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#In\$tagLam: Instagram as a Repository of Taste, a Burgeoning Marketplace, a War of Eyeballs

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Abstract: Bloggers in Singapore are fast becoming Asia's upcoming generation of lucrative entrepreneurs, some with earnings rolling into the millions. Through 'lifestyle blogs' containing personal diary entries interwoven with personalized advertorials and paid reviews, their private lives become a tool for selling products and services, and this manufactured celebrity has in recent years begun to be broadcast on other social media enterprises. Among these, Instagram is the fastest growing media application among mobile-savvy users in Singapore (TNP September 1st, 2013). As a result of these emergent practices, entanglements such as the ownership of hashtags, competitive strategies to be featured on Instagram's 'Popular Page', and tagging 'wars' have begun to circulate within an industry where personal lives are real-time billboards to eager, watchful eyeballs.

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A silver tray of finger food has finally arrived at our table during a bloggers-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 nonbloggers 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 bloggers. Mid-sentence, the 18-year-old's cell 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 (6 p.m.) 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 toward the window, 'then my Instagram photo will be nice'.

With island-wide Wi-Fi spots (iDA 2013), 87% smartphone penetration (Media Research Asia 2013), and 123% mobile Internet penetration (Singh 2014) for a population of almost 5.4 million (Singstat 2013), Singapore is one of the most 'wired' nations in the world (Tan 2009). Instagram is also the fastest growing media application among mobile-savvy users, with its share of total social site visits growing '8,121 per cent in Singapore between July 2011 and July 2012' (Aw Yeong 2013).

Although designed as an app that spontaneously catalogues one's life 'as they happen' (Instagram 2013a), the three vignettes above showcase Emma, Ryan, and Linda laboring over their photographs to portray a crafted persona. Like many lifestyle bloggers in Singapore since early 2012 (personal notes), they have monetized Instagram as an advertising space.

Instagram is a free photo-sharing smartphone app that requires an Internet or 3G connections. Users may tag their photos into searchable categories by adding the hash key in front of a word or short phrase; this is known as a 'hashtag'. 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 photograph. 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 known as the ‘Explore Tab’ (Instagram 2013b)—that showcases 15 trending posts worldwide. Featured users often gain a sizable number of new followers. Many Singaporean bloggers make it to Instagram’s ‘Popular Page’ regularly, even writing ‘how to’ guides on their blogs.

International news reports reveal how Instagram is used for business, including American retailers hawking wares (Rosenberg 2013), Saudi women selling cosmetics (Ahmad 2014), and Australian women advertising products (Bennett 2014). Scholarly studies have investigated Instagram’s use to engage undergraduates in teaching and learning (Salomon 2013), analyze location-based visual information flows (Hochman and Schwartz 2013), communicate the museum experience (Weilenmann et al. 2013), and in photojournalism visually document war (Alper 2013). Caumont describes cell phones as ‘the third screen, in addition to television and computers’ (Caumont in Goggin 2006, 162) that advertisers are increasingly using to reach their target audience. Following on, this chapter is an ethnographic study of how commercial lifestyle bloggers in Singapore use Instagram for their business.

While they may have made their debut on blogs, commercial lifestyle bloggers are now using Instagram extensively. I refer to them as ‘bloggers’ rather than ‘Instagrammers’ for two reasons; first because blogging is the mainstay of their industry, and secondly to differentiate them from web personalities who have a presence solely on Instagram.

Wendy Cheng, better known by her blog persona Xiauxue, is Asia-Pacific’s most prolific commercial blogger and the winner of several regional blog awards. As of January 2014, Xiauxue boasts 40,000 daily blog views, 177,000 Twitter followers, and 449,000 Instagram followers. On her blog, she details receiving sponsorship for her house renovation and interior design, valued at an estimated SGD\$100,000. She also received a year’s use of three different vehicles from a car dealer. In exchange, Xiauxue advertises for the companies on her social media platforms. In most arrangements, bloggers receive payment for advertising. Popular commercial bloggers are usually signed to blog advertising companies—whose managers broker such collaborations and endorsements—while others work freelance. Both groups, however, need to consistently

maintain their Instagram personas to lure followers, and do so by curating Instagram posts to perform a desirable lifestyle.

