Chapter 7

Net Idols and Beauty Bloggers' Negotiations of Race, Commerce, and Cultural Customs: Emergent Microcelebrity Genres in Thailand

Vimviriya Limkangvanmongkol and Crystal Abidin

Abstract

Around the mid-2000s, the first wave of young Thai women who attained fame organically on the internet emerged when their photos and profiles were widely shared by friends and fans in web communities and discussion forums. Comprising mainly of students, these women were known as "net idols" and celebrated primarily for their looks, as online conversations focused on their beauty, cosmetic and dressing skills, and overall pleasant appearance. Since then, some of these net idols have parlayed their online popularity into commercial exchanges and partnerships by advertising for clients, evolving into a commercial form of microcelebrity known as "influencers" (Abidin, 2016), while still others progressed into different forms of internet celebrity confined only to online fame as social capital without further tangible returns. In this chapter, we review the conceptual history of net idols and a subset of influencers known as "beauty bloggers" in Thailand, drawing on observations and content analyses of net idols' Instagram posts, beauty bloggers' Facebook posts, conversations from selected discussion boards, and popular sentiment about these internet celebrities in tabloids and online websites. Most of the content is originally in Thai and translated by the first author.

Keywords: Net idols; beauty bloggers; microcelebrities; commerce; Thailand

Introduction

Thailand is home to 69 million people, of whom 57 million people are internet users and 51 million are active social media users (Asean Up, 2018). The country

is also ranked eighth worldwide in the number of Facebook users, and the top five mobile apps are Line, Facebook, Facebook Messenger, Instagram, and K-mobile banking, based on average monthly active users for full-year 2017 (Asean Up, 2018). Thai internet users fall under three major groups: Everyday users (89.26%); Traditional celebrities from the mainstream entertainment industry, business, and politics (0.26%); and influencers (Abidin, 2016) (10.48%) (Sakawee, 2014). Yet, against the backdrop of globalizing forces where Silicon Valley social media such as Facebook and Instagram are rapidly being taken up in the country, Thai social and cultural norms are still strongly practiced and enacted on digital platforms, resulting in a Thai internet culture often pioneered and role-modeled by prolific users. Although it may appear at first glance that Thai internet celebrities are a mere local variant of global microcelebrity cultures, this chapter will highlight how these savvy young women enact hybrid forms of enact hybrid forms of self-presentation to reconcile tensions between local cultural norms and international industry practices. Specifically, the chapter will detail how net idols negotiate pressures between Thai customs and the commercial rhetoric of their businesses, and esthetic ideals around the Thai race and regional ideas of beauty esthetics filtered through popular culture.

Net Idols, Pretties, and Beauty Bloggers

In Thailand, many vernacular terms have been introduced to identify the different budding groups of influential internet users in society. One of these is "net idol," shortened from "internet idol," which frequently appears in traditional and popular media coverage on internet celebrity in Thailand (Taweephol & Nakpathom, 2017; Thairathonline, 2018; The Ensure Team, 2017). The term "'idol" originally relates to religious gods and deities, and refers to an object that is used to represent a god or deity, and is prayed to or worshiped by people. But "idol" also connotes persons with exceptional qualities who are regarded with admiration and adoration (Putnark, 2016). Prior research on net idols has cataloged how they self-describe as a group of people who rise to online fame due to their unique and special personality, image, talents, and interesting lifestyles that are admirable by everyday audiences and thus worth "following" or keeping a watch over for the purposes of emulation (Taweephol & Nakpathom, 2017: 118). Although some studies argue that net idols emerged when they organically accumulated attention from a niche group of audiences on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (Taweephol & Nakpathom, 2017), these forms of internet celebrity have a more distinct origin story.

Net idol culture in Thailand began on internet discussion boards, dating back to the mid-2000s (Guruclub, 2012), and were most prolific on Thai web communities popular among teens such as dek-d.com (dek-d, 2014). At the time of writing, the legacy of dek-d.com is still acknowledged as it is ranked 17th nationally in terms of visitor count and page views. The first generation of net idols were often conscientiously cataloged and promoted by popular media (Guruclub, 2012; Sanook Campus, 2017) and even memorialized as "lovely school girls" as they leapt from mere online fame to being stars on the cover of

teen magazines in Thailand. In a feedback loop further amplifying their fame, many fans post photographs of their magazine covers on internet discussion boards and start discussion threads tracing their favorite net idols' careers in the popular media circuit. In particular, Four Sakolrat and Bebe Thanchanok were scouted from discussion boards for magazine covers and even singing and modeling careers in the mainstream entertainment industry (Guruclub, 2012). In this pre-social media era, the original conceptualization of net idols referred to ordinary young women who strived to parlay their online fame into achieving success in the traditional entertainment industry, taking after their favorite celebrity idols (Putnark, 2016).

