

Influencers Tell All?

Unravelling Authenticity and Credibility in a Brand Scandal

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Abstract

This chapter discusses the emerging practices of social media Influencers. In focus are six influential Instagram Influencers who were ‘exposed’ for involving themselves in campaigns aiming to discredit telecommunications providers in Singapore. In the absence of enforced legal boundaries and industry norms regarding advertising formats and advertising ethics, brand scandals are frequent, causing concern among regulators, brand managers, and platform owners. When starting to accommodate commercial brands and contents in social media posts, Influencers are constantly at risk of breaching their contract of trust with their followers. The case study shows how Influencers, followers, and eventually also the brand clients, are sensitive to what they experience as deceptive and unethical behaviours that will put normative pressures onto the Influencers to conform to certain ethical standards.

Keywords: Instagram, bloggers, social media practices, Influencer networks, advertising ethics, Singapore, Influencers

This chapter discusses the emerging practices of social media Influencers. In focus are Influencers in the ‘lifestyle’ genre who advertise products and services in the industry verticals of Fashion, Beauty, and Electronic goods on blogs and social media such as Twitter and Instagram. In the absence of enforced legal boundaries and industry norms regarding advertising formats and advertising ethics, brand scandals are frequent, causing concern among regulators, brand managers and platform owners. In this chapter we present illustrative examples and discuss a way to start analysing the mechanisms behind the formation of this emerging professional field.

In the transforming brand management landscape, we focus on a specific group of stakeholders – everyday Internet users who manufacture themselves into a new form of social media microcelebrity (Senft 2008) known as the ‘Influencer’ (Abidin 2015a, 2015b). Whereas the commercial use of Influencers is a growing global marketing phenomenon, the material for the included examples was collected through research in Singapore, between 2011 and 2015. Since 2005 in Singapore, many young women have taken to social media to craft ‘microcelebrity personas’ as a career. Unlike

mainstream entertainment industry celebrities who are public icons with large-scale followings, microcelebrity “is a state of being famous to a niche group of people” and involves the curation of a persona that feels “authentic to readers” (Marwick 2013:114).

Central to the success of the semi-professional Influencers is the management and growth of their personal brands. Studies have shown how they carefully aim to build awareness and audience growth (Marlow 2006), but also that central to their success is the deep and intimate relationships between their personal brands and their followers (Abidin & Thompson 2012). Their media brands constitute ‘Lovemarks’ – brands that are not simply respected, but trusted and loved (Roberts 2004; see also Fournier 1998; Ots & Hartmann 2015). Abidin & Thompson (2012) identified four practices used by commercial bloggers (a predecessor to Influencers) to create this intimacy with their mass audiences – endearment and personal language, authenticity through unaltered ‘behind the scenes’ material, commonality with readers by displaying shared mundane practices (despite a luxurious lifestyle), and real-life meetings with their followers. Beyond mere intimacy (Abidin 2015a), the success of the Influencers hinges on their own taste and credibility. McQuarrie et al (2013) accordingly showed how Influencers’ conscious selective choice of text, images, and style led to the accumulation of social capital (building their celebrity status and personal brand) as well as economic capital (commercial success). In other words, credibility is important for the Influencers both for the growth of their own media brands and for their effectiveness as commercial product brand endorsers – this is crucial as followers and consumers are increasingly aware of the commercial nature of Influencer editorial content, but a pronounced sense of credibility serves as a safeguard against indiscriminately positive paid reviews. As shown by Johansson and Bengtsson in this volume, the commodification of social media network fans, followers, and contacts is not limited to Influencers alone, but the emergence of an Influencer industry can of course be seen as a manifestation of a ‘third enclosure’ – the market orientation of human life.

As commercial brands continue to abandon traditional advertising, marketers start to look for new carriers of their brand messages. In this process, Influencers are catching attention as their accumulated social capital and audience relationships have made them valuable as marketing intermediaries and brand endorsers (Chu & Kamal 2008; Kozinets et al 2010). Hence, in their most basic capacity, Influencers now produce advertorials on blogs and social media platforms in exchange for payment or sponsored products and services. Consequently, many bloggers have financial and contractual relationships and engagements directly with product advertisers, or indirectly via various agencies and content networks.

The professionalization of Influencer commerce

Influencers are one form of microcelebrities who document their everyday lives from the trivial and mundane to exciting snippets of the exclusive opportunities in their

line of work. Influencers are shapers of public opinion who persuade their audience through the conscientious calibration of personae on social media, as supported by 'physical' space interactions with their followers in the flesh to sustain their accessibility, believability, emulate-ability, and intimacy – in other words, their 'relatability' (Abidin 2015b). In this way, followers bear more attachment to the Influencer as a brand, than the actual product or service they advertise, or what Abidin and Thompson (2012) refer to as 'persona intimacy'. Influencers write primarily on commercial blogs and social media platforms (i.e. Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube) in the 'lifestyle' genre, where the women's lives 'as lived' are the central theme of their output. The main draw of these Influencers is that their web content is premised upon sharing the personal, usually publically inaccessible aspects of their life (Abidin 2014, 2015a).

