

# Entrepreneurial Selves, Feminine Corporeality and Lifestyle Blogging in Singapore\*

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## Abstract

The making of the entrepreneurial self is a dominant trope of contemporary media culture, and a multitude of media formats across divergent national contexts showcase the contemporary obsession with media visibility and the attainment of celebrity status as the most aspirational form of social mobility. In Singapore, commercial lifestyle blogs are prime examples of entrepreneurial identity-making as websites almost exclusively created by young women, showcasing user-generated content oriented around the pleasures of consumption as a means of empowerment, self-actualisation and individualisation. By analysing content on a selection of blogs, this article aims to answer the following questions: To what extent are Singaporean women's identities contingent upon material consumption as a means of identity creation? How do blogs created by women demonstrate an entrepreneurial investment in their appearance and feminine corporeality as the means of perceived empowerment, even at the expense of more formal and structured forms of individualisation, such as education?

## Keywords

blogging – Influencers – Singapore – individualisation – consumption

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Late modernity is marked by transformations and flows that have radically reconstructed contemporary configurations of citizenship. Deindustrialisation, the contraction of the welfare state, border transformations within and between states, the expansion of multi-ethnic and racial polities, the globalisation of neoliberalism and emergent technologies of communication have all impacted on the rights and duties of citizens in the new millennium. In the developed world, economic autonomy has become both a personal expectation and a political obligation—individual responsibility to support oneself must now come before the state's duty to do so (Aapola et al., 2005). Moreover, economic viability is understood as no more predicated on citizens' capacity for production than their capacity to consume. As has been asserted, the relation between the self, the social and culture is also one of "consumer to the goods and services that saturate and materialise modern life" (Tanner et al., 2013: 3), a shift that is especially pertinent to the lives of young women whose discretionary income is increasingly targeted by an ever-growing range of multinational corporations. Young women's consumption practices have been enabled by a number of individualising mechanisms of late modernity, in particular gendered socio-economic transitions, such as higher levels of educational attainment, labour market participation, delayed marriage and non-marriage, the feminisation of migration and declining rates of fertility (Kim, 2012). All of these conditions have allowed female youth to be positioned as the standard bearers of neoliberal "do-it-yourself" life projects, validating the individualisation of the life course as one of the central claims of contemporary social theory.

Social theorists have argued in force that what distinguishes the construction of identity in post-Fordist economies is an increased "reflexivity", with the responsibility for managing the complexities of everyday existence resting on the enterprising self and the privatised, informed citizen who holds the agency to render judicious consumer and lifestyle choices (Martin and Lewis, 2012). Positing that subjects are decreasingly constituted by determinants such as gender, class, age and place, and increasingly by self-design, self-creation and individual performance, theorists such as Ulrich Beck have optimistically asserted that the modern citizen is now "the producer of his or her own labour situation, and in this way, of his or her own social biography" (Beck, 1992: 93). Under neoliberalism, two central subjectivities are valorised: the entrepreneur who is an innovative producer and the consumer who is free to make market choices (Ball, 2008). Both subject positions are informed by discourses of responsabilisation, as David Harvey notes, for while personal and individual freedom in the marketplace is guaranteed, each individual is held responsible and accountable for his or her own actions and welfare (Harvey,

2005). Within the cultural logic of neoliberalism individual success or failure is, therefore, interpreted in terms of entrepreneurial virtues or personal inadequacy.

The making of the entrepreneurial self is a dominant trope of contemporary media culture, and a multitude of media formats across divergent national contexts showcase the contemporary obsession with the attainment of celebrity status as the most aspirational form of social mobility. Susan Hopkins remarks that the pursuit of media visibility has become one of the primary goals of entrepreneurial, female youth: "In the postmodern world, fame has replaced marriage as the imagined means to realising feminine dreams" (Hopkins, 2002: 4). In this context, new media locations such as hyper-visible blogs are important avenues of neoliberal self-invention. They are also crucial locations for exploring self-making since online media is intrinsically performative: The act of producing a blog is not merely a passive reflection of one's identity, but rather brings plural identities into being (Grisso and Weiss, 2005). If identity is redefined and reconstituted through everyday reflexivity, then blogs are clearly central to ongoing identity projects. In accordance with discourses of individualisation, blogs are framed by compulsory individuality where the freedom to express oneself becomes a requirement which allows identities to be carefully constructed and managed (Willett, 2008). It is in this way that digital sociality, scholars argue, offers new opportunities for identity-making, for online selves are ostensibly unbound by the exigencies of corporeality, socio-economic location and geographical specificity (Dery, 1994). While this critical position is idealistic—online bodies are never truly unmarked and are, in fact, demarcated in a number of ways—the freedom to play with identity on the Internet has been lauded as democratising and agentic, with the Internet notionally allowing individuals to produce identities that better reflect their "hoped-for possible selves" (Mehdizadeh, 2010), an assertion predicated on the conviction that true or "authentic" selves are seldom expressed in social life and face-to-face interactions (Bargh et al., 2002). Recognising, then, that new types of media are central to emergent networks of female individualisation—producing the alternative forms of social and cultural relations women wish to live within and the type of self they wish to become—this article seeks to explore commercial lifestyle blogs and the nexus between consumption practices and the cultivation of women's bodies as signifiers of feminine corporeality.