However, as Thailand welcomed the social media age, an expansive variety of net idol categories and genres proliferated. Before Facebook and Instagram took over as leading social networking sites, hi5 was the most popular network in the country (Russell, 2011) and primarily allowed users to share photos and expand their friendship networks. The site was the host platform on which many second-generation net idols rose to fame, with several users being scouted by traditional entertainment companies such as GMM Grammy – one of the leading and largest integrated entertainment media companies in Thailand. Net idol Toey Jarinporn, for instance, is best remembered for starring as the female lead in many music videos produced by GMM Grammy. Another net idol Cee Chatpawee, who was branded the "Princess of IT" owing to her beauty and extensive IT knowledge, was also recruited to host an IT program on the leading broadcasting television channel in Thailand, Channel 3 (Guruclub, 2012).

As pioneering net idols became professionally acknowledged for talents and expertise apart from their mere beauty and graduated into the mainstream entertainment industry, newer cohorts of net idol aspirants who lacked these skills felt pressured to further leverage on their looks. During this time, a subcategory of net idols known in the vernacular as "pretties" emerged to encapsulate young women who were specifically celebrated for being beautiful, sexy, amply chested, and most crucially, fair skinned. Although pretties were in existence on the Thai internet pre-social media, the phenomenon truly only exploded into mainstream popularity with the proliferation of social media platforms in the country. Stereotypically, pretties are known for dressing in "revealing or scant clothing and attract(ing) swarms of amateur photographers" (Mokkhasen, 2016). Pretties were scouted from social media sites primarily as show girls at trade shows such as automobile exhibitions and electronics expos in order to attract crowds and drive sales. Despite the distinct conceptual histories and genres of net idols, pretties overtook as "the face of" net idols, dominating media coverage and public commentary such that net idols were eventually conceived in the popular imagination as mere young women with appealing faces, skin, and curves who were limited to selling beauty and lifestyle products using their bodies as a canvas. Following the mainstream success and acceptance of net idols, pretties, and other forms of microcelebrity, in 2013 the first "Thailand Zocial Awards" was launched to recognize and celebrate social media talent in the country (Thumbsupteam, 2013).

Theoretically, very few studies have observed the history of net idols in Thailand. One such study is that by Phahulo and Boonnak (2015), who categorize net idols in Thailand into two groups: The first group are outstandingly good-looking, physically fit, young people who boast refined and healthy complexions, or what has been categorized as internet celebrity arising from exclusivity (Abidin, 2018). This group is the epitome of traditional attractiveness in that their followers publicly laud their fashion styles, grooming, and interesting lifestyle habits. The second group are those with special abilities or talents pertaining to music, sports, cosmetics, comedy, or the creative arts, as demonstrated through highly curated photographs and videos that they publish on themselves, or what has been categorized as internet celebrity arising from exceptionalism (Abidin, 2018). On the whole, appealing to one's physical appearance and beauty lends itself to an audience more easily than possessing and demonstrating a talent because Thai society "give(s) agency to the social cosmetic and elevate(s) it into a significant social form" (van Esterick, 2000: 36). The culmination of this mixture is predominantly presented and represented by images of national identity that are linked to beauty, grace, and femininity (Manderson, 1997; van Esterick, 2000: 4).

Conceptually, for industry insiders and users who were involved in the early days of discussion boards, the use of the term "net idols" is derogatory as it trivializes the curatorial and editorial work performed by bloggers, by demoting them as "mere pretty faces." In a prior study conducted by one of the authors (Limkangvanmongkol, 2018), an interview with the Managing Director and her team who over saw branded entertainment in a Thai media agency revealed some of the industry tactics for categorizing internet celebrities. Regardless of the popular press' ranking of net idols, and despite general sentiments among internet users who interact with net idols online, media and event agencies tended to prioritize their own internal lists of celebrity influencers. These lists differentiate categories such as "net idols" who are known primarily for their appearance and beauty, "beauty bloggers" who are known for the quality of their social media content and reviews, "university queen bees" who are good-looking undergraduate students from each university, and "entertainers" who are traditional celebrities from the mainstream entertainment industry such as actors and singers. Net idols and beauty bloggers are primarily ranked based on the number of followers they have garnered on international social media such as Facebook and Instagram, and the social mentions on Thai beauty communities such as jeban.com.