These commercial 'lifestyle' posts are one successor of contemporary women's magazines. Kim and Ward (2004) define contemporary women's magazines as "mainstream adult magazines that are geared toward an adolescent or young adult female audience and that express the clear intention of providing readers with advice, scripts, and information about dating and sexual relationships" (2004:49). They also feature product placements (Frith 2009) and concealed ads (McCracken 1993). Commercial lifestyle posts bear similar offerings but with an underlying rhetoric of personalising 'advertorials' to readers engaged in aspirational consumption patterns role modelled by Influencers. The advertorial, Influencers' primary advertising device, is a highly personalised and opinion-laden advertisement written in the style of an opinion-editorial (Abidin 2014). The most effective advertorials have been those that are seamlessly woven into the daily narratives Influencers publish on their blogs and social media, such that readers are unable to tell apart 'paid opinions' from 'unpaid' sentiments. Often, these advertorials may take the form of complaints or praises for a product or service that is written in a tone that is personal, emotive, casual, and informal.

It has been noted that some Influencers count followers in the hundreds of thousands, or even millions, making their reach comparable to that of traditional media. At the same time the Influencers are becoming more professional and aware of their role in the branding process, offering various services to companies (Griffith 2011). They are not only part of a growing movement of consumer participation where everyone can become a media entrepreneur, but also participating in the shaping of brand management itself, its functions and processes (see also Dolbec & Fischer 2015).

Now fashion bloggers are leveraging their followers to become marketing machines for brands other than their own (in other words, to earn money), augmenting those companies' advertising and PR strategies. They're taking on numerous roles including guest bloggers, models, designers, and endorsers. They're maintaining credibility with fans – they hope – by choosing partnerships discerningly, while discussing deliverables, audience composition, ROI, and conversions with their sponsors. (Griffith 2011)

Owing to their capacity to shape purchase decisions, Influencers' clients have progressed from small home businesses to blue-chip companies including Canon, Gucci, and KLM. The immense success and extensive popularity of the Influencer industry has garnered widespread attention from several other ecologies including multinational corporations, politics, education, social and humanitarian organisations, and the mainstream media. Riding on their extensive popularity and consistent readership, these sectors often invite Influencers to make special appearances to bring publicity to the project or special cause. Influencers are also invited to events as special guests and VIPs in acknowledgement of their unique status and the social prestige they have earned.

A case study: The SingTel/M1/StarHub incident

In a short case study we will demonstrate how Influencers exert pressure on each other to conform to certain implicit standards, norms, and ethics, when it comes to the publication of commercial content. Material from the data set was publicly disseminated by Influencers and pitched for public consumption, and Influencers are identified here by their public Twitter and Instagram handles.

In this case study, we explore the institutional effects of publicly revealing social media posts as 'commercial branding work'. In this case the actual brand strategy is leaked. Despite the fact that no legal boundaries have been crossed, two core norms of the Influencer industry (authenticity and credibility) are broken (Abidin & Thompson 2012; McQuarrie et al 2013). The breach of trust is used by competing Influencers to exert coercive pressure on the Influencer who is forced to make public accountability to her followers. Gushcloud, the Influencer agency behind the campaign, is also under normative pressure by the brand client to conform practices to the brand owner's norms and values. There are related cases when Influencers have been exposed as 'inauthentic' based on other pieces of evidence – such as inconsistency in product preferences over time, discrepancies between what posts say, and what pictures show, and incongruence with their overall profile and established brand values.

As mentioned earlier, effective advertorials are those that are so natural and personal in tone that readers are unable to distinguish them from the daily narratives which Influencers publish online. In the vignette that follow, we see how a group of Influencers published complaints and praises about a particular product or service in Tweets and blogposts, but were subsequently exposed by an Influencer from a rival company for 'masking' their advertorials following the anonymous leak of a campaign brief. Based on Abidin's fieldwork (Abidin 2015b), it is learnt that Influencer agencies exert some coercive pressures on the Influencers, defining their contractual relationships within each campaign and client brand. Agencies usually propose 'briefs' or 'story boards' advising Influencers on key points that have to be clearly addressed in their advertorials (i.e. highlights of a new product, how prospective customers can make purchases, suggested narratives based on the Influencer's lifestyle for crafting believable advertori-

als). However, in Singapore the content of each advertorial and the approach towards content dissemination is still largely the Influencer's prerogative, and has not yet been standardised nor regulated by any industry guidelines. In an international perspective, the situation in Singapore is far from unique as global industry practices are still in their infancy, but regulators are more and more concerned about how to apply and enforce, for instance, advertising regulation and tax regulation to social media Influencers.