In Singapore, lifestyle blogs are websites almost exclusively created by young women, showcasing user-generated content oriented around activities of the everyday and the mundane, especially vignettes of romantic relationships (Abidin, 2016a), homosocial friendships (Abidin, 2013) and the pleasures, prac-

tices and postures of consumption (Abidin and Thompson, 2012; Abidin, 2013, 2014). The blogs are an important medium for examining notions of feminine corporeality and entrepreneurial selfhood, simply because the consumption of fashion and cosmetics remains one of the primary means through which young women construct their identity (Gleeson and Frith, 2004). Anthropologist Crystal Abidin has studied such Singaporean lifestyle blogs and associated social media belonging to the women bloggers she terms “Influencers”, that is, “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 monetise their following by integrating ‘advertorials’ into their blog or social media posts” (Abidin, 2015a). She argues that such blogs and social media are important sites through which young women re-narrativise their self-branding through selfies (Abidin, 2016b), navigate forms of “visibility labour” that endear their consumption desires to fellow Influencers, followers and their peers (Abidin, 2016c), and perform commercial intimacies with followers (Abidin, 2013, 2015a), romantic partners (Abidin, 2016a) and their children (Abidin, 2015b) in a bid to shape purchasing decisions. Sinanan et al. (2014) have similarly studied how such lifestyle blogs are a “crafted assemblage” of consumerism aspirations and citizenship in Singapore. This practice has so evolved that “brand scandals” surrounding the disclosure of commercial consumption-oriented messages on lifestyle blogs and social media posts have been noted and escalated to corporate and legal governance (Abidin and Ots, 2016). As such, lifestyle blogs are practical locations to explore debates surrounding consumption and agency, for they enact dramatic articulations of gender performativity through their interpellation of “commercial femininities”, a term used by Angela McRobbie (2000) to describe feminine subjectivities that are produced within media culture. By analysing content on a selection of blogs, this article aims to answer the following questions: To what extent are Singaporean women’s identities contingent upon material consumption as a means of identity creation? How do blogs created by women demonstrate an entrepreneurial investment in their appearance and feminine corporeality as the means of perceived empowerment, even at the expense of more structured routes of individualisation such as formal education? Prior to answering these questions, it is important to contextualise critical engagement with consumption practices within the context of modern, neoliberal Singapore.

## Consuming Singaporeans

Within the context of modern Singapore, the centrality of consumption to identity-making appears inevitable given the nation-state's dramatic transformation from pre-independence underdevelopment to post-independence prosperity. In a nation that was able to accelerate the course of economic and industrial development by luring prospective foreign investors and multinational corporations with generous tax incentives, industrial infrastructure and political stability, neoliberalism has become the culture's defining ideology, which informs the social and the political (Tan, 2012). Underscored by the doctrines of free trade and noninterventionist free markets, Singapore is regarded by many as "a model of Asian neoliberalism, lauded for its championing of capitalism, free economic growth and near miraculous economic success" (Ng, 2011: 261). It is renowned as a nation of workaholics and shopaholics, where consumption and production governs almost every aspect of the social fabric, even to the extent that Singaporeans political and social apathy has been attributed to a fear of losing what is commonly perceived as "the good life". As Phyllis Chew contends: "In Singapore, this has possibly led to increased self-centredness, lack of interest in politics, and a focus on values benefiting the individual, physical self" (Chew, 2008: 209). Recent developments in the nation's transition to the new creative economy have also given rise to a media-savvy and entrepreneurial polity (Yue, 2012), perhaps most definitively announced in a government-authored document of 2002 titled "Renaissance Singapore: Culture and the Arts in Renaissance Singapore", which projected a vision for a new Singapore for the 21st Century where aesthetic expression becomes a conduit for creating a competitive economy: "Renaissance Singapore will be creative, vibrant and imbued with a keen sense of aesthetics. Our industries are supported with a creative culture that keeps them competitive in the global economy. The Renaissance Singaporean has an adventurous spirit, an inquiring and creative mind and a strong passion for life" (Singapore Government, 2002: 5). Aihwa Ong has noted how "Renaissance Singapore" propelled citizens towards neoliberal models of risk-taking entrepreneurialism, for they are now expected to "develop new mindsets" (Ong, 2006: 194) and to embrace enterprising individualism—albeit an individualism manufactured and engineered by the state.

This paradigm shift towards supporting the creative industries and the entrepreneurial self serves to only entrench Singaporeans commitment to wealth-creation and, accordingly, consumption. The more Singaporeans earn, the more they are liable to spend, reifying neoliberalism's model of the ideal producer-consumer-citizen in a nation where consumption and materialism

