CHAPTER NINE

Growing Up and Growing Old on the Internet: Influencer Life Courses and the Internet as Home

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As an anthropologist, I frequently travel to different cities to conduct fieldwork alone. After years of being perpetually on the road, all cities start to appear as mere permutations and combinations of pedestrian walkways, vehicular roads and railway networks, instigating in me bouts of disorientation and anomie. Between teasing out train maps and currencies, while retreating alone to yet another bedroom on yet another night, I go to the internet. I go to *my* internet. In there, I know the spaces and places and buttons and plumbing like the back of my hand. As the only constant experience in my life regardless of my geographical perplexity and inter-cultural fatigue, my internet is often my only continuous companion, my most trusted guide, and my home.

In a similar vein, many of the first-generation Influencers, whom I have been studying since the mid-2000s, often nostalgically refer to various spaces on the internet as their home, or sometimes a precious storage room. These pioneer batch of Influencers first debuted on blogs hosted on OpenDiary, LiveJournal, Diaryland, Blogger, tumblr, and WordPress that were popular in Southeast Asia, and subsequently moved on to more popular social media, but particularly Instagram and YouTube. Newer, shiner social media apps emerge every few months and the blogs where many Influencers first embarked on their now decade-long careers have been dwindling in audienceship, are dying out, or are being deleted en masse as companies go under. Yet, the few commercial lifestyle blogs (Abidin, 2013) that are still kept afloat hold special significance and productive purposes for

first-generation Influencers. I see this in the romanticized tributes the Influencers pay to the sacred spaces of their usually-neglected blogs.

In this chapter, I consider how three pioneer-batch Influencers in Singapore regularly return to their old blogs to make sense of their relationship with the internet and of their prolific careers. Drawing on classic sociological theory on placeness such as 'matter out of place' (Douglas, 1966), 'place and space' (Tuan, 1979, 2001), and 'props and stages' (Goffman, 1956), this ethnographic essay reflects on the felt physicality and emotional materiality of the internet as a place (Markham, 1998, 2003). I argue that against the backdrop of the rapidly changing social media landscape, Harriet, Alexis, and Timothy experience and describe their old blogs as a home. The metaphor of home highlights how these Influencers experience their blogs as a grounding sanctuary where they feel safe to housekeep the less glamorous aspects of their careers, as an archival checkpoint to which they return to evaluate their histories and their progress, and as a panoptic room in which they have to be accountable to their earliest readers as family. My analysis adds nuance and a recent example to a significant body of work exploring how people consider and build home through such contexts as game environments (e.g., Nardi, 2009; Sunden, 2003), avatar based virtual worlds (e.g., Boellstorff, 2008); interactions with others in text spaces like chatrooms (e.g., Markham, 1998); in fan communities (e.g., Baym, 2000), and through blogging (e.g., Hodkinson & Lincoln, 2008).

APPROACHING USUALLY-NEGLECTED BLOG SPACES AS HOME

Harriet's, Timothy's and Alexis' stories are adapted from my larger study of internet celebrity culture in Singapore between 2010 and 2018. The incidents referenced here are taken from fieldnotes compiled through participant observation and digital ethnography on these Influencers' digital estates, and coded through a constructivist grounded theory-guided (Charmez, 2006) analysis. The larger anthropological project of long-term immersion follows the informants through digital spaces (Postill & Pink, 2012). I focus on the socio-cultural rhythms of what is considered normative or subversive in the Influencer industry at a particular moment in time, and the progression of Influencers' socio-political identity-making projects between and across older and newer social media platforms.

In the stories below, Influencers explicitly or implicitly refer to their usually-neglected blogs as 'home'. These feelings of leaving and returning to a blog are situated against the backdrop of the continuous emergence of newer social media platforms, each demanding that Influencers upgrade their skills, adapt to new digital environments, and learn to connect with new followers while retaining

the congruence of their self-brand. Akin to Annette Markham's spatial metaphors conceptualizing the internet as a place (2003), for the Influencers studied, their blogs are a familiar site where they can: "wande[r]" through old archives and nostalgically review the growth of their careers while long-time followers watch over their progress at the origin site; "navigat[e]" through digital artifacts to curate a personal front to newer followers on newer social media as evidence that they were established icons in the age of commercial blogs; and "explor[e]" the public sharing of vulnerable feelings to reinstate follower affection and loyalty (Markham, 2003, p. 7). In the next three sections, I trace how Alexis, Timothy, and Harriet wander 'home' to their blogs to meet with loyal followers, navigate 'old props' in these spaces to curate different strategic fronts, and explore safe ways to 'take out the trash' as a cleansing ritual.

