

**Commercialism, audience intimacy and brand credibility in fashion blogging.**

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## **The professionalization of Influencer commerce**

This paper is focused on a specific group of stakeholders in this transforming brand management landscape – everyday Internet users who manufacture themselves into a new form of social media microcelebrity known as the ‘Influencer’. 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).

The paper opens with a discussion on the professionalization of Influencer commerce, outlining the current climate of Influencer commerce in Singapore, and the tensions between credibility and self-disclosure. Specifically, we demonstrate how Influencers are effectively moving towards a vernacular marking of advertorials to maintain their credibility, resulting in advertorial disclosures as an emerging industry standard in Singapore.

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; Fournier, 1998). Their media brands constitute ‘Lovemarks’ – brands that are not simply respected, but trusted and loved (Roberts 2004). Abidin & Thompson (2012) identified four (branding) practices used by bloggers 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, the success of the bloggers hinges on their own taste and credibility. McQuarrie et al (2013) accordingly showed how fashion bloggers’ conscious selective choice of words, pictures and style led to the accumulation of social capital (building their celebrity status and personal brand) as well as economic capital (commercial success). The role of fashion bloggers as online Influencers is well recognized in marketing (Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010). The credibility and perceived trustworthiness of Influencers is also found to make them more effective promoters of brand messages (Chu & Kamal, 2008). In other words, credibility is important for the bloggers both for the growth of their own media brands and for their effectiveness commercial product brand endorsers.

It has been noted how some Influencers are counting followers in the hundreds of thousands 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, they are also participating in the shaping of brand management itself, its functions and processes.

*“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)*

## **Methodology**

The data in this chapter draws on a larger study of social media microcelebrity in Singapore since mid-2010, including a year of intensive participant observation conducted with these Influencers in the flesh in the capacity of various roles. These interactions and observations were archived in extensively detailed field diaries. 120 personal interviews were conducted with Influencers, Influencer management agencies, (prospective) clients, readers, and friends and family of Influencers between

December 2011 and July 2013.

### **Findings: Curating credibility under institutional pressures**

*The following analysis will focus on how Influencers approach and bridge the dualities between credibility and commerce in their roles as media brands, and their role as commercial brand industry workers – brand Influencers and product endorsers.*

#### *Pressure 1a: Influencers feel personally responsible for the quality of the products they endorse*

Lucy and Jane insist that they would always try out the product or service themselves before writing up an advertorial. Lucy frames this as “a sense of responsibility” to her readers, in order to maintain their trust and faith in her work ethic. She says that if she “doesn’t have the time” to “go for a trial” or “personally experience” the product/service, she would rather forego the advertorial. Jane explains that she would rather “maintain a clear conscience” by “using” the product/service herself before producing an advertorial:

“It’s actually quite a lot of effort, but I would rather try the product [or service] myself so my advertorial will be more real... a lot of bloggers sometimes just write advertorials... especially those who [are experienced and] get a lot of [contracts]... they can write very well, use the [same few words], and like, have a template... but you don’t know whether or not they really try the product, or just use it to take pictures for the blog...”

#### *Pressure 1b: Influencers are responsible for promoted offerings to be transparent and non-discriminatory to their followers.*

Theresa was engaged to promote a bust-enhancing service, and had produced a blog advertorial after having tried the service herself. However, the terms and conditions, as well as perks and benefits that Theresa introduced to her readers were not uniformly extended to every customer. While some readers got to experience “the full package” that Theresa raved about, others were only given “discounted versions” with fewer services at the same price. In addition, a few readers commented on Theresa’s advertorial blogpost to complain that their results post-treatment did not match up to Theresa’s documented experience. Although the responsibility here seemed to lie with the beauty company’s administering of the treatment, and despite the fact that Theresa had clearly signposted the blogposts as an advertorial, these readers accused Theresa of “making a quick buck”, for failing to “verify the authenticity” of the product/service, and for being “irresponsible” to her readers.

#### *Pressure 2: Non-authentic product endorsements are dishonest and will be revealed*

Jane tells me that it is “possible”, and indeed even “easy”, to “cheat” and simply write a “template advertorial” bearing only “glowing reviews” – she even suggests that she knows of other Influencers who have indeed done so. However, Jane maintains that readers “will be able to tell” if her advertorials lack the level of personalization and engagement that she usually conveys in the lifestyle narrative of her everyday posts. More crucially, she asserts that she would feel uncomfortable “earning money” with such underhand means:

“I think I’d rather just be truthful... and not “cheat”... take the easy way out, because readers who have been following your blog for a long time will surely... will be able to tell if the post is just ‘not you’... even if it’s some *cheem* word [sophisticated vocabulary], or if the style is not your usual style, they can tell... and I don’t want to earn like, this ‘dirty money’... how will I sleep at night, right...”