are already intricately woven into the personal and the political. The social structure that the People's Action Party (PAP) has developed over the last 50 years privileges capitalism as the only legitimate political and economic arrangement for the nation, where the individual security and happiness of the citizenry depends upon the nation's economic progress. Moreover, local consumption practices are also driven by external forces, with Singaporeans taking their place within regional flows amidst the dramatic growth in globalised consumerism, which has been identified among a youth segment of "lifestyle consumers" and the "new rich" in East Asia (Chua, 2002). Shoma Munshi asserts that the discourse surrounding the "modern woman", particularly in Asian contexts, is saturated with ideas of "social progress, improvement and acceptable modernity" (Munshi, 2001: 6). Young Singaporean women's aspiration to social mobility via consumption occurs in such a context, yet, in a nation where status symbols, such as cars and private housing, remain unaffordable for the vast majority,<sup>1</sup> corporeality has become the primary site of aspirational consumption. In his study of consumerism in Singapore, sociologist Chua Beng Huat identifies "excessive materialism" (Chua, 1998: 987) as one of the three ideological discourses of consumption in Singapore. As he astutely observes: "Twenty-something Singaporeans are on the make, impatient for success. Deprivation from car-ownership, contextually the ultimate success symbol, has made their bodies the locus of consumption" (Chua, 2003: 32). He 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 and, thus, is more likely to have discretionary income with which to embellish the body (Chua, 2002: 183). For many Singaporean women an entrepreneurial investment in the body—and its attendant capacity to fulfil the demands placed on citizens to become valuable participants in a neoliberal economy—becomes a primary source of agency. This is particularly true of lifestyle bloggers, and concomitant with a global trend of branding the body and turning "online persona into a full-fledged business" (Banet-Weiser, 2012: 53), Singaporean lifestyle bloggers can be read as "lifecasters" whose corporeal investment is a project of labour that creates and maintains a self-brand. More significantly, the growth of the blogging industry in Singapore in recent years suggests that self-branding is "understood not only as legitimate but as a goal to strive for" (Ibid., 54). This article demonstrates the ways in which local bloggers employ the corporeal self as a means of transforming quotidian and personal

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1 In Singapore, car ownership depends upon acquiring a Certificate of Entitlement (COE), valid for 10 years. At the time of writing, a COE costs \$79,867 for a vehicle less than 1,600 cc.

existence into a commodity that is packaged and sold. It aims to demonstrate how Singaporean commercial lifestyle bloggers between the ages of 21 and 28 deploy feminine corporeality as a form of entrepreneurial selfhood, even at the cost of repudiating formal education, the latter widely perceived to be one of the most direct pathways to autonomy and individualisation.

### Commercial Lifestyle Blogging in Singapore

In this article, we focus on one particular Singaporean blogger, Hong Qiu Ting—better known by her blog moniker, Bong Qiu Qiu—and contextualise her blog alongside others authored by Beatrice Tan, Jamie Tan, Melissa Koh, Rachel Wong and Rachell Tan. Our insights are also supported by a selection of personal interviews that Abidin conducted with over 40 Singaporean lifestyle bloggers between December 2011 and July 2013. As an educational practitioner, Gwynne frequently witnesses female students browsing these blogs in between (and sometimes during) classes. Abidin similarly observed the popularity of such blogs among undergraduates in one local university, where she eventually conducted participant observation between 2010 and 2011, followed by participation observation among these commercial bloggers and their management agencies between 2012 and 2015. All of the blogs under discussion have been active for between four to seven years, and all of the six women discussed are currently “professional” bloggers who are pursuing lifestyle blogging full-time. Four have opted out of higher education, while two are graduates from local universities who resigned from their day jobs after a couple of years to focus on blogging.

While no research data currently exists on the quantity of such blogs, the ones discussed were selected from both authors’ combined lists of 116 blogs, compiled between July 2010 and July 2013. They were selected for analysis based on their popularity measured by informal interviews with blog readers who are the blogs’ target audience, and the amount of coverage the blogs receive from mainstream media newspaper and magazine publications. As such, the blogs were chosen with the hope that they may have much to say about why lifestyle blogs resonate with contemporary young women. Bloggers remain persuasive to readers by sustaining communicative intimacies (Abidin, 2015a) and perceived interconnectedness (Abidin, 2013) via various social media platforms. They amass revenue by interweaving advertisement space and “advertorial” posts—advertisements in the form of a blog editorial—with non-commercial, “personal” posts often focused on fashion and cosmetic products (Abidin, 2014, 2015a). To command higher rates of pay, a blogger has

to sustain her readership, which is generally measured by the number of daily (unique) page views or “likes”, “engagements” and subscribers to her social media platforms.

Unlike mainstream celebrities, lifestyle bloggers are ordinary consumers who self-reflexively market themselves as accessible, relatable and realistic role models whose lifestyles can be emulated by adopting similar consumption practices. Therefore, much emotional labour is invested into negotiating the balance between “sponsored” posts and “personal” posts in order to maintain a sense of sincerity and intimacy (Abidin and Ots, 2016). Rachel Wong, for instance, acknowledges the increasing commerciality of her blog posts and seeks the understanding of her readers:

OMG ... I miss this space so much!!! Honestly I'm so sorry and ashamed that this space has been so dead and filled with non-personal posts ... BUT I HAVE TRULY BEEN SUPER BUSY. [...] I know I keep explaining and kinda “complaining” as well everywhere and I am so sorry but this is my life for now ...<sup>2</sup>

Bloggers also work to construct and maintain themselves apart from mainstream celebrities—such as television actors and professional models—to avoid alienating their audience. They are a form of “micro-celebrity” (Senft, 2008) who utilise technology and digital media for self-branding and cultivate a niche audience, and who rely on selective self-disclosure (Marwick, 2013) to cultivate feelings of “relatability” (Abidin, 2015a) among followers. Those who overtly display the successful achievement of social mobility lose readers who no longer find them “relatable”; readers disengage and settle with gazing at bloggers from a distance because the latter’s lifestyles do not seem realistic enough to emulate or aspire to. As such, self-deprecation and the perpetual pathologising of the body and the self serves the purposes of fostering impressions of relatability as everyday, ordinary people and as segues to promote products and services through advertorials.