COMING HOME

Like many veteran Influencers who first debuted as commercial lifestyle bloggers, Harriet has all but left her blog for the more enticing and lucrative image-based platforms like Instagram and YouTube. However, she occasionally returns to her blog as a sanctuary away from these what she experiences to be highly competitive and aggressive new social media spaces.

In a series of blogposts between 2015 and 2018, each earmarking a moment of personal difficulty linked to an industry scandal or a romantic breakup, Harriet refers to her blog as the place in which she feels "the most comfortable." This is despite the fact that she primarily earns her income on Instagram, where she boasts over 160k followers, that she is a frequent guest star on several popular YouTube channels in the country, and that she also manages at least another half a dozen accounts on newer social media platforms.

I interpret Harriet's extended activity on other social media before her transient homecoming to her blog akin to how human geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1979) analyzes returning home after traveling: "An argument in favour of travel is that it increases awareness, not of exotic places but of home as a place. To identify wholly with the ambiance of a place is to lose the sense of its unique identity, which is revealed only when one can also see it from the outside" (p. 411). In this way, the salience of Harriet's usually neglected blog as a special place that feels like home is established through the juxtaposition of her experience when she is 'away.' In this analysis, it is this nostalgia arising from having left her blog for the more lucrative social media platforms that continually reframes Harriet's return as romanticized comfort.

Acknowledging the remaining audience of her scanty and irregular blogposts as her "very first readers" and in all likelihood the most "loyal" of the lot, she thanks

them for "watching over" her as she has grown up and "matured" from an adolescent into an adult before their eyes. This familiarity that she feels these readers share with her is crucial for allowing Harriet to discursively housekeep her emotional struggles on her blog, much more transparently than she would on her highly prolific Instagram account. And this is because, according to Harriet, her loyal long-term blog readers understand the social norms of her blog where transparency is valued, judgement is withheld, and catharsis is the intention. Just like at home, with close friends of family, there is an assumption of shared tacit norms, loyalty, and positive predisposition.

The feelings of comfort and safety and the values of openness and trust fostered in Harriet's blogspace are co-constructed between herself and her longtime readers. The blog is differentiated from her other social media spaces that are less imbued with value (Tuan, 2001, p. 6), and maintained as such because the group continuously assigns it "greater emotional charge" (Tuan, 1979, p. 409). For instance, her followers' comments demonstrate a general assumption that the content on Harriet's various social media are constructed and curated to some degree as this is "her job,", but they simultaneously maintain that her blog is the one place where she is more "real," more "genuine," and more "sincere," because of the disproportionate vulnerability she displays there. This ongoing social contract between Harriet and her longtime readers on her usually-neglected blog can be described as almost sacred, as Harriet says she feels "safe" enough there to share even her deeper, darker thoughts around depression and anxiety; something she would never address on her pristine Instagram account.

But there have been instances where Harriet's confessionals on her usually-neglected blog circulate widely across social media platforms, going viral among different audiences, and soliciting unwelcome guests at the doorstep of her 'home'. Comment wars unfold as visitors from her other social media platforms leave remarks doubting the veracity of her emotional breakdowns or the authenticity of her Influencer persona. "Are you acting depressed just to attract attention?" quips one commenter. "Yeah right, you look pretty happy in your last Instagram post though," ventures another. Without the tacit knowledge of her usually-neglected blog as a home, these visitors are unable to understand why Harriet's self-presentation there may differ from that on other platforms, but still be read as coherent and authentic by her long-term followers.

Using Tuan's discussions of the sense of place (1979), I suggest it is in these moments that the inhabitants of the 'home'—the longtime blog readers—"demonstrate their sense of place" on Harriet's blog by reaffirming their "moral and aesthetic discernment" in governing and maintaining the preciousness of this space (Tuan, 1979, p. 410). Through counter-comments and pushback in long threads, supporters emerge in defense of Harriet and her blog as a site for vulnerable self-expression. They mark off her blog as a place to be "defended against intruders"

(Tuan, 2001, p. 4), against those who do not exhibit the felt values of the inhabitants who live there. In so doing they re-establish themselves as what Anderson (1991) would describe as a self-selected "imagined community" who virtually share the place as the 'home' of the "real" Harriet to whom only those who still linger on her usually-neglected blog are privy.

REARRANGING THE STORAGE ROOM

For other veteran Influencers who have progressed on to social media platforms, transient returns to their usually-neglected blogs serve as journeys back into the storage room where they hold the things they once used when they first made public their personal politics and values upon embarking in the industry. In my analysis of their actions and statements, they revisit old blogposts as an archivist would, reacquainting themselves with facets of their Influencer persona they have previously made public to reevaluate the coherence of their narrative.

