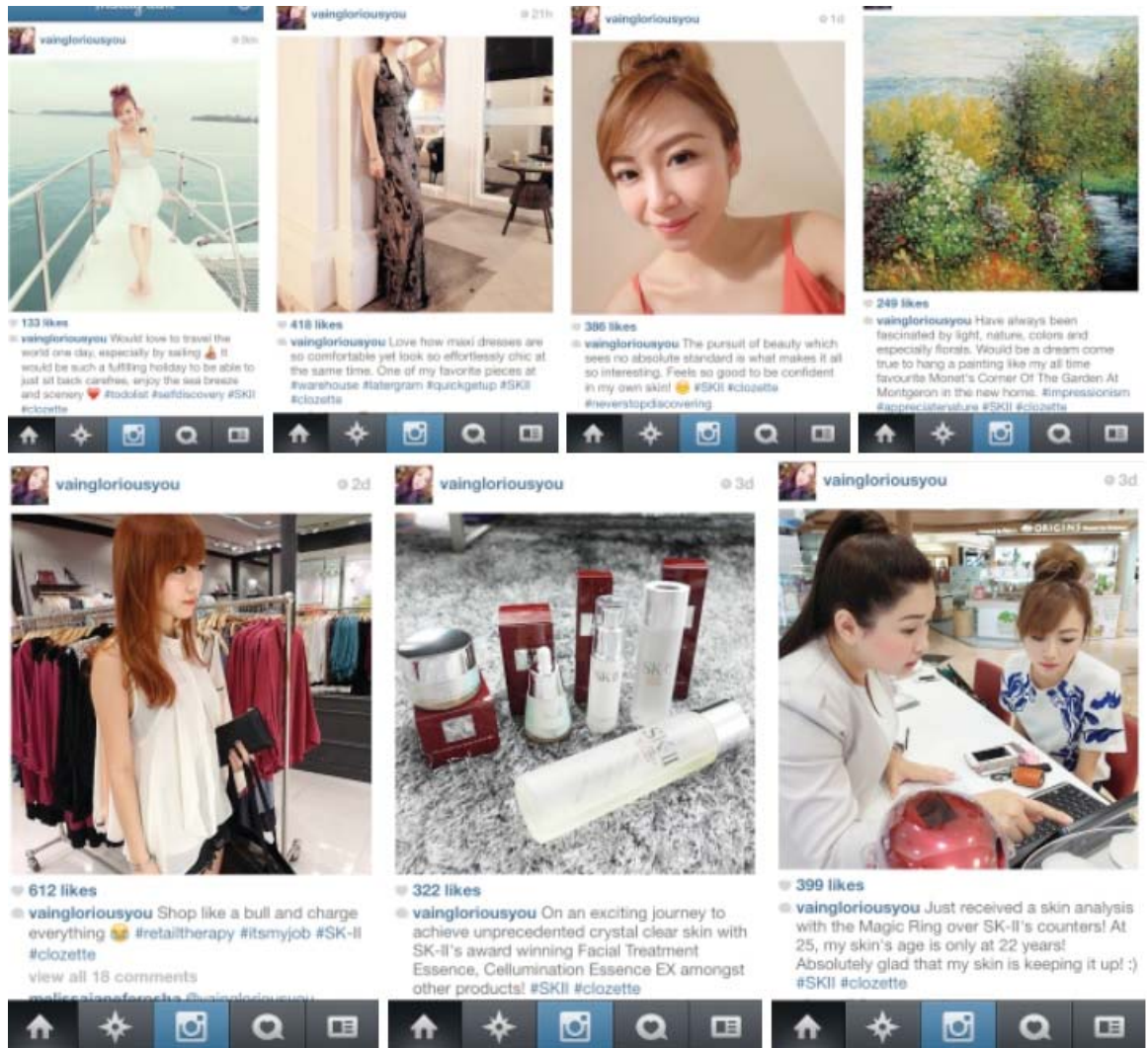


Figure 7. 26 (Top, L-R: Images 1, 2, 3, 4. Bottom, L-R: Images 5, 6, 7)

*“The Instagram aesthetic”*

Posting advertorials according to “the Instagram aesthetic” affords the most naturalized and subtle forms of advertising. This is because it is often difficult to tell if the post is sponsored or merely in theme with the Influencer’s social media personae, unless one has a keen eye or is willing to conscientiously draw out patterns in the Influencer’s posting habits. There are several popular styles in the

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Singaporean Instagram landscape. “Selfies” featuring close-ups of one’s makeup or lashes are one such example, along with professional photography “couple shoots” of Influencers and their partners. While these couple shoots used to be in commemoration of weddings, engagements, or dating anniversaries, in recent years they have become commonplace, with a rising number of Influencers receiving sponsored photo shoots from professional photographers. There are six other popular styles of “the Instagram aesthetic” in Singapore, and these are used to naturalize advertorials.

Firstly, the OOTD is when Influencers post snapshots of the ensemble they have put together. While the acronym suggests that these captures are taken daily to document one’s dressing, many Influencers have been known to organize photography sessions to document several different OOTDs at once before queuing the posts and selectively publishing them over the ensuing week or month. The convention for OOTDs is also to state the labels that one is wearing. Some OOTD fashionistas may also publish the price of the individual pieces of apparel for the convenience of followers who wish to make a similar purchase.

@ongxavier is an Influencer who frequently publishes OOTDs. In many of his Instagram posts (Figure 7.27), a tap on the image reveals some of the sponsors whose apparel he is wearing. However, not every piece of apparel is tagged with a brand name, suggesting that only the sponsored items are given publicity to his followers:

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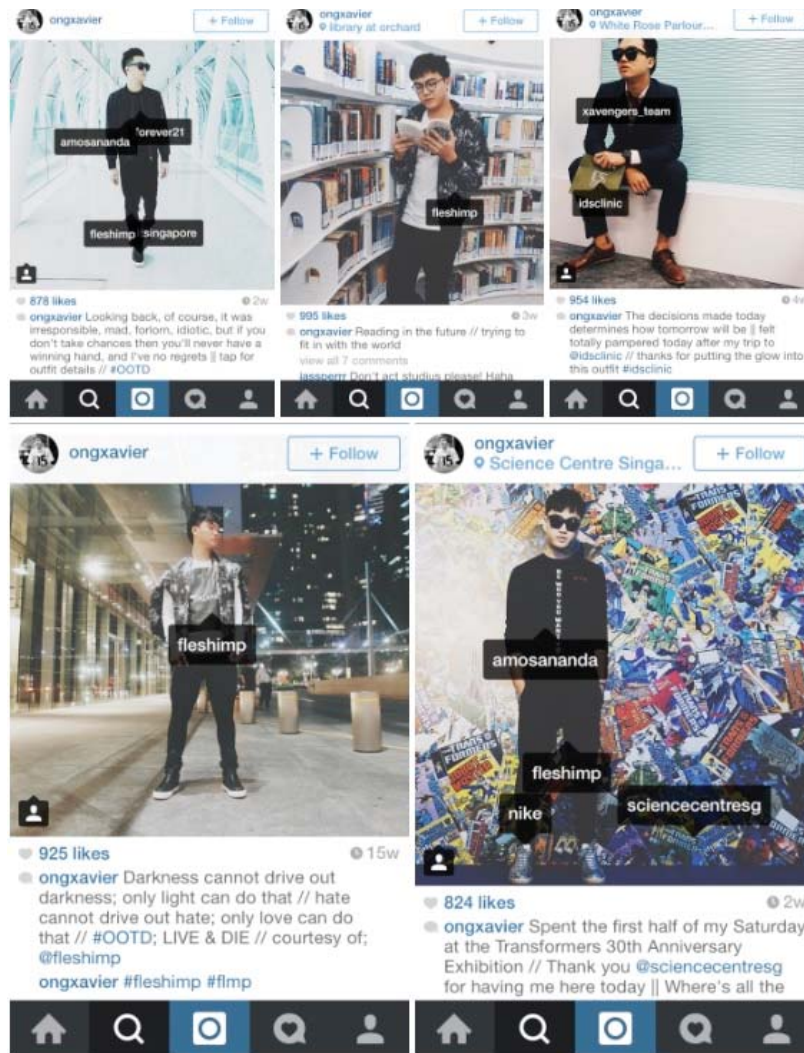


Figure 7.27

Secondly, the flatlay is a variation of the OOTD; instead of photographing the outfit when worn, the Influencer lays the pieces of her or his ensemble on a flat surface to be photographed (Figure 7.28). Similar to @ongxavier's OOTD tags, @beatricesays only tags selected pieces of her ensemble – presumably the items that are sponsored and deserving publicity. Flatlays are slightly less cumbersome to prepare in that the Influencer does not actually have to put on the outfit and scout for a presentable background at which to be photographed:

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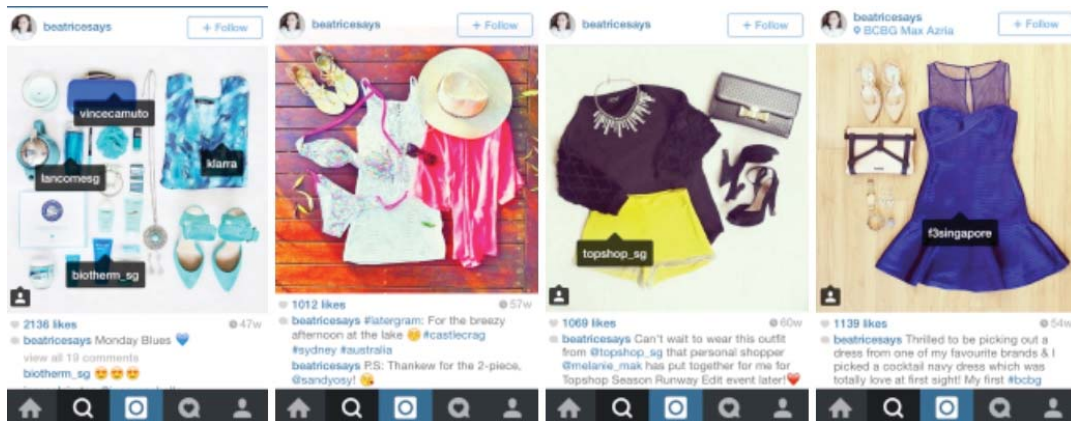


Figure 7.28

Thirdly, a fashion spotlight is when Influencers usually feature one fashion accessory of which they are fond. For instance, some popular Influencers are known to showcase their impressive collection of luxury handbags, while others display jewelry, caps, or dresses. @jaynetham is an Influencer who regularly posts close-ups of her shoes (Figure 7.29). However, in many of these posts spread out over months, she is observed to be tagging the same shoe company, “@pvs\_sg”. Read in tandem with sparsely flattering captions and the occasional post that redirects followers to the same company’s events and sales, this collection of posts is probably sponsored by the company tagged. Since the Influencer also posts (untagged) images of other shoes from her personal collection, it is not always obvious to her followers that some of these fashion spotlights are ads. In addition, unless the caption is earmarked with obvious discount codes or promotional material, it is often ambiguous whether the Influencer is simply showing off the label of her apparel (similar to that of the OOTD and flatlay) or advertising for a brand. This approach is effective, since followers are unlikely to notice the commercial activity and perceive her feed as being “hard sell”:

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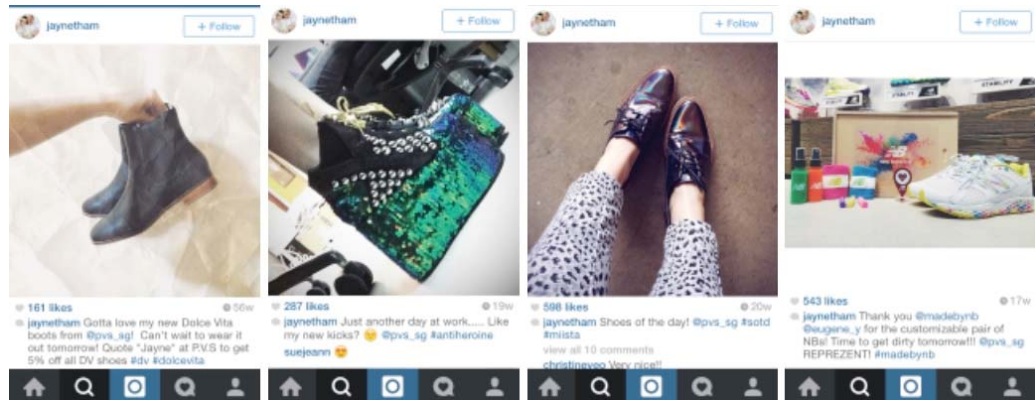


Figure 7. 29

Fourthly, makeup shots are a variation of the fashion spotlight, except that the focus is on one’s collection of cosmetics (Figure 7.30). Again, since only some of these labels are named, and even fewer are named via hashtag or an Instagram handle to redirect follower traffic to sponsors, it is difficult to determine personal “beauty” posts from sponsored ones. At times, these beauty posts may be presented in a flatlay, or as a DIY/makeup tutorial with instructions:

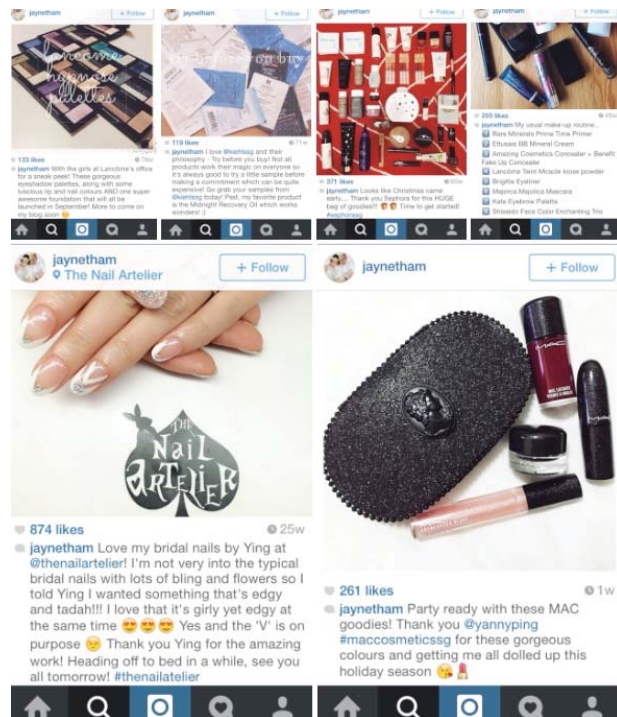


Figure 7. 30

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Fifthly, images of partygoers are also popular on Instagram. Be it behind-the-scenes of dressing up, pre-party drinks, party mischief, or post-party recoups, these images are especially rampant during festive periods. For example, a collection of four Instagram shots (Figure 7.31) depicts @naomineo\_ at (presumably) four different parties, judging by her different outfits. Her captions are unrelated to and make little allusion to the sponsor or advertiser, save for a consistent hashtag “#GrantsWhiskeySG”. These photographs also do not reveal any overt sponsor logo or event in the background. In addition, these posts are spread out over a week, and there are no specific products being featured. All these come together to constitute subtle advertising:

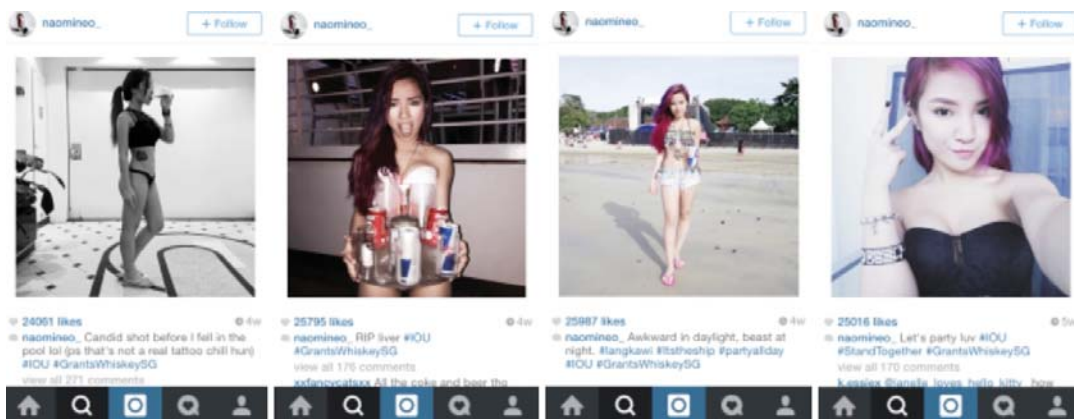


Figure 7. 31

Lastly, café hopping is among the post popular styles in “the Instagram aesthetic”. In Singapore, the rising popularity of café hopping photography came about when brunch grew to become a trendy weekend past time among young adults. News outlets have reported over 200 new cafés in 2014 alone, with “listicles” (articles structured in the form of lists, recently popularized by content-aggregate and viral websites) and “best of” countdowns being common blog fodder among Influencers. That café hopping is a middle-class privilege afforded to those with spending power – such eat-ins do not come cheap – alludes to the classed “leisurely”



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aesthetic and curation of taste (Goffman 1956; Veblen 1961) among young adults on Instagram in Singapore.

In the following collection of three images, @beatricesays mentions the local café, “Strangers’ Reunion” in hashtags, user tags, and geolocation tags. Apart from the first image (Figure 7.32, left) that overtly promotes the café, the other two images (Figure 7.32, center & right) situate the brand more subtly. The first image (Figure 7.32, left) is of @beatricesays holding up a takeaway mug of coffee in the office of her webstore. In the caption, she overtly thanks the café for sponsoring “specially crafted... gourmet coffee freshly brewed” for her guests. The second image (Figure 7.32, center) is of a careful arrangement of items, including a laptop, headphones, notebook, briefcase, and plated food on a desk. It is geotagged “Strangers’ Reunion” and suggests that the Influencer was using the café as a transient workspace. The third image (Figure 7.32, right) is focused on her brunch – a plate of waffles – and features a small table card with the brand’s name and logo on it. @beatricesays spreads these posts out across two months or so, and integrates “@mentions”, “name drops”, and “shout outs” to the brand into her usual Instagram routine, as opposed to placing it as the prime feature of her Instagram post. As such, the advertising intent is once again obscured and tailored to be more appealing to her Instagram followers:

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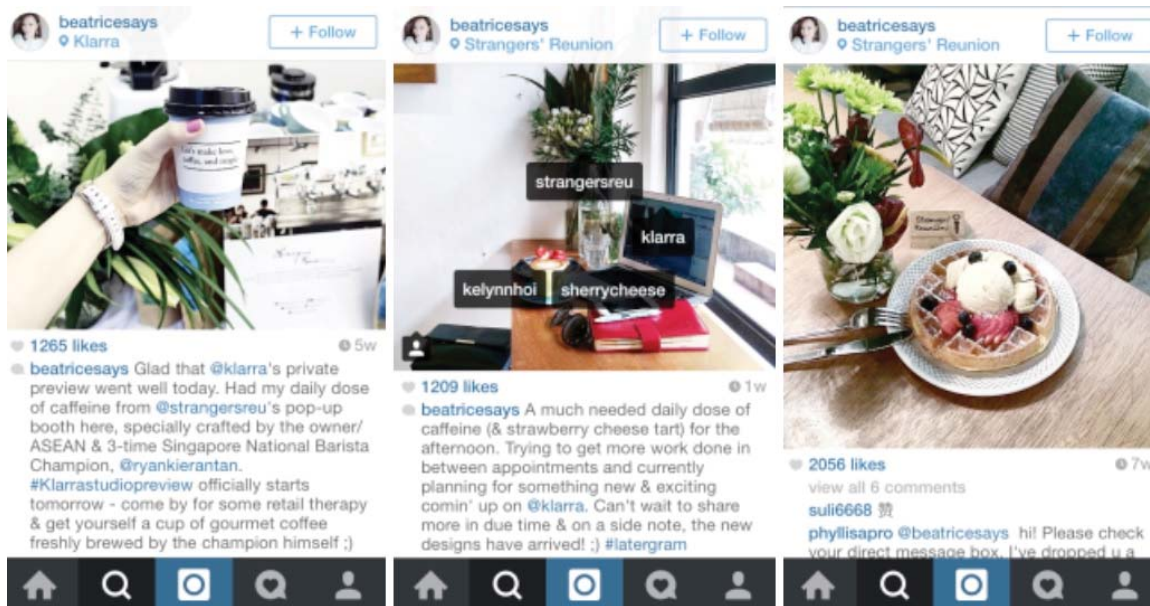


Figure 7. 32

## Influencer managers as intermediaries of taste and relatability

Unless specified by the client, in most instances it is the managers and agencies that make sales pitches recommending appropriate Influencers for potential advertorials. Although the Influencers on whom I focus in this research are those in the lifestyle genre, they all personalize and subtly mark their personae with different performances of taste curation (Veblen 1961). Hence, by filtering potential Influencers for advertorial campaigns, managers and agencies are, in effect, intermediaries and co-producers of Influencers' performances of taste and authenticity. In addition, Influencer managers are often deeply engaged in shaping campaign briefs and advertorial angles for clients, thus adding another layer of taste filtering.

Throughout my fieldwork, I witnessed several Influencer managers from various agencies speak to potential clients at events or pitch to them on the phone. A recurring request from clients is for Influencers to conduct Instagram "blasts", or a

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series of back-to-back advertorial Instagram posts within a short period of time. For instance, one client even requested that an Influencer “rave about” and “promote” a product in her next five Instagram posts. The manager whom I was observing very coyly persuaded this client that the selected Influencer would “never do this kind of thing” because it was too “hard sell”, meaning the content would be over-saturated on the Influencer’s feed and lose followers’ interests. On several occasions, different managers have convinced clients that such “blasts” are not effective and even counter-productive for the brand, because Instagram followers find such a practice “annoying”, “spammy”, “hard sell”, and “unbelievable”. In fact, I witnessed managers expend much energy persuading clients that their intended campaigns were far from “believable”, would be perceived as “not real”, or “inauthentic”.

These clients, who were more well versed and familiar with advertising practices in traditional print and television media, often attempted to map their understandings of publicity and exposure onto Influencer commerce on social media, much to the dismay of managers brokering the campaign. Many of these clients had little awareness and understanding of the curation of aesthetics and affective labor that Influencers manage in order to produce an appealing and relatable Instagram post that would generate “likes”, “comments”, and positive publicity for the brand. At times, clients failed to understand the nuances of hashtag use, often requesting cumbersome, unattractive, and overtly commercial signposts that were incongruent with “the Instagram aesthetic”. There were also clients who felt Influencers’ Instagram posts were “too subtle”, “not obvious”, or “not direct” in conveying the advertorial product, whereas these qualities were often prized by managers who were grooming Influencers to be more “natural”, “authentic”, and “relatable”. It was up to the managers to convey the logic and praxis of Influencer commerce on social media to potential clients, who may not always immediately understand the importance of taste displays. In these instances, the responsibility often fell onto the managers and agencies to broker the fine details of taste displays while

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satisfying the client's demands, on the one hand, while retaining the Influencer's personae performance, on the other.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter showed how Influencers are able to curate taste and class among their followers, focusing on Instagram as the most popular social media platform in Singapore at the time of writing. I argued that through hyper-visible displays featuring the integrated consumption of high-end luxury and low-end discount goods, and through calibrating advertorial disclosures to emphasize the aesthetic value of an Instagram image over overtly commercial markers, Influencers balance emulation and aspiration in advocating a "perpetual transitional mobility". I defined perpetual transitional mobility as a gendered and classed social mobility that Influencers convey to followers by eliciting aspiration, affect, and envy, albeit one that is perpetually in transit and can never actually be attained in full, for there is no end-point to the excessive consumerism canvassed through Influencer lifestyles and personae. Part one, "Curating taste on Instagram", showed how Influencers use the social media platform to perform taste displays. Part two, "Knockoffs and authentic replicas", evaluated Influencers' conscientious integration of luxury and discount goods in order for the social mobility scripts they perform to be accessible to followers. Part three, "Calibrating taste and advertorial disclosure on Instagram", analyzed how Influencers signpost their advertorials on Instagram, while retaining taste displays in congruence with the hegemonic aesthetic of Instagram. The chapter closed with a brief discussion on the role of Influencer managers in being intermediaries of taste displays and relatability between Influencers and clients. Taste displays are almost always the most prominent visual feature of Influencers. However, much of the work in which they partake to secure the allegiance of followers and convince them to make purchasing decisions is often hidden from view, in the form of intimacy labor, which I discuss in the following chapter.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT: INTIMACY**

### **Technologies of Intimacy <333: Perceived Interconnectedness, Cyber-BFFs, and Laboring Sociality**

I once co-chaperoned three Influencers to a high-street fashion chain where they were tasked to offer fashion tips to customers, dress them up, and have them upload photographs in their outfits on Instagram with the brand's dedicated hashtag. About a hundred teens and young women (and a few teenage boys) flocked to the store to meet with their favorite Influencers in the flesh, who were of course the highlight of the event. At first, many of these followers stood around awkwardly, secretly snapping photographs of the Influencers from afar. The Influencers themselves seemed to feel rather out of place, having to approach followers who were star-struck and reluctant to "leave the pack" to be dressed up and photographed.

While maintaining her composure and smile, the youngest of the three Influencers, a 17-year-old, whispered to me a few times to say that she was "feeling so awkward" and "didn't know what to do". I decided to accompany her around the store as she approached prospective "models" to dress them. I figured that by being in close proximity to her, she could "save face" when followers turned her down as I would be there for her to "return to" and talk to. I also felt that by hyper-visibilitying my status as her chaperone, star-struck followers might feel more comfortable asking me to negotiate introductions to the Influencer, rather than having to approach her themselves.

Both hunches turned out to be true, and the 17-year-old was soon busily dressing customers and snapping selfies with them. She often addressed them with terms of endearment – "Hey babe, would you like me to dress you?", "Hi dear, thanks for

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coming!” – and continued to reciprocate these interactions on social media whenever followers Tweeted to her while still in the store. I had the privilege of witnessing various forms of intimacy and emotional labor (Hochschild 1979, 1983) that transpired with followers on social media and in the flesh, as well as the glimpses into the Influencer’s more unsure, vulnerable lapses that she was attempting to mask from her followers.

Drawing from this incident, this chapter focuses on the key tenet of intimacy, observing the intimacy labor in which Influencers engage in digital and physical spaces, and among followers, back-end actors, and fellow Influencers. This is important as the ability to maintain an impression of intimacy with others accords Influencers the appearance of being relatable and approachable.

## **Intimacy labor**

As noted earlier, in her book, *The Commercialization of Intimate Life* (2003), Hochschild describes three types of “emotion work”: cognitive, bodily, and expressive. Cognitive emotion work is when we “change images, ideas, or thoughts” in order to alter our feelings; bodily emotion work is when we “change somatic or other physical symptoms of emotion” in order to alter our feelings; expressive emotion work is when we “change expressive gestures” in order to alter our feelings (Hochschild 2003: 96). Hochschild deems “work” as the effort in which one engages within private settings, such as the home or with family and friends, but “labor” as the work that is enacted in public settings, specifically in workspaces and usually for monetary compensation as part of the job. Later on (2012: 7), she updates her terminology, using “emotion labor” and “emotion management” to refer to the management of feelings when they are done in private with “use value”, and “emotional labor” when this management is “sold for a wage” and has “exchange value”. Hochschild defines “emotional labor” as “the management of feeling to

*Chapter eight: Intimacy**Technologies of Intimacy <333: Perceived Interconnectedness, Cyber-BFFs, and Laboring Sociality*

create a publicly observable facial and bodily display” (2012: 7), in which a person has to incite or quell different feelings and synchronize feelings and corporeal performances to remain agreeable to others.

In this chapter, I demonstrate the enactment of cognitive, bodily, and expressive emotion work as types of “emotional labor” that solicit intimacy with different groups of people, resulting in an impression of Influencers’ relatability, which can then be exchanged for a wage through advertorials; in other words, Influencers engage in the commodification of intimacy since their intimate displays are able to command market value (Constable 1999: 50). Since Influencers’ primary aim in engaging in emotional work and labor is to convey an impression of intimacy, I term their work “intimacy labor”. Additionally, I neglect Hochschild’s earlier dichotomy of “work” as private and unwaged and “labor” as public and waged because boundaries of the private/public and personal/commercial are often strategically indistinguishable in the Influencer industry, and because Influencers engage in hyper-visibility and commodifying aspects of their private lives as a form of expressive emotional labor (Hochschild 2003: 96) to appear relatable to followers.

Many scholars have studied intimacy enacted as business strategies, some among women. In her work on domestic labour and migration through marriage, Constable (2009) has underscored instances of the commodification of intimacy within marital relationships and the family. Hochschild’s (1983) work on staff in the service industry has similarly disclosed the enactment of intimacy in business exchanges. Gregg (2011: 3) examines the impact of online technology on contemporary work culture in which a “presence bleed” causes boundaries between professional and personal identities to break down and affective labour has to be renegotiated. Marwick & boyd’s (2011) study of celebrity practitioners on Twitter reveals that personal information is used to create a sense of intimacy with followers. Baym’s (2012) investigation of musicians and their social media audiences revealed that

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musicians saw their fans as equals and derived genuine interpersonal rewards from the intimacies exchanged online. Similar communicative intimacies play out among Influencers and followers in Singapore as a form of “bounded authenticity” (Bernstein 2007a, 2007b), among whom “intimacy” is emically understood as how familiar and close followers feel to an Influencer. However, I follow Zelizer (2005: 16-17), who argues that “truly intimate relationships” do not necessarily have to be premised on “authentic expressions of feeling”. Zelizer (2005: 17) argues that feelings can fluctuate depending on the “interpersonal relationship” being negotiated, and have the propensity to develop into obligatory services when routinized over time, as is evident later in this chapter where I show how Influencers maintain impressions of intimacy with followers. This is also supported by Shouse’s (2005) definitions of “emotions” as social projections and displays of feelings, as opposed to “affects” that are more embodied, less controlled, and less self-conscious.