Logistically, net idols are primarily mobilized by marketers to be brand representatives to expand visibility of products, services, and campaigns through seeding strategies. Selected ones are handpicked to be initial consumers or "seeds" who will disseminate the earliest messages about new products, services, or campaigns, in the hopes that their audience reach will amplify these branding messages. To enhance the believability and success of such seeding campaigns, net idols are usually assigned products that are already congruent with their own skin type, body type, lifestyles, or activities (Bampo, Ewing, Mather, Stewart, & Wallace, 2008; Watts & Peretti, 2007), as naturalized advertorials (Abidin, 2014) that harmonize with the already-public curation of their personal lives. In

particular and perhaps in congruent with the legacy of pretties, popular products include whitening creams, breast-enhancing creams, sunscreen, and collagen drinks.

Methodology

This chapter synthesizes observations from three sets of data, in which we recorded details including the users' account names, usernames, biographies, number of followers, as well as the number of "likes" and comments, geotags, hashtags, and emoticons and emoji on each post (adapted from Marwick, 2015). Each post was analyzed for textual and image content.

In the first data set, 31 Facebook pages run as personal microblogs by male and female beauty bloggers were studied between October 2016 and December 2017 and posts were captured via screenshots. Despite writing primarily in Thai – with some English text peppered into captions, quotes, and hashtags – these beauty bloggers conveyed branding messages pertaining to internationally renowned products and services and also highlighted their travel experiences abroad, to showcase their social capital (Bourdieu, 2011) as informed users who are kept abreast of international consumer trends.

In the second data set, 30 public Instagram accounts run by Thai female idols were studied between January and May 2015. All users were actively posting and recorded at least 30,000 followers. A hundred selfie posts were filtered out per account, of which 50 posts were the first selfies published since each account was formed, and the remaining 50 posts were published in 2013 when selfie-taking practices gained international prominence after being instituted as the Word of the Year by Oxford Dictionaries (2014). This was done via the Instagram web viewer iconography.com, which eased the process of observing and coding data, as it displays each photo as a single post along with its caption and comments from other users.

These works examined discourse (Fairclough, 1995) as a text, considering social media posts as media texts that contained both written and visual elements (van Dijk, 1985). Visual and textual analyses methods were employed to add "rigor" and "breadth", and to reflect "an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon it questions" (Flick, 2002). In particular, the analysis relied on Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as an entry point to understand social practices by net idols and beauty bloggers. We used Initial Coding to suggest "a wide variance of possibilities" (Saldana, 2009: 85) and to search for processes of participant actions (2009: 84). For example, posts were coded as "revealing bodily curve," and "showing off porcelain white skin." In the second coding cycle, we used Focused Coding to develop major categories or themes (2009: 213). For instance, "revealing curve" and "showing off porcelain white skin" were grouped under a larger category of "crafting esthetic beings."

In the third data set, we searched the keyword "net idol" in Thai on Google and coded the content from the first 15 websites published in 2018. This was supplemented by articles on net idols from 25 Thai websites that circulated widely on social media, as observed in the first author's prior project

(Limkangvanmongkol, 2018). The articles primarily recorded public perceptions of net idols, especially in the comment sections. We further searched for articles on net idols published on leading Thai news websites such as thairathonline.com, sanook.com, and kapook.com and web communities such as pantip.com. These sources were selected after verifying their credibility and the average monthly traffic registered in 2017 (Asean Up, 2018).

Between Thai Customs and Industry Commerce

Despite writing primarily for a local audience, Thai beauty bloggers embed themselves into the regional and global influencer industry by attending to visual and textual registers that are canon in their field and by attuning to time-sensitive esthetic and product trends that emerge in different parts of the world. For instance, in the Facebook sample of posts by bloggers in the beauty genre, we observed around 12,000 posts endorsing products and services from Asian/ regional beauty industry hubs in Korea and Japan, such as the Face Shop's Miracle Finish Cushion and Japanese SK-II Facial Treatment Essence, and 10,000 posts promoting Global North beauty industry hubs in the UK and US, such as the British Charlotte Tilbury lipsticks and American Urban Decay's Naked Heat eyeshadow.