Alexis was among the first bloggers in Singapore to receive monetary incentives for her blogposts through embedded advertising links and sponsored advertorials. Although she still maintains several other blogs on different platforms—alongside the Influencer staples such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat—her original blog has not been updated in years. However, Alexis is fond of redirecting followers across her social media to old blogposts dating back as far as ten years to reference her long-standing ethics or stance on an assortment of issues.

Although she no longer monetizes her blog content as extensively as she used to, Alexis still uses her old blog to cultivate and strengthen her present-day Influencer persona. This is especially crucial given that her original Influencer self-brand was premised on being 'controversial', or her ability to generate scandal and channel attention towards herself.[1]

Specifically, whenever Alexis 'bandwagons' on or appropriates trending Twitter or Instagram hashtags to post outrageous content, and gets called out for being "just a troll" or an "opportunist" harvesting "clickbait," she barrages accusers with old blog links to underscore that being disagreeable and argumentative is her long-standing personality rather than a spur-of-the-moment whim. For instance, when same-sex marriage was legalized in the USA in June 2015, Alexis attention-jacked the prolific celebratory hashtags on Twitter and Instagram to repeatedly convey her disdain towards such unions. When American social media users who were surveying the hashtags called her out for "attention whoring," Alexis responded

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1   Building on the work by James B. Twitchell (1997) on "shamelebrity", I have elsewhere discussed similar negative-attention generation strategies as the commodification of shame and displays of weaponized shame (Abidin, 2016).

with links to old blog and social media posts in which she had expressed similar anti-same-sex marriage sentiment earlier. Yet, based on the June 2015 incident above, it is unclear if Alexis genuinely opposes marriage equality, or if it was staged for self-publicity. Later on, in June 2016, Alexis uploaded several selfies on Facebook and Instagram depicting her attendance (and general revelries) at Singapore's annual pro-LGBT event Pink Dot SG. Her posts even included same-sex affirming hashtags such as "#isupportthefreedomtolove" and "#loveislove."

Using sociologist Erving Goffman's metaphor of the theatre, I analyze how Alexis positions her old blog as the storage room, from where she picks the digital artifacts—dated selfies, photographs, artworks, text posts, backlinks, and comments from readers—to selectively piece together what Goffman would call "background items" to "supply the scenery and stage props" for her next discursive assault (Goffman, 1956, p. 143). Alexis is a "circumspect performer" who is able to "adjust [her] presentation according to the character of the props and tasks out of which [she] must build [her] performance" (Goffman, 1956, p. 143). Depending on the material she decides to bring to the foreground and piece together, Alexis skillfully rearranges her existing props to stage different persuasions or appearances. Hence, like the performer on Goffman's theatrical stage, Alexis is unable to "begin" her "act" until she has curated an appropriate and congruent stage on which she is able to perform (1956, p. 13). Or, coming back to the central metaphor of home, Alexis continually modifies and modulates the content and tone of her posts across social media, posting contradictory viewpoints on different platforms, which she is later able to reconcile and reorganize to present specific (and potentially contradictory) narratives, akin to redecorating her home depending on the type of visitors who are on the way for a visit.

TAKING OUT THE TRASH

Usually-neglected blogs also surface when Influencers return to them as confessional spaces to tell 'their side of the story', especially when the text spaces of Instagram captions and comments and YouTube comment threads can be easily overrun by animosity from haters and (paid) trolls and bots.

Timothy has found himself embroiled in a string of Influencer scandals in his decade-long career. In one incident, rival Influencers sullied his professional reputation; in another incident, antagonistic followers were aggressively questioning his sexuality on internet forums; and in yet another incident, he was subjected to viral hate when it was revealed that he had undergone cosmetic surgery. In each of these instances, Timothy returned to his blog to address these accusations, repair his image, and reinstall follower loyalty in a manner than resembles anthropologist Mary Douglas' retreatment of dirt as "matter out of place" (1966, p. 36).

Douglas asserts that there exists "no such thing as absolute dirt" (1966, p. 2) but that dirt is merely matter that has fallen out of order and requires reorganization to be put back in place. In other words, the presence of dirt signifies that there is a normative "system" of ordering at work, and dirt is the "by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements" (1966, p. 36). In an act of reinstating order, dirt has to be identified as transgressive, demarcated from other matter, then purified before being returned to the mass of matter (1966, p. 4).

Following this metaphor, I analyze Influencer scandals as the dirt that needs to be attended to and reordered, in order for the system to return to an equilibrium where only selective aspects of Timothy's life are on display, while others are kept away from the public eye. To reverse the backlash of unexpected exposé, Timothy engages in what could be described as housekeeping, by returning to his usually-neglected blog to post a confessional addressing the scandals, expounding on his feelings, and announcing his corresponding reactions. All of this mirrors the practice of sorting dirt back into its place.