The allure of Influencers is premised on the ways they engage with their followers to give the impression of exclusive, intimate exchange. Generally, Influencers in the lifestyle genre write about their lives “as lived” as the central theme of their output, unlike Influencers in other genres, such as parenting, fashion, or food, who focus exclusively on a streamlined thematic interest that does not have to intimately relate to their personal, private lives as much as Influencers have to. That is, while these themed bloggers focus on specific categories as commodities, Influencers commoditize their personal lifestyles for display. Like Constable (2009) focused on conjugal relationships and domestic labour, and Hochschild (1983) on customer service, I assert that Influencers practice a feminine labor that hinges on commercial intimacies, albeit one that focuses on homosocial friendships and advertorial advertising.



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Influencers appear to be critically aware of the latent profit-oriented motivations behind their interactions, but like the informants in Baym's (2012) study of musicians and their social media audiences, attest to benefitting from the commercial intimacy on some level. Influencer Marianne, who was contemplating a "dramatic post" about her breakup, admits that while she is enthused by the potential increase in follower traffic from her controversial post, she would also genuinely be benefitting from emotional support from her followers:

...so obviously [blogging about a] breakup will surely get [my blog] many hits... because people are curious what... and [they] like to gossip... but some readers will surely leave nice comments to, you know, cheer me up... and I'll be lying if I say [their comments] don't make me feel good, right?

Influencer Tina, who frequently travels for work, enjoys the companionship from her followers:

... I mean, it's nice to read comments from reader[s]... you can tell some of them really put in a lot of effort... and like when I travel and I'm alone in the hotel... I feel supported... when I read and reply...

On a more practical level, Influencer Brittany, who has been blogging since 2005, acknowledges her followers' contributions towards improving her Influencer practice:

Some of my readers have been with me for very long... they are very sweet, they will say, oh maybe you can blog more about this... or maybe you can improve on this...

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As evidenced, Influencers' communicative intimacy can sincerely engender personal attachments despite being motivated by "underlying commercial interests" (Abidin & Thompson 2012: 472), and are certainly not clearly marked as "counterfeit intimac[ies]" (Barton 2007). For this reason, I do not interpret Influencers' communicative practices as forms of "phatic communion", in which communication is established *primarily* for companionship (Malinowski 2004: 250, emphasis mine), since all forms of interaction are ultimately intended to foster the impression of relatability through which Influencers can market ideas or products. At best, Influencers perform a commercially oriented form of "phatic communion" with the ultimate aim of being able to derive value from the relationship. Instead, this chapter is focused on the performance and enactment of intimacy gestures as a strategy for Influencers to appear relatable to followers.

This chapter comprises three sections. Part one draws on "Parasocial relations" to show how Influencers establish a structure of communicative intimacy with followers, premised on selective disclosure and the strategic use of social media semiotics. Part two reports on the under-visibility of emotional and intimacy labor in which Influencers engage behind-the-scenes between digital and physical spaces, and how these contradictions and constraints are managed for sustenance in the industry. Part three captures how Influencers practice intimacy displays and experience tensions in their relationships with technology, followers, competitors, and back-end actors. The chapter argues that through the visibility of usually obscured front-end and back-end emotional labor, Influencers toggle between displays of the personal and the commercial in order to elicit affect and desire among their followers.

## **Part I – Perceived Interconnectedness: Negotiating intimacies in the digital**

As premised in chapter one, Influencers are one form of microcelebrity. Unlike mainstream celebrity practitioners (Marwick & boyd 2011), who still convey a sense of distance and hierarchy with their Twitter fans, Influencers in Singapore are highly responsive and communicate reciprocal intimacies with their followers. In *Camgirls*, Senft (2008: 116) foregrounds microcelebrity as “responsiveness to, rather than distancing from, one’s community” (2008: 116), much in the way that these Influencers maintain open channels of feedback on social media to engage with their following, and accede to the imagery and intimacy expected of the Influencer. In addition, microcelebrity involves the curation of a persona that feels “authentic” to followers (Marwick 2013: 114), having conscientiously to maintain their relationships with online fans (2013: 115). Rojek (2001: 52) uses “second order intimacy” to describe intimacy and social relations mediated through mass media, but without the direct experience of meeting someone in the flesh. In digital spaces, Influencers construct an adaptation of second order intimacy on social media by using selective disclosure (Marwick 2013: 207-208) and semiotic conventions to convey intimacy and construct value through systems of responsiveness.

### **Disclosure**

A key feature of Influencers is how they document the trivial and mundane aspects of everyday life (i.e. outfit of the day, #nomakeup selfies, close-ups of pimples and bad skin, gripes about housework) and how well Influencers can relate these to their followers in dialogue. In addition, Influencers engaged in official “glamorous” events may also run a parallel “behind-the-scenes” commentary disclosing “insider information” from the Influencer’s point of view. An example would be captures of

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Influencers in dressing rooms being dolled up by makeup artistes and hairdressers, or teasers of potential outfits soliciting followers' opinions. When juxtaposed against the exclusive and glamorous opportunities (e.g. interactions with public personalities and mainstream celebrities, high fashion shoots with expensive labels, previews and media screenings at events) in which Influencers engage, these "behind-the-scenes" portrayals of ordinary and relatable everyday life give followers the impression that they are privy to the private, usually inaccessible aspects of Influencers' lives. In other words, Influencers construct intimacy with followers through the "intentional dissemination" of presumably private information, rather than simply enabling passive access to this information on public platforms (Marwick 2013: 223-231).

Influencers are "more interesting than actors because they are perceived to represent commonality" (Danesi 2008: 225). Thus, unlike the flexible corporate workers in Gregg's (2011) study, who experience an invasive intimacy as an undesired consequence from working with online technologies, the Influencers in this study intentionally use digital media to craft, convey, and sustain intimacies with their followers. Unlike older media like fan magazines and behind-the-scenes entertainment news that are still largely managed by a production crew, published, edited, and distributed after a lag time, the posts put out by Influencers are more amateur and raw, and allow for immediate interactivity and response from followers. Stripped of bureaucratic negotiations and social distance, followers are able to view interactions with Influencers as more personal, direct, swift, and thus intimate (boyd 2006).

However, this is not to say that Influencers are engaging in full disclosure and have obliterated personal/commercial and public/private boundaries. Instead, Influencers aestheticize and package snippets of the personal "backstage" (Goffman 1956) to present the illusion of an intimate sharing (Marwick 2013: 119-121) (e.g. a carefully

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arranged “just got out of bed” selfie, a blogpost about a bad breakup in which only selective but highly emotive aspects are shared) to curate personae that appear intimate and relatable to followers (2013: 207-208) and whose personal stories resonate with watchful audiences among whom these narratives shape the Influencers’ “authority” as an “expert” who is “constantly judged and critiqued” (Friedman 2010: 200). The performance of intimacy displays from Influencers is therefore even more crucial, since their followers will engage in “viewing strategies” to assess the authenticity of Influencers’ narratives (Hill 2005), critique the blurring of Influencers’ personal and commercial material (Ouellette & Hay 101), and reciprocate intimate displays accordingly.

## **Semiotic intimacy and value**

### *Hashtags*

After contemplating the content and style of an Instagram or Twitter post, Influencers then plot to have these circulate as widely as possible through various practices. One of these is hashtagging, usually appropriated on Twitter and Instagram, and involves adding a hash sign before a word or short phrase allowing relevant posts to be searchable and filtered from the mass. Social media linguist, Zappavigna (2012: 1) terms such discourses “searchable talk”, wherein users tag their content in order to be discovered by other users with whom they can “bond around particular values”. Some of these are generic, such as “#foodporn” for meal shots and “#ootd” for outfit of the day shots, while others were event-specific or for exclusive groups, such as “#cadburySG” and “#gcweekends”. Blog posts are similarly tagged without the hash sign. Apart from expanding the reach of a post and encouraging readership to circulate among Influencers, hashtagging and tagging may also serve four other functions, that is, branding, bonding, hypervisibility, and “scene” connection.

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Hashtags can be used as a mark of product branding. Corporations that engage Influencers for advertorials usually arrange for them to hashtag their social media posts as a means to aggregate disparate posts published by multiple Influencers and to allow the public to follow the campaign. These include “#bb10makesitbetter” by Blackberry, “#sunsilkgoodtimes” by Sunsilk, and “#AddMomOnFacebook” by StarHub. Clicking on these hashtags enables users to view an archive of advertorials and publicity material posted by various Influencers (examples of these were discussed in chapter seven’s Instagram case study).

Hashtags may also be used as a means to bond with followers. Some Influencers occasionally encourage followers to interact with them via “shout outs” or “follow backs”. In the former, Influencers encourage followers to publicize their social media accounts in exchange for being mentioned by the Influencer in a post. In the latter, Influencers ask followers to induce their friends to follow the Influencer’s various social media accounts in exchange for being followed by the Influencer herself. Other Influencers request followers to hashtag their names on posts that they wish to share with them. A usual exchange is as follows:

#stephanieissexy! Repost and ten lucky followers will be mentioned!

Hey guys! Hashtag #huiminisfollowing! The five top posters will be followed back!

Anything you want me to see? Hashtag #limweiwei okay!

These publicity drives usually give Influencers a spike in their readership and followers in a short span of time. In addition to branding and bonding, hashtags

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accord Influencers to be hypervisibile within in-groups and mark their presence at an event.

It is also crucial to remain relevant and connected to what Influencers refer to as the “scene”, that is, the highlight and bustle of popular activity such as grand openings, parties, concerts, and other exclusive events. Exclusive event hashtags such as “#gcweekends” and “#Nuffnangis6” indicate the Influencer’s presence at these functions with fellow Influencers, in a bid to show followers that one is “at the right parties” and “mixing with the right people”. In order to effectively enact one’s presence at a scene, it is important to hashtag with immediacy throughout an event as a live record of an Influencer’s actions and thought trails (Reed 2005). This is especially so because most event hashtags become out-of-date very quickly after the occasion ends and the buzz of activity dies down. As a mark of what Influencers refer to in the vernacular as “Internet street cred” or virtual world reputation, hashtagging situates Influencers in the scene, places them in the ranks of popular others, and increases their visibility.

*Favs, Likes, RTs, @mentions, and tagging*

The affordances of social media enable “self-promotion on a wide scale” (Marwick 2013: 166) and are signified by the semiotics of “social media speak”. Most Influencers are likely to “favourite” (on Twitter) or “like” (on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube) comments from followers to signify their acknowledgement or appreciation. Others “retweet” (on Twitter) comments from followers on their feeds as a way to “forward a [message] through their network” (Nagarajan et al. 2010: 295). For instance, Influencer Natalie retweets every single Tweet from followers who mention her, even though these may number in the mid-hundreds on a daily basis. Other Influencers like Marianne usually express their acknowledgement and gratitude by “favouriting” or “liking” comments from followers instead of retweeting

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them into her own feed that is broadcast to her followers in order not to “clog up” their feeds.

A more prized form of feedback to followers is when Influencers respond and “@mention” their social media handles. These may be heartfelt replies or simple ones with smiley faces and heart shaped emoji (on Twitter and Instagram) expressing appreciation. This practice publicizes a follower’s handle to the Influencers’ hundreds of thousands of followers in a shout out, as an “amplified reference” for self-promotion (Zappavigna 2012: 35). Influencer Rena often begins or closes her blogposts with a brief shout out or thanks to followers who have written personal emails to her, while Influencer Brittany, who accedes to having selfies taken with followers who see her in public, regularly tells followers to upload and tag her in photographs so that she can thank them.

Some Influencers capitalize on each other’s exposure and follower base through mutual following on blogs and social media feeds to increase their visibility. Apart from group photographs, this visibility is also manifested when Influencers @mention each other on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, or when they put up hyperlinks to each others’ social media feeds, thus redirecting one’s followers to another Influencer’s pages. Senft reports that Andy Blunder terms this form of reputation system as the “ultimate commodity fetishism” or “the belief that human relationships within networks can be quantified as if they were material goods” (Senft 2008: 99), especially when “people collecting” is perceived as social currency.

As an act of reciprocity, mutual hyperlinking itself has become a system of digital gifting through which social relations between Influencers are illuminated (see also Komter 2007). Mutual tagging is a means to publicly document one’s presence among fellow Influencers at various events. As a visual variation of a narration of



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the self, being “seen” crafts Influencers’ digital personae, allowing them to constitute their membership and draw interpersonal relationships into these networks (Ochs & Caps 1996), thus elevating their social status and increasing their social capital in the industry.

*Subtweeting*

Subtweeting – short for subliminal Tweeting – is the practice of Tweeting about someone without explicitly @mentioning their Twitter handle, such that they do not receive direct notifications about the Tweets; it assumes that users “in the loop” have prior contextual knowledge such that they can decode the Tweet and recognize the issue/person at hand. Subtweeting among Influencers usually takes place during Influencer wars – short-lived but highly intense events in which Influencers engage in heated disputes with competitors through controversial claims in order to generate publicity for themselves (see chapter nine). This form of “relational aggression” is more popularly known as “frenemies” (Coyne et al. 2012). Popularized by the 2004 cult movie, *Mean Girls*, “frenemies” is a portmanteau of “friend” and “enemy”. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines this as “a person with whom one is friendly despite a fundamental dislike or rivalry” (OED 2015). Nevertheless, users who are able to decipher subtweets are often observed chiming in with cryptic emoticons/emoji or statements in the conversation stream, signifying their valuable “in-group” status to outsiders.

**From Parasocial Relations to Perceived Interconnectedness**

In describing Parasocial Relations, Horton & Wohl (1956) posit that television and radio personalities produce one-sided interpersonal connections and an illusion of intimacy with their audience through conversational small talk that appears informal, casual, and responsive. This is supported by media personalities who

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appear to mingle with their audience and give the impression of rapport through the use of media devices and theatrics. What the authors highlight is that Parasocial Relations enable the audience to cultivate an extensive knowledge of the television or radio personality, without any actual reciprocity involved. As evidenced, Influencers enact similar relations with followers through explicit displays of intimacy mediated on blogs and social media platforms, albeit utilising a different structural rubric. However, the model of Parasocial Relations is no longer congruent with the communicative structures afforded by social media platforms. Drawing on my ethnographic evaluations and Horton & Wohl's (1956) notion of Parasocial Relations, I describe a model of communication through which Influencers convey intimacies that I term Perceived Interconnectedness.

With the affordances of social media platforms, Influencers directly control their self-representation and interactions with followers by extending revelations into the backstage "behind the scenes" and the use of personal voice (boyd 2006; Lövheim 2010) to convey intimacy. The pace, quantity, and wide circulation of their social media posts among followers contribute to the impression that Influencers are constantly sharing aspects of their personal lives with followers. Moreover, it is the "relational aspects of [the] media experience" and exchange that form the crux of attraction of Influencers to followers (Cohen 2009: 224). Followers are often invited to interact with Influencers (i.e. "Ask me anything on this hashtag and I will compile an AMA video<sup>27</sup>!"), to contribute to the curation of Influencer content from informal polls (i.e. "Should I do part two of my Christmas holiday or blog about recent events first? Comment to let me know!") and to improve Influencer content through solicited feedback (i.e. sidebar polls on blogs). As earlier noted, the intimacies negotiated are impressions that are felt by followers as opposed to whether or not

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<sup>27</sup> Ask Me Anything video: A genre of vlogs proliferating on YouTube in which vloggers solicit and compile questions from viewers, and respond to them in the style of a talking head via a dedicated vlog.

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these intimacies are actually “authentic” or “genuine”. Hence, I use the modifier “perceived” (in contrast to “actual”) in branding the model of Perceived Interconnectedness.

In comparing Perceived Interconnectedness to Parasocial Relations, I look at seven distinguishing elements: medium (where communication takes place), primary strategy (how communication mainly is achieved), origin of strategy (who controls the primary strategy), organization of actors (how producers and audiences relate to each other), authority of dissemination (who controls communication), flow of dialogue (how communication runs between producers and audiences), and conversational structure (how communication is configured among producers and audiences). The primary distinctions between Parasocial Relations and Perceived Interconnectedness are tabulated as follows:

<b>Element</b>	<b>Parasocial Relations</b>	<b>Perceived Interconnectedness</b>
Medium	TV/radio technology	Social media platforms
Primary strategy	Theatrics	Intimacies
Origin of strategy	Constructed by producer	Co-constructed by producer and audience
Organization of actors	Hierarchical	Flat
Authority of dissemination	Broadcast	Interactive
Flow of dialogue	Unidirectional	Bi-directional
Conversational structure	One-to-many	One-to-many, One-to-one

**Table8. 1**

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Parasocial Relations are mediated via a more rigid infrastructure of TV/radio technology, which stimulates a hierarchical organisation of actors where TV/radio personalities control the discursive dialogue. The information disseminated is broadcast top-down, there is low reciprocity since viewers are unlikely to respond in a unidirectional flow of content, and the structure is one-to-many. Parasocial Relations are constructed on the back of the TV/radio personality at the production back-end, and are primarily dependent upon in theatrics to sustain themselves.

In contrast, Perceived Interconnectedness is mediated via the more democratic and equalising infrastructure of social media platforms, which stimulate a flat organisation of actors where Influencers and followers co-produce and shape the conversation. The information disseminated is interactive and malleable, given that there is high reciprocity in a bidirectional conversation that is simultaneously one-to-many (as when Influencers publish posts to hundreds of thousands of fans) and one-to-one (as when Influencers favourite, repost, or reply to individual responses from readers via Tweets, Instagram comments, blog replies, or personal emails). Perceived Interconnectedness is co-constructed (albeit not as equal partners) by Influencers and followers, and primarily engages in intimacy strategies to sustain itself. However, it should be noted that it is disproportionately the Influencer (and not the follower) who controls this Interconnectedness, and that the benefits are asymmetric, occurring mainly to the Influencer. My use of the modifier “Perceived” thus hints at the illusory quality of some of these elements.

## **Part II – Cyber-BFFs: Negotiating tensions in bridging digital and physical intimacies**

This section highlights Influencers’ everyday experiences, tensions, and stresses in enacting Perceived Interconnectedness as a form of intimacy labor. Although the

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disjuncture between Influencers' and followers' understanding and expectations of communicative norms and behavioral guides is evidenced in the discussions that follow, this is not to say that there are no embedded cultural norms or that the relationship is fragmented (cf. Lenhart 2005). Instead, these fluid transitions and progressions point to the dynamic flux in which specific cultural norms for this female lifestyle Influencer industry in Singapore are continuously negotiated and co-created between Influencer and follower (see also Abidin & Thompson 2012), given that the former's "relevance" and longevity in the industry are ultimately sustained by the latter's patronage. In other words, the Influencer's income depends on sustaining the illusion of intimacy with people with whom they may not normally associate and is, at best, precarious and dependent on their followers' interest.

In *Work's Intimacy*, Gregg (2011: 1) examines the impact of "online technology" on work life. She notes the consequences flexible work arrangements have on employees' personal lives, including our "sense of availability" (2011: 2) to attend to work in our personal space and time via "always-on devices" (2011: 6) that are mobile outside of the office. Gregg (2011: 2) terms this a "presence bleed of contemporary office culture, where firm boundaries between personal and professional identities no longer apply", which is a new form of affective labor to be negotiated (2011: 3).

Influencers are one example of what Gregg (2011: 5) terms "new media jobs" that "purposefully collapse the boundaries between work and play". However, unlike Gregg's flexible corporate workers for whom online technology meant to complement their work is disrupting their personal lives, Influencers are self-employed actors for whom online technology necessarily melds into their personal lives through "always-on devices" (2011: 6) that constantly visibilize their everyday lives and construct lifestyles. Unlike the tensions from blurring "personal" and

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“professional” identities experienced by Gregg’s informants, Influencers intentionally rely on skillfully blurring “personal” and “commercial” personae in order to convey relatability – and, indeed, a “sense of availability” (2011: 2) – to their followers. Although the type of online technology-incited intimacy labor in which Influencers engage is deliberate and curated, unlike the spillover effect felt by Gregg’s flexible corporate workers, as one type of “digital” flexible workers Influencers experience similar pressures.

In this section, I detail five markers of disorder Influencers identify to be interfering with their personal lives as a result of performing intimacy labor. It should be noted that in my interviews with followers, the very markers that Influencers felt disordered their lives are deemed by followers to be barometers of Influencer relatability. Many Influencers acknowledged that these markers are an inevitable consequence of successfully practicing the Perceived Interconnectedness crucial for relating to their followers and that they were small inconveniences that Influencers could choose to neglect or overlook. However, this does not discount the fact that the disorder Influencers experience from “presence bleed” (Gregg 2011: 2) manifests in tangible ways. The markers of disorder – immediacy, constancy, exclusivity, transparency, and service – were derived after a close coding of material from the personal interviews I had conducted.

### *Immediacy*

The most stressful tension Influencers experienced was that their followers often expected immediacy in their interactions (Morton 2001: 6). Although blog and social media publishing is asynchronous, that is, a non-instantaneous form of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), some earnest followers demand instant responses by spamming the “comments” section of their blogs and social

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media platforms or sending multiple email reminders. Influencers like Farrah express the impatience of such followers:

When I wake up the first thing I do is... I [switch] on the comp[uter] and I start work... Yes! Because if you don't reply by, let's say a day, right, you get complaints...

The reactions of Farrah's followers are apparent perhaps because conventions of immediacy imply undivided attention, as reflected by quick responses. Others took to tracking Influencers on their real time social media feeds, such as Twitter and Instagram, to seek immediate attention, and even track whether these Influencers were logged onto the Internet. Annabelle recounts the instances where "fussy readers" surveyed her Twitter feed and even tracked the time and pace of her response as evidence that she was "online but not replying" to them.

Apart from the pressure of feeling policed and having complaints from disgruntled followers accumulate publicly, Annabelle and Farrah also hinted that their quality of life has changed to meet the pressures for immediacy:

the thing is for blog industry I feel like people will require you to reply very promptly even on weekends so... there's no 'paid leave'

I feel very stress[ed] because sometimes even when I sleep... I haven't really wake up [sic], I see my phone... I start looking for new mails and things like that just in case...

As evidenced, the Influencers feel that the demands of immediacy infringe on their rest or recreational time. Despite largely communicating to followers via their asynchronous blogs and social media platforms, swift responses via email or

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comments are necessary to signal their diligence and attentiveness (Gregg 2011: 42) and placate followers.

### *Constancy*

While “immediacy” pointed to the expectation of a very short response time, “constancy” refers to the expectation that Influencers remain continuously logged on to the Internet (Baron 2008: 215) to correspond with followers “after hours”, and even 24/7. This often extends late into the night, with disgruntled followers being upset at the lack of response in the early hours of the morning. Elaine recounts:

... very high expectations, if they send us an email at night, even *late at night* and we don't respond, in the morning we would get multiple follow-up emails asking us why we haven't responded... but [the email] was sent at night!

There is a sense of timelessness (Greenfield 2005) on the Internet, where the concept of time is hazy and standard working hours do not seem to apply. Followers who are logged on around-the-clock expect that Influencers would be as well, since their businesses are based on the web, after all (Turkle 2008: 122). Perhaps considering their capacity to work from home or “on the go” with mobile technology, followers desire continuous interaction, reflecting this young generation's pursuit of incessant stimulation (Armstrong et al. 2000).

### *Exclusivity*

As noted in chapter two, on a single platform Influencers in Singapore may boast followers numbering between 7,000 and 500,000. This number increases multifold



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if individual Influencer's various social media platforms are to be combined<sup>28</sup>. This following usually comprises a significant portion of regional and international users, as is noted in the comments section of Influencers' social media feeds; followers based outside of Singapore tended to highlight a "shared history" (Cohen 2009: 227) to mark their loyalty and mentioned the region or country from which they hail to signify some level of exoticism:

Omg [name of Influencer]! I have been following you on Insta since you started! We love you in Italy!

... [name of Influencer] ☺ your Indon supporter here! I [have been] read[ing] your blog from when you were still not so famous, lol :P Plz follow back!...

Despite blogs and social media posts being a one-to-many broadcast, some followers interpret their interactions with Influencers as exclusive dyadic exchanges. Many Influencers report having followers "complain" about not having their question personally or directly answered, even if a response has already been published to a similar question asked by another follower. It seems the attraction is to command the attention and thus form a whole and exclusive, albeit short-lived, relationship with the Influencer at some point of time.

This is evident in instances where followers seem oblivious to the fact that they are but one of hundreds thousands of users relating to these Influencers daily and expect priority over other users. This echoes Lenhart's (2005: 102) work in that "[d]espite their one-to-many mode of distribution, [followers] are engaged within a one-to-one manner". This is a familiar plight for Elaine:

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<sup>28</sup> In Singapore, the digital platforms most utilized by Influencers are blogs (Blogger, LiveJournal, WordPress), AskFM, Facebook, Formspring, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and YouTube.

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There are some customers [who]... demand immediate attention, I don't think it occurs to them that we have many other customers to tend to and we may take some time to respond to them.

This sense of exclusivity is also reflected when followers expect to be distinctive and memorable to the Influencer. It is common for some to quote past interactions or a "history" with the Influencer in a bid to stand out and thus earn special treatment, perhaps in direct response to Influencers' successful portrayals of intimacy with their followers enacted through terms of endearment. These usually resound in terms of: length of followership ("I've been reading your blog for years!"); admiration of the Influencer ("You are so fashionable! I wish my life was like yours!"); public sightings ("I was the girl in the white top standing behind you at the road junction yesterday!"); and purchasing power ("I've been buying from every collection since you started!"). These remarks are widely found in the comments section of blogs, in personal emails, and on various social media feeds, often enacted as a social grooming strategy to mark a follower's extent of loyalty to the Influencer or degree of authenticity as a "follower".

*Transparency*

For some followers, interacting behind a screen encourages them to be less inhibited and enables a sense of liberation and comfort in this "backstage", where the feeling work and impression management that take place are made less privy to the public (Goffman 1956). Some followers even demand increasing transparency in the depth and breadth of topics covered by Influencers, thus pushing for a "collapse" between Influencers' "backstage" and "frontstage" personae. Unlike studies where anonymity is a key factor promoting user comfort that allows intimacy to develop over time (Joinson & Paine 2007), followers often

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disclose their physical and digital identities to Influencers in a bid to solicit favor and remain memorable, as detailed earlier.

As Belinda explains, followers' desire for more transparency is evident through demands for increasing levels of disclosure about Influencers' supposed "private", "unseen", "secret", or "personal" lives:

They will be very hungry for more... asking and checking back on your blog to find out things about you. Some followers just keep wanting to know more more...

This constant craving for more revelations has led some fervent followers to ask very specific questions about the more sensitive aspects of the Influencer's life, often appearing intrusive and invasive (Solove 2007). The most common of these pertain to relationships, friendships, and finances, where Influencers have often been scrutinized in detail. They recount the following as examples of such pervasive questioning:

how does [name of boyfriend] turn you on? What do you think of pre-marital sex? Since you moved in together... what do your parents think?

are you and [name of fellow Influencer] true friends? I think [name of another Influencer] likes her more than you. Is she fake... What's she like in real life?

how much you earn one ah? [name of boyfriend] pays for you? Why you never talk about your job. Can earn at least 3k?

Another way followers desire transparency is from their expectations of responsiveness and commitment from Influencers. While some offer aid, feedback,

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and suggestions, many post harsh critiques or criticism, expecting to solicit some reaction from the Influencers, as Elaine recounts:

Some will give us suggestions... sometimes very rude... and they will get offended like... “how come you never use my feedback”...

This expectation of a direct and positive response to their input reflects followers’ perception that Influencers ought be committed to them, and that Influencer personae are public entities in which followers feel they have a stake. As noted in Senft’s study of Camgirls (2008: 47-48), many followers act as “brand loyalists”, seeking to alter the image of their favourite Influencer rather than switching allegiance to another. Followers volunteer evaluations of Influencers’ physical appearances (“ohmygod shouldn’t you get a boob job? or a push-up?”), apparent emotional states (“urgh stop being so emo, stop acting so deep and troubled...”) and relationships (“oh please you think he really loves you?”). That these desires for transparency are highly personal and bluntly stated is a mark of how convincingly Influencers’ practice of Perceived Interconnectedness demonstrates their relatability.

In some extreme cases, Influencers receive “hate mail”, generally long, spiteful rants from disgruntled followers making personal attacks, who expect a reaction (see also chapter nine). Like many others, Belinda has encountered such followers:

They’re really, really mean, super mean... fat they complain I’m fat, skinny they complain I’m skinny... then they complain that I don’t look Eurasian enough, I must be lying...

