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INFLUENCER EXTRAVAGANZA

Commercial "Lifestyle" Microcelebrities in Singapore

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Winnie gets up in the morning, leisurely strolls to the bathroom, brushes her hair, puts on light concealer, draws her eyebrows and lines her eyelids, then gets back into bed. With an outstretched arm, she tilts her head towards her windowsill for natural lighting, and snaps a dozen selfies. In the next ten seconds, she carefully scrutinizes every shot, zooming into various body parts, and decides on one image. She then effortlessly processes the selfie through a series of photo-editing apps, and uploads the photo onto Instagram: "Good morning, guys! How is everyone doing today? #justgotoutofbed #nomakeup."

Within three minutes, her selfie has amassed over 5,000 "likes" and hundreds of comments. "I love you so much," writes one follower. "Your hair is #lifegoals. What do you use?" writes another. "I'm your biggest fan! From the US!" exclaims yet another. Winnie selects a few outstanding comments and rhythmically taps out quick responses: "Aww babe, you're the sweetest!"; "I use Sunsilk! Check out my hair tutorial on YouTube and my #SunsilkGoodTimes promo :)"; "<3 from Singapore!". Although she has never met them, Winnie broadcasts to hundreds of thousands of followers daily, reserving her coveted personal responses to a handful of followers at whim.

Winnie gets out of bed once more, completes her makeup regime, and gets dressed in an immaculately coordinated outfit with accessories, conscientiously styled the night before. She opens one of several packages addressed to her, personally couriered and customized in her favorite colors with compliments of yet another sponsor. This time, it's three pairs of high heels. Winnie puts them on in rotation, finally deciding on one pair to complete her outfit, and walks to the blank wall along the corridor of her apartment with a camera tripod. She sets up the self-timer, leans against the blank wall, and in an autopilot muscle memory, effortlessly displays ten poses in succession for the camera. She picks her favorite shot, makes a quick upload onto Instagram, and thinks up an inspirational caption: "Everyday is lived to the

fullest when such gorgeous heels give you confidence #CharlesShoes, quote 'Winnie10' for a 10 percent discount from now till the end of this month!" The "likes" and comments start streaming in again. #CharlesShoes' sales are on the rise. Winnie has earned another $1,000 for her advertorial. All in a morning's work.

Since their debut in 2005, commercial "lifestyle" bloggers in Singapore have progressed to become Southeast Asia's most lucrative, impactful, and longstanding microcelebrities. Having expanded their self-branding in "digital" spaces across integrated social media platforms, and in "physical" spaces across a range of different industries, this chapter examines how young women have transited from being lifestyle "bloggers" to "Influencers." In Singapore, Influencers are predominantly women between the ages of 15 and 35 who dominated in terms of numbers, impact, and earning power, catering to a market of regional consumers under the age of 35.[1] This chapter traces the growth of the microcelebrity and Influencer industry in Singapore. Drawing upon ethnographic research with Influencers in Singapore between 2011 and 2015, it illustrates how young women who began selling used clothes on the Internet developed into microcelebrity Influencers, and the role of supporting infrastructures, such as management agencies and followers, in their trade. Through an extrapolation of various digital methods grounded in anthropology and ethnographic practice, this chapter provides a brief overview of Influencers' communication norms, commercial activities, impact on mainstream industries, and self-branding concerns.

From Microcelebrity to Influencers

Senft (2008) first coined the term "microcelebrity" as a burgeoning online trend, wherein people attempt to gain popularity by employing digital media technologies, such as videos, blogs, and social media. Marwick (2013) further developed the concept of microcelebrities through her work in the San Francisco technology community focused on microcelebrity tech workers. Senft (2008, 16) describes microcelebrities as "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.'" Drawing from Rojek's (2001) work on types of celebrity, Marwick (2013, 116–17) 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-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.

