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Agentic cute (^.^): Pastiching East Asian cute in Influencer commerce

ABSTRACT

There has yet to be a definitive study of cute culture that is organically Singaporean. Drawing on existing work on East Asian cute culture and the regional popularity of commercial social media microcelebrities or 'Influencers' in Singapore, this article annotates three modes of agentic cute used to obscure the soft power that Influencers hold. Through the qualitative textual and visual analysis of content from three popular Singaporean Influencers, and their associated blogs and social media, this article examines how three tropes that I term 'the Doll', 'the Darling' and 'the Dear' are enacted as cute femininities among adult woman. It argues that the subversive power of this performative cuteness is obscured by the corresponding sensual delight, romantic docility and homosocial desire that the Influencers develop in tandem with their cute self-presentations. By continually emphasizing stereotypical gendered relationships with their male partners, and relations with their followers, these Influencers are able to position themselves as non-threatening and submissive, when they are in fact quietly subverting these hierarchies for personal gain.

PASTICHING EAST ASIAN CUTE

Within East Asia, cuteness in adult women has been theorized and studied as Japanese kawaii, South Korean aegyo, and Taiwanese and mainland Chinese

saijao. In her study on Japanese cute, Yano posits that the cute consumption Tokyo women partake of is 'assertively in-your-face kawaii', referencing the Hello Kitty-clad youths parading their 'cute overload' fashion while posing for cameras in Harajuku. Some genres of kawaii include 'Sweet Lolita', which involves Victorian-era dress styles fashioned after porcelain dolls in baby pink hues (Yano 2009: 681, 685); 'Gothic Lolita', which takes a punk spin on Sweet Lolita with dark make-up and black lace; and 'Cosplay', where women may role play characters from manga, anime, games or movies. Kawaii also entails the cultivation of behaviours and mannerisms such as adopting a higher pitched 'baby' voice or emulating the syntax of a child by referring to oneself in the third person. This genre of performance is known as burikko, where adult women feign childlike behaviours. Drawing on her work among Japanese high school girls, Allison suggests that kawaii is associated with amae, 'a sweetness connected to dependence', and yasahii, a 'gentleness' (2010: 385). This kawaii normatively corresponds to 'girls and girlishness' (2010: 385) and is actively pursued by girls who desire protection and care from their male partners. Despite its attention commanding propensities, kawaii is still primarily associated with a 'feminized position that is born in passivity' (Yano 2009: 686) because its eye-catching performance is meant to solicit affect from the viewer.

In South Korea, aegyo encompasses both 'linguistic and non-linguistic, non-verbal behavior' that is 'charming', 'cute', and indicates 'qualities associated with childhood' (Strong 2013: 127). Aegyo speech registers tended to be higher pitched with a higher repetition of sounds (Strong 2013), a 'nasalized and ventriculated voice quality' that 'demonstrates femininity' (Harkness 2013: 24), and a 'distorted child-like voice' with vocabulary choices that imply 'helplessness or confusion' (Puzar 2011: 99). In text-based communication, this learned vulnerability may be expressed with 'sad and crying emoticons' (2011: 99). Puzar expands on the non-verbal behaviour of aegyo as:

> acting charming yet childish, vulnerable and volatile, pretending sudden surprise or unmotivated sadness or anger including pounding of feet, lighting kicking the partner with closed fist, pout, bloated cheeks […] along with the highest regard for physical appearances, including cosmetic and surgical interventions, wearing circle eye lenses, etc.
>
> (2011: 99)

More crucially, Puza's preliminary findings have discovered that aegyo is androcentric, given that this speech register is used substantially less within female-only schools as compared to co-ed environments (2011: 99).