As evidenced, the ways in which followers attempt to solicit more and more elusive and exclusive information about Influencers reveal their unending quest to break

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into the latter's personal and private "circuit". The ways in which they pressure Influencers to be committed and respond directly to all their requests underscore their intrusiveness.

*Service*

Although Influencers are untrained, self-taught individuals writing about their individual lives, followers are constantly making requests for bloggers to share knowledge (Chai & Kim 2010) beyond the scope of their capabilities. Influencers lamented to me about being approached as if they were "professional advisors", "relationship counselors", or "psychologists". Several Influencers also alluded to feeling like "search engines" (i.e. "I feel like telling them I am not Google. Go and Google yourself *lah*.") or "God" (i.e. "I'm also not God... how do you expect me to [know all the] answer[s] right?") from the high number of assorted queries they receive from followers.

Many followers want to hear about exactly how the Influencers themselves would experience or manage situations, living vicariously through their blogs and social media platforms. Influencers Annabelle and Jean reveal respectively:

I will blog about the food and just give my casual remark... but they will say I have no appetite to eat when I see your [blog] and all... they really want very detailed info on the food... but I'm not expert...

They ask for relationship advice, but what works for me might not work for you. But they don't care... as if I am some qualified expert to tell them what to do... Then when it doesn't work... am I responsible?

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Influencers' projected accessibility and coverage on a wide range of topics give followers the impression that they are available to provide instruction and advice whenever necessary, and followers expect quality assistance analogous to that expected from staff in the service industry. Certainly, as discussed in chapter five, the accessible, intimate, and relatable tone Influencers use and the "lifestyle" genre of their blogs contribute to this impression. This is also suggested in common disclaimers adopted by numerous Influencers asking followers to "Google before asking", "search through the archives/tags", or simply "buzz off". As candidly phrased by one Influencer, "this is not an information center".

Despite being distinct individuals who follow Influencers online in their own time as opposed to a group activity, most followers seem to hold similar anticipations of reciprocity from their role model, practicing immediacy, constancy, exclusivity, and seeking transparency and service in their correspondence. However, this creates tensions for Influencers and disrupts their lives beyond their comfort zone.

## **Reacting to disorder**

In this section, I detail some common strategies Influencers employ to cope with the stresses of intimacy labor. In her work on an analytical framework of blogging practice, Schmidt (2007) discusses rules as a guide to situation performance. Borrowing from Höflich (2003), she discusses "adequacy rules" and "procedural rules". "Adequacy rules" guide the process of media selection through common expectations regarding the medium's ability to provide specific gratification, while "procedural rules" frame the actual use of blogs as the selected medium. The latter is further subdivided into three types of rules – "selection rules", "publication rules", and "networking rules" – and can be applied to the Influencers I investigate depending on their preferential positioning as a follower, author, or networker. "Selection rules" involve a habitualized set of decisions in which Influencers decide

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what material to read in order to prepare their blogposts. “Publication rules” involve a blog’s content, presentation, and design, which Influencers negotiate to manage their narratives of self-creation in digital spaces while preserving aspects of their less public personae in physical spaces. “Networking rules” address Influencers’ semantic and social relations as a means to maintain continuous communication, while expressing social ties to an extent to which they are comfortable, depending on the individual characteristics or demographic of their followers. Following from these, I identify five coping mechanisms adopted by Influencers, the first three characterized as “networking rules” and the remaining two being “publication rules”.

While there are some similarities in the strategies adopted by this set of Influencers based in Singapore and Lövheim’s set of top female Influencers based in Sweden (2010), their motivations are different. Lövheim’s Influencers engaged in different levels of disclosure with regards to their blog content and conventions of female language and discourse as a means to negotiate normative femininity and pass as “authentic selves”. In contrast, these Singaporean Influencers are reacting to tensions and disorders arising from the pressure to over-share, at times even resisting followers’ invasive attempts to intrude into information and communication circuits that Influencers deem – in my etic view – inviolable. Perhaps in direct contrast to Lövheim’s Influencers, it could even be said that some of these Singaporean Influencers are restricting access to their whole “authentic” selves, which they reserve for a more select personal or private circuit. This section illustrates five common coping mechanisms they adopt in response to the increasing demands from followers’ practice of Perceived Interconnectedness, as discussed earlier in the chapter. The strategies are to disregard haters, to publicly shame haters, to adapt to followers’ demands, to draw topical boundaries, and to demarcate work and leisure hours.

*Disregarding haters*

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The first of Influencers' coping mechanisms is to disregard haters, a type of cognitive emotion work (Hochschild 2003: 96). As noted in chapter five, in the vernacular, haters are hostile individuals who leave malicious comments or harsh criticism to stir commotion "just for the sake of it". Instead of entertaining haters and their hating, most Influencers ignore them in the hope that they would leave.

Christine shares:

Part of me wants to reply and say eh, you know, mind your own business, but another part of me is like, if I reply [to] this person, this person will think I actually give a shit about what he says *lah*, which is not what I want him to think...

For Christine, disregarding haters was one of her coping mechanisms in dealing with criticism. Following from traditions of trolling and the adage to not feed the trolls (Bergstrom 2011; Hardacker 2010; Phillips 2015), she feels that on the whole, this has decreased the amount of hating mail she has received in recent years, because ignoring haters deprives them of the entertainment they seek from her reactions<sup>29</sup>.

*Publicly shaming haters*

The second of Influencers' coping mechanisms is to implicitly shame haters by relying on their loyal followers to do the shaming work, a second-order form of expressive emotion work (Hochschild 2003: 96). Influencers would intermittently publish hate mail in a bid to solicit sympathy and support from fans who would, in

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<sup>29</sup> Chapter nine discusses a different group of Influencers, who deliberately provoke haters and hating through "Influencer Wars" and "Shamelebrity Rituals".



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turn humiliate the hater in defense of their idol. Such group policing has proven to be an effective strategy for some women, such as in Belinda's example:

So I just um, put a dash and publish it so people can see how idiotic some people can get... then they get hate from other readers...

While some Influencers crowd source for methods of revenge, a handful of very influential Influencers have been known to retaliate aggressively against haters. In extreme cases, followers have on the occasion joined in to ridicule and shame haters. One Influencer even tracked down and publicized the legal identities and social media handles of some of her haters, including details of their educational, work, and family history, along with photographs, thus making national news (Sim 2012) for the massive intervention rallied by readers. Indeed, with a following so large and a presence so impactful, Influencers have capitalized on their followers to manage haters.

*Adapting to followers' demands*

The third of Influencers' coping mechanisms is a type of cognitive emotion work (Hochschild 2003: 96) in which they internalize and adapt to their followers' demands as constructive feedback. Some Influencers are genuinely impacted by and responsive to the criticism they receive from followers, while a vast majority seeks to edit their self-presentation to adapt to followers' preferences (Senft 2008: 47-48). Annabelle, for example, has decided to diversify her blog content after followers criticized her writing as "unexciting" and "uninformative". She feels pressured to be "comprehensive" and publish "quality" posts on a wide variety of topics with greater depth, despite her lack of knowledge and experience on these matters.

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Many Influencers have also become more conscientious with their diet and weight after having had their appearance scrutinized by readers. Belinda is one such Influencer who has altered her lifestyle after being critiqued:

They will say I'm getting fat, I can feel it also... and I must admit I'm becoming a little more conscious with my appearance also, need to watch myself, what I eat, exercise...

Annabelle confesses that she has even begun to rely on readers' critique as a feedback mechanism for self-improvement:

Whenever they say that I guess there's some truth to that, right, if not they won't say that... it's kind of like a wake up call cos I wouldn't know if I'm growing fatter or not if I see myself everyday, that kind of thing... so it's good in some ways...

In the same vein, Christine now polices the personae she conveys, although she is still torn between a "neutral" stance her followers seem to prefer and an "opinionated" stance with which she claims to be more comfortable:

Some people when they are trying to be like nice... sweet... portray a very neutral person, they become a very boring person... I don't want to be a neutral person... I also want people to know my view on things... so it's like try to do two things at one time is actually quite difficult...

Be it content, physical appearance, or even personality, Influencers have admitted to policing themselves more closely to adapt to their readers' preferences and sustain their following.

*Chapter eight: Intimacy**Technologies of Intimacy <333: Perceived Interconnectedness, Cyber-BFFs, and Laboring Sociality**Drawing topical boundaries*

The fourth of Influencers' coping mechanisms is to draw topical boundaries, selectively voicing only some of their opinions as a combination of cognitive and expressive emotion work (Hochschild 2003: 96). To deal with readers who persistently crave and pester them for more personal and intimate information, some Influencers are beginning to keep certain aspects of their lives strictly off the web. These topics include their relationships, sex and crudity, and religion.

Annabelle, Christine, and Belinda reveal respectively:

Actually now I try not to talk too much about my boyfriend, cos the blog is about me... my life... not him, and sometimes if I blog too much about him then it's like... too personal already

I don't discuss about sex, that is one big no-no, I will not talk about it... sex tips or things...

I don't really talk about my religion... I think anything controversial like that that people will have something to... you know, talk back at?

Influencers seem to be drawing from the Singapore state's adoption of OB (out-of-bounds) markers (see Lyons & Gomez 2005), where themes or topics that could potentially stir controversy – such as sex, religion, and politics – are unlikely to be sanctioned for public discussion. Although Influencers generally avoid such contentious topics, it should be noted that a select few, such as Xixue, who already have an established following are less likely to self-censor and instead use such controversial topics to stir up “hype” or frenzied interest for their blogs (see chapter nine). While not necessarily cautious or fearful of disapproval from

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Singapore's censorship board, the Media Development Authority, most Influencers are more likely to play within the OB markers for their largely local readers.

### *Demarcating work and leisure hours*

The last of Influencers' coping mechanisms is to demarcate work and leisure hours mentally and physically, as forms of bodily and expressive emotion work (Hochschild 2003: 96; cf. Gregg 2011). Because they are constantly faced with readers' demands for instant responses 24/7, Influencers like Heather have had to intentionally set aside recreational time for themselves:

I built in my own offline period for my personal space and time... I purposely force myself not to blog everyday now.

Some Influencers have attempted to impose standard office hours – that being 9am to 5pm in Singapore – for a sense of normalcy, despite previously anticipating the flexibility of fluid work hours. However, many like Annabelle lament that it is usually impossible to complete their work within that given timeframe and have since given it up.

Likewise, many Influencers have begun posting disclaimers on their websites and email signatures informing readers that all correspondence will be handled during working hours or within a certain timeframe. In our personal interviews, Influencers reveal that despite these disclaimers, they continue to work overtime in order to manage the volume of correspondence. However, they feel that the disclaimer has indirectly advised some usually impatient readers to be more understanding.

These varied reactions to the disorder arising from Perceived Interconnectedness reveal the constant self-policing and emotional work in which Influencers engage

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daily. While ridden with difficulties, all informants mentioned in this section said that they would continue in the Influencer industry. Having established Perceived Interconnectedness as a communicative model through which Influencers convey intimacies in digital spaces in the first section and discussed the tensions Influencers face in bridging tensions across digital and physical spaces in the second section, this third section looks at how Influencers manage intimacies in physical spaces.

### **Part III – Laboring sociality: Negotiating intimacies in the physical**

I sit in a dessert café in the heart of Singapore with 19-year-old Jamie, a full-time Influencer. Although this is the first time we are meeting in the flesh, she warms up to me quickly and we chat like old friends. We discuss her social media content, which I have been observing for months, in a bid to understand the unseen work that constitutes her digital persona. I am pleasantly surprised by the degree of intimacy she is exhibiting to me through the private stories of her personal life “behind-the-scenes”, since she is something of a microcelebrity on social media; after all, she boasts 26,000 followers<sup>30</sup> on Instagram alone.

Our conversation segues into the correspondence she regularly receives from followers, many of whom “see her on the streets” and recognize her. Many of these are private emails in the likes of Agony Aunt<sup>31</sup> columns, where she painstakingly crafts personalized responses to followers who seek her advice on academic or relationship issues. Jamie is no expert in the area, but she tries to be patient and respond in as “personalized” a way as possible. Fans aside, Jamie tells me she

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<sup>30</sup> At the time of the interview; at the time of writing, Jamie boasts close to 30,000 followers on Instagram.

<sup>31</sup> Newspaper or magazine columns in which readers write it for advice about personal problems, more commonly known as “Ask Abby” in the U.S.

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also copes with her fair share of hating comments publicly posted on her social media platforms. “Some people just want to hate, want to find fault with you... there’s not much you can do,” she laments, shrugging her shoulders.

I ask if she knows of fellow Influencers who deal with similar issues, which sparks a long discussion of how she manages her relations with these competitors. It seems there are the friends, the friends-with-privileges, the frenemies, and lastly, the outright rivals. “You don’t want to step on *that* Influencer’s tail, you know? She has a lot of clout,” she tells me. I recall a photograph on Jamie’s Instagram in which she appears friendly and intimate with Influencers she now tells me she “is actually not very familiar with”. Female sociality in the Influencer industry world is undoubtedly complicated.

Jamie offers me a quick exposition of her “skincare and makeup regime” in preparation for the high-resolution photographs she publishes on her social media. She tilts her head and closes her eyes to show me her fake eyelashes, gifted to her by a beauty sponsor in exchange for brief advertising on Jamie’s Instagram feed. While she claims that her “15-minute to one hour” process is “therapeutic”, I later find out that Jamie sometimes avoids leaving the house unnecessarily because she is too “lazy” to handle the “dressing up and making up”. After all, Singapore is a small place, and Jamie laments being caught “barefaced in public” by a follower *again*. When she is all dressed up, she relies on her partner to photograph her outfit of the day at various backdrops. “He used to mind, but he doesn’t complain anymore,” she adds.

Jamie’s phone has been buzzing non-stop since we met. The constant rattling from the vibration of her mobile phone against our wooden table has not fazed her, until now. She abruptly truncates our conversation despite a good momentum: “You can continue talking, I just want to check my phone.” I sneak a glance at my voice

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recorder. It is the 51:16 mark of our interview. I am secretly impressed Jamie has lasted *this long* without fidgeting with her phone. In fact, at six months into the second leg of my fieldwork at this point, it occurs to me that Jamie might be the only Influencer thus far not to have multi-tasked on a smartphone throughout our whole interview. “You really need to be in it to keep up,” she says of her meandering Twitter feed, “I don’t know how people who follow so many other people keep up.” The hour passes quickly, and I formally thank Jamie for her time before switching the voice recorder off. We hug, and go our own ways before I see her again at an Influencers’ road show a couple of weeks later.

In this ethnographic excerpt, Jamie reveals at least four mobilizations of intimacy labor that Influencers like her undertake, albeit these are largely hidden from the view of the hundreds of thousands of followers who follow them on social media. Through the performance of intimacy with followers, the curation of social interaction with fellow Influencers, the management of one’s self-representation online and in the flesh, or the seemingly frivolous task of being connected on social media, Influencers like Jamie undertake intimacy labor on a daily basis.

### **Practicing intimacy**

This section is focused on some of the intimacy labor in which Influencers partake in physical spaces, in tandem with the Influencer personae they enact. I discuss Influencers’ intimacy labor with technology and devices, with followers, with fellow Influencers, and with the back-end actors on whom they rely. The section closes with a discussion of how intimacy labor is a practice of sociality that is critical for longevity in the industry.

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### *Influencers and technology*

Like Jamie, many Influencers are very much attached to their electronic devices (Singh 2014). While the most used devices include laptops and cameras, mobile phones seemed to be the most intimate, in that they were always an arm's length away from these women and almost always in their hands. Rachel, for instance, was single-handedly replying to text messages while maintaining eye contact with me over lunch. Full-time Influencer Tammy told me:

I will feel very uneasy [if I don't have my phone]. There are so many times when I lost my phone, and I will [replace it] the very next day...

In fact, many of the Influencers interviewed revealed sleeping with their mobile phones every night, be they tucked under their pillows or sitting close to their bedframes while being attached to a wall socket for charging. Many Influencers never left home without bringing a portable battery pack along since their high usage throughout the day often drains the mobile phone battery quickly. Jamie explains that battery life is crucial to keep up with social media:

Let's say for Twitter, if your phone dies, by the time you get home [to charge it] there's so many more updates... it's so hard to follow all the updates...

Those who drive use cigarette lighter USB chargers to keep up their battery life. Even before battery packs were popularized in Singapore in the early 2010s, many Influencers reported carrying around power cables and insisted on sitting near power sockets in restaurants or cafés to charge their mobile phones. It is not uncommon for Influencers to have more than one mobile phone on them, since the affordances of different operating systems enabled them to "clear work emails" on



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one device, while using the other to surf the Internet. Mobile phones have thus naturally become the extension of one's hands (see also Horst & Miller 2006). However, simply maintaining their electronic devices and battery lifespans is not enough. Mobile Internet connectivity is especially prized to these Influencers. As Tammy declared:

I was supposed to go on a cruise with my boyfriend a few months ago... but I actually decided not to go because on a cruise you don't get internet connection... you're out at sea and there's no [connection] for one week.

Tammy tells me that she requires her Internet connectivity around the clock, and wants to be able to log on at her "own time [and] own target".

Similarly, about half of my interviews with Influencers took place in various restaurants and cafés, where I noted a handful of them requesting the "Wi-Fi password" from wait staff. A couple of them sheepishly explained that they "Wi-Fi hopped" due to being almost over the limit for their monthly data bundle plan, and had previously received excess charges for Internet usage on their mobile phones. Some also did not hesitate to extend their knowledge of various telecom mobile phone data plans to me, and regularly blogged about this administrative "research". Wi-Fi connectivity was often necessary for Influencers to maintain intimacies with followers and fellow Influencers by catching up with updates and posting responses. While Tammy explained that on most days, she is "just busy with replying [to] emails," others were continuously logged on to keep up with their social media feeds. Jamie told me:

It is a lot to juggle right... I have like one whole [folder on my phone] for all the social [media apps]. I have like Facebook, Echo phone, Instagram, Safari for me to browse blogs, Formspring, all these...

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Similarly, Audrey and Junying speak of the need to “constantly check” their updates or risk having “too much backlog” to scroll through. Junying emphasizes that stamina and discipline are key:

If you get lazy, sometimes you will [end up] just scrolling endlessly to check everything... even for one day.

Joanna adds that this constant pressure to stay in the loop can be “a bit tiring”. Staying abreast of new posts, developments, gossip, controversy in the industry is important in order for Influencers to “stay relevant” and “not miss out” on the latest news. In fact, when Instagram was under maintenance during the evening of August 17<sup>th</sup> 2013, several Influencers took to Twitter to express their anxiety over being unable to post or receive new updates. The tone of these posts ranged from genuine frustration, as in the case of one Influencer who tweeted “STILL NO INSTAGRAM UPDATES \*RAGE\*” in uppercase, to reflexive self-mockery at their own reliance on social media, exemplified by another Influencer who tweeted “Instagram is down. What do I do with my food now?!?”

While these incidents showcase the Influencers exhibiting considerable savvy in the affordance of hard and soft infrastructure, more crucially, it draws out the entrenched intimacy they share with their devices and their continued access to social media. This has sparked a change in the lifestyles of many Influencers, as evidenced in Tammy’s decision to back out of a cruise holiday. The bleeding of work into recreational leisure and vice versa has led to a drastic informalization of working hours, such that there are no longer clear demarcations of one’s work and non-work periods (cf. Gregg 2011). Curating their lifestyles for public posting on social media has led Influencers to a cycle of perpetual affective work, where keeping up with fellow Influencers’ posts and premeditating one’s next social media

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content constitute the “unseen” labor hidden from followers’ view. Even when Influencers are physically disconnected from social media, due to circumstances such as a flat battery or lack of Internet access, anxiety over “falling behind” occupies their imagination, constituting an intimacy work that is effectively invisibilized and unacknowledged.

*Influencers and followers*

Like Senft’s (2008: 16) Camgirls, Influencers are “non-actors as performers” whose narratives take place “without overt manipulation” and who are “more ‘real’ than television personalities with ‘perfect hair, perfect friends and perfect lives’”. Unlike Camgirls, however, these Influencers routinely meet up with followers in the flesh when they are not streaming their lives online. Additionally, Marwick (2013: 116) distinguishes between two types of microcelebrity. Influencers in Singapore tend to begin as “achieved microcelebrity”, which involves a deliberate curation of personae, forming personal relationships with others, and acknowledging a following (Marwick 2013: 117), and later progress into “ascribed microcelebrity”, where the online personality is made recognizable through the production of mainstream “celebrity media”, such as paparazzi shots, or from an accomplishment of something acknowledged as significant (2013: 116). Meeting followers in the flesh thus allows Influencers to calibrate personal relations by publicly displaying intimacies towards and acknowledging appreciation of their followers.

As noted in chapter two, a distinctive feature of Influencers in Singapore is their extensive integration of face-to-face meet-ups with followers on a regular basis in formal and informal settings. Formal events include those sponsored and organised by clients in conjunction with the launch of a new product or service or parties (i.e. birthdays, anniversaries, festive occasions, meet & greet sessions, photo-taking sessions) organised by Influencers that are sponsored in kind by

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clients (i.e. venue, party favours, F&B, photography, make up, wardrobe) in exchange for advertorial publicity.

Informal events include those casually organised by Influencers themselves, such as Christmas giveaways and lucky dips for selected followers, and impromptu coffee sessions in cafés where followers can take the opportunity to snap selfies with Influencers. These physical interactions usually incorporate the use of a dedicated event hashtag that followers are encouraged to use while they “live Tweet” or “live Instagram” their activities. Such practices are also commonly incentivised through competitions, such as giveaways to selected users on the hashtag or prizes awarded to the best Tweet or Instagram post.

These physical space interactions complement digital space engagements because Influencers are expected to perform their personae in congruence with depictions they have displayed on their blogs and social media. As such, the intimacies fostered and negotiated in digital platforms through use of terms of endearment, “girl talk” (Currie 1999), and emoticon/emoji use are transferred to physical settings through use of hugs, group selfies, and gift exchanges, in a feedback loop that amplifies the sense of intimacy followers feel towards Influencers.

During my fieldwork, I attended several “meet & greet” sessions, and observed the Influencers performing hyper-feminine exchanges as a mode of expressive emotion work (Hochschild 2003: 96) with followers, many of whom they were meeting for the first time. This involved mobilizing “girl talk” (Currie 1999) as a “discourse register” wherein Influencers apply situationally specific, culturally familiar, public way[s] of speaking” (Frazer 1987: 420) to followers to solicit favor and give the impression of intimacy. Common strategies include a liberal use of terms of endearment, an overt courtesy, and amiable posture seeking approval

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among followers. This transition is seamless, but not unnoted in my personal observations in the months I spent with the Influencers. As I grew more familiar and intimate with some Influencers during fieldwork, I would attend these public functions as a personal friend, an assistant, or as a shadow blog manager with one of the Influencer agencies.

Often, when Influencers spot followers approaching them from a distance, I observed a marked shift in their speaking voice and tone when truncating conversations with fellow Influencers and myself to chat with followers – a smooth transition from the “backstage” to the “frontstage” (Goffman 1956), a form of bodily and expressive emotion work (Hochschild 2003: 96), in order to adequately signify a sense of intimacy with followers. Influencers’ registers are higher pitched, the overall tone is more chirpy, but more significantly, their body language is more inviting, so followers feel comfortable in their company. For instance, whether subconsciously or intentionally rehearsed, many of these Influencers would hold a smile for longer, and nod their heads when followers are speaking, or let out back channel vocal cues such as “hmm”, “mmm”, and “yeah” to emphasize their interest and engagement in the conversation. Influencers engage in what (Goffman 1956: 84) terms “scheduling”, or the segregation of different audiences from each other, such that only one aspect of their personae is presented as required (1956: 30-31, 84-85). They also obscure the “routine character” of their performance and stress its spontaneity so as to foster the impression that their interactions with followers are unique and specially tailored to them (1956: 31-32).

While pre-organized sessions allow Influencers the time and space to prepare themselves for the intimacy labor that is required, “chance” meetings or overt public observations by followers do not accord them the same opportunity to transit into their affable Influencer personae. On her social media feeds, 20-year-old Rachel frequently posts pictures of her Korean-inspired makeup and daily outfits. In these

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photographs, she appears polished, poised, and poses conscientiously against beautiful backdrops in a careful curation of her digital persona. She also responds politely to followers who ask about her cosmetic routine, her shopping destinations, and her spending habits, in a bid to foster an affable and agreeable self-image. A well-known face in the regional social media industry, Rachel is often recognized in public:

When I go out with [my friends], people recognize me, and they will be like, “Can I take a photo?”, and my friends will be like, “Wow! Wow! Celebrity!” [mockingly].

Rachel states that while she does not mind being stopped by fans who want to take selfies with her, the pressure to stay continually groomed can be overwhelming:

It’s a nice thing to be recognized, but at the same time if I’m out with my family and I just want to spend time with them, and I cannot like... I mean, I will still put on make up, I will still feel the pressure of dressing, you know, looking at least presentable even if I’m just going downstairs because I’m afraid that somebody will see me.

Recounting an incident, she adds that some followers expect her social media persona to be continuously maintained even in the flesh:

When I go out, and if I’m in a bad mood or whatever, that night I will receive comments [from followers] like, “I saw you today and you are so arrogant. You look so arrogant. You weren’t smiling”. But I was just walking! What am I supposed to do, you know?

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In Senft's theory of microcelebrity, she asserts that unlike audiences of film and television, viewers of web stars have taken an "ethical turn" by shifting interests from "purchasing products endorsed by Web stars" and "speculating on who a Web personality 'really is'" to an interest in "the personality's obligations to those who made her *what she is*" (2008: 25-26). In the case of the Influencers in this study, however, speculating over an Influencer's actual/staged personae becomes part of the allure of "the game" whenever one of them fails to maintain the congruence of their personae within and across physical and digital spaces. In fact, it is this very congruence that persuades followers that their mediated relationship with the Influencer is somewhat genuine and intimate, which in turn solidifies the trust they have in the Influencer's role-modeling behavior and consumption recommendations. Rachel's experience with one follower's unrealistic expectation for her to maintain her social media congruence in real life at all times underscores followers' sense of entitlement and policing of their favorite Influencers. Similarly, Yvonne and Tammy respond to the need to be constantly aware of their surroundings when in public, by being prepared for followers to approach them, regardless of their mood at any given moment.

Unlike Senft's American sample of Camgirls, however, the Influencers in Singapore engage with a following that can still very much invested in working out the authenticity and off-microcelebrity personae of these Influencers; in other words, some of them are still fixated on who these Influencers *really are*. These sneak peeks and the hating comments on Influencers' occasional personae incongruence are exactly why Yvonne makes the effort to dress better when she goes out, since she realizes she is a "more high profile face" and why Tammy prefers to run errands or take quick meals only in the vicinity of her home, so that the trips are short to avoid bumping into many people, so she can "dress more casually".

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Generally, the main function of the intimacy that these Influencers calibrate and sustain with their followers is to maintain their illusion of being relatable, everyday, ordinary people who are accessible to followers who aspire to model themselves after them. In doing so, the Influencers are better able to market products and services to their followers through personalized advertorials, which are the mainstay of their industry after all.

### *Influencers and competitors*

Among the Influencers themselves, several layers of intimacy labor may take place concurrently, depending on how they identify with each other – two types of such social groupings were discussed as “alliances” and “cliques” in chapter five. However, the focus in this section is not on the structural makeup of Influencers’ social groupings, but on the intimacy labor in which they engage within these groups.

Exhibiting cognitive emotion work, Tammy prefers to see fellow Influencers as “mostly friends” and feels she excludes herself from any overt “competition”. For instance, Tammy explains that whenever she is among Influencers who are “gossiping”, she would “not gossip” or “backstab” and “just remain neutral”. She also claims not to aggressively pursue advertorial opportunities if she is aware that her close Influencer friends are competing for the same contract. However, it should be noted that Tammy has the privilege to opt out of aggressive competition because she has already established herself among the top ranked Influencers in the country. In addition, Tammy underscores some of the thin solidarities that bind Influencers together, usually unseen by viewers despite photographs of groups of Influencers holding each other and appearing intimate at various events:



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I think it will be awkward [whenever I meet other Influencers for the first time]  
I don't know, I just say hi... and if they ask me something then I will just  
reply, and I will ask them general questions, like "oh how is your day?",  
"what did you have for lunch?"...

Junying also engages in the practice of small talk as a method of socializing and to  
keep up with Influencer friends in her more distant social circles:

I talked to a few of them, you know, because I've been blogging for some  
time, we follow each other... sometimes we will just talk to each other via  
Facebook inbox or Twitter inbox...

The mundane conversation in small talk has been discovered to draw speakers  
more closely together in most instances (Kashdan et al. 2011), as a commercially  
oriented variant of Malinowski's "phatic communion" (2004: 250). On a separate  
occasion, Audrey shares similar sentiments of distance and unfamiliarity among  
Influencers who interact in person:

Sometimes... bloggers just meet for the sake of... they meet at events and  
they will talk like they are very long-term friends, but apparently they don't  
even meet up... you know, you also have friends like that, you all only meet  
once in a long while?... you only see them at friends' weddings...