Beauty bloggers also tended to emphasize the origin of the beauty product, especially when mobilizing the discourse that internationally branded cosmetics were novel and prestigious. For instance, beauty blogger Feonalita who usually blogs about luxurious beauty brands mentions:

> Charlotte Tilbury items are not sold in Thailand. Whoever goes to England must visit the Charlotte Tilbury counters for a one-in-a-lifetime experience, and you will fall head over heels for the brand (Translated from Thai).

But this is not to say that local products are shunned. In fact, beauty bloggers tended to blend the use of local low-end products and international high-end ones to demonstrate national pride and enact the megaphone effect (McQuarrie, Miller, & Phillips, 2013) on local products. For instance, beauty blogger PuPe_so_Sweet who posts in-depth reviews of skincare products by analyzing each ingredient mentions:

> I am introducing to you a good item. The main ingredient in this cosmetic item is snail slime that is not imported but of the Siamese snail breed. Siamese snails are researched, farmed, and secreted in Thailand. The snail slime's efficacy is excellent. I couldn't ask for better glowing skin. I really want you all to try it (Translated from Thai).

However, they generally adhered to international beauty trends as closely as possible, since they are positioned as interlocutors, mediators, and disseminators

of global consumer habits for young Thai consumers on the internet. For instance, over the course of 2017, the trend of using pink, peach, and red makeup kick-started in the US and UK from Urban Decay and Charlotte Tilbury's new color palettes, and swiftly made its way to Asia, especially through the Kpop market in South Korea. This international influence, filtered through regional adaptations by East Asian and Southeast Asian countries, eventually seeped into Thai beauty culture when Feonalita and OnnBaby became the first to adopt this trend.

Although beauty bloggers exerted external beauty influences from other countries, they negotiated between such influences and local culture for occasions that were culturally specific. In October 2016, Thailand's beloved King Bhumibol Adulyadej, known as the Father of Thailand, passed away. A yearlong period of mourning was announced by Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha, and all entertainment functions were toned down for a month (Belopotosky, 2016). As the entire country's color palette shifted with Thai people dressing exclusively in black or in somber colors bearing a black ribbon, beauty bloggers in the genres of beauty and fashion also shifted their content programming. Beauty bloggers on YouTube who continued producing videos abandoned their usual self-branded esthetic and donned black and somber colors. Female and transgender beauty bloggers produced video and image content wearing only natural and simple makeup.

Some beauty bloggers even began producing instructional videos such as "How to wear makeup in soft or muted tones" and "How to dress in black politely/respectfully (modest and minimal)" (Fig. 1). These videos showed beauty bloggers demonstrating how to choose, as well as mix and match, different items of clothing that were black and dull colored from different brands into various combinations of outfits to last the long mourning period (Fig. 2). Beauty bloggers who had to keep up with commercial endorsements also reshaped the narrative of

Fig. 1:   KhwanKhong's How To Wear Makeup for Mourning Period.
Source: Photo screengrabbed from https://www.facebook.com/khwankhong/posts/1670205096537788 on June 25, 2018. Republished with permission from KhwanKhong.

Fig. 2:   Namiizz Nam's Makeup Look for Black Clothing During the Mourning Period. *Source:* Photo screengrabbed from https:// www.facebook.com/Namiisnam/photos/ a.1669024129999034.1073741828.1669008380000609/2000727420162035/? type=3&theater on June 25, 2018. Republished with permission from Namiizz Nam.

their advertorials to incorporate branded content in a tone that fit with the somber mood of mourning. For instance, YouTuber Nutty B who collaborated with a blogger to create a makeup video mentions:

> Our video showcased nine muted-color lipsticks that we can use during the mourning period. The colors work well for women with tanned skin (Translated from Thai).

As such, while curating mourning content for their local audiences, between the rhetoric of sincere bereavement and that of a commercial obligation to continue their content programming, beauty bloggers managed to reposition national grief into a commodity that is keyed into the industry genre of "How-To" tutorials. The beauty diaries and vlogs, while usually serving as instructional guides on self-beautification for young consumers, also doubled up as cultural and ethical spaces for cultural etiquette around self-adornment and commodification in times of national crisis. While some beauty bloggers did not share any "How-To" tutorials, they, like other Thai media users, changed their profile pictures to black and white images or used black backgrounds as profile pictures for an extended period of time. Some created goodbye posts and circulated content related to the late King and his royal family. They disseminated news articles from the national and international press, and/or expressed their deepest gratitude and condolences for the late King. Some expressed their mournfulness and sorrow, including trending key phrases like "In Remembrance of His Majesty, King Bhumibol Adulyadej" or hashtags like #BorninTheReignofKingBhumibol. As such, beauty bloggers took on the role of public educators who cultivated and preserved cultural traditions.