The 'scandal' looks at how a group of six Influencers were 'exposed' for non-credible branding work of three local telecoms (i.e. SingTel, M1, StarHub). Two rival Influencer-management agencies are mentioned – Gushcloud and Nuffnang. Akin to modelling agencies that groom model talents and broker deals on their behalf, Gushcloud and Nuffnang function as intermediaries promoting portfolios of contracted Influencers to prospective clients who wish to advertise with them. Influencer 'Xiuxue' is contracted to Nuffnang, while the others are contracted to Gushcloud. Such 'scandals' are usually framed by mainstream media as mere 'blogger spats' – a regular occurrence in the industry's history of a decade – as opposed to orchestrated controversies between rival agencies. As such, it is tempting to trivialise the incidents that unfold and overlook the productive work they do for the industry.

On 11 March 2015, an anonymous user 'leaked' a campaign brief for Gushcloud Influencers on a public Tumblr site. Titled the 'Gushcloud x Singtel Youth Plan x LG G3 Blogger Brief', it detailed local telecom 'Singtel' engaging Gushcloud Influencers to market its mobile phone subscription plan targeted towards youth. Such documents are usually highly confidential between the client, the agency and the engaged Influencers, since they indicate which social media posts that Influencers publish are paid advertorials and which are (unpaid) personal opinions and lifestyle narratives. Among many guidelines, the 'leaked' brief presumably prepared by a marketing manager from Gushcloud suggested that Influencers badmouth rival telecom companies:

Complain/lament about competitor's (M1/StarHub) services/network connections and pinpoint with existing plan (Insufficient local data bundle and no unlimited SMS/MMS etc).

To share with readers on how they have had enough of their current mobile plan not being able to fit their needs and currently have plans to sign up for new mobile plan!

Influencers will ignite conversations where possible amongst their readers on their blog post(s) and social media accounts.

This revelation was contentious because it was made public for the first time that even Influencers' seemingly harmless and off-hand gripes against particular products and services could in fact be orchestrated advertorials. In its eleven-point 'Proposed Story Board' that was meant to be assigned to the engaged Influencers, the brief suggested that Influencers craft some narratives to naturalise their advertorial – a common strategy to avoid appearing too commercial or 'hard sell' when marketing products. Some of these were more contentious and dramatic:

Phone bill, *kena* [get] scolded by parents. Then luckily, got youth plan for 10% discount.

Phone spoilt. Oh no. Need new phone. Student not enough money, so thank god for this \$50 voucher.

Personal hotspot to tether to laptop/ipad. School wifi sucks. And outside no wifi. Last time 2Gb how to tether? Now, you can with 5gb!!

One even suggested that Influencers explicitly “badmouth” rival telecom company M1:

M1 connection *jialat* [terrible] in Orchard Central. Eating at EwF [an eatery], then cannot upload photo on instagram. Pissed. Few days later, Got offered this youth plan plus so many freebies. Yay. Happy instagramming.

Three days later on 14 March 2015, prominent Nuffnang Influencer Xiaxue, wrote an extensive blogpost on this issue that went viral regionally. In this post, she collated screenshots of Influencers badmouthing SingTel’s rival telecoms. At least six Gushcloud Influencers were publically named for allegedly making false claims against M1 and StarHub on their Twitter streams:

My phone is ALWAYS getting “No Service”. Urgh screw Starhub! -@LydiaIzzati, 26 Jun 2014.

Thanks m1... Can't even get signal in MY HOUSE -@iatedork, 28 Jun 2014.

Omg M1 seriously needs to like have better coverage. I can barely do anything with my phone now. Zzzz. - @ongxavier, 27 Jun 2014.

So pissed off with the M1 server [crying face emoji] everywhere also no Internet & I'm on 4G [crying face emoji] -@symoneoei, 28 Jun 2014.

Zzzz my starhub plan is always exploding!?! I hate how they cap the data plan at such a low GB [dollar bills with wings emoji].. Someone save me [weeping face emoji] -@MarxMae, 29 Jun 2014.

It's not funny M1!!! It's not nice coming home to such sucky connections. I'm so gonna switch to Singtel Youth Plan {NOT AN AD. I mean it.} -@EuniceAnnabel, 20 Jul 2014.