Joanna, on the other hand, tends to avoid such transient socializing. She  
expresses concern that Influencers tend to gossip when they get together, and  
prefers to stay clear of "bitchy girl talk":

I don't really talk or gossip about people, I don't blog about it, it's not my  
forte *lah*, and it's boring to me! I don't find it very entertaining, like, you just

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bitch about this person, and suddenly this person bitch[es] about you. It's never-ending, so I'm not very, yah...

However, Sharon shares that she is friendly with most Influencers, and even counts one of them among her closer friends:

I'm very thankful for [name of Influencer]... for a young girl, she's my age... to me she's very wise, and I'm like very kiddish, but she's like very serious and she knows things, she can see things that I cannot...

Sharon seems to be casually highlighting a practical benefit of having a close friend in the blogging industry. When prompted on the "things" she feels her Influencer-friend "sees" and helps her with, she explains:

There is this new blogger, she's always very nice to me, I always think that she's very nice... but [name of Influencer] told me anybody can be nice what, when you are who you are *lah* [an Influencer of higher status and popularity than most]... she tells me to be careful, that kind of thing, very thankful that people help me to look out...

Sharon's anecdote underscores a common informal organization within the blogging industry, where the more successful Influencers find themselves in the position of a "queen bee", with several lower status Influencers clamoring to be associated with them. Senft (2008: 100) calls this a request for "explicit affirmation", in which top-tier users who publicly acknowledge lower-tier users are offering trust and inviting others to do the same. A conversation I once observed between Geraldine and Yvette frames this calculated association as an "alliance" (see chapter five). Many Influencers often refer to this practice as "riding on someone else's fame".

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Geraldine: I have this theory right, they [Influencers who mingle in groups] have a very strong alliance, because of their friendship, their readership rose together...

Yvette: I'm really not sure if this friendship is really what she wanted, to accomplish what she wanted, or if it is pure friendship... you know one blogger said 'oh I hang out with whoever so and so, so that they all can help me gain readership'... a lot of drama... they were saying, just face it, you are just using each other to boost their readership...

Geraldine: If you think about it, if you hang out with this famous person, and you take a picture with this famous person, this person blogs about your outing

Yvette: They mention you... [when I meet with Influencers], I can have a sudden increase in followers on my Instagram, like hundreds of new followers at one time...

Geraldine: There is a blogger, she is very very pretty, but I feel that [name of blogger]'s friends are all famous because they are [name of blogger]'s friends...

Yvette: They have a leader...

Geraldine: They are just known as [name of blogger]'s friends, but they are famous as well in that way...

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These anecdotes from Sharon, and Geraldine and Yvette emphasize the importance of sociality among Influencers in the flesh in order for them to achieve visibility on each other's social media feeds. While Sharon experienced a "newbie" attempting to be close and intimate with her in order to gain favor or be taken under her wing, Yvette and Geraldine observe a couple of upcoming Influencers quickly rising to fame and gaining followers for frequently appearing on another top Influencer's social media feeds. In both cases, newbie Influencers are observed strategically socializing with more prominent Influencers as "friends with benefits"<sup>32</sup>, thus underscoring an instrumental approach towards their networking.

In all three groups, friends, "friends with benefits", and frenemies exhibit intimacy labor when Influencers socialize with each other in physical settings. For many, these informal networks are built behind-the-scenes, away from the view of followers, and are paramount for Influencers to increase their visibility on social media. The intimacy labor in which these Influencers engage thus produces concrete outputs in the form of increased viewership and mutual acceptance into "in-groups".

### *Influencers and back-end actors*

Actors in the back-end of Influencers' lives tend to see less public facets of their personae the most. In earlier anecdotes, both Jamie and Tammy discussed the cumbersome routine of preparing their "game faces" before leaving home. Like

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<sup>32</sup> Influencers' emic choice of phrasing despite the common knowledge this typically refers to sexual friendships. However, a casual musing from one Influencer shed some light on the changed connotations of this vernacular terminology: "It's quite true what, don't you think?... you see [an Influencer] who has value to you, you use them, but then maybe you secretly fuck them over without them knowing, right?"

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Jamie's partner who photographs outfits for her, partners, siblings, parents, and close friends are often roped in to capture images of Influencers. Apart from photographing Outfit Of The Day images (#ootd, see chapter seven), close relations are brought along as "plus-ones" to events for company or to assist with photographing Influencers in the bustle of activity. This, too, was my role on several occasions throughout fieldwork.

While many partners of Influencers to whom I have spoken playfully lament their "boyfriend duties", some Influencers reveal that their incessant need to "photograph everything" to produce content for their social media feeds has at times been the source of disagreement and conflict with their partners. However, most Influencers express how their partners would later grow understanding of the needs in their line of work. When all else fails, some Influencers turn to self-timed photographs with cameras or tripods in instances when selfies cannot suffice. On other occasions, however, the conflict is centered on the Influencer's presentation of her partner on social media. Joanna recalls:

[My partner] doesn't mind unless it's ugly... and nags at me to say, "I'm very ugly leh"... [my partner] is more than willing [to be photographed] but says, as long as the photo is not unglam. I got scolded once... after I posted, [my partner] was like, "can you remove this photo?", I had to go back and edit and remove the photo, cos of eye bags...

Tammy similarly shares that uploading photographs of her boyfriend used to be a major source of conflict. Since Tammy was among Singapore's most highly ranked Influencers, her boyfriend's colleagues would read her blog daily and spot pictures of him. She said he would feel "very unhappy" that his co-workers knew about his whereabouts and daily activities from reading Tammy's daily blogposts. The Influencer declared that while she merely wanted to share some happy aspects of

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her life with followers, she now tries her best not to put up photographs of her partner, and if she does, “only if it’s really necessary” or “only very rarely”.

Partners aside, some Influencers have also had to recalibrate intimacies with their close friends from outside the industry. At the time of our interview, Rachel was about to graduate from tertiary education and was already a full-time Influencer. However, she struggled with maintaining some of her closest friendships:

Some of my own friends, they would think that I changed. There was a period of time that they didn’t really wanna like, you know, ask me out or talk to me. I think... after that, recently they told me “we thought that we changed cos you started going out with us less”, you know?

While Rachel feels that she handled her rising popularity well and “did not really change much”, she realizes that her schoolmates perceived her busy schedule and failure to sustain the sociality rituals of meeting up regularly as arrogance. She admits that she now expends more effort to conscientiously enact her non-Influencer, personal self among her personal friends in order to solicit their approval and maintain her membership within their social circles. Joanna similarly reports that she intentionally sets aside time for her “non-Influencer friends”, and also makes it a point to follow them on social media. Sherry Turkle (2007, 2008) writes that identity in the age of the Internet is fragmented, multiple, and composite, just as how Christine and Angela appear to mentally demarcate social groups within and outside of the industry and adjust their behaviors accordingly:

I feel less need to dress up when I [meet with] my non-blogger friends... cos we won’t like, take photos and they know me very well... I won’t take so many photos cos they will get annoyed [and ask me] “why [are] you always working?”... cos even taking Instagram [photos] is for my job...

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... of course when I spend time with my boyfriend [or] our close friends [at home] I will be less conscious... less makeup... more comfortable... I don't feel like I have to worry about what they [might] say about me... but bloggers, you just never know unless you are very close...

To maintain social relations with their intimate others, they have grown conscious of the intimacy labor required set aside their Influencer personae for their more personal, private selves to sustain the ties of their social circle, and developed a different register of the enactment of this embodied affect, thus rejecting the “notion of a holistic self” (Senft 2008: 21) in favor of one with multiple personae staged strategically.

On other occasions, Influencers are also especially intimate with their back-end production crew. These actors include the professional photographers with whom they usually work, who have “seen all [their] hidden fats” and poor complexion before editing work is done on their photos, and the Influencer managers who have groomed them and are responsible for overseeing their welfare in this line of work. I recall an incident when an Influencer fell into depression after a particularly high profile breakup. Her social media posts, while more infrequent and spread out, expressed some grief in the form of cryptic quotes signaling a meditative state of mind. While she had not yet *explicitly* announced the breakup but only posted cryptic posts *suggesting* the breakup, fellow Influencers and back-end managerial staff were among the first to know.

“It’s quite a small industry after all,” she later tells me, “and word gets around, fast.” I learnt of her Influencer manager who took time out of work to accompany her on mundane daily errands, and who interceded to push back advertorial deadlines with clients on her behalf. “I think I need to clear some space for her... if not, it is

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overwhelming and she will really lose her mind,” the manager expressed after hanging up the phone with a client. Later in the week, I overheard the same manager on the phone with the Influencer, “psyching her up” right before she was due to appear at a public event. The manager also gathered the Influencer’s close friends from outside the industry and organized an informal dinner for her to unwind afterwards.

I had initially thought that this particular Influencer might have been a personal friend of the manager and thus received some form of “special treatment”. Four months into fieldwork, however, I had witnessed different blog managers exhibiting a similar range of care, concern, and cognitive emotion work (Hochschild 2003: 96) with their Influencers in times of need. These ranged from conflict resolution among frustrated Influencers engaged in Tweet wars to prep talks to insecure Influencers about to make their debut at stylized events. Having spent time with some of these managers in my personal after-hours capacity as a friend, I have also witnessed them responding to phone calls and text messages from Influencers late into the night, way past formal working hours. It crossed my mind that the managers might have been concerned over the company’s “assets”, and were just doing their jobs. I informally brought this up with one of the managers in a cab ride one day, and her response partially refuted my hypothesis:

I’ll be lying to say it’s not for the company. I have to take care of them so that they are happy [to be signed] with us, and also it’s my job to look after their welfare... but even if I’m not their manager, even as just a normal human being, [anyone] would want to relieve some of their pain and help make their lives better, you know? It’s a very human thing to do.

I grew to see how most Influencers had both a personal and professional relationship with different managers, with some of whom they got along better than



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others. Christine, who has worked with at least six different blog managers in her career, declares:

It's like [name of manager] is very good with organizing logistics and talking to clients for us... but I prefer to talk to [name of another manager] because it's more personal, I feel more care from her... but other Influencers may prefer other managers *lah*.

However, this selective personalizing of relationships may have been a source of jealousy among other Influencers. Angela explains:

Actually I've always felt that some Influencers get more [exposure] because they are more friendly with the managers... they seem like, closer at events? You always see them posting photos when they hang out [in their personal time]... like outings and dinners...

In our later conversations, Angela suggested that this disparity in Influencer-manager relations may be a matter of personality or preference. She also expressed feeling more comfortable with one particular manager over another because the former "seems more mature" and "easy to talk to", signposting a personal relationship fostered at some point. Regardless, Influencers have unveiled different modes and layers of intimacy labor in their back-end interactions with romantic partners, close friends, and managerial staff.

As noted earlier, the allure of Influencers is premised on the ways in which they engage with followers to give the impression of exclusive, intimate exchange, involving deliberate displays of what might conventionally be thought of as the more private aspects of a person's life. For this reason, the work Influencers do cannot always be clearly demarcated along the dichotomy of the

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personal/commercial, especially since hyper-visibility and staging private displays are forms of cognitive, bodily, and expressive emotional labor (Hochschild 2003: 96) in which they engage to synchronize their feelings and corporeal performance as much as possible to appear relatable to followers (Hochschild 2012: 7). In this section, I have demonstrated how Influencers engage in various extents of “backstage” (Goffman 1956: 28) work with technology, followers, fellow Influencers, and back-end actors in physical spaces, usually obscured from the direct view of followers to maintain good relations with fellow Influencers and various back-end actors (Goffman 1956: 78-82) and to retain their competitiveness in the industry.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has shown how Influencers are able to curate taste and class among their followers, focusing on Instagram as the most popular social media platform in Singapore at the time of writing. I have argued that through hyper-visible displays featuring the integrated consumption of high-end luxury and low-end discount goods, and through calibrating advertorial disclosures to emphasize the aesthetic value of an Instagram image over overtly commercial markers, Influencers balance emulation and aspiration through a “perpetual transitional mobility”. I defined perpetual transitional mobility as a gendered and classed social mobility that Influencers convey to followers by eliciting aspiration, affect, and envy, albeit one that is perpetually in transit and can never actually be attained in full, for there is no end-point to the excessive consumerism canvassed through Influencer lifestyles and personae. Part one, “Curating taste on Instagram”, has shown how Influencers use the social media platform to perform taste displays. Part two, “Knockoffs and authentic replicas”, evaluated Influencers’ conscientious integration of luxury and discount goods in order for the social mobility scripts they perform to be accessible to followers. Part three, “Calibrating taste and advertorial disclosure on Instagram”,

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analyzed how Influencers signpost their advertorials on Instagram while retaining taste displays congruent with the hegemonic aesthetic of Instagram. The chapter closed with a brief discussion on the role of Influencer managers in being intermediaries of taste displays and relatability between Influencers and clients. The intimacy labor in which Influencers partake predominantly sustains their relationships with existing followers. In the wake of content saturation and attention fatigue, it is increasingly difficult to capture a mass of new followers, unless and Influencer is recognized for something distinctive. Some Influencers turn to unconventional means of wresting attention, which intentionally depend on negative publicity. These attention-grabbing strategies will be investigated in the final thematic chapter.

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*Chapter nine: Attention*

*Attention, Please!: Influencer Wars, Shamelebrity Rituals, and Productive Disorder*

## **CHAPTER NINE: ATTENTION**

### **Attention, Please!: Influencer Wars, Shamelebrity Rituals, and Productive Disorder**

For two whole weeks in December 2014, while conducting follow-up fieldwork in Singapore, I diligently camped out on Instagram between 0000hrs and 0300hrs. This was at the peak of an “Influencer war” – short-lived, but highly intense events in which Influencers engage in heated disputes with competitors through controversial claims in order to generate publicity for themselves – in which factions of Influencers were “digging for dirt” and making accusations against each other. My past experience from closely following half a dozen Influencer wars led me to concur that these three hours were the local prime time in which the majority of anonymous haters and trolls would usually publish exposés on either “camp” – Influencer vernacular for which “side” of the dispute people supported. I would stay up to archive publicly-accessible material from various social media platforms, especially those that were contentious or defaming, because such posts were often published by “throwaway” accounts that were set up specifically to publicize information within a short period of time to gain high visibility before being deleted, lest the owner of the account be tracked and dealt with. In other words, much of this material only had a ephemeral lifespan on the actual accounts that published them, but would usually continue to circulate widely once groups of savvy users took screenshots and made copies for their own circulation and publicity.

The attention economy is a complex system in the Influencer industry. Several Influencers have highlighted to me the need to remain “relevant” in the industry, to the point that some Influencers find themselves voluntarily or unwittingly engaged in a war of words with other Influencers in order to instigate controversy, attract curious followers, and experience an increase in click-through rates and followings.

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Several outspoken “haters” (see chapter five) I have interviewed have speculated that on occasion these high profile scandals usually are timed just before or after an Influencer’s major advertorial, so as to boost publicity for their clients.

Regardless of their intent, my interest is in identifying how Influencers engage in such controversies and their function in the industry.

This chapter comprises three sections. Part one reveals how Influencers disrupt competitors for self-publicity. Specifically, it demonstrates the orchestration of controversy and manufacturing of disorder through three short case studies on status claims, authenticating appearance, and “tell all” exposés, in relation to disorder and equilibrium in social media commerce. Part two demonstrates how a segment of Influencers often deliberately engages in self-shaming practices to provoke negative attention as a publicity strategy. This forced propulsion into the limelight is discussed in short case studies of three Influencers and their brief biographies with self-shaming, in which I assess their success in enacting shamelebrity. Part three discusses the types of hating discourse that usually emerge from “Influencer wars” and “Shamelebrity rituals” and closes with some organic mechanisms that Influencers have erected to manage this sense of disorder, as well as the value of “web amnesia” in ensuring the longevity of Influencers in the industry. The chapter argues that some Influencers’ selective spectacularization of the mundane and mundanization of the spectacular is paramount in baiting their followers, sustaining attention, and remaining relevant in the industry.

## **Attention events and rituals**

In his 1997 article, “The Attention Economy and the Net”, Michael Goldhaber asserts that since “attention” is now the most “scarce” commodity, it has created a “new kind of economy” he terms “the attention economy”. He argues that

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“economies are governed by what is scarce”, yet we are moving into an age of “abundant”, “overflowing” information “drowning” us, thus the ever important need to distinguish oneself from the crowd. Goldhaber adds that to command attention, one must practice originality, transparency, and the ability to convert attention into other resources and currencies. In their work on the attention economy from the business perspective, Davenport & Beck (2001: 2) later added that while “capital, labor, information, and knowledge are all in plentiful supply”, it is “human attention” that is in shortage. They developed three pairs of attention types: “voluntary” and “captive”, wherein one gives attention out of choice or not; “attractive” and “aversive”, wherein one gives attention for gains or to avoid loss; and “front-of-mind” and “back-of-mind”, wherein one gives attention explicitly and consciously or out of habit (2001: 22-24). On a regular basis, Influencers command a passive form of voluntary, attractive, and back-of-mind attention from their stable stream of followers. However, the shamelebrity Influencers discussed in this chapter engage in spectacle-like practices to generate an active form of captive, aversive, and front-of-mind attention to recapture the foci of existing followers and attract new ones.

The Influencer wars and shamelebrity rituals discussed in this chapter show how Influencers convert bad publicity, self-shaming practices, and hating into attention, which in return expands their follower traffic and increases the value of the advertorial exposure they can provide. Influencer wars and shamelebrity rituals are spectacles in that they are visually dominated with symbolic codes of a “certain size and grandeur” (MacAloon 1984: 243), and that they serve as a “focal point of consciousness” and are a “means of unification” (Debord 2002: 6) within a social group. Boorstin (1961: 9-12) describes the orchestrated spectacles I observe as “pseudo-events”: “news” that is generated as a “synthetic novelty”, that is not spontaneous but staged, executed for the mere purpose of creating “newsworthy” content, bears an ambiguous representation of the reality of events, and most

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crucially, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. This is echoed by Debord, who similarly emphasizes the “false consciousness” (2002: 6) generated by spectacles that “ai[m] at nothing other than [themselves]” (2002: 7). With the Influencers in this chapter, this is especially the case since the “spectacles” constructed are often merely exaggerated and dramatized accounts of and reactions towards the mundane and the ordinary; Turner (2014: 92-93) terms this an “explosion of the ordinary” that is being mined as seemingly authentic and dedicated representations while actually being calculated productions of entertainment, or a “demotic turn” in which (micro)celebrity culture is enabled by digital technology to be increasingly ordinary although not necessarily increasingly democratic.

Anthropologically, these spectacular practices bear some semblances to what Victor Turner (1974: 33, 37) has termed “social dramas” – “public episodes of tensional irruption” in which conflict arises from “aharmonic” or “disharmonic” processes. Social dramas are also concerned with the cohesion and conflict within a social group (1974: 45-46). They can be productive to a group when the conflict generated thrusts into eminence the usually negligible and taken-for-granted “customs and habits of daily intercourse”, causing people to “take sides in terms of deeply entrenched moral imperatives and constraints, often against their own personal preferences” (1974: 35). Turner (1974: 37-43) outlines four main phases of social dramas: 1) “overt breach or deliberate nonfulfillment” of “norm-governed social relations”; 2) escalation of the crisis causing a reordering of social relations; 3) redressive action initiated by “representative members of the disturbed social system”; and 4) “reintegration of the disturbed social group” or “the social recognition and legitimization of irreparable schism between the contesting parties”.



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**Part I – Influencer wars: Disputing competitors for self-publicity**

Influencer wars are short-lived, but highly intense events in which Influencers engage in heated disputes with competitors through controversial claims in order to generate publicity for themselves. Similar clashes have been noted on YouTube as “flame wars” in which “a flurry of video posts clusters around an internal ‘controversy’ or an antagonistic debate between one or more YouTubers” (Burgess & Green 2009: 97-99). However, while Burgess & Green (2009) describe YouTube flame wars as a “ludic” event that is spontaneous, undirected, and even playful, the Influencer wars among Influencers are deliberate publicity attempts. Through exaggerated and highly sensationalized accounts, Influencers stimulate widespread interest in a “controversy” beyond their regular following, inviting other Influencers and their followers to comment on the issue. The commotion generated produces a short gap time in which Influencers can capitalize on the general curiosity by producing “insider accounts” of the controversy, joining “camps” which are polarized supporters of opposing parties involved in the dispute, or make provocative statements in order to join in the Influencer war. This event disrupts the equilibrium of Influencers’ relative stable follower traffic, in which they can wrestle for attention, create publicity for themselves, and increase their following on their social media platforms.

Constructing three genres of such Influencer wars as case studies, the following section investigates Influencers’ engagements with status claims, appearance manipulation, and “tell all” exposés to disrupt the equilibrium of follower traffic and negotiate their command of the attention economy.

*Status claims*

In July 2014, Influencer Eunice Annabel posted a picture (Figure 9.1) of her

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management’s annual event, comprising a group of Influencers with the caption “So you wanna be on top?” – a quote from modeling reality TV programme, America’s Next Top Model. Eunice Annabel had updated her Instagram profile to reflect the title of “celebrity blogger” as opposed to “blogger”, which was understandable and perhaps even justified given her recent involvement in a string of movie and television appearances, as well as endorsement deals with various cosmetics brands. Eunice Annabel was also a regular feature on magazines and newspapers for her rising popularity in the mainstream entertainment industry and continuously received good publicity from the press. While she had been a child actress on television, this was her formal crossover into the entertainment industry after having established herself as an Influencer.



**Figure9. 1**

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However, this angered Xiaxue, who published a series of Instagram posts (the first being Figure 9.2) cryptically and directly criticizing Eunice Annabel. This eventuated in two camps, each in support of Eunice Annabel (Figures 9.3 & 9.4) and Xiaxue (Figures 9.5 & 9.6), cross-posting cryptic captions and critical statements of support across various social media feeds. The Influencer war most notably took place on Instagram and Twitter, although several Influencers published opinion pieces about the incident on their blogs, and circulated these links on the Instagram and Twitter streams. This was widely dubbed the “Xiaxue vs. Eunice Annabel” episode by the mainstream media, with heated discussions and follower camps breaking out on popular online forums and online news outlets.

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**Figure9. 3**



**Figure9. 4**

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**Figure9. 5**



**Figure9. 6**

At stake was who was entitled to partake of the label “celebrity” in “celebrity blogger”, whether it can be achieved or ascribed, and what constitutes “celebrity”. There was no formal resolution, as both camps generated relatively equal amounts of support and hating. However, after the commotion had died down, Eunice

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Annabel edited her Instagram biography again, this time excluding the “celebrity” title.

### *Authenticating appearance*

Influencer Seline has been accused of Photoshopping her photos since she began blogging in 2005. While she has refuted these claims in some instances, in others she has merely ignored the accusations. Unedited photographs of her that were previously posted by herself, by her friends, or by photographers who have worked with her are widely circulating on the Internet. There are several threads on online forums and disparate blogposts dedicated to exposing her Photoshopping antics.

In July 2012, however, a relatively low profile Influencer, Jermaine, published a blogpost collating several of these active discussions, in a bid to call out Seline’s edited images. This blogpost circulated widely and was cross-posted onto several social media platforms and online forums. The post featured a string of flickering .gifs to demonstrate how much Seline had doctored her images. Jermaine filtered through several forums, public Facebook albums, and blogposts for a “compare and contrast” of Seline’s “before and after” images. Although it is popularly known that Influencers use photo-enhancing applications to edit their images, it is the Influencers who do not disclose or even deny this practice who receive criticism from their counterparts. In Seline’s case, a long-standing and extensive doctoring of her images without any of these “disclaimers” thrust her into an Influencer war for not being truthful about her self-representation online.

### *“Tell all” exposés*

In December 2013, Influencer Cassie published an Instagram photo of herself sitting on the lap of a man. While this is not an unusual sight on the popular

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Influencer's feed, the deliberately hazy image featured a man who was not her then boyfriend – he was previously widely sighted on all her social media feeds and well known among Cassie's followers. The image of this new man was widely circulated on social media, creating much gossip among followers, until a handful of Influencers published social media posts identifying the man. He was allegedly a romantic interest of one of Cassie's best friends, and it was speculated the two had been exchanging intimate correspondence despite Cassie's current relationship. Cassie's best friend soon published a blogpost detailing what she termed the "betrayal" and "hurt" that she experienced.

In response, Fern was among the first few Influencers who published an exposé on the issue, revealing that Cassie's mystery new boyfriend was one of her ex-boyfriends. Fern wrote a lengthy blogpost entitled "Girlfriend code", arguing that ex-boyfriends' best friends and best friends' ex-boyfriends are "strictly out of bounds" in the dating game. She also drafted several other codes of "femininity" detailing the relationship boundaries she felt "girls" could or could not transgress among each other. Many other Influencers and followers published similar sentiments on social media platforms and blogs calling for "sisters before misters" and "bros before hoes".

Although Cassie came out to clarify that she had already broken up with her previous boyfriend a week before the incident, followers charged her for not having "declared" or "announced" this publicly before posting the "intimate" picture. Many Influencers also weighed in and repudiated her for dating again "so soon after the break up" and for getting into relations with a man of whom, her best friend was fond. Interestingly, most of the focus was on Cassie's alleged "promiscuity", with little discussion on the behavior of the man. Days later, Cassie responded to the controversy with what she termed a "heartfelt post", bearing connotations of regret and hints of apologies. She also expressed surprise at how quickly her Instagram

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photo went viral. However, the overarching discourse on her “transgression” that was popularized by Fern’s exposé and parroted by others overshadowed Cassie’s attempts at redemption.

## **Disorder and equilibrium**

Influencers’ staging of wars and smear campaigns against competitors serves as a productive form of disorder through which Influencers wrestle for the attention of followers and renegotiate their viewer traffic. Unlike the constant and relatively passive stream of voluntary, attractive, and back-of-mind attention that Influencers consistently receive from followers, the attention generated from Influencer wars is captive, aversive, and front-of-mind (Davenport & Beck 2001: 21-24), enticing new followers to observe the confrontation and join a camp while strengthening the allegiance from existing followers. While it is tempting to brand such spats as mundane or trivial, and gloss over them as mere gossip mongering, Influencer wars are actually a ritual of disorder that impacts everyday practices (Malefyt & Morais 2012: 45).

Influencer wars such as status claims, authenticating appearance, and “tell all” exposés follow the cycle of social drama outlined by Turner (1974: 37-43). In each of these, an Influencer accuses another of committing a “breach” by using a status-elevating title already claimed by a higher profiled Influencer, by being dishonest about the use of photo-enhancing software, or by apparently inappropriate dating behavior respectively. Generating controversy in the industry generates “hype” or a frenzy of activity, in which the stasis of Influencer hierarchy is disrupted. Despite the apparent frivolity of things, these topics have the ability to command attention and attract (good and bad) publicity, and serve the function of appropriating drama and controversy for individual Influencer’s net gain.



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In Influencer wars, the peak of the drama is the “escalation”, in which the accuser produces a string of highly emotive and persuasive accounts to convince fellow Influencers and followers of the accused’s wrongdoing, resulting in a frenzy of users breaking into camps in support of the accuser or the accused and a proliferation of attacking/defensive accounts from each camp (Figures 9.3, 9.4, 9.5, 9.6). Low profile Influencers may capture the attention of passers-by by capitalizing on this sense of “disorder”, attempting to produce side commentaries, personal editorials, or mini (and often sloppy) exposés of their own promising “previously unseen” information from “behind the scenes” as “an insider” – in summary, by producing click bait (Blom & Hansen 2015). This creates publicity for themselves and intensifies the exposure for their social media platforms through redirected click-throughs.

As an attempt towards “redressive action”, Eunice Annabel later edited her Instagram profile to omit the title “celebrity blogger”, while Cassie wrote a clarification blogpost and removed the photograph from Instagram. However, Seline did not directly respond to the accusations apart from a few cryptic and seemingly passive-aggressive statements on her blog, suggesting that haters will always be “attracted to drama” and are “not worth [her] time”. Engaging in “wars”, or responding to one if one happens to be dragged in, is not always a viable option. Some Influencers choose to stay away from drama, save for the occasional cryptic one-liners (ironically) signifying their disregard towards haters and disengagement with the commotion. Others are ambivalent and may comment only to refute allegations, but not to instigate any accusations. Still others feel that Influencer-warring is an inevitable element of their industry and one undeniably often used to increase viewership. While some Influencers appear more hesitant than others to speak up, almost all Influencers keep up with breaking news and new scandals around the clock.

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In the “reintegration” process, a new stasis is temporarily constructed in which alliances among Influencers are reformed and allegiance to the accuser and accused that were publicly declared during the “escalation” process and solidified. Lines between each camp are made more defined and followers similarly align themselves behind each new grouping. More crucially, follower traffic would have substantially increased for the accuser, the accused, and the more vocal supporters within each camp, until the next Influencer war breaks out to wrestle attention away from the temporarily static hierarchy again.