In contrast to microcelebrities, "Influencer(s)" is a vernacular industry term, inspired by Katz and Lazarsfeld's (2009) notion of "personal influence." I capitalize "Influencers" as a professional career focused on social media-based, multimedia microcelebrities in distinction from the term "influencer" in business studies used to describe a model of marketing and advertising that targets key individuals who exert influence over a large pool of potential customers. Although the original concept pre-dates the Internet, today Influencers can be defined as everyday 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. Engaging with their followers in "digital" and "physical" spaces, Influencers 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 promotions of products/services that Influencers personally experience and endorse for a fee (Abidin 2015a).

In Singapore, the development of Influencers can be traced back to the early beginnings of the "blogshop" industry from the mid-2000s and the "commercial blogging" industry. A Singaporean bricolage of the words "web blog" and "shop," blogshops were uniquely popular in Singapore, beginning as small home Internet-based businesses with low start-up costs that primarily market 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 (Greenhill and Fletcher 2011; Fletcher and Greenhill 2009). Abidin and Thompson (2012, 467), by contrast, argued that blogshops are "online sites in which young women model and sell apparel via social media" based on "commercial intimacies," "value (co-)creation," and "persona intimacy." Drawing on Roberts' (2004) concept of "lovemarks," wherein brands build positive feelings and loyalty with customers, Abidin and Thompson (2012, 468) identified a shift 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."

In a bid to interact with their customers, blogshop owners and models began crafting their own personae and depicted lifestyles through the use of personal blogs as a parallel commentary to their blogshops. Over the past ten years, Influencers have moved beyond a single platform and are no longer anchored in blogging as their main activity. Influencers now exhibit a command of social media platforms through depicting their personal lives and lifestyles as canvases for self-branding in which personal privacy is commodified (Abidin 2014a), and followers are persuaded to make purchasing decisions.

Management Agencies

With the Influencer industry in Singapore expanding so quickly, Influencer management agencies began launching in 2007 to 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, save for a few exemptions such as blogshops, hair salons, and nail parlors, because these predate Influencer managements. Between 20–50 percent of advertising revenue is apportioned as the management's commission, which, in exchange, negotiates fair work conditions and timely payment for Influencers, and quality and timely work for 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 are usually those who are able to operate independently to attract and negotiate with clients because they are exceedingly popular and command strong bargaining power; whose daytime jobs do not allow them to be under other contractual agreements, such as women in civil service who instead attend exclusive events and receive products in kind; and who are fairly new and upcoming Influencers who have not yet garnered a sustainable following.

One of the key actors in such agencies is the "Influencer manager." As staff that work the most closely with Influencers, they play multiple roles (see Malefyt and Morais 2012, 20). 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.

Followers

On the receiving end of the curated content are "followers" whom Influencers emically categorize as "readers" (neutral or supportive towards Influencers), "haters" (disavowing 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 tends to imply a sense of distance and status elevation between Influencers and followers. Liew (2016) also conducted a case study on one prominent (and pioneering) Influencer's anti-fandom, whom she argues was motivated by "moral judgments" of the Influencer's "inauthentic presentation of self," "performance of femininity," and "nature of her celebrity." Additionally, 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 2012).

Influencers often brand themselves as having "relatability," or the ability to persuade their followers to identify with them (Abidin 2015b). 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"), 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 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).

A key 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 organized by Influencers that are sponsored in kind by clients in exchange for advertorial publicity. Informal events include those casually organized 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 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.

Communication

Influencers have crafted their own unique language, drawing from Singlish (a creole of Singaporean colloquial English) and Internet conventions such as abbreviations, acronyms, bricolage, emoticons/emoji, keyboard symbols, leetspeak (Blashki and Nichol 2005), 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 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*," "*leh*," "*mah*," and "*meh*," among others, are also distinctive features of Singlish (Forbes 1993), and usually serve as conversation softeners or to convey emotions.

Influencers convey 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 (i.e. babe, dearie, sweetie, gal) 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. I (Abidin 2013a) have previously termed these intimate forms of communication "Perceived Interconnectedness," wherein Influencers use social media to produce a sense of familiarity. However, the tensions arising from expectations to cultivate familiarity include the needs for immediacy, constancy, exclusivity, intimacy, and a high quality of interactions (Abidin 2013a).