Between Thai Beauty and Regional Esthetics

Cultural norms tend to dictate cultural intelligibility for normative beauty and femininity: Thai beautiful women should have white, clear, and radiant skin (e.g., Japanese-like, Korean-like, or White-like skin types); a slim and slender figure (e.g., slender neck, slim fingers; see Phakdeephasook, 2009: 63); a high and narrow nose bridge; and a youthful appearance (see Rongmuang et al., 2011a, 2011b: 11). The concept of whiteness has developed together with Thai beauty norms, which have been influenced by western colonial developments in Asia (Chaipraditkul, 2013: 27), transnational consumption of Japanese pop culture in the early 1990s, and Korean pop culture and drama series (Siriyuvasak & Hyunjoon, 2007: 109). For many years, more than 100 prominent Korean beauty companies have participated in the K-Beauty Expo Bangkok with the main goal to showcase Korean beauty products and the latest Korean beauty trends (Rungfapaisarn, 2018). Hyo Choon Yoon, executive vice president of the Korea International Exhibition Centre (Kintex) who organized the K-Beauty Expo, considered Thailand as one of the largest distributors of Korean beauty products in the Asean region. The country accounted for 30% of Korean cosmetics business in the region (Rungfapaisarn, 2018). Despite the unstable political situation in Thailand, consumer spending remains high in the beauty and personal care categories (Euromonitor, 2014).

The quest for white beauty in Thailand is also driven by television commercials. Many advertisements associate life benefits with having white skin, with the myth comprising boosting one's self-esteem, increased job hiring opportunities, and increased opportunities for marriage to partners from a higher social class (Chaipraditkul, 2013: 28–30). Representations of white skin are thus markers of better social status, while those of dark skin are associated with poverty and the working class. To illustrate: In a campaign of a whitening drink product Amino PLUS Brighten, an advertising team used arresting taglines to underscore the

privilege of white-skinned people. Wrapped outside a Bangkok Sky train (BTS), the slogan reads "Step in if you are pinkish, white-skinned people" [translated from Thai]. Inside the train, a poster stickered on a glass window above seats read: "These seats are reserved for white/light-skinned persons" [translated from Thai]. The campaign sparked criticisms for skin color discrimination by Internet users.

In addition to being hired for advertising campaigns, net idols are also taken to be role models in image management, especially through the savvy use of cosmetic products to enhance their looks. As iterated earlier, net idols are known for their appealing and desirable skin, as well as facial and body features. They usually share their beauty secrets and routine using appealing pictures and persuasive captions. For example, net idol Skykikijung introduced her skin protection strategy:

> Lately, the sunlight is very strong. I need to apply this clear-face cream before foundation as to brighten my facial skin and fully protect my skin from sun rays. Actors/Actresses and celebrities also use it. If you are interested in this cream, follow this IG: @rayshicream #rayshiiwww.facebook.com/rayshithailand (Translated from Thai).

The ability to own a face and body that meets Thai beauty standard affords net idols the ability to accumulate social capital among other social media users and serves to reaffirm public discourse of the normative beauty standard.

The Good and Dark Sides of Microcelebrity

While media coverage has significantly expanded the visibility of net idols in Thailand, not all press is good publicity. Much of the coverage on net idols by leading tabloids also focus on scandals including premarital pregnancy, debts, theft, and illegal gambling. Media criticism of the net idol phenomenon is usually focused on their lucrative commerce and its impact on education, with commentators concerned that the seeming ease of entry and success in the industry will distract aspirational youth from completing their compulsory education (Pantip, 2016a). A leading private university has also announced their new "Net Idol Scholarship," intended to attract prolific internet users with high social media followings and a general good reputation online. In exchange for their full fees being covered, scholars are expected to use their influential social media estates to promote the university to followers (Pantip, 2016b). Evidently, in spite of popular preoccupations over the apparent frivolity net idols, they are at the very least acknowledged and lauded for their savvy public relations skills in a time where attention on the internet is scarce, sacred, and savored.

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