For Qiu Qiu, in particular, retaining a sense of ordinariness, and thus relatability, is especially crucial because the blog persona she portrays is that of a “heartlander”, a term coined by former Minister for Information and the Arts, George Yeo, to describe the 85% of Singaporeans who live in public housing estates built by the Housing and Development Board (HDB) (Poon, 2013: 560).

2 Rachel Wong, 9 April 2014: <http://www.rchlwnx.com/2014/04/coco-ichibanya-x-short-update.html>.

By this broad definition, most Singaporeans are “heartlanders”, yet, the term has gained traction and now signifies romanticised working-class Singaporeans (Chong, 2011) belonging to a lower income group (*The Straits Times*, 10 August 1991) who speak Singlish and have limited marketable skills (*The Straits Times*, 23 August 1999). Ideologically, they are “materialist and consumerist in orientation” (Tan, 2007: 22), and represent in essence, a “hegemonic understanding of Singaporeanness” (Poon, 2013: 561). Like other bloggers, Qiu Qiu appropriates her body and blog persona as a living canvas on which social mobility is performed via the enactment of consumption practices. Specifically, the transformative “behind-the-scenes” labour of self-care and adornment is explicitly instructive for readers to model after. Qiu Qiu also befittingly stars in her own online reality television series, *Budget Barbie*, in which “Shopaholic Qiu Qiu shows you all the best buys you can get with a \$100 budget!”. Hosted by clicknetwork.tv since August 2010, the series offers viewers practical tips for achieving fashionable looks for cheap, as a creative strategy for young “heartlanders” to accrue value through cultivating their body as opposed to through big ticket items, such as car and home ownership. Episodes usually garner between 80,000 and 100,000 views. In this sense, and more discursively, lifestyle blogs can be viewed as offering a more “authentic” engagement with consumer identity, as opposed to professional websites and celebrity endorsements, which may be artificially driven by the imperatives of corporate sponsorship.

### Feminine Corporeality and Entrepreneurial Selves

Alison Winch has observed that popular culture marketed to women positions the female body as “an object of scrutiny and anxiety, offering consumers the aspirational possibilities of image change, makeover and reinvention” (Winch, 2013: 16). The significant term here is “aspirational”, for while cultural narratives have always emphasised the importance of female desirability, the global media has in recent years employed the makeover narrative to further entrench the notion that female desirability is a goal to be relentlessly pursued, at all costs, for the purpose of professional or social advancement. Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon have observed that the makeover narrative has emerged as a “crucial feature of postfeminism whereby the ‘idiom of reinvention’ can be applied to every aspect of our social world” (Genz and Brabon, 2009: 127). While this idiom of reinvention can be seen as a marked aspect of postfeminist culture as it emerges in Western contexts, scholars have increasingly paid attention to post-feminism as a global practice integral to a host of cultural industries. Scholars, such as Angelia McRobbie, have showcased how

post-feminism emerges in the global South, particularly with reference to the “the global Girl” whose femininity is a defining characteristic of her identity as a citizen (McRobbie, 2009). Simidele Dosekun’s ethnographic research on new femininities in Lagos demonstrates women positing themselves as post-feminist subjects and privileged consumer citizens freely choosing a “highly normative, disciplined, laborious and sometimes physically painful style of dress” which is ultimately liberating as it signifies “neither feminine frivolity nor traditional domesticity but rather stylised freedom” (Dosekun, 2015). Likewise, Singaporean lifestyle bloggers demonstrate how both the consumption of goods and the makeover process is central to the cultivation of the normative female body, which is then mobilised as a form of feminine corporeality central to the formation of the entrepreneurial self.

The makeover process, while framed as empowering by lifestyle bloggers, is arguably motivated by anxiety and a sense of disempowerment and lack of control over self-perceived corporeal abjection. Estella Tincknell has noted the problematic relationship between female agency and the makeover narrative: “Perhaps it should not be surprising that the achievement of a limited social and political autonomy in the twenty-first century for women has been paralleled by a renewed discursive emphasis on femininity as a pathological condition, this time recast as a relentless drive for physical perfectibility” (Tincknell, 2011: 83). While Tincknell is referring specifically to Western cultural texts, one only needs to look towards Singaporean blogger Qiu Qiu for evidence of the endless body-work required to meet globalised cultural norms pertaining to beauty:

So my birthday wishes revolves around looking slightly better. Lol. Like better hair for one. Better skin (already happening coz Adonis is freaking near me!!! =DD) and maybe a chioer (prettier) pair of eyes, smaller nose, less saggy butts and less cellulite on thighs. Thank you.<sup>3</sup>

Qiu Qiu continues to confess, “I am 25 and I am going through a mid-life crisis with the way I look and I need a lot of beauty tips!”<sup>4</sup> and illustrates the manner in which perpetual maintenance needs to be continued throughout the life course:

3 Hong Qiu Ting, 27 June 2011: <http://bongqiuqiu.blogspot.sg/2011/06/qweekly-my-birthday-wishes-are-noble.html#.UmzzGal3eot>.