## **Part II – Shamelebrity rituals: Self-shaming as publicity strategy**

When I first started researching Influencers in Singapore, whom I consider to be first world, tech savvy, hyper-feminine women, I never imagined myself poring over books that discussed placenta burial rituals. I once felt somewhat removed and distant from the anthropological academy, especially at the beginning of my fieldwork when I was craving anthropological “adventures”, because the “physical” aspect of my fieldwork accorded me all of life’s comforts, be they interviews in cafés and restaurants, attendance at exclusive media events, or spending time with young, powerful, women who flaunted hundreds of thousands of dollars’ worth of luxury goods. Speaking with some colleagues whose fieldwork took them into the thick of jungles, who slept in modest makeshift housing, and who literally had their hands in the dirt often brought me a mild sense of shame, as if I was less of a “legitimate” anthropologist for not being “out there”. On hindsight post-fieldwork, some of this shame has now faded after I learnt about the diverse types of anthropological research across class sectors, various researcher positionalities, different methodological approaches, and their varying material comforts. However, when my investigation of attention took me back to anthropological texts on early-1990s rural villages and their systems of shame, I truly felt that my modern field sites and traditional anthropology’s “out there” had truly converged.

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In the previous segment, I have shown how some Influencers incite controversy about competitor Influencers in order to tarnish their reputation and wrestle attention from followers. This segment, however, is about Influencers who deliberately construct scandal around themselves in order to provoke and incite emotionally charged public reactions. Through what I term “shaming practices”, Influencers incite “hating reactions” to generate viewer traffic from followers, haters, and curious others, often to the appeal of mainstream media outlets whose cross-platform coverage only intensifies the attention commanded. In fact, many of these events often occupy the national imaginary through mainstream press coverage and viral gossip circulating on various social media platforms for any time between three days to a month. Looking at three Influencers as case studies, this section examines the use of self-shaming practices as strategies to generate attention from followers.

### **Shaming practices**

Based upon some few key anthropological works on shame and its associated rituals, I have characterized shame into three functional categories: “weaponized shame”, “reflexive shame”, and “vernacular shame”, as determined by their functions within a social group. The first type, “weaponized shame”, is directed outwards, towards an external other, conferred onto individuals as a mode of punitive sanction. Young’s (1971) work on the Kalauna in Papa New Guinea describes two of these types of shame. *Laumamala*, also known as *Harangue*, is a state of grievance towards an offender of social norms in order to shame them, and in doing so, appeal to the policing and upholding of moral norms. In a different setting, *Abutu* is a type of shame conferred on enemies during gift or affective exchanges, in which the party that gives less or receives more feels public humiliation. Armstrong’s (1998) research on football gangs in South Yorkshire

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similarly shows how young boys engage in ritualized procedures to confer shame upon their enemies, to display bravado in their own “territories”, and in defense of one’s self-honor.

The second type of shame is “reflexive shame”, directed inwards, towards the self, as a form of reflexive guilt to incite self-correcting behavior. Young’s (1971) work on the Kalauna in Papa New Guinea describes a third form of shame, *veumaiiyi* that belongs in this category. *Veumaiiyi* comprises the exoticizing of one’s own shame, and is manifested in anger, self-pity, and resentment towards the self, including bodily punishments. Williams’s (1930) study of a different region in Papa New Guinea, Orokaiva, also details *sisira* as a self-directed form of shame, in which people destroy their own property as penance.

The third type is “vernacular shame”, a boundary marker that demarcates in- and out-groups, and signifies status designations within a community. For instance, *maya* among the Busama of Papa New Guinea studied by Hogbin (1947) is a term for shame derived from unorthodox behavior, or from actions that are a breach of custom. As a result, the community accepts socially conforming individuals while marking off deviant ones. The people of Negeri Sembilan in Malaysia (Peletz 1996) have a similar term, *malu*, to denote a shy, self-conscious discomfort that individuals are meant to acquire and into which they should be socialized during childhood. *Malu* functions as a subconscious calibration that pressurizes and disciplines individuals into moral behavior. Women are believed to have more *malu*, and this is most commonly manifested in their modesty displayed towards the opposite sex.

Influencers of modern day Singapore engage in all three categories of shame practices depending on their self-shaming practices. Whereas psychological studies of shame have focused on cognitive dissonance and the medicalization of

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individuals (Breslavs 2013), anthropological understandings of shame have looked at how the emotion is circulated, discussed, and appropriated in the context of a community. In traditional anthropology, shame has largely been posited in two dichotomies. The first is that of shame and honor, in which honor functions as a code that if transgressed, provokes shame as a public reaction. The second is that of shame and guilt, in which shame is the public front being performed, while guilt is a feeling internalized by the actor. The Influencers investigated here, however, manage the element of shame with little relation to a formal honor code or felt guilt. Prior to fieldwork, I had anticipated my informants to delve into discussions of East Asian “face value” and face work when broaching the topic of shame (Wong & Tsai 2007). However, shame was hardly, if ever, framed in this mode during our personal interviews. Although the sentiments appropriate to a modest, conventional, and traditional East Asian society is often mobilized by the state for various paternalistic causes, the young women Influencers themselves did not seem to engage with these.

The type of shame discussed in this chapter is not experienced as a bodily affect, nor do the Influencers seem ashamed of their actions. Instead, shame is performed and utilized as a commodity that adds value to an Influencer. As examined earlier in “Influencer wars”, Influencers confer shame onto their competitors when they create controversy about others. They deploy shaming practices and invite the public to do shaming work in ways that they believe will enhance their reputations as shameless interveners. However, in order for this to be achieved, what Influencers essentially do is engage with scandalous behaviors they actively determine will bring shame, while simultaneously disavowing that shaming.

According to Probyn (2005: x), “[w]hat makes shame remarkable is that it reveals with precision our values, hopes, and aspirations, beyond the generalities of good manners and cultural norms”. It is usually felt as affect, but also beyond emotion

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and in corporeal form, such as when actors who experience shame involuntarily blush. The term “actors” is apt, since actors can project shame in a performance without feeling guilt. She argues that shame usually enacts a public and visible reaction within actors, playing a “self-evaluative role” that can even be “self-transforming” if actors acknowledge their shame (2005: xii-xiii). She asserts that shame is neither “positive” nor “subversive”, but simply reflects how actors have come to understand societal norms and understand that their actions have not been compliant with these norms (2005: xvii-xviii). As an emotion, shame usually incites an “acute state of sensitivity” that stirs up feelings of uncertainty and is difficult to shake off (2005: 2). It may bring about guilt (2005: 2) or disappointment (2005: 13), and “repeated exposure” to it is likely to cause actors to be more susceptible to experiencing it again (2005: 85). However, as the rest of this chapter will demonstrate, Influencers seem to play with the cultural norms of shame by acknowledging what the normative boundaries are, then purposefully and hyper-visibly disavowing them.

This section will demonstrate how Influencers commodify self-shaming practices in tandem with Twitchell’s (1997) notion of the “shamelebrity”.

Influencers seem to appear completely unabashed, and even confident, when engaging in shaming, although this evaluation is limited to the “front stage” or “expression” (Goffman 1956) of their personae, since it is unknowable what they actually feel about engaging in such prolific shame practices, be it shaming themselves or others. For Influencers, shame – like the other tenets of personae, femininities, taste, and intimacies – is a transitive element that they try to engender in others rather than a phenomenological feeling and seems to operate as a commodity that they have the capacity to manipulate in order to command attention. In other words, it is the practice of “shaming” more than “shame” itself that is the focus of this chapter.

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## **Shamelebrity**

Developing the notion of “shamelebrity” first came to me when I was documenting the Influencer war between Xixue and Eunice Annabel in July 2014 that was presented as a case study earlier in this chapter. In this incident, one Influencer from the “Xixue camp”, Yutakis, posted a Twitter hashtag referring to Eunice Annabel as a “#shamelessbrityblogger”. It was an intriguing allusion to the contention over “celebrity” title, fame, and shame. The first people who came to mind were the Paris Hiltons and Kim Kardashians – the types of celebrity who are “famous for being famous” or “a person who is known for his well-knownness” (Boorstin 1961: 57). *Washington Post* staff writer, Amy Argetsinger (2009) also termed this type of celebrity “famesque”, or those who “possess the seeming gravitas that comes with a title and the suggestion of a job – actor, singer, pro-athlete”, but in reality only engage in these pursuits on the periphery and hold a disproportionate amount of fame. Both Hilton and Kardashian are now regular fixtures on entertainment television and celebrity gossip magazines, are self-proclaimed models, actresses, and singers, and have established their businesses in the beauty and fashion industries – Paris Hilton has released perfumes and colognes, while Kim Kardashian has produced several fashion lines. However, the genesis of their fame, induction into the entertainment industry, and propulsion into limelight can be attributed to a shaming practice that has become a formulaic rite of passage: leaked sex tapes in 2003 and 2007 respectively. While they are still occasionally remembered for that contentious claim to fame, the women have been able to capitalize on their shaming practice to make the leap into the celebrity economy, given that personality-driven stories are more engaging and lasting in the audience’s consciousness (Bird 2003: 21). Some Influencers seem to be taking a similar route, with varying degrees of success.

*In For Shame: The Loss of Common Decency in American Culture* (1997),

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Professor of English, James B. Twitchell, develops a similar concept in the vein of a “shamelebrity”. He states:

The shamelebrity is not a villain or even an antihero. He, or she, is simply someone who has done something wrong, often something shameful, and is able, with the help of press agents, tabloids, publicists, fanzines, and managers, to make the act into a sequence of images, a salable commodity (1997: 100).

The key characteristic of the shamelebrity is that he/she is a real person, not some fragment of a press agent’s imagination. She/he has crossed over into Shameland and returned... almost. Only after media attention does this character become mythic, a fragment of our popular imagination (1997: 102-103).

According to Twitchell (1997), there are four types of shamelebrity. Firstly, there are the wannabes of afternoon talk shows who revel in tales of their own egregious behavior. Guests on tabloid talk shows, such as *The Jerry Springer Show*, who blatantly share their provocative sexual exploits (i.e. daughter who sleeps with a stepfather; husband who has kept his transgenderism a secret) and goad confrontation from fellow guests for their “15 minutes of fame” fall into this category of shamelebrity. Secondly, there are the real world characters of reality TV or entertainment programs embroiled in contentious social situations. For instance, shows such as “cops”, comprising “caught in the act” scenes with covert camera work capturing people’s reactions in real time, show everyday people engaging in boundary-breaking subversive acts that are shameful. Thirdly, there are celebrities who already have fame in their own right who engage in the dismantling of their own fame. These are the individuals who are already famous through some form of talent in the entertainment industry, but who partake in retrospective “tell-all”



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exposés about a previously guarded situation, commonly featured on daytime talk shows such as Oprah and Dr Phil. Lastly, Twitchell claims the “pinnacle shamelebrity” is a person focused on the single-minded subversion of shame codes. He cites Madonna as a prime example, recalling her re-enactment of pseudo-sexual acts in her music videos, her donning of conical bras, and her simulation of erotic domination and submission acts while clad in bondage gear and leather.

The Influencers discussed in this chapter tend to enact the third and fourth types of shamebrity according to Twitchell’s model – that of already famous persons (albeit of microcelebrity fame) partaking in shaming practices and persons intentionally subverting shame codes. Applying Twitchell’s notion of the shamelebrity to the Influencers here, however, requires the reconceptualizing of media platforms and the reconfiguration of celebrification in the age of social media. Firstly, Twitchell’s shamelebrity was situated in the late 1990s climate of televisual media, whereas the Influencer shamelebrity I study is situated in the 2000s-2010s climate of Internet media. While the earlier shamelebrity had little direct access to audience reception and reactions, shamelebrity in the age of social media is heavily involved with interactive engagements with followers and haters, however peripheral. Unlike their former counterparts who were restricted behind the camera, social media shamelebrity can mediate their Internet persona via self-publishing platforms in the comfort of their homes, where self-presentation of their appearance and the curation of narratives of the self can be negotiated through image-enhancing software such as Photoshop.

Secondly, the shamelebrity in Twitchell’s era had a back-end production stable that formulated their public image, whereas the shamelebrity in the social media age are self-made entrepreneurs. The celebrities who dismantle their fame in “tell-all” exposés and the “pinnacle shamelebrity” like Madonna had the assistance of

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specialists who knew how to construct fame and popularity among a mass following. Most Influencers, however, are their own publicists, publishers, makeup artists, writers, and editors all packaged as the social media entrepreneur. While they may rely on managers in their agencies for brief guidance and to barter some of their business deals and for light editing work when approving advertorials for clients, these Influencers are usually left to independently curate and maintain their self-image.

Thirdly, some of the shamelebrities Twitchell investigates seem to emplace themselves in a position of receiving unsolicited shame, or accidentally finding themselves in situations of shame, whereas the type of shamelebrity I examine are those who intentionally practice self-shaming. In the former, individuals find themselves in situations of shame, therefore entering the public limelight where the public evaluates and labels them. It is after this that some of them manage to make the crossover into legitimate celebritydom by taking up other pursuits, as demonstrated in the examples of Paris Hilton and Kim Kardashian mentioned earlier. In the latter, shame is continuously curated and channeled as a deliberate marketing strategy with no formal visions for a crossover and is usually accompanied by the shamelebrity's blatant disregard towards haters, as exhibited through big talk.

Additionally, the shamelebrity that Twitchell and I investigate engages with different conceptions of shame – unlike the mass media's imposed shame that is meant to elicit “reflexive shame” in the accused (cf. Young's (1971) *veumaiyiyi* and Williams's (1930) *sisira*) i.e. Hilton and Kardashian ought to be ashamed for having a leaked sex tape; the Influencers I present in this chapter engage in self-shaming practices to galvanize “weaponized shame” (cf. Young's (1971) *laumamala and harangue*), i.e. shaming others or the self to win more followers for oneself, and “vernacular shame” (cf. Hogbin's (1947) *maya* and Peletz's (1996) *malu*), i.e.

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realizing that fellow Influencers and followers deem some practices shameful, but not others.

Lastly, while the shamelebrity Twitchell examines seem focused on the achievement of a crossover from shamehood to celebritydom, the shamelebrity I conceptualize is invested in a continuous reframing and reconstituting of self-shaming as a practice. This is likely to require more interpretive work on the part of Influencers in order for them to constantly gauge the “status quo” moral values exhibited by fellow Influencers and their followers. Hence, while some of the shamelebrities in Twitchell’s work aim to dissociate themselves from their shameful history upon acquiring celebrity status in one form or another, the Influencers upon whom I focus are locked into cyclical shame-forming practices in order to constantly produce controversial acts that will incite arousal in a feedback loop. This enables them to remain in the limelight and maintain “relevance” among followers.

### **Shamelebrity Influencer case studies**

I next present case studies of three Influencers who, I argue, have been engaging in various practices of self-shaming and shamelebrity in order to build on the publicity of shaming and its generating power as an arena of notoriety. It is interesting to note that the coverage of such negative reputation strategies have been disproportionately published in mainstream newspapers, tabloids, and their electronic counterparts, as opposed to magazines. In general, the representations of Influencers on magazines tend to draw more on positive coverage, highlighting the achievements of significant profiles by these Influencers. While newspapers also focused on Influencers in a positive light, they seemed to be the dominant medium bearing entertainment news; despite some of this “news” being tabloid-style “celebrity gossip”, several of these incidents were allocated the front page of

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national tabloids and sections of newspapers (cf. Sparks & Tullock (2000)) on the tabloidization of news). Many of these incidents also dominated discussions on popular online forums and group blogs, underscoring the collective interest in and influence of these Influencers in everyday life.

The three case studies presented below are of Xixue, Xavier Ong, and ThyDowager. At the time of writing, Xixue is a full-time Influencer in her early-30s who also owns an online store and has her own web television series. Xavier Ong is a full-time Influencer in his early-20s and is currently completing his National Service. ThyDowager is a full-time Influencer in her mid-20s who also owns an online store. The case studies present some highlights of the shaming practices in which these Influencers have engaged in recent years.

### *Xixue*

Most of Xixue's shaming practices are directed to specific individuals (i.e. fellow Influencers) or to specific groups of people (i.e. the disabled, foreign workers, haters). However, the shaming become self-directed in that her stance and opinions are often controversial, quickly polarizing followers into camps comprising supporters and haters. Haters and the general public usually decry her actions, with which she engages by taking on the bad press, standing her ground, and responding with heated and argumentative retorts. Many of her supporters have been known to initiate smear campaigns against other Influencers and followers who criticize the Influencer. They also fight against criticism on her behalf and defend her, thus exacerbating the "hating". Additionally, Xixue has also publicly admitted to engaging in controversy for publicity, such as in her "kissing a girl" video. Curiously, perhaps in part due to the extent of her influence, press coverage on Xixue's shaming practices usually adopt a reportage style, and if bearing critique, often cite public opinion on various social media platforms rather than offer

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an opinion from the reporter per se.

**October 2005:** Published a blogpost recounting her witnessing of a disabled man reprimanding an able-bodied man for using a public toilet designated for the disabled. Publicly criticized the disabled man and stated this controversial statement on her blog

As far as I am concerned, you have a physical disability – and that is where you have a disadvantage. Your bladder is working fine isn't it? So you wait, just like normal people do, when there is a queue for the toilet. The rest of us queue up to use a toilet – I don't see why the disabled should be any different.

**July 2007:** Published an unsolicited blogpost about the “seven most disgusting bloggers in Singapore”, with harsh criticism about their appearance and relationship status. The post also comprised images and hyperlinks to their various social media accounts. This post was widely covered by the mainstream press and dubbed a “flame war”.

**June 2008:** Published an apparently defamatory post against fellow Influencer Dawn Yang, and received a legal suit. She also published the email correspondence between herself and Dawn, as well as their respective legal representatives

**October 2009:** Published a YouTube video of a kiss with fellow Influencer Yan Kay Kay on her web show, “Xiaxue’s Guide to Life: EP56” (Figure 9.7). The video was removed at the request of the Media Development Authority (MDA) for explicit content. Xiaxue later reposted the video on her own YouTube channel in November 2011, and included a caption for her reasons:

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It's ridiculous! The video has no nudity, no sexual content, and it's even pretty funny if I say so myself. Why should it be censored?? Isn't it ridiculous you can watch 2 girls 1 cup in Singapore and not this video?!



Figure9. 7

Much later in March 2014, in an interview to the press regarding the YouTube Fan Fest (Figure 9.8), Xiaxue revealed that the video was “good for publicity”:

It was an idea that I knew would provoke a response, and [the MDA’s decision to delete the video] was good for publicity.

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**Singapore blogger Xiaxue: I thought the 'kissing a girl' video would be controversial, but it was good for publicity**

A top Singaporean blogger who fell foul of the citystate's media regulator because of a YouTube video featuring herself kissing another woman said she suspected the video would court controversy, but it was "good for publicity".



*Xiaxue addresses the YouTube Fan Fest press conference today*

Xiaxue, whose real name is Wendy Cheng, created the video 'Kissing a girl' in 2011, which was removed from Singapore lifestyle channel Clicknetwork after the Media Development Authority objected to the nature of its content.

The blogger later uploaded the video to her YouTube channel, which has almost 150,000 subscribers. The video has been watched more than 1.4 million times.

**Figure9. 8**

**June 2012:** Published a blogpost listing the personal details of some of her critics who spoke ill of her on a Facebook thread of comments. The blogpost included their public Facebook profile pictures, pictures of their wives and children, as well as their places of work.

*Xavier Ong*

Before he became an Influencer, Xavier Ong was an everyday Internet user with an average following. In his initial shaming practice that propelled him into national limelight, the Influencer Tweeted a photograph of a national examination paper. Despite being exposed, barred from the exams, and critiqued in the mainstream news, in subsequent news interviews Xavier Ong appeared to display a brazen

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confidence that he would not require educational qualifications. Shortly thereafter, he was exposed for publishing tweets suggesting he illegally drove without a license. Over a year, the commotion surrounding Xavier Ong's contentious acts died down. However, he surfaced in the news again, announcing his desire to pursue a career in the acting industry. He was also called out on STOMP for controversial YouTube videos. Throughout these incidents, Xavier Ong was slowly entering the Influencer industry through blogging, Tweeting, vlogging, Facebooking, and Instagramming. In the process, he has deleted several of his original contentious social media posts, although he still makes references to them frequently and in detail, encouraging followers to search his recent history, as many of these deleted posts were archived in mainstream news reports, and screenshot and cross-posted on several user-run forums, online news websites, and even trended on social media at various times. He has also since curated his usernames across the different social media platforms for a more coherent brand identity as an Influencer; while the Twitter account that propelled him to infamy was @humyourlife, his current usernames are now variations of his name, Xavierong or Ongxavier.

**November 2010:** Brought a mobile phone into the national "O" level examinations and Tweeted a photograph of the cover sheet of his Social Studies exam paper. The provocative Tweet bore the caption:

Do you dare bring a phone into examination hall and take a picture?

Everyday Internet users who spotted Xavier Ong's antics posted about the incident on STOMP, an online citizen-journalism website in the aesthetic of a tabloid, run by the dominant news conglomerate in Singapore, The Singapore Press Holdings. In response, Xavier Ong challenged STOMPers to "expose" him (Figure 9.9).



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## So what? 'Who needs a uni education?'



Figure9. 9

The Singapore Examinations and Assessment Board (SEAB) soon called him up for an investigation. Despite the severity of the situation, Xavier Ong posted a candid response in a YouTube video trivializing the investigation. He spoke of his plans to take the SAT exams for US college admissions, and proclaimed his desire to abandon the Singaporean education system:

The further the better, you know what I mean? Since you want to get out, you get far away, no point getting so near

Later in the month, Razor TV, an “online television service” that transmits from the Multimedia Centre at the SPH, interviewed him. In the interview, his tone took a drastic turn as he expressed “regret” over his Tweet.

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**January 2011:** The SEAB publicized its verdict to award Xavier Ong a “T” grade for his exam papers, indicating the “termination of results due to exam misconduct”.

In spite of his expressed “regret” just two months earlier, he allegedly responded:

It's okay as long as my job is not affected and I earn more money... I've already earned \$6,000 in the last three weeks. Who needs a university education if I can earn so much?

Xavier Ong was reported to be a used car salesperson at the point of the interview.

**January 2011:** Published Tweets boasting about driving a car illegally, under aged and without a license. In a series of three Tweets published by STOMP (Figure 9.10), he mentions:



Figure9. 10

The news circulated widely on online forums and was posted on STOMP once again. When exposed and questioned by his Twitter followers, Xavier Ong

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responded in another three Tweets:

It is totally untrue that I drove. I was next to a friend and he was the one driving.

I tweeted the stuff to fool around for as usual, I HAVE NOTHING ELSE BETTER TO DO.

It is just totally untrue that I drove a car. Like, I'm only SIXTEEN. I can't even dare sit in the driver's seat.

**December 2011:** It was revealed in a press interview that Xavier Ong was the stepson of local veteran actor, Wang Yuqing. The two were photographed together for the article, and news travelled widely. Xavier Ong announced his aspiration to become an actor, with the support of his stepfather, who claimed his stepson will “wise up” for his chance in the entertainment industry.

**June 2012:** Published a lengthy blogpost about his haters, once again reviving the now-forgotten controversy of the Tweeting incident. Some notable passages were widely cited on online forums and circulated on social media. He tells followers that Google's auto-complete search function now lists “o level”, “twitter”, and “father” in connection to his name.

**June 2013:** Published a collaborative “charity” video on YouTube with fellow Influencer, ThyDowager. In the video, dubbed “Project Happiness”, the two Influencers record themselves purchasing a McDonald's meal and handing it out to an elderly man on the street. The tone was called out by online users to be “self-righteous” and suspected to be a “publicity stunt”. Despite both Influencers separately blogging about the launch of their new initiative, to date only one

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episode was published on their collaborative YouTube channel on 5 June 2013, with only slightly over 3,700 views at the time of writing.

**July 2013:** Published a YouTube video of himself mimicking the Thai accent. The video was once again reported on STOMP, with several followers calling Xavier Ong out for being “racist”, “offensive”, and needlessly controversial.

### *ThyDowager*

ThyDowager has a presence as an Influencer dating back to January 2005, although through several migrations of her blog and webhost, she has selectively deleted some blogposts while transferring others. She is a recurring feature on mainstream news and tabloids for consistently pushing herself into the limelight for mostly negative publicity. She toggles between her Influencer moniker, “ThyDowager” and her legal name, “Peggy Heng”. As a mark of her shamelebrity practice, ThyDowager even archived all her press mentions, no matter how small or even if they are bad press, on a page on her blog. Her most common shaming practices include highly dramatized and exaggerated posts regarding relatively mundane issues (i.e. dust falling, being overcharged \$0.36) and posting shocking content about herself (i.e. leaked sex tapes, plastic surgery). Despite being often mocked for her poor grammar, she continues to experiment with superfluous language, even though this has not always been successful. To counter some of this negative publicity, ThyDowager occasionally publishes social media posts that frame her in a better light; these include outings with her mother to expensive restaurants, conspicuous displays of the commodities she gives to her mother, documenting the time she spends with a younger sisters, and showcasing her aesthetic taste in the recent renovation of her family home. However, her overt focus on flashing the impression of material wealth, extravagant consumption

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desires, and amateur photo shoots in which she proclaims herself to be a model still place her very firmly in the arena as a “shamelebrity”.

**December 2009:** Published a blogpost demanding monetary compensation from a building management for soiling her store apparel with dust. ThyDowager had contacted a national Mandarin newspaper for press coverage of her complaint against the management company from whom she rents a store space in a shopping center. The center was undergoing construction work, and ThyDowager claimed that the “construction work dust” on her apparel amounted to \$5000 in losses. She posted her own translation of the article on her blog:

She also commented that the apparels were filled with dusts. Even if she were to send them for cleaning, there would be no guarantee on 100% clearance of the dust. She’s also worried that she could be blamed, should the dust causes skin or other irritations to her customers. Therefore, these clothes should no longer be sold and would cause her losses to amount up to \$5000+. [sic]

**July 2011:** Published an emotionally charged expletive-laden blogpost accusing her telecom company of “cheating” her. In enlarged, bright red, bolded, and underlined font, ThyDowager called for followers to “beware” of a major local telecom company whom she claimed had “cheated” her.

She recounts being sent spam text messages from the company, for which she was billed \$0.36. She also complained about their inconsistencies in awarding vouchers to subscribers, after comparing experiences with friends and family:

My gf told me about the vouchers only after I re-contracted, and when I asked Singtel for it,they said: “Dear Miss Peggy, because you’ve re-

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contracted, your points are re-accumulated and the previous points are FORFEITED! FUCK YOU...Apparently they said that their service staffs in the shop will not be able to track our points or even inform us that we are actually entitled to vouchers rebate.THEN YOU EMPLOY STAFFS FOR FUCK? I might as well just get a re-contract over the net?!

**August 2011:** Staged and released a fake “cat fight” and “leaked sex” video. On 24 August 2011, a video featuring ThyDowager and another woman screaming and fist-fighting appeared on YouTube with the caption

LOL, confirm liao, its that blogger PEGGY HENG LOR!!!. - [www.thy-dowager.blogspot.com](http://www.thy-dowager.blogspot.com) THE BOYFRIEND AND HER just emailed me lo ask me to remove the video, even offer money sia!! HAHAHA part II in my friend's camera le, wait till he book out from camp, maybe i will upload it up on youtube. what do your think? [sic]

The video had received over 47,000 views at the time of writing. The YouTube uploader used a pseudonym, and posted links to popular local forums in which he began threads asking users for suggestions for “compensation” that ThyDowager could offer him in exchange for removing the video. Many forum users suggested “piak piak”, a colloquial onomatopoeia for sex, and “bj”, a colloquial acronym for “blow job”. The Influencer remained quiet on her social media platforms at this time.

Shortly thereafter, on 29 August 2011, a second video (Figure 9.11) surfaced from the same YouTube user. It has received over 130,000 views at the time of writing. The video appeared noticeably more staged and less ‘caught in the act’ than the first video. It featured ThyDowager entering a house, and proclaiming “I’m here, what do you want from me?” The man in the video, presumably the person who

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had uploaded the first video and brainstormed “compensation” ideas with forum members gestured towards his crotch, seemingly implying that he was asking for oral sex in exchange for removing the earlier video of the Influencer and withholding others that he claimed he had.



Celebrity Blogger Catfight (Part 2)

Figure9. 11

ThyDowager proceeded towards him, knelt down, and undid his belt and zipper, looking visibly traumatized. The video was shot in an aesthetic that gave the impression the Influencer knew she was being filmed. Just as the man’s zipper was to become completely undone, ThyDowager swiftly turns to the camera, breaking the fourth wall, and chirpily exclaimed, “But that is not the way to solve your relationship problems!” At this point, “Xavier See”, a “top dating coach” came through the door to intervene. The pair then began plugging a “traffic light” dating party for singles, and flashed a poster of the event as well as their respective blog URLs. The video closed with a soundtrack repeating rap lyrics “I am not a whore”.

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In a follow-up blogpost posted soon after, ThyDowager says of her shame practice:

I'm sorry that I had to keep this mum and my deepest apologies for not responding to all the concerns. [...] A live act is always the best to reach out to people and raise the awareness of the problem; In this case, "cheating" This live act was also directed due to the rising numbers of people airing their dirty laundry in the public.

These videos were widely circulated and received much media attention, but were also dubbed "misleading", "attention-seeking", "unprofessional" by followers in newspaper coverage. On her Twitter, ThyDowager seemed thrilled to have been successfully plunged into limelight, and even urged followers to "grab a copy today! :)" In an interview with Yahoo! Singapore, she is quoted:

When it boils down to social issues, people's attention span is always close to zero [...] We certainly needed to come in with a 'big bang'... and the best way (to do that) is through controversies... We will not be deterred by (the negative reaction it has received thus far), because we strongly believe our cause is for the better.