In Taiwan, sajiao is a type of register variation (Hudson 1980) with vocal inflexions that model after babytalk or a vocal feature known as fadia or wawa yin which literally translates as 'babyish voice' (Yueh 2013: 166, 171). Wawa yin is commonly associated with the Mandarin concepts ke-ai, meaning cuteness, and wugu, meaning innocence, which when performed together reflects an ideal Taiwanese woman who is 'tiny', 'childish' and 'controllable' (Yueh 2013: 167–68). In her study on babytalk and the voice of authority among young children in Taiwan, Farris borrows from Ferguson (1978) and specifies the modifications of babytalk as 'prosody (e.g. higher pitch), grammar (e.g. shorter sentences), lexicon (e.g. special vocabulary – 'doggie', 'pee-pee'), phonology (e.g. simplification of consonant clusters), and discourse (e.g. more questions)' (Farris 1992: 188–89). Similar to the linguistic features of

the Japanese kawaii and South Korean aegyo, sajiao borrows from archetypal Chinese babytalk that is slow, soft and nasal, references others in a deferential first person, and uses sentence-final vocal particles such as *ma* and *la* to 'soften' one's delivery (Farris 1992: 197). Yueh, a native speaker of Taiwanese Mandarin, further expands on the gendered and infantile appropriation of sajiao to include: the reduplication of short phrases and monosyllabic words; first person 'directness' when displaying a verbal expression; the 'transliteration' of non-Mandarin words such as vocalizing 'baby' as bě*ibi*; and hypocorisms (2013: 161).

Non-verbal characteristics of sajiao may include 'pouting', 'smiling' and 'shoulder twists' (Farris 1992: 197), and is best enacted by women who are 'small', 'tiny', 'thin', 'seemingly controllable' and 'helpless' (Yueh 2013: 171) to maintain visual congruence with the infantile vocal inflexions performed. Sajiao is a skill that women can develop through socialization (Yueh 2013: 169), and serves the secondary uses of intimate exchange between lovers (Ferguson 1978), or stylized courtship behaviour (Farris 1992: 206). Following from this, sajiao can be read as an expression of the dynamics between masculinity and femininity (1992: 187), and adulthood and childhood, and is commonly employed by Taiwanese women to solicit 'love' and 'attention' (Yueh 2013: 170) from a male partner by positioning themselves as 'subordinate' or 'pleading' (1992: 196) for soft 'manipulation' (Farris 1992: 197; Yueh 2013: 162) and 'persuasion' (Yueh 2013: 159), to 'evoke dependency and help' from a carer (Farris 1992: 200). Sajiao is a 'powerful weapon' (Yueh 2013: 170) for women to exaggerate emotive expressions, evade tensions, and direct others through the exercise of soft power (Nye 1990).

Sajiao culture in mainland China is similar to that of Taiwan. In her study of Chinese urban female youth and the online feizhuliu (non-mainstream) culture, Qiu defines sajiao as 'deliberately act[ing] like a spoiled child in front of someone because of the awareness of the other person's affection' (2012: 232), and that '[t]o be jiao is to be delicate, dependent and vulnerable' (2012: 232). Such infantile yet coquettish behaviour is meant to incite gentle affection, towards which Qiu notes most Chinese men respond favourably. In addition to these facets of Taiwanese sajiao, Qiu lists additional mobilizations of Chinese sajiao enacted by women who are of marriageable age such as to 'coo in a baby voice, bat their eyelashes or pout using big puppy eyes' (2012: 232) as some mobilizations of Chinese sajiao.

INFLUENCERS IN SINGAPORE

It has been argued that Singapore is 'culturally a rather defensive space, constantly vigilant against 'polluting' influences from the 'constitutive' outside' (Chua 2000: 135). Perhaps it is for this reason that the Singaporean cute in the Influencer industry does not draw singularly from Japanese (Jpop), Korean (Kpop), Taiwanese or Chinese cultures, but instead refashions and localizes emblems from across East Asia. At present, there has yet to be a definitive study of cute culture that is organically Singaporean. Studies have looked at the influence of Hello Kitty (Ng 2001) and Japanese media and cultural products (Hao and Teh 2004) in Singapore, but not yet on Singaporeans per se. Drawing on existing work on East Asian cute culture and the regional popularity of Influencers in Singapore, this article annotates three modes of agentic cute as femininized strategies performed by adult woman Influencers to sustain their viewership. It argues that these three modes, the Doll, the

Darling, and the Dear, emerge as somatic visual cues and behavioural patterns pastiching from East Asian cute, and can be strategically enacted as a practice to solicit compliance, empathy, care or desire.