4 Hong Qiu Ting, 1 February 2013: <http://bongqiuqiu.blogspot.sg/2013/02/how-about-no-head.html#.UjXNqql3eos>.

One of my goal in life is to always look 25. Lolol. Maybe until I hit 50. Then okay lah, I don't mind looking like 35. When I hit 60, I don't mind looking like 40. When I hit 70 I don't mind looking like 50. You know what I mean. It means I don't wanna live past 70 coz I can't handle the wrinkles. Lololol.<sup>5</sup>

While Qiu Qiu's tone remains light-hearted in all of her blog posts, even when expressing anxieties concerning her appearance, the manner in which she pathologises personal imperfections remains startling. In one post in particular, the blogger presents a self-annotated photograph (see Figure 1) accompanied with a detailed breakdown of her perceived inadequacies:

So you see ... Let me break it down for you lah okay.

- 1 Line of dent on my forehead. It ALWAYS SHOWS UP IN PICTURES ONE =((( So I have try to keep fringe but you know how fringe can limit your style =X I just wanna be free to wanna do whatever I want without having to worry about a uneven line showing up as a dark line in pictures. And it does make me look very masculine =(
- 2 My curb in temple on both sides makes my zygoma look EVEN larger. I'm not up to shaving my zygoma / jawline yet so the best way is to balance it out by adding my own fats to my temple!
- 3 Laugh lines \*immense hate on my face right now\*
- 4 Hollow undercheeks that again, emphasize on my zygoma =(

From the side... You can see too...

- 1 Dent on forehead
- 2 Bridge between eyes not high enough
- 3 Hump on my nose
- 4 Sunken laugh lines<sup>6</sup>

Given such extreme levels of body dissatisfaction, it is unsurprising that technologies of the self, such as cosmetic surgery, are positioned as the primary

5 Hong Qiu Ting, 25 June 2013: <http://bongqiuqiu.blogspot.sg/2013/06/oh-k.html#.UhLYOql3eos>.

6 Hong Qiu Ting, 2 April 2013: <http://bongqiuqiu.blogspot.sg/2013/04/seoul-far-so-good-nose-job-fat-grafting.html#.Ui7dTql3eos>.

route to agency and empowerment, although the vernacular discourses around such corporeal self-improvement gravitates more towards “self-love” and “self-care” and less towards fostering one’s value in the dating or sexual market. As Susan Tait notes, this is part of a “post-feminist surgical imaginary” that values consumption as a means to empower the gendered body (Tait, 2007), and Qiu Qiu employs the post-feminist rhetoric of individual choice to extol cosmetic surgery procedures on the teeth:

And you know how singers sing into the camera in MTV? I realise at the age of 22 I cannot do it becex my teeth is so fugs [fucking ugly]. Lolol. So you never know, maybe when invisalign finally fixed my teeth, i’d go be a singer. Hahaha. The possibilities and ways you can choose to live your life with invisalign, unlimited!!! Lol.<sup>7</sup>

The blogger positions procedures such as Invisalign as much more than simply a way to enhance appearance, but rather a way of transforming the internal self and improving personal and professional life:

It’s not just about being chio [pretty] I feel! It’s about being presentable for the people you’d meet. Your clients, your colleagues, your bosses, your potential bf/gf. And having straight teeth will really affect your confidence level!!!<sup>8</sup>

In this way, then, attention to self-management is configured as a personal responsibility rather than a vain pursuit, marking the alert and vigilant female subject as properly responsive to social expectations and the empowering possibilities of body-work. Qiu Qiu has also undergone a sponsored temporary breast enhancement surgery (*AsiaOne*, 21 December 2010)—filmed live for Budget Barbie (*clicknetwork.tv*, 15 December 2010)—and a sponsored face job (*AsiaOne*, 15 May 2013).

Even beyond measures such as cosmetic surgery, bloggers like Qiu Qiu demonstrate that the modification and management of online representations of corporeality has a positive impact on success: “Photoshop really saved my life. And you can’t deny, only the bloggers who bother to Photoshop, are doing

7 Hong Qiu Ting, 26 June 2012: <http://bongqiuqiu.blogspot.sg/2012/06/my-invisalign-journey-smile.html#.UIUr8Kl3e0s>.

8 Hong Qiu Ting, 26 June 2012: <http://bongqiuqiu.blogspot.sg/2012/06/my-invisalign-journey-smile.html#.UIUr8Kl3e0s>.

slightly more than significant.”<sup>9</sup> By suggesting that bloggers who Photoshop their images attract more viewers and, by implication, secure greater sponsorship from retailers of lifestyle products, such examples show that the makeover process cultivates the entrepreneurial self because it involves the consumption of products, technologies and services as forms of investment that facilitate self-improvement. Although individual commercial bloggers’ earnings are a guarded secret, mainstream media coverage on prolific bloggers has reported that some of them to earn “at least \$3,500” per blog advertorial (Aw Yeong, 2014a), “\$100,000” for one multi-company sponsorship (Aw Yeong, 2014b) and \$45,000 a year for one 18-year-old in particular (Aw Yeong, 2014b). So crucial is appearance to success, that personal interviews with several managers in local blog advertising firms reveal it is easier to hone a blogger’s writing skills than her ability to produce “good photographs”:

Writing skills, I can still train, we can send them for courses. But photos is more personal, more natural ... you either have it or you don’t ... you must have a good eye, good taste, to know what your readers like, and you must have the looks.