**July 2012:** Underwent a highly publicized sponsored plastic surgery, and flaunted the experience with "grotesque" images (Figure 9.12). ThyDowager broke the news that she had undergone sponsored plastic surgery in South Korea, citing an exclusive front-pager and interview with the top local tabloid, *The New Paper* in her Tweets. On her blog, she encouraged followers to purchase the paper:

Feel free to grab a copy of The New Paper today if you're keen to find out more on the sneak preview coverage:



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Her act was controversial, as the tone of the article and her continuing narrative on various social media feeds featured the Influencer unabashedly shopping in public in a face covered with bandages just a couple of days after surgery. These were interspersed with photographs of the fashion apparel she had bought, including their price tag and details of her shopping venues. The narrative of her surgery also included close-up pictures of her wounds, including discharge and bleeding, and tubes inserted into her body.

For the next three months, she published a series of eight blogposts detailing her plastic surgery experience in an advertorial format. This included the details of her

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sponsors that were understandably part of her contract. The blogposts were titled:

Sneak preview

The New Paper Coverage

Plastic Surgery Journey Part I

Plastic Surgery Journey Part II

Plastic Surgery Journey Part III

Day 2 after stitches removal

1 week later

1 month after surgery

In these recounts, she claimed to have posted unedited photographs of her face at various stages of her recovery. These were often signposted with bold and underlined disclaimers such as “Genuine photos with no editing at all”. However, fellow Influencers soon exposed the photo-editing work in some of her images, conscientiously archiving the inconsistencies in her skin tone, body shape, height, bruises, facial features, and makeup in photographs she claimed were *au natural*.

ThyDowager remained unabashed and shifted the narrative focus to her shopping adventures clad in bandages:

My Korean friends who told me how impressed they were, with me. That I could still stay so positive and confident to walk around like this. They were sharing with me: ‘Most Koreans have got it done somewhere or another, but they would usually get it fixed one at a time instead of going for the full shot. Even so, they would stay at home to recuperate...

It was also widely speculated on various social media platforms and user-run forums that ThyDowager’s front page press coverage was paid for, suggesting that

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the Influencer would resort to extreme means for her claim to fame.

### **Maintaining followers in tandem with shamelebrity practices**

In the case studies above, all three Influencers approach shaming practices differently. While Xixue appears to claim crass honesty and narcissism in her displays, Xavier Ong seems more ambivalent, as he constantly alternates between sparking controversy and releasing apologies. On the other extreme, ThyDowager's string of self-shaming practices rarely allow for downtime in between controversies, often saturating followers who lose interest quickly, judging by her inability to remain "trending" for a substantial amount of time.

In response to Xixue's controversial personae and shaming practices, several "hate blogs" run by anonymous Internet users have emerged over the years. Not only does she have the charisma to attract supporters, her spectacles also unite disparate haters who take her shaming practices as their focal point (Debord 2002: 6). One of these blogs, "Xixue exposed", has a blogmast with the title "Exposing the hypocrisies of Xixue: Embarrassing secrets that Xixue never wanted people to find out". In one of the posts dated 6 November 2014, the blog archives a selected series of screen grabs of Tweets posted by Xixue over the years, detailing some of her engagement with haters:

I love it that Twitter allows you to block people. MAD AWESOME! (Xixue's Twitter, 5 June 2009)

You know what I love? Deleting longass preachy comments from haters. (Xixue's Twitter, 5 July 2009)

So fun and easy to block dumb people on twitter. Love it. (Xixue's Twitter,

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2 August 2010)

I almost wish people would be rude to me on twitter coz it feels SO AWESOME blocking them. (Xiaxue's Twitter, 19 September 2010)

The block function on twitter has to be on par with orgasms in terms of how good it makes you feel. Bye assholes, I no longer read ya! (Xiaxue's Twitter, 15 March 2011)

Singapore executes drug dealers. Wanna bring heroin in? Deal with the consequences. I'm a FAMED cyberbully. Wanna insult me? Try. (Xiaxue's Twitter, 25 March 2011)

People who still reply me after I tell them they are blocked are really stupid. I've got the last word, SORRY! (Xiaxue's Twitter, 29 May 2011)

Thanks for all the hate, people. You know I thrive on attention, good or bad. ;) maybe you can trend #Xiaxueisanattentionwhore lol (Xiaxue's Twitter, 7 March 2012)

As such, I'll like to thank my haters, who by their obsessive hatred, keep me famous. Thank you so very much, please continue. (Xiaxue's Twitter, 6 June 2012)

Anyone who has anything unsavory or preachy to say about my decision, I'll be most happy to block ya. :) (Xiaxue's Twitter, 8 January 2013)

In these responses, Xiaxue mostly taunts haters and expresses some form of "self-righteous" victory for having blocked them from her Twitter feed. Elsewhere on her

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blog, however, she has expressed her desire and love for public attention on several occasions. In one post, she writes:

I wanted fame and attention, loads and loads of attention, and I love being at the top. Best if it's well-paying and gives me free stuff. The universe created exactly a job for me that lets me write... About myself, no less. Lets me create art via photoshop... With my face, no less. Gives me shitloads of attention, fame, sponsorships... I get paid to fly to places and I hang out with my fellow pretty blogger girlfriends. And I am the top blogger in Asia Pacific, at least until 2013 according to the Nuffnang Blog Awards. I even get haters because the universe knows I like debating and insulting people (Xiaxue's Blog, 23 June 2012). [sic]

Xiaxue certainly appears to be at the pinnacle of shamelebrity in the industry (Twitchell 1997). In the FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) section of her blog, she even has a category dedicated to "Controversy". Some of the FAQ include "Why do people hate you?"; "How do you handle haters?"; "Are you racist?"; and "Are you a cyberbully?". Despite her relatively successful self-shaming practices, Xiaxue's actions were not without repercussions – two sponsors pulled out shortly after her October 2005 "handicap toilet" controversy (Aw Yong 2005) in light of public backlash, although it is unknown if other sponsors have reacted to the more recent controversies.

Xavier Ong's controversies often attract only some support from followers, while a majority of less invested followers critique him from the periphery. He often mobilizes his fans for social support, soliciting their relatability through Tweets and Instagram posts directing questions about his insecure popularity towards them. In other words, he largely depends on his fans to reinstate his confidence after each shaming practice. However, his following appears to be stable and consistent,

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given the Influencer's efforts to interact with them through digital chats or physical meet-ups. Xavier Ong also frequently displays the communicative relationships he shares with the "managers" of his fan club, who have "exclusive" access to his mobile phone number, thus constructing an appearance of emotional investment and affective reciprocity with his following. He suggests that the parasocial relationship he shares with followers is patterned, routinized, and familiar, by signifying the "unique knowledge" (Cohen 2009: 227) a smaller group of them share with phrases such as "for those of you who know that..." and "some of you already know this...". With regards to press management, however, Xavier Ong usually reacts explosively, with rash responses that appear as yet another shaming practice.

ThyDowager's controversies do not appear to solicit any firm support from followers, but instead often encourage public scrutiny and disgust. While her following and supporters are not as visible on social media as those of Xixue and Xavier Ong, there appears to be just a handful of positive and neutral sentiment posted by anonymous or pseudonymous commenters on her blog. She does not appear to engage with bad press directly, but instead mechanically archives and exhibits all her press mentions, as if displaying her accolades. Xixue and Xavier Ong's shaming exploits have largely been confined to social media posts, with crossovers to media appearances through invited interviews. ThyDowager, however, appears to have widely pursued coverage in the mainstream press, and has even allegedly paid for a front-page story for her sponsored plastic surgery. In addition, because ThyDowager thrusts herself into the limelight in front of a mainstream mass audience who, unlike social media followers, might lack the repertoire of "symbolic codes" involved in Influencer shaming spectacles (MacAloon 1984: 243) – the backlash and "hating" she receives may be disproportionate. Hence, while ThyDowager constantly remains in the field of vision of followers on social media and audiences in mass media, this continual

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occupation of the limelight also saturates followers, who then quickly turn from curiosity to disdain.

As microcelebrities in the “demotic turn” (Turner 2014), the content from shamelebrity practices (and Influencer wars) that Influencers put out is “ordinary” in the sense of being “first hand experience” and the publicizing of the “backstage” of their lives (Grindstaff 2002: 19). However, Influencers manage to frame the mundane as the spectacular through calculated productions of entertainment in the guise of more authentic, genuine, and democratic access to their most private lives. As high profile disruptions to the equilibrium of Influencers’ follower traffic and overall exposure, shamelebrity practices (and Influencer wars) at their peak perform what Grindstaff (2002: 19-20) calls “the money shot”, in which human emotionality and volatility seem to be transparently performed to an audience so as to signpost the event as “real” and “authentic”. Influencers are able to enhance the construction of a self-reflexive “simulated self” (Thomas & Round 2014) that “emotioneers” or structures followers’ emotions to solicit relatability, reflection, and occasionally, empathy, along with considerable “hating”.

In sum, while Xixue and, to a lesser degree, Xavier, pursue temporal notoriety and infamy that amount to fame over time, ThyDowager has lapsed into permanent ostracism. This is because Xixue and Xavier have adequately understood “vernacular shame” among their followers – that criticizing marginalized groups is frowned upon and denouncing mainstream education is taboo – and were able to mobilize their shaming practices as “weaponized shame” – by disproportionately criticizing the handicapped and foreign workers and brazenly giving up formal education – in order to wrestle more attention to themselves and increase their following. On the other hand, on some occasions ThyDowager does not yet seem to have a firm grasp of “vernacular shame” nor a sense of appropriate scale – wrongly anticipating that complaining about dust or an overcharged \$0.36 phone

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bill would win her attention despite her “spectacle” lacking “size and grandeur” (MacAloon 1984: 243). In other occasions, the shaming practice she performs is so outrageous – a staged “leaked” sex tape and publicizing grotesque images of her plastic surgery – that followers feel “reflexive shame”. ThyDowager frequently courts fame without having any actual accomplishments in the industry – a process which Marwick (2013: 135) describes as “famewhoring” or “fameballing” – such that her overt self-promotion has solicited ridicule. The different ways in which Influencers manage their shaming practices and curate their shamelebrity reflect the utilization and economization of shaming, along a continuum of success, in which Influencers have to conscientiously manage the crossover between the mundane and the spectacular.

### **Limitations of commodified shaming**

As laid out earlier, in the “front stage” Influencers seem to appear completely unabashed, and even confident, when engaging in shaming practices, even though it is unknowable if they actually feel any shame, let alone guilt, in the “back stage”. Freud (1914, 1933) ascertained that the emotion of shame is largely constituted between what he terms the “ego” and the “ego ideal”, where the “ego” is the front that calibrates our instinctive, unconscious desires and our actual lived environment, and the “ego ideal” is the desired image of our inner selves that we strive to become. He also posited that the “ego ideal” is often perceived as an image of perfection, admiration, or idealization that is represented by our parent figures. Although none of the Influencers has explicitly made any references to how their parents might feel about their actions, in chapter five, I explained that one of the elements that affects whether or not Influencers feel comfortable with touching on contentious or sensitive issues is who the demographic of their following is. Jayne and Collette explicitly mentioned that knowing their older siblings and parents read their blog would pressure them to exercise self-censorship. There



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thus appears to be a sense of “generationalism” (include *older* siblings albeit being from the same generation) in the discourse of feeling shame and a loss of face. Being in their teens to early-30s, Influencers and followers in their cohorts may disavow concerns about flirting with shame. However, if the figure of the parent is invoked, or with the discourse of what an Influencer’s parents might think about their actions is mobilized, Influencers may very well express some hesitation in employing their shame practices.

In addition, in his book on *Queer Youth Suicide, Culture and Identity*, Cultural Studies scholar Cover (2012: 97-116) writes that shame is usually articulated through the tensions of the ego and ego ideal, the private and public, and normativity and biopolitical non-proximities to norms. While the tension between the ego and ego ideal has been addressed through the notion of “generationalism” above, shamelebrity Influencers seem to be overturning and subverting the tension between the private and public, and between normativity and biopolitical non-proximities to norms, since they do not feel shamed when performing their provocative selves in the public eye, and even embrace certain kinds of non-normativity for the very reason that performed “counter-hegemony” brings them the attention they desire. However, unlike the vulnerable young persons of marginalized sexualities on the fringe of society whom Cover investigates, shamelebrity Influencers usually possess resources – some extent of financial stability from repeated success in drawing in a crowd, a certain level of status and reputation in the industry allowing them to partake in risky shame practices, and fans and supporters who enjoy their provocative ways – that enable them to take on and embrace these non-normativities and shame practices in a public way, and which might be said to “immunize” them against the felt, corporeal affects of shame.

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### **Part III – Productive disorder: Hating and web amnesia**

Hating (like shaming) as a practice that is a vernacular concept among Influencers and their followers warrants a brief discussion. In a similar vein to using “shaming” as a practice as opposed to “shame” as a quality, I use “hating” as opposed to “hate”, since followers are practicing moral judgement and personal attack. Additionally, “hating” follows in the traditions of practices of incivility in digital spaces, such as “trolling” and “flaming”, whereas “hate” alludes to an emotion.

As noted in the earlier discussion of Influencer wars, Burgess & Green (2009: 97-99) observe “flame wars” on YouTube as an “internal controversy” or “antagonistic debate” among YouTubers manifesting as a high volume of video posts within a short span of time. However, this section is focused on hating as a practice among followers towards Influencers that may occur in peaks and troughs (as in Influencer wars or shamelebrity rituals) or as an ongoing “background” reaction to the voluntary, attractive, and back-of-mind attention (Davenport & Beck 2001) that Influencers elicit. In existing scholarship on the attention economy, hating most closely resembles “trolling”. In her study of subcultural trolling practices, English and communications scholar Phillips (2015: 15) notes that the first official definition of trolling defined “troll responses as those that ‘fish for flames,’ ‘flames’ indicating an incensed response”.

While some scholars have defined “haters” as “negative and often personally offensive commenters” (Burgess & Green 2009: 96), I noted in chapter five that there was a unanimous agreement among Influencers that hating usually occurs “just for the sake of it”. Influencers felt that hating comments were not merely “harsh criticism”, but deliberately unproductive, hostile, and malicious in order to cause ill will among Influencers. Similarly, in her study of the term “troll” in Usenet group rec.equestrian, linguistics scholar Hardacker (2010: 237) defines a troll as a

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person “whose real intention(s) is/are to cause disruption and/or to trigger or exacerbate conflict for the purposes of their own amusement”. The extent and momentum of hating generated by shamelebrity Influencers could be attributed to the fact that their spectacles accord with Bird’s (2003) observation that long-lasting scandals generally: dramatize and skirt the boundaries of moral codes, invite judgement from followers, allow followers to engage in dialogue such as in supporter and hater camps, appeal to emotions as human interest stories, and are excessive to the point that followers are able to distance themselves from Influencers as violaters.

Phillips (2015: 17) observes that some early scholarship (Bergstrom 2011; Hardaker 2010) on trolling focused on “effects-based definitions”, in which the practice is premised on deception. However, she views trolling as a subculture “marked by a set of unifying linguistic and behavioral practices”. Phillips argues that trolls are motivated by “lulz”, an “unsympathetic, ambiguous laughter” in which trolls “reve[l] in the misfortune” of those they dislike (2015: 24). Contrary to popular sentiment among followers I have interviewed that hating is “frivolous stuff”, “just for fun”, and “has no effect in ‘the real world’”, as established in chapter five, haters and their hating are valuable to Influencers in that they ultimately comprise follower traffic and help to raise awareness of and interest in the Influencer among the general pool of Internet users.

Accusations from hating cannot always be verified and are often shrouded in rumors and fictives (i.e. “I heard from a friend of a friend”, “According to this unnamed source”). However, they have the potential to galvanize extensive support or disregard for Influencers, as evidenced in the Influencer wars and shamelebrity rituals evidenced above. Following from Phillip’s (2015) analysis of systemic subcultural trolling behaviors and drawing from my personal interviews among a small pool of followers (and haters), I give a summary of why some

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followers engage in hating as a vernacular practice. Through a close coding of my personal interviews with followers, the ensuing section identifies five prevalent discourses of hating: counter-normativity, non-news, manufacturism, sensationalism, and temporality.

## Hating

Haters repudiate controversial Influencers (i.e. shamelebrity Influencers) for attempting to be counter-normative and straying from the “mainstream” crowd. These Influencers are chided for attracting “too much attention” to themselves, as noted by two followers to whom I spoke:

Everything she does is just “me, me, me”, it’s damn annoying *lah*... she is *sooo* AA [“attract attention” – vernacular abbreviation referring to a person who warrants unnecessary attention]

Some of [the Influencers] are high profile for good things, like their achievements?... But [name of Influencer] is just always in the news for no reason... everything, also talk to reporters...

Although Influencers frequently headline newspapers and magazines, haters highlight that much coverage of shamelebrity Influencers is merely frivolous and trivial gossip (i.e. Influencer spats, plastic surgeries). These are occasionally labeled “first world problems”, after a popular Internet meme connoting the exaggeration of very minor frustrations as a luxury that only well-off peoples can afford. Many haters make references to major world events, such as wars and natural disasters, occurring concurrently as Influencers dominate the national imaginary, to underscore a disproportionate amount of publicity accorded to “non-news”:

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I think it's damn lame because like, the front page news is about some stupid bloggers fighting... or [having a] Twitter war, but it's not *really* "news" news like people dying or what...

The third type of hating discourse focuses on the manufactured nature of Influencers' controversies and gripes. These usually feature Internet users complaining about Influencers who stage incidents that hold little substance, such as if Influencers decried shaming incidents that followers did not feel breach any moral code – for instance and as discussed earlier, Influencers who fail to mobilize weaponized shame due to failing to understand vernacular shame, resulting in receiving reflexive shame from followers:

... *haiyah*<sup>33</sup> you know they say until like they [are] damn tragic, but who knows?... maybe they all *pakat pakat* [conspire in secret] then come out to [create] drama... it's always like that one

Haters also decry the sensationalist nature of Influencers' "antics", citing actions and statements getting blown out of proportion, and coming across as melodramatic and exaggerated. One hater mentions Cassie's "hazy Instagram photo" that was discussed earlier as a "tell all" exposé, ridiculing how merely being photographed sitting on a man's lap can "blow up" and invite insinuations that an Influencer "is a slut" or "sleeps around". Others observe that Influencer wars can break out as soon as one Influencer (mis)interprets another's "vague" Tweet as a smear campaign against oneself despite no confirmation:

... who really knows [what vague Tweets refer to]? They are all so PA  
[Passive Aggressive]

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<sup>33</sup> Denotes exasperation in the Singlish vernacular

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... every small thing also make until so drama[ti]c... like the situation is actually very small, but they can talk and *hype* until it's damn big deal

Lastly, haters deride the temporality and transience of Influencer drama, dispelling the necessary effort to keep up with every single incident. This is especially the case as potential Influencer wars and shamelebrity rituals are attempted by Influencers almost all the time, with some simultaneously taking place and wrestling for followers' attention, resulting in attention fatigue. However, only some emerge to be recognized as actual Influencer wars and shamelebrity rituals, arresting the stasis of voluntary, attractive, back-of-mind attention for captive, aversive, front-of-mind attention (Davenport & Beck 2001):

... after a while I was like, I give up, because the trends keep changing and there is always a new [incident]... and they are all mostly the same just repeating repeating repeating...

as soon as you [have been up-to-date] with one [incident], another one will pop up...

Despite their denouncement of Influencers' shaming practices (i.e. counter-normativity, non-news, manufacturism, sensationalism, and temporality), haters are still generally active and creative in their hating practices, constituting a form of productive disorder for Influencers through the increased interest and traffic generated. In fact, haters and hating are still so prevalent and effective that new laws have been enacted in response to Influencers' concerns over their safety, reputation, and intellectual property rights: the Protection of Harassment Act came into effect on 15 November 2014, allowing Internet users to be guarded from others who cause them alarm, distress and abuse, including harassment, fear of

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provocation of violence, threats, and unlawful stalking. The first invocation of this Act was taken out on 29 January 2015 by Influencer Xixue, who successfully filed for a Protection Order against Internet “vigilante” group, SMRT Feedback (Ltd). She cited fear for the safety of her toddler and husband, given that a few users have published her personal information, including place of residence and contact number, on the SMRT Feedback (Ltd) Facebook page.

However, anonymous users on popular local forums speculated that this move was merely the Influencer’s bid to silence haters rather than a genuine fear for safety, given that Xixue has already been publicly announcing her (and her toddler’s) whereabouts on social media<sup>34</sup> for years and that much of her “personal information” is voluntarily archived on her blog. What we are beginning to observe is Debord’s (2002: 7) notion of a cyclical spectacle that “aims at nothing other than itself”, or Boorstin’s (1961: 9-12) description of a “pseudo-event”, in which the generated news staged by shamelebrity Influencers, the solicited reaction from followers and haters, and shamelebrity Influencers’ response to the hating form a feedback loop that amplifies the “synthetic novelty” of self-shaming, in a self-fulfilling prophesy that continually generates attention for Influencers. This is also evidenced in the observation that an increasing number of Influencers are dedicating entire blogposts addressing their haters despite being (recently) unprovoked. Such blogposts are situated to aggravate haters and incite more hating, and thus publicity, towards the Influencer.

On the whole, many of the Influencers to whom I spoke claim they try their best to distance themselves from the Influencer wars and shamelebrity rituals discussed in

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<sup>34</sup> Additionally, she has been encouraging followers to photograph and post images of her high profile car, bearing several decals of her child’s face, on its dedicated hashtag (see Appendix B).

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this chapter. The majority acknowledges that shamelebrity Influencers are brave to engage in these provocative attention-gathering tactics, and that not every one is able to stomach the judgment and criticism that undoubtedly accompany their actions. While their attention-garnering strategies are often spectacular, scandalous, and occupy a significant portion of mainstream media coverage on Influencers, shamelebrity Influencers who engage in shame practices are a vocal, high profile minority, and are not representative of the larger segment of the industry, Influencers who generally aim to put their best behavior forward and maintain their role-model status among followers.

Demonstrating some reflexivity on the permanence of information on the web, a handful of Influencers also casually mused over reactions from their parents, prospective employees (if they were to change jobs), and future children if the “top few search results” for their names raked in controversial material<sup>35</sup> as a result of their “self-surveillance”, or what Humphreys (2013) describes as recording oneself for archival or sharing purposes. However, these concerns were often merely passing comments: when queried if they were worried over the privacy of their personal information being archived on the web, few Influencers displayed any cause for concern as they, like Humphreys’ (2013: 6) informants, “implicitly defined privacy as privacy from other users or people and not privacy from state, corporate or bureaucratic entities”. In fact, many Influencers seem to have faith that new eruptions of “pseudo-events” (Boorstin 1961) and the cyclical spectacles that take the form of “social dramas” (Turner 1974) would quickly surpass their Influencer wars and self-shaming, making them “yesterday’s news”. The following section addresses this belief in a concept I term “web amnesia”.

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<sup>35</sup> Curiously, none of the Influencers I interviewed specifically referenced my thesis as one potential source of this permanence.



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**Web amnesia**

Shamelebrity Influencers may not always publicly discuss their concerns with negative publicity. On the contrary, invite it so that they may capitalize on the attention generated. In my personal interviews, however, other Influencers weighed in on Influencer wars and shamelebrity rituals as effective but harming attention strategies. Many agree that “it is very important to stay relevant”, that they “want to remain talked about”, and that they want to “differentiate” themselves from others. Yet, they also value the ability to dissociate themselves from deviance over time. While not always explicitly expressed, many Influencers make references to the sentiment of “forgetting”, or what I term “web amnesia”:

...the news changes so fast, it won't even be relevant in a few days

... the [shamelebrity event] used to be the hottest news... we [would] check forums and Tweets everyday, but I think not a lot of people remember it now...

Unlike scholarly discussions that describe the infrastructure and technology of the Internet as one that “never forgets” (Rosen 2011) in light of data retention tendencies, “web amnesia” is focused on the social effects followers experience in the age of abundant data (Goldhaber 1997). I posit here three vernacular understandings of web amnesia that have emerged from my personal interviews and observations.

Firstly, as observed by Goldhaber (1997), in the attention economy there is always an abundance of content that is rapidly circulating. This has been exacerbated in recent years by increasing volumes of content produced via the addition of new social media and messaging platforms into the local online repertoire not covered

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in this thesis (i.e. Snapchat, WeChat, LINE, and QQ). With spectacles and trends experiencing a high turnover rate, even dramatic news gets old very quickly and loses its impact on followers, resulting in lack of capacity to wrestle attention.

Secondly, there are typically several attempts at soliciting publicity in any given period of time. As the Influencer industry in Singapore rapidly expanded, some Influencers took to shaming practices as an attention-grabbing strategy to distinguish themselves from others (Goldhaber 1997). Multiple Influencer wars and shamelebrity rituals often collide and appeal to different segments of Internet users. As such, whether or not one's incident or shame practice trends and receives the spotlight may be a matter of which is more controversial, timing, or just plain luck. Only a selected few Influencers ever get propelled into a national- or region- wide limelight, with numerous other Influencers receiving a significantly smaller volume of attention and bad publicity for their act.

Lastly, with the practice of Influencer wars and self-shaming becoming popular and even blasé to desensitized followers, shamelebrity Influencers are pioneering new practices of click bait (Blom & Hansen 2015) (i.e. staged "leaked" sex tapes, grotesque visuals from plastic surgeries) in a bid to better command attention. In other words, the moral boundaries of shaming are ever shifting. In 2010, it was still largely taboo for Influencers to admit to having undergone plastic surgery, with many preferring to deny allegations and keep their operations a secret. As of 2012, such plastic surgeries have been renarrativized as an intimate "journey" of sharing, commoditized for sponsorship, and normalized among followers. As boundaries of what constitutes a spectacle and what is merely mundane keep shifting, newer shaming practices will reinvent narrative scripts and innovate to further solicit reactions and command attention.

In sum, some Influencers vie for attention through Influencer wars, self-shaming

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practices, and followers' hating practices. Yet, as observed in my discussion of web amnesia, Influencers have to manage a high rate of ephemerality in the spectacles they stage. For this reason, Influencers deliberately strategize and labor over feedback loops comprising their spectacle, reactions from followers, and responses to the hating they receive in a self-fulfilling prophecy that continually generates new attention; this is evidenced through taking and circulating screenshots of already-deleted faux pas, archiving and publicizing even the bad press they receive, and provoking haters. In an environment where attention is scarce and increasingly dispersed, Influencers rely on followers and haters, and on shamelebrity Influencers and each other to sustain an ecology of attention in which moral boundaries are continually reasserted in order to be breached through weaponized, vernacular, and reflexive shame, such that pseudo-events (Boorstin 1961) and social dramas (Turner 1974) – or “unsocial pseudodramas” – can continue to be produced as spectacles. As one veteran Influencer says, “all publicity is good publicity, even bad publicity... yeah only if you know how to manage it.”

## **Conclusion**

This chapter analyzed some controversial but common mechanisms of gaining viral attention in the social media landscape in Singapore, emphasizing strategic manipulation of attention management practices. I have argued that Influencers' selective spectacularization of the mundane and mundanization of the spectacular are paramount in baiting their followers, sustaining attention, and remaining relevant in the industry. Part one, “Influencer wars”, revealed how Influencers disrupt competitors for self-publicity. Specifically, it demonstrated the orchestration of controversy and manufacturing of disorder through three short case studies on status claims, authenticating appearance, and “tell all” exposés, in relation to disorder and equilibrium in social media commerce. Part two, “Shamelebrity

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rituals”, demonstrated how a segment of Influencers often deliberately engage in self-shaming practices to provoke negative attention as a publicity strategy. This forced propulsion into the limelight was discussed in short case studies of three Influencers and their brief biographies with self-shaming, in which I assessed their success in enacting shamelebrity. Part three, “Productive disorder”, discussed the types of hating discourse that usually emerge from “Influencer wars” and “Shamelebrity” practices, and closed with some organic mechanisms that Influencers have erected to manage this sense of disorder and the role of “web amnesia” in problematizing the longevity of Influencers in the industry. The concluding chapter of this thesis provides a summary of key arguments, addresses some concerns and considerations about my current research, and pinpoints areas that warrant future research in light of incipient developments.

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## **CHAPTER TEN: CONCLUSION**

### **But Wait, There's More!: The Expansion of Commodified Life**

This thesis has presented an analysis of how some everyday Internet users manufacture themselves into an upcoming form of social media microcelebrity increasingly labeled as “Influencer”. Influencers are shapers of public opinion who persuade their following through the conscientious calibration of personae on social media, as supported by physical space interactions with their followers in the flesh to sustain their accessibility, believability, emulatability, and intimacy, or what is known in the vernacular as “relatability”. In this way, followers bear more attachment to the Influencer as a brand than to the actual products or services they advertize. Influencers make a spectacle of the ordinary, the everyday, and the mundane, which I analyze through five key tenets: personae, femininities, tastes, intimacies, and attention. More precisely, I have argued that the success of an Influencer is premised on the conscientious calibration of extremes within the five key tenets: between “privacy” and “publicness” with regards to personae; between “agency” and “vulnerability” with regards to femininities; between “aspiration” and “emulation” with regards to taste; between the “personal” and the “commercial” with regards to intimacies; and finally, between the “mundane” and the “spectacle” with regards to attention. In other words, it is the Influencers’ savvy negotiation of boundary work in performing their personae, femininities, taste, intimacies, and attention that constitute their success.