Since 2005 in Singapore, many young women have taken to social media to deliberately craft microcelebrity (Senft 2008) personae as a career role known as 'Influencer'. On their blogs, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, AskFM, and other social media, they document their everyday lives from the trivial and mundane to exciting snippets of the exclusive opportunities provided by their line of work. This form of blog and social media publishing falls within the 'lifestyle' genre, where a woman's life 'as lived' is the central theme of the output. Those with a strong enough viewership are able to monetize their social media platforms in three ways: (1) by selling advertising space on their sites in the form of a click through image or URL; (2) by writing personalized advertorials, which are advertisements in the form of an editorial opinion; and (3) by taking on sponsorships for various brands and companies (Abidin 2014b).

In fact, these women are increasingly substituting for mainstream television and cinema celebrities as spokespersons and ambassadors for a wide variety of campaigns and initiatives. Outside of the entertainment industry, the women have also been co-opted into the education industry, being engaged by secondary schools, junior colleges, and polytechnics to give talks on topics ranging from entrepreneurship to mental and sexual health (Abidin forthcoming). They have even appeared on the fringes of politics, being invited to have tea sessions and webcast dialogues with ministers in the cabinet, to name a few. While there are male participants, Influencers in Singapore are predominantly women aged between 15 and 30. In reflection of Singapore's national ethnic make-up, the majority of them are Chinese and predominantly use English.

Within East Asia, the Singaporean Influencer industry is one of the most established since its first 'commercial lifestyle blogger' (predecessor of 'Influencer') debuted in 2005. Several Influencer management firms were set up specifically to groom talents and upcoming social media microcelebrities, as well as to broker business deals between advertisers and these young women. For Influencers, this social media commerce is mediated via a commercial persona that the women carefully craft to portray only selected aspects of their lives (Abidin 2014a). Among the social scripts that these Influencers 'role-model' (Abidin and Thompson 2012) for their audience are the gendered scripts encountered by the author during extensive fieldwork between December 2011 and July 2013. Data captures from blogs and social media platforms were taken between June 2012 and March 2014, and are part of a larger ethnographic research project undertaken by the author since 2010.

Much of the analysis is shaped by personal interviews and participant observation conducted with these Influencers in the flesh, allowing for an in-depth understanding of agentic cuteness as strategic performance. A grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967) was adopted in the thematic coding of all content in a bid to theorize cuteness in the Influencer landscape in Singapore. All three Influencers belong to the 'lifestyle' genre. Charmaine has been blogging since 2010, Denise since 2005, and Penelope since 2011. They belong to the 16–19, 20–25 and 26–30 age groups, respectively. In the discussion that follows, each Influencer is observed simultaneously deploying performances emblematic of all three agentic cute tropes, given that the modes of the Doll, the Darling and the Dear are flexible strategies

(as opposed to static personae) that can be enacted and emphasized as needed. In my analysis, I explain how each trope is best embodied by a particular Influencer, and how the other two Influencers perform other aspects of the tropic performance, in order to fully explicate the workings of the agentic cute trope in question. Pseudonyms are employed and lengthy direct quotes are avoided to reduce the traceability of their social media content that is public.

Chua (2000) argues that while '"cute" may be a term of endearment […] "cuteness" in behaviour and configured appearances […] signal[s] immaturity' (2000: 138) among Singapore youth. Japanese-influenced 'cute' is therefore shunned by some teenagers who may prefer to be read as 'tough' or 'street smart' (Chua 2003: 90). To counter this perception of immaturity, Influencers appropriate a 'fragile, helpless and playful' (Granot et al. 2014: 75) persona in tandem with underlying performances of sensuality, romantic docility and homosocial desire as a strategy for their business. More specifically, the cuteness these Singaporean Influencers engage in is thus 'consumer-oriented, contrived, cultivated, artificial, bought and sold' (Granot et al. 2014: 71), and can be understood as a script of femininity that is made coherent via 'regulatory practice' and repetitious performance (Butler 1990).