As a testament to the importance of corporeal management among young Singaporean women, bloggers who become known for their savvy Photoshop skills are even requested to publish tutorials or hold public workshops to share their “secrets”.

It is important at this point to stress that the success of lifestyle blogging depends on the readership of the female audience, who turn to bloggers in order to learn how to cultivate their own neoliberal selves. As old structures of class and community disintegrate, “the choosing, deciding, shaping human being who aspires to be the author of his or her own life” becomes “the central character of our time” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 23). For those seeking advice about gender normativity and makeover, self-help guides are among the technologies that “provide the cultural means by which individualisation operates as social process” (McRobbie, 2009: 19). Women are looking to the lifestyle industries, but also to each other—to girlfriends—for normative performances of femininity, as well as for guidance in negotiating the proliferation of choice that is apparently available. The makeover process is entrepreneurial not only because it is understood as improving the self, but also because it is performed

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9 Hong Qiu Ting, 27 Sept 2010: <http://bongqiuqiu.blogspot.sg/2010/09/how-photoshop-saved-my-life.html#.UnkOdal3eos>.

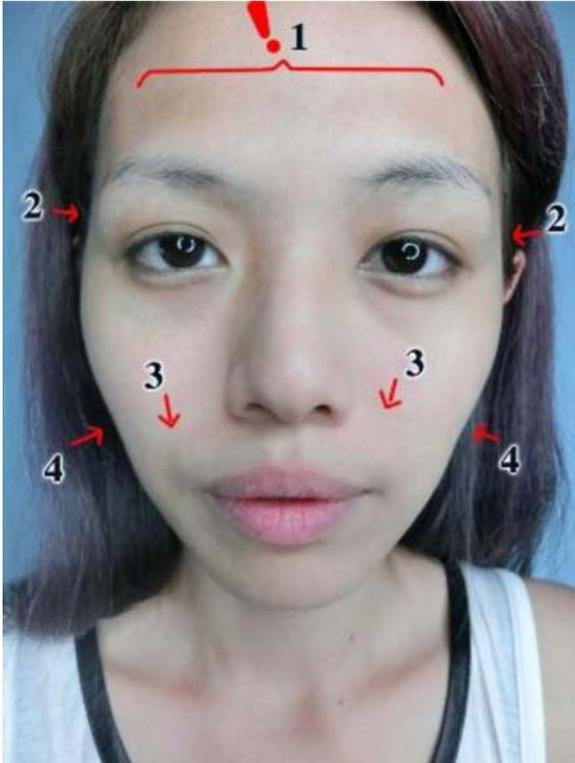


FIGURE 1 *Qiu Qiu's self-annotated 'problem areas' on her face*

with the specific intention of attracting fellow women to the blog with the aim of increasing the media visibility and popularity of the blogger, and by extension the market-value of the blogger. In this way, the feminine corporeality of the female blogger is controlled, governed and evaluated by what Alison Winch terms “the girlfriend gaze”:

In girlfriend culture the gaze objectifies women's bodies but it functions differently from the male gaze. Here, the straight male gaze is rendered inadequate or redundant and, instead, regimes of looking are promoted between women. The long tradition of the commodification of women for male desire is internalised, redirected and utilised by girlfriends. The female body still remains at the centre of the gaze, but it is strategically subjected to analysis, calculation and control.

WINCH, 2013: 21

In this context, securing the girlfriend gaze is entrepreneurial for it is a collaborative enterprise between women, which enables the mutual development of online hypervisibility as the pathway to self-actualisation. Qiu Qiu's blog, for example, showcases the reciprocal relationship between blogger and audience in terms of crafting the entrepreneurial self:

I am just trying to keep you informed of ME! =D Cos that's our relationship right? I be interesting, you be interested. Hahah. I be cute, you be awwwwwed. I be shameless, you laugh. I be pretty, you praise me. It's a great relationship we have here! We're working in harmony.<sup>10</sup>

Such posts invoke a strong sense of female audience reception. Yet, the question: "Cos that's our relationship right?" indicates that positive reception of the idealised self is by no means assumed. In this example, Qiu Qiu seeks to affirm the girlfriend gaze, conscious that the digital self produced may be perceived as a vain self, rather than an entrepreneurial self. The blogger recognises the imperative in blogging to produce an attractive and appealing self—one that is affirmed by the female audience as agentic—yet she simultaneously recognises the instability of this relationship. Extracts such as the above demonstrate the anxieties that female bloggers harbour in terms of their ability to gain female approval and, by doing so, confirm their status as a successful blogger.

If the cultivation of the normative body and its attendant feminine corporeality is central to securing the female audience, then it follows that lifestyle bloggers will understand individualisation, self-actualisation and empowerment as firmly deriving from the body. The body is, thus, constructed as the object of a women's labour; it is her asset, her product, her brand and her gateway to freedom and empowerment in a neoliberal market economy. As such, the trope of employing the vernacular of liberation and empowerment to describe consumption choices is common across a number of blogs beyond Qiu Qiu's. Blogger Beatrice Tan emphasises how red lipstick "creates this confident, sophisticated look for almost anyone,"<sup>11</sup> while Melissa Koh promotes Pilates classes to readers, claiming to "see [her] abs more visibly again the next morning [she] woke up after a few sessions."<sup>12</sup> What these examples