The data is drawn from fieldwork undertaken between December 2012 and July 2013. It comprises personal interviews, observations in bloggers' working environments, and observations of bloggers' Instagram feeds. Pseudonyms are used. The chapter has three aims. First, it shows how lifestyle bloggers use Instagram to 'perform' taste. Secondly, it situates Instagram as an innovative medium for advertising in the electronic market place. Thirdly, it investigates bloggers' strategies to increase their viewership. This chapter argues that commercial bloggers labor to manufacture a commercial Instagram persona, to such a degree of calculated performativity that it has evolved into a lifestyle.

Like me! Instagram as a repository of taste

Bloggers maintain their ongoing Instagram personas 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. One post reveals up to SGD\$6,000 of leather goods. Linda has a 'megaphone effect' on her viewers, in which ordinary nonprofessional consumers independently publicize their consumption practices, and accumulate a 'mass audience of strangers' (McQuarrie et al. 2013, 137).

Linda rarely reveals her nonluxury items, despite them being the mainstay of her wardrobe 'off Instagram', to channel a 'pecuniary taste'. This borrows from Veblen's notion of 'pecuniary beauty', in which expensive objects are perceived as more desirable and beautiful because people increasingly value wealth (Veblen 1961). 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 bloggers, however, Linda makes an exception for the low-end mass produced apparel that she models on her Instagram for a fee. Her labor to portray a luxurious Instagram persona obscures the fact that she is actually working for an income.

'Pecuniary taste' here extends to displaying one's sociality and personal networks. Some bloggers only post group photographs with fellow commercial bloggers, excluding personal friends who are not

familiar faces to Instagram followers. These boundary markers embed them within a particular class of successful bloggers, thus establishing the value and exclusivity of their social network.

Evidently for commercial bloggers, using Instagram is less about making ‘memor[ies] to keep around forever’ (Instagram 2013a) and more about catering to an audience. 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 bloggers constantly deliberate over the value of an image. As arbiters of taste, some women bloggers even cosmetically manipulate their bodies 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 bloggers adopted porcelain skin tones, enlarged dark pupils, and blonde hair. Commercial bloggers thus reflexively critique and discipline their bodies to convey a desirable Instagram persona.

Photo-taking skills are crucial in the industry, as blogger managers refer to it as a talent that is difficult to train, whereas other aspects of the business such as good writing skills and carrying yourself well can be developed. This capacity to create aesthetically pleasing images is an ‘inborn taste’, to borrow from Veblen’s notion of ‘inborn beauty’ (Veblen 1961). Unlike pecuniary taste, inborn taste is posited as an innate ability. Gronow refers to this as a ‘judgment power’ (Gronow 1997) that is irrational and arbitrary, although widely agreed upon by most people. Both types of taste are alternative ladders for bloggers 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 bloggers conscientiously hone their public personas as arbiters of taste.

However, what is excluded from bloggers’ Instagram 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. Bloggers thus labor over maintaining the congruence of their persona to remain believable to followers. In summary, only bloggers whose Instagram portray a desirable upper-middle-class lifestyle, whose bodies channel hegemonic beauty, and whose persona is congruent, attract a sizable number of followers, and thus, advertisers.

Buy me! Instagram as a burgeoning market place

Commercial bloggers' aptitude for creating and sustaining social media trends has been monetized by the sale of advertising space. In this process they are exchanging their acquired cultural capital for financial gain. However, this requires maintaining a balance between commerciality and intimacy, and distributing viewership between Instagram and blogs. Followers are most receptive to posts that seamlessly meld into a blogger's daily stream, and lose interest in bloggers who have become too commercialized (Kozinets et al. 2010). Therefore, bloggers must ensure that sponsored posts do not take precedence over 'personal' posts, and avoid 'selling out'. After all, commercial bloggers started out as ordinary people who are more accessible and believable than mainstream celebrities, and whose credibility is based on their ability to relate to the experiences of average consumers. To obscure the commerciality of their business and maintain intimacy with followers, Anna bookends each advert with a 'personal' post, while Irene integrates products into her signature 'selfies' (self-portrait photographs taken with a handheld phone or camera).

By mid-2013, blog readership decreased drastically. Instagram became the most popular social media app. This was detrimental as blogs are more effective than Instagram in terms of selling power, because they allow space for lengthy, detailed advertorials. Ryan laments that his 'Insta [followers] are increasing but blog [viewership] is decreasing'. He is focused on improving his Instagram posts to 'lure readers back' to his blog. Bloggers have begun publishing 'selfie' shots announcing a new blogpost. Hashtags such as #blogged and #ontheblog were introduced to adapt this self-promotion into stylized 'Instagram speak'. These innovations, while appearing like creative wordplay, are in fact deliberate efforts to steer readership toward avenues that are more profitable for bloggers. In general, bloggers have to maintain their Instagram personas without appearing too commercialized. They must develop creative strategies to integrate advertisements into their feed, and redirect Instagram viewership to their blogs to increase their advertising revenue.