THE DOLL AND SENSUAL DELIGHT

The Doll is characterized by a visually infantile cuteness, which, insofar as it panders to ephebophillic tendencies (i.e. adult attraction towards teenagers), becomes simultaneously sexually desirable (cf. Yano 2009 on Lolita fashion). Konrad Lorenz's (1943) canonical work on Kindchenschema posited that specific paedomorphic facial features that are characteristic of infants tend to evoke affective caregiving responses. Participants in one scientific study have defined this cuteness as 'babyish' or 'pleasing to look at', with the ability to 'receive pleasure from a cute person' (Alley 1981: 650, 653). In a later study, Golle et al. specify 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' (2013: 1).

In Singapore, some of this cuteness is characterized by the 'Jpop' wave of the 1990s to early 2000s, and the more recent 'Kpop' wave[1] 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. For instance, Charmaine is known for her distinctive ulzzang (literally 'best face') style eyebrows, which are shaped to be thicker than natural eyebrows, extend from her inner eyelid past the corner of her eyes, and coloured in with a dark brown eyebrow pencil. She regularly puts on pupil-enlarging contact lens that are ornamental rather than prescriptive (see also Qiu 2012: 234). Charmaine is also fond of adding layers of baby pink blusher to give the illusion of rosy cheeks and a slimmer face. When she takes selfies, Charmaine tilts her head downwards so that her forehead and eyes seem larger, her cheeks appear rounded, and her chin smaller, thus taking the form of the paedomorphic features described in Lorenz's Kindchenschema.

In his study of dollification in South Korea, Puzar adds that 'doll images and objects, including dollified female bodies and the language of dollification' seems to have infiltrated K-pop production (Puzar 2011: 91), often appropriating an 'infantile cuteness merged with budding sexuality' (2011: 92) such as when Kpop female stars model themselves after mannequins or dolls

that 'come alive' in music videos. He discovered that there is a broader use of East Asian doll imagery and metaphors among YouTubers borrowing from the South Korean pop idol uljjang, ulzzang and eulzzang (best face) styles than that of the western Barbie, where 'dollified Asian femininity' (2011: 90) is based on a 'docile and malleable yet exotic and eroticized femininity' (2011: 90) drawn from the intersection of a western occidental gaze and local patriarchal systems.

Similarly, Penelope unabashedly declares her love for 'pastel' and 'delicate' fashion in colours resonant of baby apparel. She often adorns herself in lilac, baby pink and mellow yellow tones in soft fabric with lace trimmings. More explicitly, Penelope 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 mode of the Doll to an extreme, Denise literally embellishes her physical appearance to resemble a life sized human doll. Professionally shot in a studio, her blogmast 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 and plastic wires to simulate the rigid joints of a plastic doll, and brushed with a gloss to attain a 'certain plastic-like and waxy texture' (Puzar 2011: 100) akin to a realistic doll, albeit one that is coquettish with covert sex appeal.

The Doll inflates her sense of purity and childlikeness by pouting or pursing her lips, and staring wide-eyed into the camera (cf. saijao culture in mainland China in Qiu 2012: 234) to fashion an innocent infantile doll image, akin to the Japanese 'Sweet Lolita' kawaii (Yano 2009). Qiu argues that this 'fundamentally passive position' (2012: 235) demotes women to the status of mere sexual objects despite initially seeming to perform an agentic form of cute, since their desire to be looked at panders to an assumed masculine spectator (Mulvey in Qiu 2012: 235). In other words, the Doll is reduced to an object of desire for the male gaze (Mulvey 1975), a phallocentric scopophilia that derives pleasure from admiring women bodies on display. However, upon considering statistics from the managerial backend of Influencers, which indicate that around 80 per cent of Influencers' followers are women (personal communication), I have extended Mulvey's notion of the gaze and redefined it as a 'refracted (fe)male gaze' (Abidin and Thompson 2012: 468). Through this concept, I argue that those who look upon Influencers like the Doll are in fact fellow women who have internalized the male gaze and who now enjoy both this voyeurism and the ability to evaluate other women based on presumed heterosexual masculine desire.