Through these interconnected and concurrent processes, Influencers have constructed a vernacular around the making of spectacles, and in so doing, are able to commodify everyday life. Yet, as the title of this chapter suggests, this allure for followers to “Please subscribe!” has progressed into a continuous cycle of

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attention baiting, as encapsulated by the popular informmercial phrase, “But wait, There’s more!”. From the commodification of *everyday* life, Influencers have expanded their influence and professionalized their profession to encompass the expansion of *commodified* life, in which the entirety of a person’s life can now be appropriated for advertising, consumption, and entertainment via strategic posturing on social media.

In this chapter, I summarize the key points discussed in each chapter as my argument has unfolded. Additionally, I address some concerns and considerations that have repeatedly surfaced in the four years I have presented portions of my research to the academy (conferences, seminars, art exhibitions, lectures, and workshops), the Influencer industry (Influencers, management agencies, corporate pitches, and White Paper working groups), and the transient everyday following. To pay homage to my informants and the Influencer industry from an anthropological perspective, I adopt an emic model of communication popular among Influencers who seek to solicit relatability from their following: the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ). The chapter closes with some incipient developments that warrant future research in subsequent work, focusing on recent developments in Singaporean law and regulation as a direct result of Influencer commerce, as well as budding developments in the Influencer industry.

## **Summary**

In the first four chapters, I laid out the introduction, contextual background, methodologies, and conceptual and theoretical frameworks utilized in this thesis. In chapter two, I situated the proliferation of Influencer commerce in Singapore within a combination of unique cultural traits and structures in Singapore, including consumption and consumerism, hyper-competitiveness, high IT penetration, and the state press. I traced the historical beginnings of Influencer commerce to an

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older form of DIY blog commerce known as “blogshops”, which shaped the structure of the Influencer industry comprising management firms, clients, and subcategories of followers. Additionally, Influencers are noted for their multimedia impact across various industries, despite the industry’s relative youth of only ten years in Singapore. Chapter three presented a reflexive account of my fieldwork in which I utilized a combination of physical and digital ethnographic methods, including participant observation, personal interviews, web archaeology, archival research, and content analysis of newspapers. In these integrated spaces, appropriations of nuanced parlance such as emoji/emoticons, Singlish, and girl talk, were necessary evocations of delicate communicative norms guiding my access into my fieldsite. Chapter four laid out a review of key academic literature I utilize through the thesis. Conceptually, I provided a brief history of the (micro-)celebrity. Thematically, I reviewed research upon blog and social media advertorials in Singapore and elsewhere. Theoretically, I described Goffman’s (1956) theory of strategic interaction, with an emphasis upon such concepts as decorum and staging. Additionally, I mapped out cornerstone work according to the five key tenets upon which I focused and cross-referenced in the thesis – personae, femininities, taste, intimacies, and attention.

The next five chapters developed each of the key tenets in detail. On personae, I argued that Influencers’ system of followers and numbers, and their negotiations of disclosure and exposure across different social media platforms all hinge upon a balance between being able to selectively package the public and the private as sellable commodities. In regard to femininities, I demonstrated how that the hyper-feminized portrayals of tropic femininities in digital spaces, and the hyper-visibility of usually obscured “backstage” practices of gender performance, are embroiled in a tension between feminine agency and vulnerability. With respect to taste, I delineated how that through hyper-visible displays featuring the integrated consumption of high-end luxury and low-end discount goods, and through

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calibrating advertorial disclosures to emphasize the aesthetic value of an Instagram image over overtly commercial markers, Influencers balance emulation and aspiration through producing a “perpetual transitional mobility”. I defined perpetual transitional mobility as a gendered and classed social mobility that Influencers convey to followers by eliciting aspiration, affect, and envy, albeit one that is perpetually in transit and can never actually be attained in full, for there is no end-point to the excessive consumerism canvassed through Influencer lifestyles and personae. Using the tenet of intimacies, I argued that through the visibilizing of usually obscured front-end and back-end emotional labor, Influencers toggle between displays of the personal and the commercial in order to elicit affect and desire among their followers. Finally, focussing attention, I showed how that Influencers’ selective spectacularization of the mundane and mundanization of the spectacular function to bait their followers, sustain attention, and (hopefully) remain relevant in the industry.

## **FAQ: Concerns and considerations**

The FAQ model used by Influencers certainly warrants future research: it is intriguing, as it allows Influencers to give the impression of relatability by soliciting followers’ participation, simulating reciprocation, and displaying public but personalized responses to only a select few questions from followers who are, on the occasion, acknowledged by their names or handles as a “shout out” – a device of communicative intimacy and value discussed in chapter eight. In reality, Influencers still retain control over the discursive narrative of their self-presentation, since they capitalize on this opportunity to selectively disclose only some aspects of their personae to followers. Many of the “selected” questions support and amplify the personae Influencers curate for themselves to begin with, thus constituting a feedback loop to give followers the impression that the personae broadcast by Influencers and that perceived by followers are congruent, and thus, relatable.



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*Q: But what about the men?*

A: Apart from partners of women Influencers who receive proximate microcelebrification (see Appendix A), there are only a handful of male Influencers in the industry. They constitute a minority estimated to make up only 5-10% of the “lifestyle” Influencer genre in Singapore. Although they advertise largely consumables for men, or gender neutral products such as educational institutes, food & beverage, or social movement campaigns, the majority of their following, estimated by Influencers and their management to be at 80-90%, comprises a female following. As such, many of these male Influencers utilize similar styles of intimate address and accessible disclosures, albeit to a much smaller extent than their female colleagues.

A brief analysis of the ways in which these male Influencers craft their advertorials also reveals that even when they are advertising products for men (i.e. @ongxavier and Nivea facial wash in chapter seven), their advertorial narrative pitches are oriented to their primarily female followers, who in turn purchase these products for their male partners. In other words, many of the current male Influencers in the lifestyle industry also adopt some of the feminized modes of relatability discussed throughout this thesis (i.e. Tyler Hikaru and the *gwiyomi* challenge in chapter six), including the feminized modes of communicative intimacy discussed in chapter eight, and this would be a fascinating arena for further research. Elsewhere, men feature more prominently in the back-end production scene as photographers and owners of Influencer management agencies.

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*Q: Are they all rich, young, and beautiful? Where are the other races/ethnicities?*

A: As posited in chapter seven, the crux of displays of taste and class is anchored on Influencers' abilities to *simulate* a lifestyle of luxury and everydayness, as opposed to actually *living* a lifestyle of luxury. Hence, while many Influencers have indeed achieved extensive commercial success and displayed this wealth through conspicuous consumption neatly archived on their social media platforms, not *all* of them have reached this measure of success and wealth.

The earliest Influencers debuted as Influencers in 2005 and were between 18 and their early 20s. Many of these pioneer Influencers have grown up with their followers in the last decade, and the content they generate has also evolved to reflect the changes in their life stage. For instance, while they used to blog about partying and shopping, many of these pioneer Influencers have now progressed to writing about coupling, wedding preparations, homemaking, mothering, and their careers. At the same time, cohorts of younger Influencers have been continually joining the industry, some with aspirations in their very early teens. Of these, Influencer Naomi Neo rose to viral fame at the age of 15, and has long been touted as the most popular under-18 Influencer in Singapore. I first interviewed Naomi when she was 17, but young women are continuing to enter into the Influencer industry through blogshop modeling. Influencer Eunice Annabel, who is now being approached and cast in international beauty campaigns in the United States and in local television and cinema products, for instance, first began as a blogshop model at the age of 15.

Followers admire the vast majority of Influencers for their appearance, including cosmetic skills and dress sense. While some are often praised for their “natural beauty” or “unconventional looks”, the main attraction and vehicle of aspiration still

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remain these Influencers' abilities to simultaneously display a raw quality of being ordinary and everyday and the potential to achieve hyper-femininity through the consumption of products and services marketed, as discussed in chapter six. This "beauty" modeling, role-modeling, and role-playing, is also exhibited through "ugly duckling to beautiful swan" transformations that visibilize the "behind-the-scenes". Moreover, most Influencers also occasionally feature their "off day" personae, including unkempt post-workout situations and barefaced selfies, to frame their authenticity and relatability. In other words, it is "perpetual transitional mobility" (see chapter seven) towards hyper-femininity that enraptures followers.

Perhaps mirroring the racial ratio in Singapore, local Chinese make up a vast majority of the Influencer industry. Malay, Indian, and Eurasian Influencers seem to be a prized commodity that management agencies are eager to contract, as reported by the minority race Influencers I encountered during fieldwork. Influencer managers similarly note that there is a need for more diverse racial representation in the industry, and seek to groom Influencers from under-represented demographics of Singapore society (i.e. minority race, men, the non-able bodied).

*Q: Has any one left the industry?*

A: Many Influencers, especially those in the pioneer generation and early cohorts, have moved across various social media platforms and focused on some over others at different points in time. For instance, Twitter advertorials are no longer as popular as they used to be; Instagram advertorials are overtaking blog advertorials; and vlogging on YouTube is on the rise. However, only a few Influencers who have obtained success according to the analysis I have demonstrated in this thesis have left the industry entirely. As they journey through different life stages, some of the older Influencers may take on fewer engagements, spread them out, or slow down

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their advertorial publishing depending on their personal commitments, such as childbirth or beginning a new venture.

I have personally encountered only two Influencers who contemplated leaving the industry for good in the near future, although both women admitted that the decision stemmed from a fear that they would no longer be “competitive” in the lifestyle genre as they progressed into their early to mid-30s. At the time of writing, one of them has begun to incorporate her young children (a toddler and an infant) as micro-microcelebrities in her advertorials and has managed to remain relatable to her followers, while the other has specialized in interior design and home decorating to keep up with her followers who are becoming new home owners. Like them, most Influencers remain relevant and relatable to their followers by “growing up” and “growing old” together, by integrating (prospective) family life with their work through featuring romantic partners, homemaking, and children in their presentations of everyday life (see Appendices A & B).

*Q: Do you aspire to be an Influencer/microcelebrity?*

A: No, although since beginning fieldwork and with my research blog gaining some prominence, I have been receiving a steady stream of international (Singapore, Malaysia, Australia, United States, United Kingdom) invitations to be contracted to Influencer management agencies or to be engaged in one-off campaigns. Many of these invitations were clearly impersonal, mass-sent, templates that were sent out in batches. I also received the impression that even the managers who sent me follow-up invitations or, later in the process, personal correspondence soliciting my response had not spent much time going through my blog to realize that I was an academic *studying* Influencers as opposed to *being* an Influencer myself. My guess is that many of these solicitations relied on snowball sampling in which social media handles mentioned by prominent Influencers were collated as potential

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“proximate microcelebrity” Influencers. Another possibility could be that these agencies relied on bots or keyword searches to locate potential Influencers, since my blog contains selected field notes that I have made public over the years.

## **Recent developments in regulation and law**

As the Influencer industry continues to expand, mature, and develop, debates about the ambiguity surrounding the lack of standardized market rates and relatively loose regulation of advertorial disclosures have begun to have a budding impact on Internet law and the regulation of social media commerce.

### *Protection Orders*

After a series of exposés (and exposés on said exposés) involving Influencers, their management agencies, and a satirical “vigilante” anonymous Facebook group in late 2014, prominent Influencer Xixue (also known by her legal name, “Wendy Cheng”) became the first person in the country to successfully file for a Protection Order against such a satirical group, “SMRT Ltd (Feedback)” in February 2015. Nestled under the newly enacted Protection from Harassment Act in November 2014, the Protection Order forbids the group from any further publication of offensive material regarding the Influencer; failure to comply will result in a S\$5,000 fine or jail term of up to six months, or both. In the following month, Influencer Grace Tan filed for a similar Protection Order against Xixue in response to alleged cases of cyber bullying she experienced from the Influencer. More popularly known in the online vernacular as the “Xixue vs. SMRT” and “Grace Tan vs. Xixue” “sagas”, these two incidents quickly trended online, went viral nationwide, headlined mainstream news for days, and even gained some publicity in the region.

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What is contentious in Influencers performing such boundary work is that both of these incidents involved Influencers first exhibiting non-gracious, hateful, and even cyber-bullying behavior among themselves, ranging from snarky passive-aggressive social media posts to full-blown “exposés” revealing private contracts, personal correspondence, and covertly recorded conversations. With reference to my discussion on “shamelebrity” in chapter nine, it is not always immediately clear if such high profile controversies were framed for attention and publicity, or if the Influencers/Influencers in question genuinely felt threatened and responded by taking legal action. Despite a handful of Influencers being engaged to front campaigns promoting gracious Internet practices and Internet safety, there has yet to be a consolidated agreement on what constitutes “cyber-bullying” in Singapore, let alone in the industry. Singapore was previously reported to have the second highest rate of young people experiencing cyber-bullying.

It is anticipated that working committees from the Influencer industry or the Media Development Authority (MDA) – a statutory board under the Ministry of Communications and Information (MICA) that regulates the media sector – may step in to formalize strict definitions of and measures against cyber-bullying and harassment online. This will significantly shape the attention economy of the Influencer industry given that many Influencers manufacture controversy, while others “cash in” on such clashes to increase their viewership. In addition, several factions of (mostly anonymous) haters have been running both consolidated and disparate threads dedicated to “hating on” (Internet vernacular, meaning to demonstrate one’s hate in visible modes online) Influencers on various social media platforms and especially on online forums, and a more refined set of regulations may discourage such anti-social behavior and reshape social and communicative norms online in Singapore. Additionally, future research should focus on the (perceived and actual) repercussions of hating on Influencers, and the effect of the new anti-harassment legislations enacted.

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*Advertorial disclosures*

In another incident known as the “Xiaxue vs. Gushcloud” saga, or the “Gushcloud exposé”, Influencer Xiaxue made some allegations against Influencer management agency, Gushcloud, with regards to viewership, disclosure, and media ethics. In one of the claims, an Influencer was accused of masking her Instagram ad. In an Instagram post, the Influencer stated that she “chanced upon” an ad she saw on another Influencer’s blog and decided to share the information with her followers on Instagram. Unbeknownst to her, the client that had engaged her for this advertorial and who had explicitly asked for her to frame the advertorial in this manner was none other than Xiaxue, who used a pseudonym. Xiaxue later called out the Influencer for dishonest practice and masking her advertorial, and questioned the ethics of the Influencer’s management agency that brokered this transaction.

Although this appeared to be an ambush, the productive outcomes of the incident are that Influencers and their management agencies are working towards a standard of advertorial disclosures for the local industry. As I have detailed in my case study on Instagram in chapter seven, some Influencers have already been marking their advertorials in a variety of ways, some more subtle and obscure than others. I have also argued that the most successful and seamless of such advertorial disclosures are posts that comply with “the Instagram aesthetic”, in which Influencers utilize popular Instagram styles to weave personal narratives into their advertorials. The standardization of advertorial disclosures, however, may lessen the creative license and leeway Influencers have to calibrate displays of taste and class, in their adherence to Influencer advertising ethics. We may witness a shift in the aesthetics of advertorials in the near future.

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## **Budding developments in the Influencer industry**

Since their debut in 2005 and their rapid professionalization from 2010, there have been at least six shifts in the markers of an Influencer's reputation. I mark these as upcoming phenomena, that rather than being ephemeral, are likely to shape the future of the industry and the modes of boundary work that Influencers have to negotiate. Specifically, what is being contested is the differential prestige attached to the different work models of being uncontracted, contracted to an agency, or choosing to work independently. In short, the institutional organization and structural management of Influencers have been in a flux, with more varied models according more independence and control to the Influencer.

### *Influencers going independent*

Firstly, an increasing number of Influencers are choosing to go independent, or even head Influencer marketing companies of their own. In the early years, being "spotted" and "signed" to a management agency was a distinctive mark of prestige for Influencers. In 2007, the Influencer management agency surfaced in Singapore, followed closely by a handful of similar agencies vying to contract Influencers. As this marker of prestige gained momentum, Influencer hopefuls began building portfolios through blogshop modeling and pitched themselves to agencies in the hopes of being contracted. At the same time, however, a few high profile Influencers resisted such binding contracts, instead preferring to focus on their side business or to pitch themselves at a higher market rate without agents taking a cut of their profits.

At the time of this writing, we now see an increasing number of Influencers who – having accumulated a strong following, sufficient social currency, and a reputable standing in the industry – are choosing not to renew their contracts with



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management agencies, but instead broker their contracts independently. Some Influencers have been expanding their brand and have started their own Influencer marketing networks, such as “ladyironchef” (a male Influencer despite “lady” in his moniker), an Influencer of the same moniker who features blogposts from relatively unknown writers and his Influencer girlfriend, and Influencer thejianhaotan, who has rebranded as “thejianhaotan co” after recruiting a handful of Influencers primarily focused on vlogging, including his high profile Influencer girlfriend, Naomi Neo. Being able to sustain oneself as an “independent” Influencer – a marked semantic shift from the previous nomenclature of an “uncontracted” or “freelance” Influencer – is now often flaunted as a measure of success, industry leadership, and legitimation in the business. An increasing number of Influencers are also reframing and legitimating their authority by signposting the blog awards they have won, the workshops they have conducted, the books they have published, and their host of blogging “students” or “protégés” – a shift away from the more mainstream markers of success, such as one’s follower stats and profile of past clients.

*New types of Influencer agencies*

Secondly, the number of Influencer management agencies and hybrid forms of Influencer-traditional advertising has been growing steadily. Apart from Nuffnang and Gushcloud discussed in chapter two, My Fat Pocket features a stable of Influencers on its network, while The Influencer Network is modeled after Nuffnang and Gushcloud. Streetdirectory, more commonly known for its print advertising in traditional media, has also begun to broker events specifically for Influencers and has been building a network of its own digital Influencers of late.

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### *Outsourcing production to Influencers*

Thirdly, more social-entertainment content websites are outsourcing content production to Influencers, in the hopes of leveraging on their celebrity and following. These websites are a hybrid between the early commercial lifestyle blogs that emerged in 2005 and viral content, as modeled after the American website, BuzzFeed. Some Influencers are given a segment of the website to manage, such as Christabel Chua – better known as “bellywellyjelly” – who hosts beauty vlogs for The Smart Local, while others are recruited for one-off posts as guest features.

### *Traditional media industries emulating Influencers*

Fourthly, traditional and mainstream celebrities in the entertainment industry are beginning to emulate Influencers on social media in a bid to tap into a potential wealth of followers. Television actress and host, Jade Seah, launched her own YouTube channel “Jade Seah” in 2011 featuring a web series including “ChicPeek Fashion”, which offers fashion tips from mainstream celebrities and Influencers, and “ChicPeek Celebrity Chat”, which is an informal interview in a talk show host format focused primarily on Influencers. MediaCorp, the national media broadcasting corporation comprising companies in the television, radio, film, and print industries, has also been tapping into the Influencer phenomenon as well. In late 2012, it launched styleXstyle, a fashion website with interconnected social media platforms. At the helm of the business is Sharon Au, a former MediaCorp actress and compere, who has consistently invited popular Influencers to front styleXstyle’s campaigns, generate content, and advertise products. The company has also utilized several advertorial and attention-garnering strategies originating from the Influencer industry, such as #ootd (Outfit Of The Day) featurettes spearheaded by Influencers or crowd sourced from everyday users via social media and follower chats using dedicated hashtags on social media. However,

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such mainstream celebrity (in the case of Jade Seah) and corporate (in the case of MediaCorp and styleXstyle) tapping into the Influencer industry has not (yet) received the reception and acclaim accorded to Influencers. This is likely because they are ventures fronted by more traditional and mainstream celebrity figures who do not achieve the same relatability as Influencers.

*Influencer cameos in traditional media industries*

Fifthly, producers from the television and cinema industries have been integrating Influencers and Influencer-based marketing strategies into their productions. Influencer Xavier Ong was given a supporting role in the local movie, *That Girl in Pinafore*, while Influencer Eunice Annabel was cast in the local movie, *The Lion Men*, as well as in television productions *The Circle House* and *2025*. Influencer Mae Tan was also cast in her own 12-episode web-based reality series, *Miss Korea: I'm Mae*. This was hosted by Korean-based YouTube channel "insiteTV", operated by a South Korean media and entertainment corporation, CJ E&M, and exemplifies an incipient transnationalization of the Influencer industry. Several other productions have also featured cameos from Influencers, such as Hong Qiu Ting, better known to her followers as Bongqiuqiu, who made brief appearances as the girlfriend to the lead character in the vastly successful local movie, *Ah Boys To Men*. In these productions, featured Influencers were often emphasized in publicity campaigns and promoted on social media in order to tap into and attract the Influencer's following to consume the program or film.

Since 2013, critically acclaimed local director, Jack Neo, has been explicitly calling for vloggers and Influencers to respond to his casting calls. In a demonstration of his understanding of the Influencer industry, these calls have been disseminated on his production company's YouTube and Facebook platforms, in which his crew explicitly invited local vloggers such as Tosh Zhang ("toshrock" on YouTube) and

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Noah Yap (“waitformelah” on YouTube) to audition for roles in *Ah Boys To Men*. In his latest string of movies featuring Influencers as the main and supporting cast, publicity for the movies has adopted the Influencer model of selectively disclosing behind-the-scenes footage in YouTube snippets, showcasing various personae of upcoming actors and characters via self-branded Instagram, Facebook, and blog accounts, and ongoing conversations with fans on Twitter and YouTube. Most recently in March 2015, leveraging on the vision of relatability (accessibility, believability, emulatability, intimacy) that Influencers elicit among their followers, director Jack Neo has taken to “WhatsApp auditions” for his upcoming production, *Long Long Time Ago*. In this, he calls for everyday users to send short videos of themselves reading lines from the script to a mobile phone number via the messaging application WhatsApp and cites his preference for this mode over live auditions.

### *Influencers on video*

Lastly, of their several social media platforms, vlogging (video blogging) – mostly disseminated on YouTube in Singapore – has been gaining traction and prominence among Influencers. While Influencers have always been managing YouTube platforms as one mode of engaging with their following, such as JamieTYJ’s beauty vlogs or Peggy Heng’s talking head vlogs, these have largely been complementary to the Influencer’s overall social media strategies for marketing their personae. Of late, however, vlogging Influencers have become more consolidated and structured into different models. Online content production companies, such as clicknetwork.tv and Gush Studios, have been producing web series fronted by Influencers, in which sponsored products and services are woven into the narrative of the clip. These include Wendy Cheng’s *Xiaxue’s Guide to Life* (lifestyle narrative format that now includes her micro-microcelebrity son, Dashiel), Hong Qiu Ting’s *Budget Barbie* (thrift shopping and bargain buys around

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Singapore), Yan Kay Kay's *Babe of All Trades* (experiencing "a day in the life of" different occupations), and Tammy Tay's *Bump to Mum* (pregnancy and motherhood video diary of a young mother). While these web enterprises have been fronted independently by prominent Influencers, vlogging brands by *groups* of vlog actors and production crew has also emerged as a new practice of "group vlog" Influencers.

For Instance, TreePotatoes is fronted by three web actors and Wah Banana by four web actors, whereas Night Owl Cinematics (N.O.C), which was founded by a husband-and-wife team, features up to 20 recurring web actors, many of whom are affectionately known to followers as the "N.O.C girls". Once again exemplifying the emerging transnationalization of the Influencer industry, these local "group vlog" Influencers also consistently collaborate with international YouTubers, including Wong Fu Productions, JinnyboyTV, DanKhooProductions, and Germani Productions. Singaporean vlogging duo, MunahHirziOfficial, has also been offered crossovers into the television industry, where they were given their own TV series, *#MunahHirzi Action!*, on the only Malay language television channel, Suria. Almost all of these "group vlog" Influencers are independent of management agencies, and indeed many of them grow to become small Influencer management agencies themselves upon achieving prominence.

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As multimedia microcelebrities who are experts in self-presentation strategies that solicit feelings of relatability from others, Influencers are sought after for their expertise and as ambassadors in an increasing number of industries. One area where Influencers' self-presentation strategies are beginning to have a visible impact is in academia. There are many striking parallels between the Influencer and academic industries, wherein quality work (such as informative blogposts or a

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good research and teaching record) alone no longer deemed adequate for one to remain competitive and valuable in the workplace – the new successful Influencer or academic has to have a firm grasp of being a marketable public presence who is relatable (i.e. collaborative, press savvy) in addition to maintaining a commitment to quality work.

As Influencers indulged in increasingly committed displays of relatability with followers through engagements on digital platforms and meet-ups in physical spaces, academics were similarly starting to live stream presentations (on Skype, Google Hangouts, Bambuser, and Periscope, to name a few) to engage with a larger audience. Graduate schools were also fervently promoting workshops on how to socialize one's research and market ourselves in the wake of a proliferation of academic-oriented social sites, such as LinkedIn.com, academic repository sites, such as Academia.edu, academic networks, such as the #phdchat channel on Twitter, academic research groups on various platforms, such as The Selfies Research Network on Facebook, and quasi-academic public forums such as The Guardian and The Conversation.

Throughout fieldwork, I experimented with some of the Influencers' techniques of relatability on my academic blog ([www.wishcrys.com](http://www.wishcrys.com)), in which I was chronicling my fieldnotes on the go. Gauging the right balance between the private and public in my personae displays, the agency and vulnerability in my feminine displays, the emulation and aspiration in my taste displays, the personal and commercial in my intimacy displays, and the mundane and spectacular in my attention displays necessitated practice, as I desired to hone my personal writing voice and engage with an audience.

As the months progressed, a few of my blogposts achieved small extents of virality within different circles. Sincere heartfelt posts about the silent struggles of graduate

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school elicited personal messages from postgrads across the globe who expressed empathy, while analytical posts about various international social media trends invited heated responses (both positive and negative) from the general public. One post analyzing the social media coverage on the death of a high profile politician even solicited a week of viral hating, in which haters were sending me expletive-laden comments about my work and my character based on one blogpost. Having spent several months with Influencers behind-the-scenes by then, I was no stranger to viral hating having observed, catalogued, and analyzed these commotions in real time. Being on the other side, however, was a new experience altogether, although I mused to fellow postgrads that I was acquiring more “ethnographic authority” to produce chapter nine on viral enactments of attention. Where Influencers found productive disorder by wrestling for more attention in the midst of mass hating, I found productive humor for self-comfort and a new appreciation for the work that my informants do. Thankfully, I eventually received an outpour of support from other (non-hating) strangers on the Internet, experiencing first hand the intimacy and relatability that my Informants had recounted to me on countless occasions.

Evidently, Influencers’ self-presentation strategies constitute a precedent for future economies of labor, in which workers increasingly have to attract an audience to Please Subscribe.

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## **APPENDICES**

### **Appendix A: Public Coupling**

In chapter five, I discussed one “diffuse” genesis of microcelebrity known as “proximate celebrity”. In this trope, I explained that some microcelebrities attain their fame and status by being in close relations – or at least giving the appearance of so being – to the more traditional mainstream celebrities from the television, film, and radio entertainment industries. However, once established, Influencers themselves may also enable others to derive popularity and fame emanating from them. At times, this is more passive, as in the case of siblings or friends becoming popular to a mass of followers from periodically appearing on the Influencer’s feeds. However, proximate microcelebrification can also be a deliberately orchestrated affair, as in the case of some Influencers attempting to garner an audience around their heterosexual romantic partners or offspring in order to monetize this viewership. While close friends, siblings, parents, grandparents, or even pets of Influencers have attained different extents of celebrity through this transmission of symbolic capital, two of the most developed routes of proximate microcelebrification are directed towards one’s romantic partner (Public Coupling), and one’s offspring (Micro-microcelebrities).

A quick Google search for Influencers’ names or web monikers usually reveals their partner and relationship being one of the top enquires. Auto-complete search prompts such as “[name of Influencer] boyfriend” or “[name of Influencer] [name of her partner]” are common occurrences. Looking through Influencers’ photo streams on various social media platforms often brings up the microcelebrity photographed with her heterosexual, masculine romantic partner.

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**Figure A. 1**

While fellow Influencers, close friends, and family members are featured occasionally, romantic partners are presented as the most prominent “other”. In fact, on media like Instagram and Twitter, many Influencers and their partners even curate their own “couple” hashtags that document the mundane and the spectacular of their relationships (Figure A.1, Influencer Sherlyn’s “#yaosher” stream). From a long-term, continuous exposure to the Influencer’s audience, many partners have been known to experience proximate microcelebrification. This process is what I term “public coupling”, or the hyper-visibility and exoticization of “coupling narratives” in order to produce the couple as a unit. There are three tropes in operation: the materiality of love tokens; homemaking in third spaces; and the spectacle of dating milestones.

In the “materiality of love tokens”, the couple usually visibilizes their affective exchanges to the audience. Affective conversation is encapsulated in the screenshots of text messages of their conversations, or photographs of the cards



Appendix A  
Power coupling

and love notes bearing sweet nothings to each other (Figure A.2, Influencer Sherlyn's "#yaosher" stream). Gifting of items is also emphasized (Figure A.3, Influencer Sherlyn's "#yaosher" stream).