Emoticons/emoji also foster closeness among Influencers and followers. 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. It is crucial to account for particular formations that emerge from social media-based/informed communication, particularly since paralinguistic indicators such as emoticons/emoji operate within networks of power and knowledge, as "linguistic currency" (Herring and Zelenkauskaite 2009, 3) that clearly differentiate members from outsiders. Emoticons/emoji were also used as euphemisms or mild substitutes for expressions that were otherwise offensive, or to water down or negate harsh comments, in a bid to diffuse tension (Abidin 2013b). Elsewhere, I (Abidin 2016a) had investigated how Influencers use emoticons/emoji, along with fonts, images, and vocabulary to convey a sense of cuteness that borrows from East Asian cute culture. The most frequently used emoticons were:

:) 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"
(╯°□°)╯ (┻━┻)	flipping a table, connoting frustration

In one memorable incident, an 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 which I had to intentionally learn.

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). Focusing on visuality, the consumption Influencers express on their blogs embodies the normative aspirational consumerism prevalent in the country (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).

Commerce

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.

In Singapore, Influencers market products and services from diverse industries, although the most popular have been fashion, beauty, F&B (food and beverage), travel, and electronics. There are an increasing number of young women who put tertiary education on hold (Gwynne and Abidin forthcoming) and quit their day jobs to pursue blogging full-time (Chiew 2009; Chung 2010a, 2010b; Aw Yeong 2013). In essence, Influencers display aspirational but accessible lifestyles to their followers, seemingly attainable through the goods and services marketed, thus driving "conspicuous consumption" (Veblen 1961). They earn revenue in four main ways:

1 through advertorials focused on facial and beauty products and services, plastic surgery and cosmetic enhancements, apparel and fashion, food and beverage, and travel;
2 through advertising space on their blogs and social media platforms in the form of banners and links;
3 through hawking "pre-loved" or used personal items on their blogs and on Instagram;
4 through guest appearances at events.

Owing to their capacity to shape public opinion and purchase decisions, the sponsorships and advertorials in which Influencers are engaged have progressed from small home business to blue-chip companies including Canon, Gucci, and KLM. Influencers' creative forms of commerce have been investigated through Instagram aesthetics (Abidin 2014b)

and selfies (Abidin 2016b), and as social currency (Abidin 2013c) and digital labour (Abidin forthcoming b). More recently, industry stakeholders are discussing guidelines regarding the disclosure of their paid advertorials (Abidin and Ots 2015; Ots and Abidin 2015).

Impact

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 aspects of their activity. For instance, my coding of mainstream press coverage between January 2007 and June 2013 in the top six English-language newspapers revealed five major themes: DIY practice (Chiew 2009), entrepreneurship (Chung 2010a), affluence (Heng 2009), physical appearance (Ng 2009), and appearance enhancement (Chung 2010b), in addition to personal profiles on specific Influencers and their social impact, and miscellaneous articles on the blogshop trade.

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, social and humanitarian organizations, and mainstream media productions. I have also noted how Influencers use self-presentations known as "sex bait" as informal forms of sexuality education that counter state-authorized sentiments from the Ministry of Education (Abidin forthcoming a). 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 acknowledgment of their unique status and the social prestige they have earned.

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). 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 local Influencers were honored for their craft.

Self-Branding and the Self

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[2] and her shop.[3] 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 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 and 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 to the repute 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 and Morais 2012, 100).

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 might 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, 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 client's 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. 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 and 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 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, 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.

A Decade and Beyond

In the decade since its debut, Influencer commerce in Singapore has matured and expanded with the earliest cohorts moving into different life stages and monetizing several other aspects of their personal lives such as the "microcelebrity" (Abidin 2015a) of their young children, and "power coupling" of their romantic partners. Future research may focus on the expansion of their persona onto other areas of society (i.e. politics, housing), their commercial framings of proximate others (parents, partners, children, friends), appropriations of newer media (i.e. Snapchat, Weibo), emergent models of advertising (i.e. group YouTube channels), and their international impact.

Notes

1 Throughout this chapter I use feminine pronouns as the default for the lifestyle genre but also even feminized in praxis among the few prominent male Influencers.
2 ohsofickle.blogspot.com.
3 ohsofickle.com.sg.

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