Charmaine's performance of the Doll extends beyond visual imagery to include language. Ngai asserts that cuteness has become attached to 'a feminine and nationally specific way of using language' (2012: 60) in which the cute object utilizes discourse to publicize her feelings. On her social media, the Doll does this by adopting a combination of font styles, tone and vocabulary to emphasize her angelic childlikeness – Denise does this by employing multiple font colours in a single blog post, and steering towards more playful font types such as Comic Sans, Sketch Rockwell, and Chalkduster. Charmaine once customized her blog's click arrow into a mini rainbow and shooting stars, so that a string of sparkly animation greeted followers as they manoeuvred through her site. She also uses emoji and emoticons in a whimsical permutation of punctuation symbols to form cutesy expressive 'faces' in her text (cf. Puzar 2011: 99).

As the Doll, Denise also tends towards cooing expressions – as if speaking to a baby – when speaking about herself or addressing followers (cf. Farris 1992: 188–89; Ferguson 1978). In a post in which she thanks followers for their support, Denise uses the expression 'Awww...' to denote a sense of bashful appreciation. She also frequently textualizes her inner thoughts to followers with interjections such as 'Aoooh', 'Mmmm' and 'Hmmm' (cf. fadia and wawayin as Taiwanese saijao in Yueh 2013: 171). In describing her own physique when she tracks her weight loss and gain, Charmaine uses 'small sized adjectives and diminutive ejaculations' (Ngai 2012: 60) such as 'precious', 'tiny' and 'delicate' to describe her body. In addition, all three Influencers adopt playful pet names when referring to their partners as 'diminutives and forms of baby-talk' (Morreall 1991: 44; Strong 2013: 127), in a bid to position themselves as winsomely infantile. In particular, Penelope uses hypocorisms and terms of endearment such as 'babe', 'baby boy', 'hunny' and 'sugar'.

It is crucial to note that in these three instances, the performance of the Influencer's cute persona is meant to communicate romantic desirability to potential partners. She is, after all, enacting scripts of femininity in which heterosexual gender roles are being modelled for her followers. Hence, while the Doll portrays a cherubic and innocent childlikeness to solicit followers' 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 ephebophilic sensuality inherent in the Doll.

THE DARLING AND ROMANTIC DOCILITY

The Darling is characterized by her relative vulnerability and desire to be pampered by her romantic partner, and this delicateness and dependency complements 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. The first way the Darling performs romantic docility is by carefully crafting her photographs. On their social media, Influencers often post 'couple' photographs featuring them and their partner. While some of these are clearly professional photo-shoots in which Influencers are modelling for a product or advertising for a photographer, most of the photographs are 'candid' shots. These may be 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 these images. After all, in his study *Gender Advertisements*, 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 choreograp[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 modelling poses. The most basic of these is the careful angling of the Influencer's face and body to emphasize her relative physical smallness (Yueh 2013: 171). For instance,

when Charmaine operates in the mode of the Darling, she is fond of crossing her legs 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 her partner usually positions himself closer to the camera to appear larger in build. This is unlike Charmaine'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.

When Penelope acts as the Darling, she 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. The body language between both partners immediately suggests that Penelope's partner is strong and protective of her dependent and fragile person, thus evoking dependency (Farris 1992: 200) and drawing attention to 'an imbalance of power' (Ngai 2012: 54) between the Darling and her partner. The romantic docility performed by the Darling is meant to obscure the winsome manipulative power that the woman holds over her male partner.

The second way that Influencers operating in the mode of the Darling perform romantic docility is via conscientious accounts of their partner's acts of service. To underscore her 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 it to overtly pine after a partner who is temporarily absent, displaying what McIntyre terms 'a certain neediness and inability to stand alone' (2014: 4). In enacting the Darling, Charmaine routinely dramatizes her partner's little acts of service for her, such as taking her out to her 'favourite' restaurant – which she claims he had to save up for – or buying her a simple trinket that was 'hard to find', 'out of stock' or took 'weeks of searching'. Such blog posts obscure the facts that Charmaine also dines at fine restaurants with her family – meals presumably paid for by her parents – and the relative cheapness and low quality of her partner's mass-produced gift. On her Instagram and Twitter feeds, Charmaine also catalogues the mundane routines in 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 [she is] tired'. She also Instagrammed her 'feeding time' where her partner literally spoon-fed her dinner as a display of his pampering affection.