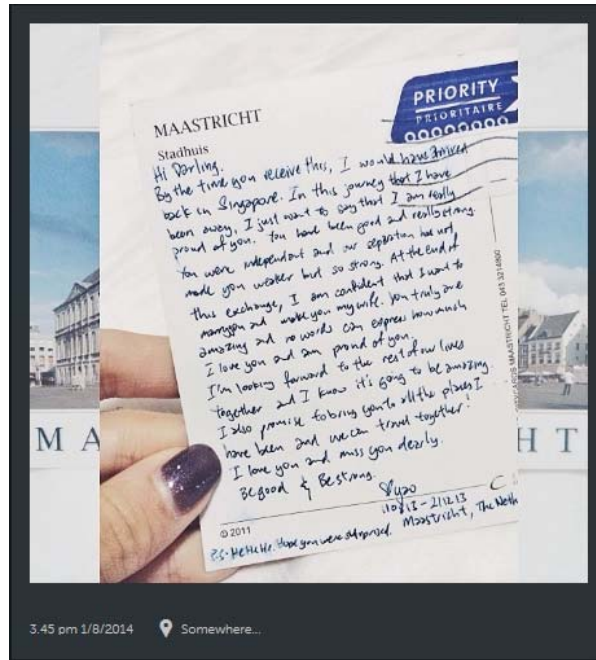


Figure A. 2

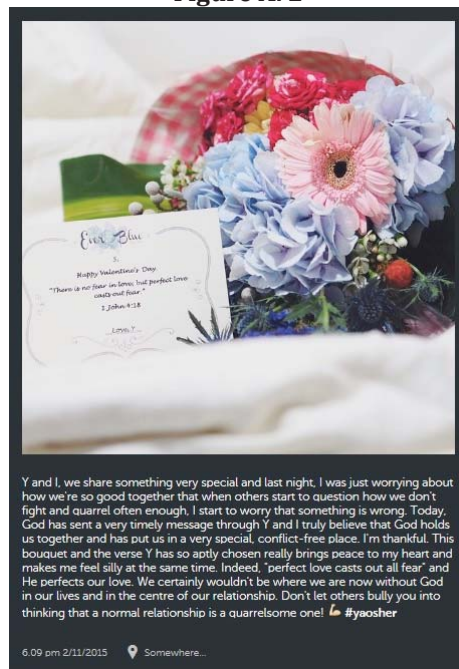


Figure A. 3

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Secondly, “Homemaking in third spaces” is when Influencer couples attempt to experience or portray domestic intimacy despite not owning a shared home. It is likely that this arose as a response to the tightly regulated public housing regulations for singles in Singapore, in which young couples have to be married in order to qualify to purchase a home. As such, many Influencer couples frequently go for staycations in local hotels or on holidays abroad (Figure A.4, Influencers Melissa and Jon, more popularly known as “melnjon”) in order to experience life as a dyad unit away from their nuclear families. Coupled with the mechanics of the Influencer advertorial market, many of these events are memorialized in sponsored “couple photoshoots” (Figure A.4, Influencers Melissa and Jon, more popularly known as “melnjon”) by photographers who tag along and provide their services free of charge, or who might even pay a fee in order to use the Influencer couple as their models or ambassadors.

## Appendix A Power coupling

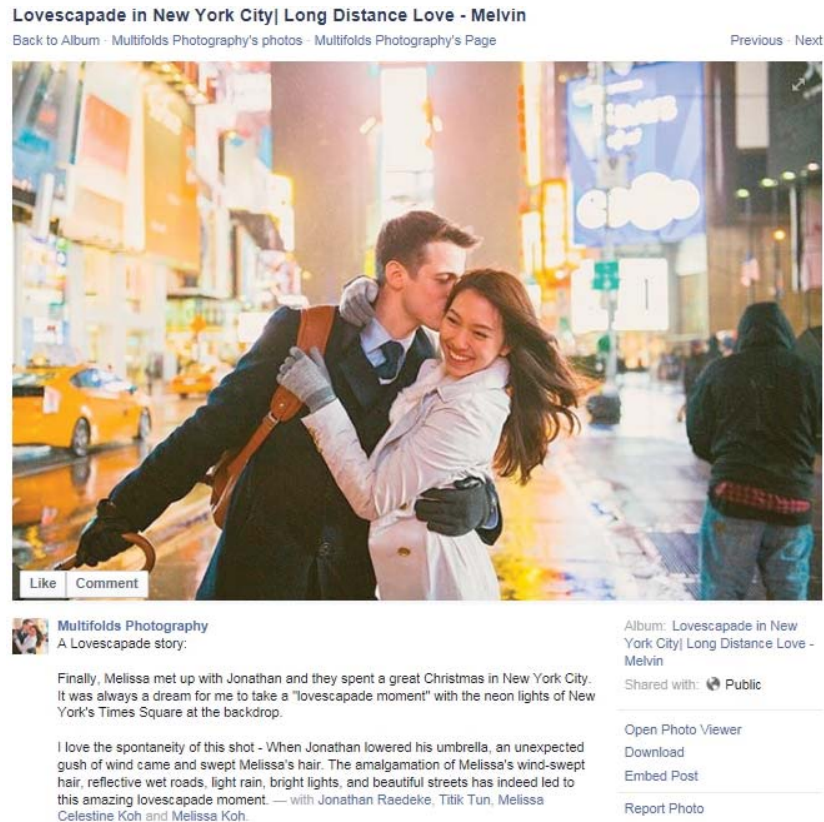


Figure A. 4

Lastly, the “Spectacle of dating milestones” documents key events that form the life cycle of every romantic relationship. These include: first dates; special “couple” events such as Valentine’s Day, “monthsaries”, and anniversaries; integration into each other’s nuclear families through the co-celebration of and co-presence at festive events; high-profile surprise proposals; and partly sponsored weddings (Figure A.5, Influencer Velda’s blog). “Monthsaries” are a concept similar to anniversaries, except that they are celebrated every month on the date the couple got into a relationship instead of every year. The integration of Influencer couples into each other’s parental homes is most evident when they visibilize their presence as “plus ones” at weddings, Chinese New Year, Christmas, and birthdays of immediate family members (Figure A.6, Influencer Jon’s – of “melnjon” – Instagram). They are also frequently featured spending time with each other’s families in leisurely activities over the weekend, or in the most mundane of errands

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such as grocery shopping or walking their pets. The notion of “public coupling” deserves more in-depth investigation in the future.



We engaged our favourite coffee artisans to be part of the set up! A huge thank you to Dennis & Jia Min ,the lovely owners of [N Coffee Roasters](#), for bringing their coffee carts & friends down to make the morning special for everyone! Until now, my friend about how it was the best espressos they ever had!



**Figure A. 5**

Appendix A  
Power coupling



Figure A. 6

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*Influencers, Social Media, and the Commodification of Everyday Life*

*Appendix B*  
*Micro-microcelebrity*

## **Appendix B: Micro-microcelebrity**

Micro-microcelebrities are the offspring of Influencers who have become proximate microcelebrities, with their celebrity and fame derived solely from their prominent Influencer mothers. In Appendix A, I refer to the process of “Public Coupling” and “Power Coupling” as the making of an “Influencer couple”. Here, however, I refrain from conceptualizing these young stars as “Micro-Influencers” for unlike Influencers, these children do not yet posture themselves to command the attention of followers, but instead are used, framed, and appropriated by their mothers for advertorials – not unlike the microcelebrity of famous Internet pets such as Grumpy Cat (<http://www.grumpycats.com/>) or Jiff the Pomeranian (<https://www.youtube.com/user/jiffpom>). This has resulted in the rapid commodification and commercialization of many aspects of their young lives as toddlers, infants, and even foetuses – many of whom have their childhoods conscientiously documented on social media – with advertisers clamoring for endorsements of anything from hospital stays to nappy cream.

Even before he was born, Dashiel Marquet Sayre received up to SGD25,000 worth of endorsement deals (Figure B.1, Xixue’s Instagram). He was born on 31 March 2013 to Influencer Xixue, in a Caesarean section that was filmed live and posted on her YouTube channel in three parts.

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Figure B. 1

Dashiel, who is more affectionately known as “Baby Dash” to his followers, represents the next generation of microcelebrities in Singapore. I term Baby Dash and those who share his trajectory of celebrification “Micro-microcelebrity”, as a reference to an upcoming generation of extremely young microcelebrities born to Influencers, who inherit their fame through continuous exposure on social media. Xixue announced her pregnancy on her blog while in her second trimester, following which she consistently posted mirror selfies of her baby bump. The



*Appendix B*  
*Micro-microcelebrity*

“bump” itself seemed to garner its own following on Twitter and Instagram, with many followers discussing how the Influencer dressed “it”, and how “it” was evolving over the weeks. One follower even compiled a collage of Xiauxue’s “bump” chronologically (Figures B.2 & B.3, Xiauxue’s Twitter), and gifted it to the Influencer as an art image via Twitter on the day she delivered Baby Dash. Followers also frequently speculated and bantered about how her baby would look, and mused about how fortunate he was going to be, being birthed by an Influencer mother.



Figure B. 2

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**Figure B. 3**

The first published photograph of Baby Dash debuted on Instagram (Figure B.4, Xixue's Instagram), and was subsequently reposted on multiple news websites, in both mainstream and user-generated genres. It was of Xixue smiling in a face clad in makeup and false eyelashes, holding on to the Baby Dash, minutes old, with the father in the background. All three were posing for the camera and directed their gaze towards the lens at the viewer. Since then, she has been writing

*Appendix B*  
*Micro-microcelebrity*

about Baby Dash's developmental milestones, including photographs of his first haircut, videos of his first steps, and even a series of videos of his expanding vocabulary. Embedded in the narrative of his growth are sponsored products and services from various advertisers, such as prams and baby spa services. Baby Dash has even been engaged to be the face of a diaper brand (Figure B.5, Xiaxue's Instagram), and was professionally photographed for the brand's new packaging.



Figure B. 4

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*Influencers, Social Media, and the Commodification of Everyday Life*



**Figure B. 5**

These corporate sponsors have also been known to organize fan meet-and-greets for young parents. While Xiaxue is no stranger to such events, an interesting progression is in the way these events are marketed towards the fans of Baby Dash. Photo opportunities and the chance to see him “in the flesh” frequently headline the press and promotional material of these marketing strategies. Most prominently, Baby Dash was incorporated into Xiaxue’s car sponsorship (Figure B.6, Xiaxue’s Instagram), with decals of one of his photos – dubbed “pineapple Dash” among followers – plastered all over her vehicle. Followers who spot the car

*Appendix B*  
*Micro-microcelebrity*

in public are encouraged to photograph and upload the image using its dedicated hashtag, “#xiaxuecar” as part of the Influencer’s sponsorship arrangement with her sponsors. Since then, Xiauxue has said she is toying with the idea of manufacturing offshoots of “pineapple Dash” products, such as smartphone casings.



♥ 21515 likes

Figure B. 6

Corporate sponsors aside, Xiauxue has even started her own baby apparel webstore, fronted by Baby Dash as its primary model. Professionally photographed images of Baby Dash displaying the shop’s wares are prominently plastered all over the website and its official Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts. Elsewhere on social media, several Baby Dash “fan” and “tribute” accounts have

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also emerged on Instagram, reposting images and related media of the Micro-microcelebrity with overt adoration directed towards the young star.

The notion of micro-microcelebrity warrants future research, especially with regards to the ethics of labour and royalties between the Influencers and their children and the rights of micro-microcelebrities as underaged, undocumented, uncontracted, and unwaged labor.

*Appendix C*  
*Newspaper reports on blogshops and Influencers between Jan 2007 and Jun 2013*

**Appendix C: Newspaper reports on blogshops and Influencers  
between Jan 2007 and Jun 2013**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Article</b>	<b>Details</b>
DIY practice	Business-savvy kids turn blogs into e-shopping outlets	8 Jan 2007, ST
	Online buys: From jewellery to art pieces	8 Jan 2007, ST
	Cost: \$0; Monthly sales: \$10,000	14 Aug 2008 ST
	Blogshop boon for young mothers	11 Feb 2009, ST
	Found: Blog shop that's reliable	2 Mar 2009, TNP
	11 tips on starting an online business	5 Apr 2009, TST
	From blog to riches	28 Apr, 2009, ST
	We shop at home	9 Aug 2009, ST
	Just light fluff... no heavy stuff	9 Oct 2011, TNPS
	\$189 for a \$1,000 dress? Copy that	30 Oct 2011, TST
	Bloggers share tips at SPH networking session	28 Mar 2013, ST
	Behind the BLOG\$	16 Jun 2013, TNPS
Entrepreneurship	Buying between the lines	28 Jan 2008, ST
	For fashionists,	15 Jun 2009, TBT

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*Influencers, Social Media, and the Commodification of Everyday Life*

	metrosexuals only	
	Blogshops venture out of cyberspace	5 Jul 2009, TST
	Now, more blogshops for men	7 Aug 2009, MP
	Blogshops move to real world for serious cash	17 Aug 2009, ST
	A passion for Munky business	20 Jun 2010, TST
	Net worth	25 Jun 2010, ST
	Chic to be cheapskate	22 Aug 2010, TNPS
	Flaw and order online	2 Dec 2010, TNP
	Marketing on the flea	21 Aug 2011, TST
	Try on clothes anywhere	21 Oct 2011, ST
	Blogshops a boon to last-minute shoppers	20 Jan 2012, MP
	Blog shops get physical	10 Aug 2012, ST
	Four blog shops which also have an offline presence	10 Aug 2012, ST
	Share a link and earn	18 Nov 2012, ST
	Girl makes money on her blogshop	9 Dec 2012, ST
	S'pore, HK e-shopping grows at fastest pace	21 Mar 2013, ST
	URBAN checks out seven online stores that cater to niche markets	19 Apr 2013, ST
	When style goes digital	31 May 2013, ST



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*Newspaper reports on blogshops and Influencers between Jan 2007 and Jun 2013*

	Clothing for curvy women goes bold	21 Jun 2013, MP
	Buy from blog shops offline	29 Jun 2013, TNP
Affluence	Social selling	7 Oct 2009, ST
	Enough of the blog slog. It's payback time	27 Jun 2010, TNPS
	\$1Billion: Amount S'poreans spent on online shopping last year	1 Apr 2011, MP
	No such thing as an iron rice bowl	18 Apr 2011, TNP
	Fashion with a passion	15 Jun 2011, TBT
	\$1,000 blogshop earns \$45,000	6 Aug 2011, TNP
	Band of BMX brothers	5 Nov 2011, ST
	Collecting vintage, sharing memories	26 Nov 2011, ST
	S'pore blogshop sales hit \$96m this year	23 Dec 2011, TBT
	Insta-cash	5 Mar 2013, TNP
	People even curse me with miscarriage	31 Mar 2013, TNPS
	Bloggers & their endorsements	16 Jun 2013, TNPS
	Physical appearance	Model owners
Hey, doll face		11 May 2012, ST
Online queen bees born to pose		27 Aug 2012, ST

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*Influencers, Social Media, and the Commodification of Everyday Life*

	Fashion that K-pops!	28 Jun 2013, ST
	We never wear the same outfit twice	30 Jun 2013, TNPS
Appearance enhancement	Plastic fantastic	2 Jul 2010, ST
	Blogging about boob job is her springboard	9 Oct 2011, TNPS
	Is her new look worth \$136,000	26 Feb 2012, TNPS
	She's FLAT but not deflated	20 Jul 2012, TNP
	Bloggers who have gone under the knife	25 Jul 2012, TNP
	Blogger is happy to blab about face job	26 Jul 2012, TNP
	Singaporeans flock abroad for nip and tuck	6 May 2013, ST
	Going plastic to look perfect	21 May 2013, TNP
	Surgical boosts	11 Nov 2012, TNPS
	Painful to look beautiful	11 Nov 2012, TNPS
Personal profiles/Social impact	1 in 3 young people regularly shops online	9 Sep 2010, ST
	Sexy, savvy, sassy: Hungry for hits	9 Oct 2011, TNPS
	Turn-off of the year	16 Dec 2011, TNP
	Singapore's own fashion bloggers	19 Feb 2012, TNPS
	Social marketing with a gush	12 Mar 2012, TBT
	Casting their netizen It could	8 Apr 2012, TNPS

*Appendix C*  
*Newspaper reports on blogshops and Influencers between Jan 2007 and Jun 2013*

	be you	
	Blogger's revenge gets mixed reactions	25 May 2012, ST
	Blogger Xiauxue: I will not change	25 May 2012, TNP
	Blogger Xiauxue fights back against Facebook abuse	25 May 2012, ST
	Mr Brown's 1 1/2-hour scare	2 Jun 2012, TNP
	Xiauxue defends her actions over Facebook abuse	6 Jun 2012, ST
	Love Xiauxue or hate her	16 Jun 2012, ST
	Brothers steal the show at blog awards	22 Jul 2012, TST
	These girls are blog-booked	3 Aug 2012, ST
	Netizens have tea at Istana with PM	31 Aug 2012, ST
	PM meets YouTube child stars	31 Aug 2012, ST
	Career all made up	16 Sep 2012, TST
	Cyber agents	23 Sep 2012, TST
	Priceless presents	25 Dec 2012, ST
	Twin power	9 Mar 2013, ST
	fAME and that f-word	15 Mar 2013, ST
	Just who is Xiauxue?	31 Mar 2013, TNPS
	Stop! In the name of the blog	25 May 2013, TNP
	S'pore social media stars	31 May 2013, TNP
	Blog awards unveil 190	7 Jun 2013, ST

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	finalists	
	Script changed just for YouTube star	28 Dec 2012, TNP
Miscellaneous	Look out for contact lenses sold online	8 Feb 2009, TST
	Wanted: Cheap replicas. Found: Online con-jobs	2 Mar 2009, TNP
	Blogshops warned to stop contact lens sales	10 Mar 2009, ST
	Blogshop woman jailed for cheating 37 buyers	14 Aug 2009, ST
	Blogshops today, close shops tomorrow	8 Jul 2010, TNP
	Slow delivery bugs SingPost customers	19 Dec 2010, TST
	Complaints against online vendors up	3 Jan 2011, ST
	Beauty products sold online: The ugly truth	14 Feb 2011, ST
	Three teen blogshop owners in trouble	29 Oct 2011, ST
	Up in arms over branded-bag sale	6 Jan 2012, TNP
	Singaporean users expose possible 'Insta-scam'	5 Mar 2013, TNP
	Singing his pain away	19 Mar 2013, TNP

*Appendix C*  
*Newspaper reports on blogshops and Influencers between Jan 2007 and Jun 2013*

*Legend*

MP: *My Paper*

ST: *Straits Times*

TBT: *The Business Times*

TNP: *The New Paper*

TNPS: *The New Paper on Sunday* (weekend edition of *The New Paper*)

TST: *The Sunday Times* (weekend edition of *Straits Times*)

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*Appendix D*  
*Glossary*

## **Appendix D: Glossary**

### *Digital platforms*

**AskFM:** A platform on which users can conduct Questions & Answers (Q&A) with other users who may be identified by their handles or remain anonymous; similar to Formspring.

**Blogger:** A blog publishing platform.

**Facebook:** A platform and smartphone application that is a social networking site; unique for allowing users to create Profiles which are structured more personally and intended for broadcasting, networking, and archiving, and Pages which are structured more professionally and primarily for broadcasts and interactions with “fans”.

**Formspring:** A platform on which users can conduct Questions & Answers (Q&A) with other users who may be identified by their handles or remain anonymous; similar to AskFM.

**Instagram:** A smartphone application on which users can share images and videos; unique for its highly aesthetic visual appeal.

**LiveJournal:** A blog publishing platform; unique for its “friending” system in which users are able to view whom others follow and are being followed by.

**Meitu Xiuxiu:** A smartphone application on which users are able to beautify their images (usually selfies) through in-built buttons or customized functions.

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**Skype:** A platform and smartphone application on which users can communicate via text messaging, voice calls, and video conferencing via webcam or phonecam.

**Snapchat:** A smartphone application on which users can share images and videos that can only be viewed once; unique for its ephemerality.

**Twitter:** A platform and smartphone application on which users can share short broadcasts known as Tweets through texts (140 characters per tweet) or images (four per Tweet).

**WhatsApp:** A platform and smartphone application on which users can send dyad or group text messages.

**WordPress:** A blog publishing platform; unique for accommodating a high degree of personalization to resemble a professional website.

**YouTube:** A video publishing platform.

—

*“Relatability”*

**Accessibility:** How easy it is to approach an Influencer in digital and physical spaces.

**Authenticity:** How genuine an Influencer’s *actual* lifestyle and sentiments are.



*Appendix D*  
*Glossary*

**Believability:** How convincing and realistic an Influencer's *depicted* lifestyle and sentiments are.

**Emulatability:** How easy it is for followers to model themselves after an Influencer's lifestyle.

**Intimacy:** How familiar and close followers feel to an Influencer.

—

*Vernacular terminology*

**@mention:** To hyperlink to another user's handle when mentioning/responding to them on social media platforms.

**Advertorial:** A pastiche of "advertisement" and "editorial"; highly personalized, opinion-laden promotions of products/services that Influencers personally use and endorse for a fee.

**Blogshop:** A pastiche of the "web blog" and "shop"; online commercial businesses that manifest as web blogs.

**Bots:** Dummy, purchased accounts used to boost follower counts.

**Camping out:** Staking out on digital devices (laptops or smartphones) and constantly refreshing a page in order to view preempted new content as soon as it is published.

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*Influencers, Social Media, and the Commodification of Everyday Life*

**Duapai:** A term in Singlish and colloquial Hokkien to signify a big shot.

**Emoji:** Small digital icons used to express ideas and emotion.

**Emoticon:** “graphological realizations of facial expressions” (Zappavigna 2012: 71) using keyboard characters.

**Favourite:** To express acknowledgement, affection, or approval of another user’s social media post indicated through clicking a “favourite” button; used on Twitter.

**Flatlay:** A genre of (mostly Instagram) photography in which users display their ensemble (apparel, accessories, makeup, shoes, etc.) on a flat surfaced to be photographed.

**Hashtag (#):** A hash sign (#) added to a compound word or phrase and attached to social media posts in order for them to be searchable and filtered according to topic or channel.

**Handle:** A person’s username specific to individual social media platforms.

**Hype:** Frenzied interest in something generated quickly within a short span of time, only to die down very quickly as well.

**Kiasuism:** A term in Singlish for the fear of losing out to others and being hyper-competitive as a result.

**Influencer:** Everyday, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in “digital” and “physical”

*Appendix D*  
*Glossary*

spaces, and monetize their following by integrating “advertorials” into their blog or social media posts.

**Leetspeak:** Stylized web-writing alphabet that appropriates a combination of upper and lower case letters and numerals to replace Latin letters.

**Like:** To express acknowledgement, affection, or approval of another user’s social media post indicated through clicking a “like” button; used on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube.

**OOTD:** Outfit Of The Day; images featuring full body photographs of someone’s attire.

**Paiseh:** A term in Singlish and colloquial Hokkien meaning to be embarrassed.

**Pre-loved:** A euphemism for second-hand goods, usually apparel and accessories.

**ReTweet (RT):** To forward on another user’s social media post by republishing it on your own feed; used on Twitter.

**Sayang:** A term in Singlish and colloquial Malay meaning to take care of, dote on, or care for someone.

**Selfie:** Digital self-portraits in which one controls the framing of the image with a photographic device (camera or smartphone).

**Shout outs:** Publicizing another user’s content on your own feed that usually has a much higher follower count, and thus much higher exposure.

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**Singlish:** A creole of Singaporean colloquial English.

**Tagging:** To hyperlink to another user's social media profile either in text or in images.

**To trend:** To be among the most searched or most talked about content on a particular social media platform within a short period of time.

**Viral:** To be widely circulated on the Internet very suddenly within a short period of time.

**Vlog:** Video blog; blogs in the form of a video.

*Appendix E*  
*Participant Information Form (PIF) & Participant Consent Form (PCF)*

**Appendix E: Participant Information  
 Form (PIF) & Participant Consent Form  
 (PCF)**



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
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20 March 2012

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

I am Assistant Professor Richard Davis from the Department of Anthropology and Sociology, School of Social and Cultural Sciences, Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Western Australia. This is an invitation seeking your participation in an academic exercise. My research focus involves online commercial blogs/blogshops in Singapore, and I am interested in why and how women between the ages of 18 and 35 buy and sell products on the Internet. I am the Chief Investigator for this project, and Ms Crystal Abidin, a Doctor of Philosophy candidate whom I am supervising, will be liaising with you throughout this project.

Participants are mainly young women aged between 18 and 35 who participate in the online commercial blog/blogshop scene in Singapore. Participants were selected based on the popularity and/or success of their blogs/blogshops, measured by a combination of (a) the number of visitor counts; (b) the number of visitors who have signed up for the blogshop's mailing list; (c) the number of mentions and/or strength of presence on the Internet and/or mainstream media; (d) recommendations by actors in the blogshop scene (i.e., blogshop owners, models, customers, reviewers, etc.) whom I have been in contact with.

Research and data collection will be conducted online. If you agree, I will focus on your blog/blogshop (i.e., the website from which you sell/purchase/advertise products) and other publicly-accessible social media that is part of your enterprise, such as Facebook fan pages; Twitter and Formspring accounts; and the blogs of the blogshop's model(s) and owner(s) where they are publicly linked through these social media platforms.

I am particularly interested in the way in which young women feature their lives as a tool for selling products. The importance of this is the extent to which their desire to use their personal lives to sell products generates discussion about how new media merges public and private lives, and how this connects to issues around celebrity. The reason for this is that this is a new form of youth commercial activity that invites lots of personal comment and interaction between blogshop owners and customers. It is a frontline youth movement that little is known about, but which shows us how young people are using the Internet in innovative and entrepreneurial ways.

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The data collected will allow me to analyze blogshops in relation to online entrepreneurship, cyber-spaces, and beauty. Unless the participant wishes to disclose her identity in the academic exercise, pseudonyms will be employed throughout the research and images depicting participants will be edited to protect your identity. In this project there are two levels of data; primary and secondary. Primary data includes interviews, interview transcripts, observations, photos of persons and any thing that requires permission to record. All primary data will be stored on the researcher's password-protected personal laptop. It will not be made available to any other person. Secondary data is my interpretation and analysis of the primary material and this secondary data will be shared between my academic supervisors and I.

There are no foreseeable harms in the participation of this academic exercise. Participation in this academic exercise is voluntary and the participant is free to withdraw from the research at any time without prejudice in any way. The participant need give no reason or justification for withdrawing. In such cases the researcher will destroy the information obtained prior to my withdrawal, unless the researcher requests for my consent to retain the records for academic study. Should you have any queries or clarifications to make, the Chief Investigator and his research candidate may be contacted at:

Assistant Professor Richard Davis  
Chief Investigator  
[richard.davis@uwa.edu.au](mailto:richard.davis@uwa.edu.au)  
+61 8 6488 2847

Ms Crystal Abidin  
Research Candidate  
20884533@student.uwa.edu.au  
+61 466 373 704

*Your participation in this study does not prejudice any right to compensation, which you may have under statute or common law.*

*Approval to conduct this research has been provided by The University of Western Australia, in accordance with its ethics review and approval procedures. Any person considering participation in this research project, or agreeing to participate, may raise any questions or issues with the researchers at any time.*

*In addition, any person not satisfied with the response of researchers may raise ethics issues or concerns, and may make any complaints about this research project by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at The University of Western Australia on (08) 6488 3703 or by emailing to [hreo-research@uwa.edu.au](mailto:hreo-research@uwa.edu.au)*

*All research participants are entitled to retain a copy of any Participant Information Form and/or Participant Consent Form relating to this research project.*

Thank you.  
Sincerely,

---

Assistant Professor Richard Davis

Appendix E  
Participant Information Form (PIF) & Participant Consent Form (PCF)



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
WESTERN AUSTRALIA

*Achieve International Excellence*

**Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences  
School of Social and Cultural Studies**

Anthropology and Sociology  
The University of Western Australia (M255)  
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E [anthsoc@cyllene.uwa.edu.au](mailto:anthsoc@cyllene.uwa.edu.au)

CRICOS Provider Code: 00126G

20 March 2012

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have read the information provided and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this activity, realizing that I may withdraw at any time without reason and without prejudice. In such cases the researcher will destroy the information obtained prior to my withdrawal, unless the researcher requests for my consent to retain the records for academic study.

I understand that all identifiable (attributable) information that I provide is treated as strictly confidential and will not be released by the investigator in any form that may identify me, unless otherwise agreed to. The only exception to this principle of confidentiality is if documents are required by law.

I have been advised as to what data is being collected, the purpose for collecting the data, and what will be done with the data upon completion of the research.

I agree that research data gathered for the study may be published provided my name or other identifying information is not used.

\_\_\_\_\_

Participant

Date

*Approval to conduct this research has been provided by The University of Western Australia, in accordance with its ethics review and approval procedures. Any person considering participation in this research project, or agreeing to participate, may raise any questions or issues with the researchers at any time.*

*In addition, any person not satisfied with the response of researchers may raise ethics issues or concerns, and may make any complaints about this research project by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at The University of Western Australia on (08) 6488 3703 or by emailing to [hreo-research@uwa.edu.au](mailto:hreo-research@uwa.edu.au)*

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