#### *Pressure 3: Congruency is needed between Influencer brand and endorsed product brands*

Like Brenda, Regina refuses to take up advertorial products/services in which she does not believe.

In fact, she has on a number of occasions screenshot and Tweeted her email and text message conversations between prospective clients, declining advertorials and refusing contracts because she did not believe in their product/service. One particular Tweet depicts her refusing an apparel advertorial because the “office wear” they wanted her to advertise did not match her current “street style”.

*Pressure 4: The Influencer has moral obligations also to the brand clients – personal opinions are allowed flexibility within boundaries*

Jennifer and Christine separately recounted unsatisfactory experiences with advertorial products, particularly apparel from small home businesses. Both of them similarly underscored their responsibility to clients who have paid them to write advertorials that stand in tension to their desire to be honest with readers. For both of them, the coping mechanism is to highlight the positive points of the product over the negatives. Jennifer recounts:

“There was once this shop sent me a dress to try [and be photographed in]... and it was really really sheer... like so thin and transparent... so I used descriptions like the dress is ‘lightweight’ or ‘airy’, which is not lying... and also that maybe it is good for ‘layering’ so readers know that it can’t really be worn on its own... I also said I wore an innerwear inside, so I wasn’t like lying...”

Christine expresses similar sentiment:

“Of course I won’t ‘bash’ the product cos after all the client is paying me for a service right? Maybe I’ll just say that I personally feel the product is quite thin... like it’s good for Singapore weather that is hot and warm... so that kinda tells [my readers] the ‘bad points’ in a good way?... obviously I won’t say that [the dress] sucks or what, but I already described the product... accurately...”

These interview insights reveal how some Influencers calibrate their internal tensions between producing quality advertorials for monetary earnings and maintaining their credibility with readers. Lucy and Jane owe it to their own conscience to personally try out every product/service before producing an advertorial, and Jane adds that astute readers will be able to pinpoint any incongruences should she stray from her personalized, natural tone of a ‘lifestyle’ narrative that feels more authentic. Based on Theresa’s bad experience, Brenda has refused to produce advertorials for products/services that she does not believe in, while Regina emphasizes this by publicly visibilizing the ‘behind-the-stage’ negotiations and rejections with prospective clients. Jennifer and Christine, however, adopt a more subtle strategy of highlighting a product’s positive features over its negative features, and have developed a vocabulary for delicately signposting the drawbacks of the featured product in ways that do not offend their paying client.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

In this early-stage research paper we have commenced some introductory work to understand how new brand management professions are institutionalized as amateurs and semi-professional Influencers are turning into 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 build brand relationships with followers (Kozinets et al 2010; Abidin & Thompson 2012).

We consider these Influencers to be the new breed of media brands. Central to our discussion in this paper has this been how Influencers accommodate the different external tensions and demands, and how they internalize them as norms, preferences and strategies. In fact, responding to pressure from Influencers, advertising standard authorities and Influencer management agencies are beginning to

formalize and institutionalize guidelines for this new form of social media advertising – In March 2014, the Advertising Standards Authority of Singapore (Asas) announced that it was working with Gushcloud and Nuffnang, and major players in the mainstream media industry, Singapore Press Holdings and MediaCorp, to formulate a first draft (Lee 2015).

When starting to accommodate commercial brands and contents in blogposts, Influencers are constantly at risk of breaching their contract of trust with their followers. We use interview material with Influencers to exemplify a number of emerging normative and coercive pressures concerning the brand management practices. In essence these “hidden” norms follow a few well-known themes:

- Responsibility for the quality of brands and offers that are endorsed
- Responsibility for the non-discriminatory nature of the brands and offers that are endorsed
- That non-authentic promotions are essentially dishonest
- That non-authentic behaviours will be detected and punished
- That Influencer brand and endorsed brands should exhibit congruency
- That Influencers have a flexible range to accommodate the needs of brand clients

In the absence of legal boundaries and industry norms regarding advertising formats and advertising ethics, this is a way to start analysing the mechanisms behind the formation of new media brands. Our future work includes a widened analysis, including more Influencers, but also to build a more structured analysis of the execution of Influencer brand endorsement techniques and advertorial executions.