10 Hong Qiu Ting, 4 May 2012: <http://bongqiuqiu.blogspot.sg/2012/05/you-wanna-talk.html#.UlooR6l3eos>.

11 Beatrice Tan, 11 April 2013: <http://www.beatricetan.com/2013/04/11/vince-camuto-spring13/>.

12 Melissa Koh, 8 June 2013: <http://www.melissacelestinekoh.com/2013/08/my-pilates-journey-part-2.html>.

demonstrate is a neoliberal disruption of earlier feminist claims regarding body management. In the early 1990s, Susan Bordo argued that new social and economic opportunities for women were being accompanied by intensifying pressure on them to manage and maintain a slender body (Bordo, 1993). The blogs demonstrate that in the contemporary historical moment, this dynamic is complicated by emerging neoliberal discourses of health. The newly-responsible healthy female subject still experiences social pressure to remain or become slim, yet the pathways to normative feminine desirability are framed as journeys towards health, agency and power. Within this framework, bloggers demonstrate an investment in the body as the primary form of individualisation and agency, even more so than alternative forms of empowerment, such as education and labour force participation. The next section of this article, then, will illustrate how a selection of lifestyle blogs rebuke the importance of formal education and qualities associated with the enhancement of the mind, placing agency firmly in the realm of the corporeal.

### **Education and Individualisation**

It is almost impossible to deny that for women in Asia educational achievement has enabled a greater capacity for the development of reflexive projects of the self, with scholars such as Youna Kim arguing that education “engenders a fundamental shift towards individualisation departing from a normative female biography” (Kim, 2012: 10). This is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the Singapore context, with the nation-state’s transformation from a regional finance hub to its current status as a global city bearing witness to the rise of female literacy to 96.3% in 2009 (Statistics Singapore, 2010), with 54% of the female population in the labour force (MCDYS, 2009:12). While there is no clear positive delineation between the role of education and the socio-economic and political empowerment of women due to the continuing interface of traditional gender ideologies and structural constraints in Singapore, education is nevertheless widely perceived as one indicator of the advancing status of women. This is especially true of young Singaporean women, with 85.5% of 25–29-year olds participating in the labour force as a consequence of rising educational opportunities and low fertility rates (Martin and Lewis, 2012). And yet, despite these statistics, an analysis of young women’s lifestyle blogs reveals a pronounced rebuke of education as a primary form of individualisation. These negotiations are apparent through the trajectory of higher education, beginning with bloggers who have opted to drop out of formal education.

On her blog and social media platforms, Jamie Tan (also known as Tan Yi Jing) regularly receives both criticism and affirmation from readers regarding her controversial decision to drop out of secondary school at the age of 16. She has been blogging full-time since. Rachell Tan, who similarly dropped out of university to pursue blogging full-time was urged to reconsider her decision by a fellow blogger: “And why do you think that it has to be your blog over school? School should always be the most important!”<sup>13</sup> While Jamie is aware that her “lower-than-normal level of education”<sup>14</sup> has caused disappointment to her family and incited others to look down on her, she says in a blogpost titled “Chasing my dream” that blogging affirms her “sense of achievement”:

I never knew i could enjoying doing something like this so much. Research, taking pictures for the products, spending long hours penning down a blog post just for the purpose of reviewing a product, and making new friends who has the same interest as I do (because my circle of friends in school were never into stuffs like this). I felt like I've finally found my calling, something that i would really enjoy doing.<sup>15</sup>

Both bloggers acknowledge that the viability of their commercial blog business is premised on the youthful desirability of their young bodies, thus choosing to capitalise on their feminine corporeality, which is at its peak for now. In response to the overwhelming importance placed on education in Singapore, however, other bloggers have chosen to obtain at least a basic diploma as a safety net, although it is clear that this education is not premised as being instrumental for individuation. For instance, Rachel Wong speaks of being “so excited for life after graduation!”<sup>16</sup> when she will pursue blogging full-time, and frames the three years spent on her education as having impeded her career mobility:

Amongst these sacrifices are 6 sponsored trips (a recent two to countries I've never been and always wanted to go to!!!), amongst other awesome sponsorships and opportunities ...<sup>17</sup>

13 Sophie Willocq, 19 January 2012: <https://twitter.com/sophiewillocq/status/160249815308054531>.

14 Tan Yi Jing, 2 January 2013: <http://jamietyj.blogspot.com.au/2013/01/my-2012.html>.

15 Tan Yi Jing, 15 June 2011: <http://jamietyj.blogspot.com.au/2011/06/chasing-my-dream.html>.

16 Rachel Wong, 17 March 2014: <http://www.rchlwnx.com/2014/03/still.html>.

17 Rachel Wong, 9 April 2014: <http://www.rchlwnx.com/2014/04/coco-ichibanya-x-short-update.html>.

Similarly, Beatrice Tan and Melissa Koh obtained degrees and even held full-time jobs in the banking industry, but resigned within two years to pursue blogging as a career. Beatrice tells readers that this decision was despite already having invested in a good education:

Actually, I was in a uber huge dilemma before I decided to give up on this job after a few months. Furthermore, it was also a HUGE MIRACLE that i can get into NUS, and was more than thankful for that chance. Yet we all studied for so long just to get a good job, yet i quit ... Not sure if it makes any sense to you or maybe it will sound foolish, but the main reason why i gave up my job was to concentrate on the blog.<sup>18</sup>

Beatrice continues to explain that she has chosen to pursue her “passion” over “an iron rice bowl” because she was still in her prime years as a renowned blogger and blogshop model in the industry. Melissa similarly quit her job to “focus on things that mattered more to me—like this very humble space of mine,”<sup>19</sup> referring to her blog. News of her career change even made the news (*The New Paper*, 1 September 2013), in reflection of a growing number of young women turning to blogging as a career despite having attained success in higher education.