In her most recent relationship, Penelope elicits the Darling when 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 incite feelings of vulnerability and dependence in her, because of his overwhelming protectiveness. As a veteran in the 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 a management or advertising broker – a self-dependency she has, on several occasions, said she takes pride in.

As the Darling, Denise is occasionally queried about the gifts from her partner that she conspicuously displays and the venues they dine at. She unabashedly tells followers she 'does not know' details about the gift, such as its commercial value, and where it 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 desiring particular material goods and the fact that she has 'done some research', 'wishing [she] could own them'. When followers ask for details of the dining places she blogs about, Denise 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 behaviour is what Ngai refers to as 'an eroticization of powerlessness [that] evok[es] tenderness' (2012: 3) from the more powerful actor. During squabbles with her partner, Denise 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.

Denise 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, Denise's passive–aggressive accounts are an attempt to buy herself some bargaining power by appealing for the 'protection' 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. In the 'tell all' blogposts of her last three breakups, Denise 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 'facade' 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.

THE DEAR AND HOMOSOCIAL DESIRE

As the Dear, Penelope emphasizes the physical and emotional labour 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 many women who yearn to model themselves after her high-maintenance consumption practices. By sharing her private knowledge of

self-care practices to which less successfully feminine women are not usually privy, she also gains the affection of followers as evidenced by the hundreds of thousands of comments left on her Instagram, Twitter and blog profiles signalling their admiration and envy (as opposed to jealousy) and desire to emulate (as opposed to compete with) her.

The Dear incites homosocial desire among women followers by depicting herself as having a fragile body, requiring intensive upkeep that she accomplishes through the conspicuous consumption of 'self-care' products and services. In this, she prizes herself as the epitome of the female consumer whose femininity is maintained with luxury products and the leisurely consumption of services that are not always accessible or affordable for the average consumer. These consumer behaviours can take many forms, from physiological maintenance such as a quality diet and waxing; to the emotional rest gained from frequent holidays; to esteem-boosting physical adornment with luxury goods and services. When enacting the Dear, Penelope '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, Penelope laments about feeling discomfort over her ungroomed and untamed body, and urges her followers to labour over their bodies in order to maintain and sustain their feminine appearance and desirability to men.

When performing the Dear, Denise is a conspicuous consumer of travel experiences, citing her 'need' to 'get out of the country' regularly in order to 'breathe' and have 'more space'. She describes her travels as a necessity rather than a leisurely luxury, in which her emotional and mental well-being is looked after and 'recharged'. Denise also frequently plays up her travels to even the most banal destinations (i.e. Johor Bahru in Malaysia, which is across a highway from Singapore; Sentosa Island, which is a resort island connected to Singapore) within South East Asia by attempting to exoticize her experiences as 'exclusive'. She tells followers that her body 'requires' travel in order to 'de-stress' and unwind from 'suffocating' Singapore. Similarly, in several selfies posted on Twitter, Charmaine is photographed in a car or taxi. She claims that her 'weak body' is unable to cope 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. Charmaine seems to set herself apart from the average commuter – and indeed the average Singaporean 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 service.

As mentioned earlier, while comments left by followers on Influencers' social media tend to be envious, they are nonetheless mostly presented in an affectionate tone that indicates the follower's desire to emulate the Influencer. This homosocial desirability is carefully curated by Influencers who, while maintaining the display of their middle-class consumption, continually redirect followers' foci towards the role modelling or teaching of these practices. In some instances, this role modelling may reveal the backstage of keeping up with appearances. For instance, through the instruments of intimacy and girltalk (Abidin 2015), followers who may not be able to afford extravagant luxuries are at least able to give the 'appearance' of

middle-class consumption through Influencers' role modelling practices. Some Influencers may share the knowledge of where to purchase imitation branded goods, or enjoy similar but slightly inferior beauty and care services at a discounted price. This openness to sharing 'beauty secrets' and 'bargain buys' steers envious followers towards appreciation and support for the Influencer.