After the anonymous ‘leak’ of the campaign brief and Xiaxue’s viral blogpost, some Influencers wrote blogposts bearing explanations and apologies. In his blogpost published on 18 March 2015, Xavier (@ongxavier) writes:

I, Xavier Ong APOLOGIZE to anyone affected for posting negative comments towards M1 (while on a SingTel campaign) and not explicitly stating or revealing that I was on a campaign with SingTel. However, I would also like to add that during that period and even before, I was indeed unhappy and unsatisfied with the network and service M1 provided me with therefore I DID NOT lie. I understand that I should

have stated clearly that I was on a campaign or at least inform that certain postings are advertorial/ sponsored posts and I am sorry for that.

Although there were no industry standards or guidelines prohibiting “masked” or non-disclosed advertorials at that time, Influencer Xavier acknowledged that his badmouthing of telecom M1 was related to the advertorial campaign for rival telecom SingTel to which he was contracted (i.e. “I should have stated clearly that I was on a campaign”, “certain postings are advertorial/sponsored posts”). However, in a bid to reconstitute his credibility with readers, he claims that his complaints about M1 were genuine (i.e. “I was indeed unhappy and unsatisfied with the network and service... therefore I DID NOT lie.”) even though he might have been paid to publicise them. More specifically, Xavier demonstrates how his bad experience with M1 predates his campaign period with SingTel by including several screen shots of his Tweets dating back to July 2011, when he was already consistently expressing frustrations against M1’s connection problems. He writes:

While I admit that I was recruited as one of the members of such brand of advertisement, not everything I said was unfounded. I had encountered many issues with M1 long before the deal was forged- perhaps it was my complaints before that would eventually get me handed the deal.

These tweets date all the way back to 29 July 2011. Yes, I was REALLY unhappy with M1. I didn’t lie for the campaign or money. So how am I lying or faking something up when I only took up the campaign on 30th June 2014 and my tweets about M1 has been going out since 29 July 2011 till 2013 and then finally up to 2014? I’ve constantly been ranting about M1, their network and their service. So... a lie?

Although many of Xavier’s readers rallied behind him after this clarification by expressing support and solidarity on Twitter, some others remain unconvinced of the truth of his claims (i.e. the genuine complaints about M1) despite his predated evidence, simply because the Influencer had failed to disclose that some of these complaint-Tweets were motivated by a monetary incentive. While it was speculated that he lost some followers, there are no hard figures to prove this, and many followers are observed displaying supportive comments on his social media. In the wake of these events, a SingTel issued a statement to say that Gushcloud “did not adhere to SingTel’s marketing standards”, and their Vice-President of Consumer Marketing apologised to M1 and StarHub. A day later, the chief executive of Gushcloud issued an apology to M1 and StarHub. He added:

We have started a process of auditing our practices, processes and people, to ensure that we can be a good agency and partner to our present and future clients. We aspire to higher standards, values and principles on which we will rebuild trust and confidence ... In the coming months, we will keep the public and industry partners updated on these initiatives through our website.

Both telecoms have accepted SingTel's and Gushcloud's apologies, and although newspaper reports claimed the telecoms were considering legal options as of March 2015, no action had been taken as of April 2016. Instead, action groups and public forums have been set up comprising advertising authorities, Influencer agencies, Influencers, and other key stakeholders and prominent public commentators to research and develop guidelines for Influencer advertising.

Authenticity and credibility

In this chapter we have commenced some introductory work to understand how new brand management professions are institutionalised as amateurs and semi-professional Influencers and are becoming brand workers. Earlier studies have noted how these semi-professional online activities do lead to institutional market change (Dolbec & Fischer 2015) but that these new professions are ambiguous as they need to accommodate both communal and commercial norms (Kozinets et al 2010), that credibility and taste are central components (McQuarrie et al 2013) and that authenticity and intimacy are common, but not exclusive, strategies to build brand relationships with followers (Kozinets et al 2010; Abidin & Thompson 2012).

When starting to accommodate commercial brands and contents in social media posts, Influencers are constantly at risk of breaching their contract of trust with their followers. The case study displayed common campaign structures and the involvement of Influencer agencies that mediate Influencers and brand clients. It also showed how Influencers, followers, and eventually also the brand clients, are sensitive to what they experience as deceptive and unethical behaviours that will put normative pressures onto the Influencers to conform to certain ethical standards. This brand scandal exemplified the emerging normative and coercive pressures concerning the brand management practices. In the absence of legal boundaries and industry norms regarding advertising formats and advertising ethics, observing the dynamics of these pressures is a way to start analysing the mechanisms behind the formation of Influencers' publishing practices. Certainly, research in this area is especially crucial since following the wave of emerging Influencer commerce, national boards and advertising regulatory authorities (Manjur 2015) across the globe are now realising the importance of formalising and enforcing guidelines and transparency in Influencer brand management.

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