Referring to the remaining readers of his blog as "long term followers" who know the "old" him, Timothy usually begins these reparation narratives by stating that he "owes" them an explanation, thus acknowledging their investment in his side of the story and their potential value in assisting in his reparation. He then addresses each accusation in detail, refuting some aspects with utmost insistence while apologetically admitting to others.

For instance, in one scandal, Timothy was called out for artificially inflating his statistics when he paid to use Instagram's 'Promote' feature to amplify the reach of a client-sponsored post. Timothy insists that he was not cheating as he had disclosed that the post was a paid ad and that there were no formal regulations against using his own money to "promote" the post through Instagram's proper channels as an added bonus for his client. But he also issued apologies for having to make this effort to secure the publicity of these recent posts, because he had not been updating his Instagram feed as regularly with non-sponsored content as needed to reel in followers more organically. Through these nuanced negotiations and boundary setting, Timothy seems to finesort his dirt, employing what Douglas refers to as "ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions" to "exaggerat[e] the difference" between practices that are "with and against" the order of things (1966, p. 4).

This practice of taking out the trash also demonstrates the networked nature of Timothy's social media persona. During these scandals, he would usually maintain a calm composure on his primary platform, Instagram, where he laboriously produces selfies that are conscientiously improved with photo-editing software and carefully curated for his highly stylized feed. While he may occasionally express some dissent and retort against accusations via the space of his Instagram

captions, Timothy always frames these discourses in cryptic layers of code-switching such that his intended message may not always have been evident to the average follower. This "Insta-vagueing"—where often sharp messages are encoded in Hallmark-esque ambiguous quotes and obscured quips whose double meaning would be lost on innocent audience members—makes it such that only those 'in the know' who possess the skills of social steganography (boyd, 2014) are able to cross-reference the hidden meanings against the networked capillaries of gossip, rumor, lore, and scandal among Influencers and dedicated followers. However, on his blog where he commits to self-reparation, followers are drawn in via long, thoughtful personal confessions and may be more likely to linger and empathize with him. This atmosphere of Timothy's blog again resembles that of a 'home' where inhabitants feel welcome and invited to linger, to exchange intimacies and exhibit more genuine layers of the self in a place that fosters these interactions.

GROWING UP AND GROWING OLD ON THE INTERNET

"Conceptualized as a space, the Internet develops architectures, boundaries, and multiple entry and exit points. Conceptualized as a place, the Internet comprises a socio-cultural milieu," writes Markham (2003, p. 7). Veteran Influencers who comfortably, nostalgically, safely retreat back to their usually-neglected blogs from their journeys onto other social media spaces exemplify this when they instinctively venture back 'home' to unwind, reaffirm themselves, or housekeep. Re-entering the blogs brings with it normative values, rules, expectations, and audiences to whom they are able to exhibit different facets of themselves. Considering the earlier and older technical affordances of blogs, this journey home also signifies a 'trip down memory lane' into a simpler time where Influencer commerce was less developed, less political, and more intimate and social. It is at 'home' in their blogs that they review and realign their values among the smaller and safer sociality of long-time readers, hone their skills and steel themselves before inevitably traveling to other spaces on the internet.

My experience of growing up on the internet is not too different from the journeys of Harriet, Alexis, and Timothy. Like Harriet who closes the door to different rooms in her home, as a compulsive cataloguer and curator of content, each of the twelve tumblr blogs that I run speak to different followers and mutuals who know me from 'way back' and chime in with forms of emotional support, even if these temporal and place-based notions of history differ across each blog. Like Alexis who rearranges the props in her home, as an academic who is active on social media, the types of data I choose to display across my professional and personal portfolios paint me in a different light with different personae. Like Timothy who takes out the trash during his housekeeping, as a highly empathetic person

who has blogged extensively to cope with grief and loss, sorting out the grub and dirt in my emotional wellbeing allows me to assign bad feelings and thoughts into the right spots, their safe spaces, in order that I may be able to function properly in my daily life.

Yet in these moments of growing up on the internet and learning to be intimate with these places, in these places, and for these places, there are simultaneously these other newer and more foreign places on the internet that will always be incomprehensible to me. The feelings of belonging and attachment I feel to some places on the internet come with maturity—from growing up in them, just as the feelings of longing and loss I feel towards their impending deletion and obscurity come with age—from growing old in them. I can only hope that as I continue to grow old on the internet, the places that are dear to me will be conscientiously archived before their impending deletion, providing me with one map and guide of the spots that were once my home.