Watch me! Instagram as a war of eyeballs

Ryan's calculated release of both commercial and 'personal' Instagram posts is common among bloggers. For followers in the Singapore time

zone, bloggers identify weekday mornings between 8 and 10 am, and evenings between 7 and 9 pm as 'high traffic' periods. These coincide with the close of business rush hours, when users are not engaged in formal work and use their phones recreationally. Bloggers like Amanda purposely schedule their prospective Instagram posts, and 'save #ootd outfits for good days.' Emma even has a pen-and-paper diary in which she notes which photos to publish weekly. This dependency on apps such as Instagram is why bloggers like Christine have at least two 'fully charged portable battery packs' for her phone. It is also why Yvonne turned down the opportunity for an exotic holiday because the remote island had no data roaming networks. Maintaining an Instagram persona has thus made 'lifestyle' and 'work' one and the same for these bloggers. Their lifestyles are no longer demarcated into formal work hours and recreational nonwork hours because maintaining a congruent Instagram persona necessitates continuous deliberations over all facets of life.

Some bloggers adopt hashtags to wrestle attention from competitors. Unique hashtags circulate their posts across different categories. For instance, if Marie hashtags her photograph with '#ootd #brunch #girl #mariepix' users who explore the feeds of any of the first three globally popular hashtags will also see Marie's posts. On it, they will notice her unique '#mariepix' hashtag and be enticed to click into her personal stream that archives all the posts hashtagged this way. However, creating unique hashtags are only personal and 'exclusive' to the blogger until they become appropriated or 'hijacked' by other users who 'piggy-back' on the success of others' hashtags.

Hijacking is a colloquial term that refers to other users taking advantage of personal hashtag streams by spamming or self-advertising. These infiltrations disrupt bloggers' Instagram personas by breaking the coherence of the lifestyle they perform—at times to the extent that the hashtag is abandoned altogether. Some bloggers publish pleas to play fair or shame unethical users, while others adapt and transform their personal hashtags once they have been made redundant. One example is fictional blogger Mary Anne Lim, who would evolve her hashtag from #maryannelim to #MALblogs to #maryannelimsg. Other bloggers create pastiche text with leetspeak (an informal alphabet replacing letters with numerals and characters that is used primarily on the Internet), such as modifying #ootd into #oo7d. Hence, while it appears frivolous, wrestling for limelight on hashtag streams is in fact a measured process bloggers' use to promote themselves. In summary, bloggers constantly generate new approaches to command the

attention of their viewers as the industry becomes increasingly saturated. They do so by tactically publishing posts in prime time slots, scheduling posts in advance, and adopting the use of global and personal hashtags.

The #In\$tagLam lifestyle

Instagram is a medium through which commercial lifestyle bloggers 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 chapter demonstrate bloggers’ creative adaptations of Instagram, which have arisen from its commercial appropriation. Be it Emma’s predisposition to photographing food, Ryan’s deliberations over primetime slots, or Linda’s labor over creating perfect (yet seemingly spontaneous) shots, performing commercial personas on Instagram is strenuous because a lot of effort is needed to ‘manufacture’ a persona that is desirable. In fact, this labor requires such a degree of calculated performativity that it has evolved into a lifestyle.

Commercial bloggers labor to portray a desirable upper-middle-class lifestyle and channel hegemonic ideals of beauty through their bodies. This attracts viewers to vicariously experience their lives by subscribing to their Instagram feed. To maintain viewer interest, they appropriate creative strategies to obscure the commerciality of their posts. They also redirect the attention they receive on Instagram to their blogs to increase advertising revenue. As the industry becomes increasingly saturated, bloggers constantly generate approaches to compete for the attention of viewers. To do so, they labor over prime time slots, scheduling posts, and the use of hashtags. They also maintain their smartphone’s battery life and Internet connection in order to be constantly connected to Instagram. Bloggers who successfully capture an audience who will ‘Like them,’ ‘Buy them,’ and ‘Watch them’ will have long careers in the industry.

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