Influencers expressing the trope of the Dear also encourage homosocial desire by obliging followers' requests. In doing so, they draw the affection of followers and become cherished as a valued member of a community. It is not always immediately clear if the Influencer 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. For example, although she spent months publicizing 'couple' photographs depicting her and her (then) new partner on dates, Charmaine did not explicitly share details on how her relationship started. She would divulge a few facts every few blogposts and Instagram posts, as if hesitant to be intimate about her bliss; on a practical level, however, such snippets were a 'click bait' (Blom and Hansen 2015) strategy used in the Influencer industry as teasers to encourage followers to keep reading. Charmaine 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'.

Another way for an Influencer to emphasize 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, for fulfilling her self-actualization needs through supportive encouragement and praise, and for validating her performance through 'liking' her posts. Charmaine tends 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 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 and being an Influencer has 'changed her life'. Similar to the way in which she recounts her excessive dependence on her romantic partner, she adopts a meek and subservient vocabulary to underscore her relative powerlessness if not for the engagement of her followers.

Through role modelling scripts of femininity and being the arbiter of gender performance knowledge for 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 audience. In the long run, her 'appeal of powerlessness' (Ngai 2012: 59), coupled to an orchestrated dependence on her followers' validation and support, subtly disguises the Dear's ability to influence and manipulate her audience.

(EN)GENDERING CUTENESS ON THE SINGAPOREAN WEB

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 Charmaine, Denise and Penelope, this article has revealed and analysed some strategies Influencers employ in order to successfully perform these cute femininities, in an attempt to better their chances in the dating market (Ouellette and Hay 2008: 119; Peiss 1996) through highly feminized (Basnyat and Chang 2014), domestic (Pugsley 2007) and sexual scripts (Kim and Ward 2004).

The Doll attempts to solicit affection through the somatic schema of Lorenz's Kindchenschema through cosmetic and apparel selections, and carefully staged language. However, this angelic innocence and appeal is ironically used to incite a sensual desirability found in the Doll's childlike appearance. 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 pointing to her relative smallness, as well as her inclination to be pampered, and her propensity to be exploited by others. However, the enactment of her cuteness is necessarily maintained by the liminality she occupies between demanding attention and playing the victim. The Dear attempts to solicit favour through an extravagant high-maintenance consumption of goods and services for the purposes of self-care and preservation, and through demonstrating a complaisant nature dedicated to eagerly fulfilling obligations. However, her ostensible sacrifice and powerlessness becomes a clever guise for the bargaining power and capacity to manipulate that she insidiously exercises over followers.

Drawing from the cultural milieu of East Asian cute culture, specifically that of Japanese kawaii, Korean aegyo and Taiwanese and mainland Chinese saijao, Singaporean Influencers have constructed a pastiche of cute femininities typified by a coherence of infantilization, self-diminution and submission, in order to solicit favour and affect from heterosexual male partners and homosocial female followers through sensuality, romantic docility and middle-class desirability. Be it the Doll, the Darling or the Dear, performing cuteness has become an explicitly feminine strategy that Influencers in order to secure different gains. First, they deploy cuteness in a display of agency that allows these Influencers to manipulate and redirect sustained attention to themselves, thus increasing their readership and following, which in turn increases their advertising revenue. Second, their performances mask these women's counter-hegemonic inversion of the gender hierarchy, since male partners are featured as 'props' or 'arm candy' to play into their 'cute' persona. Third, their performances obscure the power hierarchy between Influencer and follower by shifting the focus from the exchange of commercial services to endearing infantilism. As a performance strategy, cuteness allows Influencers to reinforce stereotypical power relations that position them as non-threatening and submissive, when they are in fact quietly subverting these hierarchies for personal gain as a form of soft power.

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