### Conclusion

The immense success and extensive popularity of the commercial blog industry has garnered widespread attention from a number of realms including private and multinational corporations (MNCs), politics, education, social and humanitarian organisations, and the mainstream media (MSM). Riding on their extensive popularity and consistent readership, these sectors often invite bloggers to make special appearances to bring publicity to a project or special cause. Bloggers are also 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 blogger Rachel Lim<sup>20</sup>

18 Beatrice Tan, 29 January 2010: <http://www.beatricetan.com/2012/01/29/a-penny-on-my-thoughts/>.

19 Melissa Koh, 1 November 2013: <http://www.melissacelestinekoh.com/2013/11/1st-november.html>.

20 Rachel Lim, 22 March 2012: <http://ms-rach.blogspot.com.au/2012/03/virgin-entry.html>.

as a keynote speaker at the “Get Inspired” workshops (Young Women’s Leadership Connection, 2013), while Viola Tan was asked to speak to students at Ngee Ann Polytechnic.<sup>21</sup> Beatrice Tan was the poster girl for her alumnus the National University of Singapore’s Career Centre as part of their “Dream Big Campaign,”<sup>22</sup> and Tammy Tay was invited to be a guest judge at several fashion and beauty contests. Within the MSM, Wendy Cheng had a short stint co-hosting the television programme *Girls Out Loud*, while Qiu Qiu gave a cameo in the local top grossing movie, *Ah Boys To Men*. In the Singapore General Elections 2011, Singapore’s top commercial lifestyle bloggers, Wendy Cheng, Viola Tan, Velda Tan<sup>23</sup> and Rachel Lim were invited to a private lunch with the then-Minister for Foreign Affairs, George Yeo. Wendy and Viola were also part of an interviewer panel for a television forum organised 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 oldest being the Singapore Blog Awards (SBA) first launched in 2008 (omy.sg, 2010), and the first Influencer agency-sponsored one being the Nuffnang Asia-Pacific Blog Awards (NAPBAS) (Nuffnang, 2009), which has included nominees from Malaysia, Singapore, China, Thailand, Philippines, Australia, Hong Kong and the United Kingdom since its launch in 2009. More recently, the biennial Influence Asia awards was launched in 2015 to honour the best Influencers in Asia, this time including Asian media giants from South Korea (Influence Asia, 2017).

Given the increasing social influence that lifestyle bloggers have attained, it is hardly surprising that many young women may rebuke more formal forms of education by focusing instead on the production of media visible, entrepreneurial selves. Bloggers like Rachel, Beatrice, and Melissa demonstrate that the formal education they have attained is barely related to the skills they employ in professional blogging, not least because many of these “skills” pertain to the cultivation of their normative corporeal capital. This is significant, for it indicates that, while education remains one of the primary means of female individualisation in Singapore, it must also be recognised that, to many, higher education may exist as nothing more than a routine Singaporean milestone or mere safety net, rather than a preferential and deliberate strategy of enacting individualisation. The knowledge professional bloggers acquire is usually

21 Viola Tan, n.d.: [http://instagram.com/p/jL\\_e3jiv9Q/](http://instagram.com/p/jL_e3jiv9Q/).

22 Beatrice Tan, 14 August 2012: <http://www.beatricetan.com/2012/08/14/random-updates/>.

23 Velda Tan, 11 April 2011: <http://belluspuera.blogspot.com.au/2011/04/spring-spring-spring.html>.

learnt on the job via trial-and-error or achieved by reading and imitating predecessors rather than acquired through formal study, signposting the bloggers' hands-on experimentation with feminine corporeality as a route to financial agency, rather than a reliance on head knowledge.

Considering the growing popularity of lifestyle blogging as both a recreational activity and as a potential career route for young Singaporean women, this may have significant implications for those who reject formal education but lack the corporeal capital that is so central to success in the industry. While lifestyle blogging may reward a minority of young women with an enjoyable and financially lucrative lifestyle, its emerging centrality as a possible career choice in an increasingly competitive blogging market may also represent illusory opportunities to many young women who aspire to become the next Rachel, Beatrice or Melissa, yet fail to effectively cultivate desirable, normative femininity. Moreover, while the bloggers discussed in this article demonstrate their sincere conviction that the cultivation of the body is a form of empowerment in its own right, such statements can be read as symptomatic of post-feminist media culture, which "sells feminist ideas through style", ultimately reducing "oppositional consciousness to symbolism so that feminism becomes something one can take on and off like a fashionable coat rather than a political movement or system of values" (Zaslow, 2009: 32). In this context, women's agency amounts to little more than consumption agency, and the level of body dissatisfaction demonstrated by bloggers such as Qiu Qiu is a testimony to the problematic incongruence between confident consumers and confident girls. It is in this way that lifestyle bloggers reify the types of power deemed valuable in neoliberal economies, as neoliberal subjects who demonstrate greater confidence in consumption than confidence in themselves.

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