

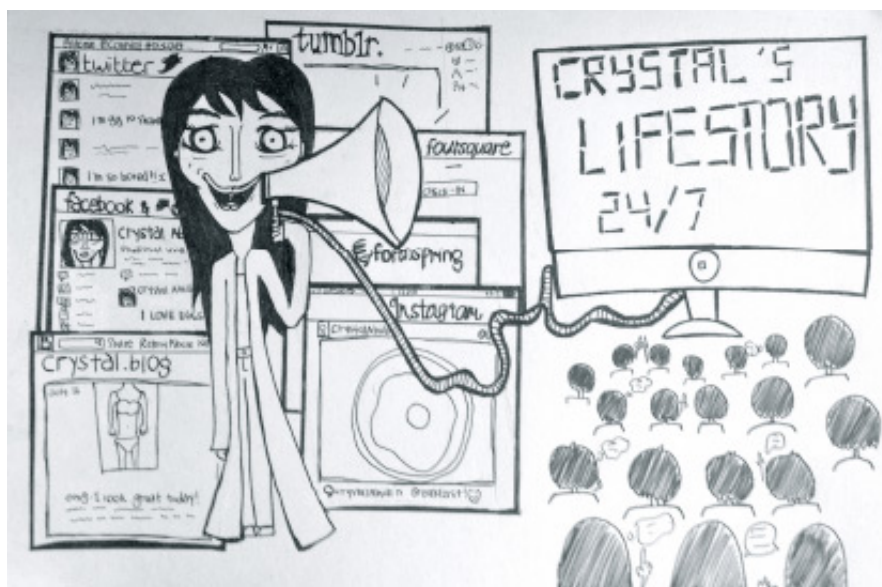
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Cyber-BFFs*: Assessing women's 'perceived interconnectedness' in Singapore's commercial lifestyle blog industry *Best Friends Forever

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'livingontheinternet.com'.

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Abstract

Following on from recent trends of research into the social media industry, this paper takes an anthropological look at Singaporean women's creative leverage of blogs and complementary social media platforms for youth entrepreneurship, namely through advertorials and advertising. As part of an ongoing doctoral dissertation, the information was gathered from young Singaporean women engaged in commercial blogging activity, specifically in the 'lifestyle' blogging genre during 18 months of fieldwork between October 2011 and March 2013. This paper argues that while social media has enabled the commercial blog industry to produce the sense of familiarity that I term 'perceived interconnectedness', using blogs and social media platforms as a medium for their business has disordered the personal lives of a group of commercial lifestyle bloggers. The paper then examines commercial lifestyle bloggers' reactions to this disordering of their lives, and discusses their motivations for staying in the industry despite the physical and emotional toil it has taken on them.

Introduction

As part of an ongoing doctoral dissertation and ethnographic fieldwork, this paper takes an anthropological look at young Singaporean women's creative leverage of blogs and complementary social media platforms for youth entrepreneurship, namely, blog- and social media-based advertorials and advertising. I specifically focus on commercial lifestyle bloggers in the period of October 2011 to March 2013, whose use of social media for their business has resulted in readers enacting 'perceived interconnectedness', and which resulted in certain expectations of blogger-reader relations. This in turn creates tension and disorders the social life of commercial bloggers who have to strategise using coping mechanisms to remain in the industry. Although they belong specifically to the 'lifestyle' blogging genre, for ease throughout this paper, I refer to these women as 'commercial bloggers'.

The foreground that birthed an entire cohort of youth engaging in this activity is three-fold. Firstly, Singapore's technological infrastructure and software is mature with island-wide wireless internet access (infocomm123, 2010) and a very high uptake of smartphones. Secondly, the country has institutionalized the uptake of internet 'savvy-ness' and technological know how from a young age via the education system (see Tang & Ang, 2002; Wong, 1992). Thirdly, there is a culture of youth consumption and "excessive materialism" (Chua, 1998: 987) that is one of the main ideological discourses of consumption in Singapore. Together, these three elements – technological infrastructure, institutionalised computer knowledge, and youth consumption patterns – highlight one's body as "the primary locus of consumption" (ibid) within which readers consume body-building or self-creation narratives via commercial blogs. Popular reception of the industry is also reflected in the infocomm Development Authority's (IDA) 2012 report that "reading blogs that are created by others" was the third most popular activity after "social networking" and "instant messaging" (IDA, 2012). At present, a simple search brings up hundreds of thousands of blogs in Singapore, and while scholarship on this industry is lacking, bloggers and industry players I interviewed suggested that only about 10-15,000 of these blogs are profitable, albeit only for a short period of time as many struggle to break into the market and sustain their following. My anthropological fieldwork focused on around 60 of the blogs that have managed to remain sustainable for between three to eight years – a considerably long period considering the rapid booms and busts of e-commerce ventures. A smaller group of 10 blogs was selected for this paper.

In Singapore, where blogging as a career is especially lucrative, successful, commercial bloggers earn money from selling advertising space, writing personalised advertisement editorials known as ‘advertorials’, and hawking apparel to their massive followings (Chiew, 2009). One of Singapore’s most popular commercial bloggers, Xiauxue (<http://xiauxue.blogspot.sg/>), garners up to 40,000 unique views daily (xiauxue.blogspot.sg, 2013). Commercial bloggers also frequently publish bite-sized updates on social media networks such as *Twitter* (<https://twitter.com/>), *Instagram* (<http://instagram.com/>), *Foursquare* (<https://foursquare.com/>), and *Formspring* (<http://www.formspring.me/>) that run as parallel or periphery commentary to complement their blogs. While the women in this study updated their blogs between one and five times weekly, each person produced at least one social media post a day, and averaged five posts (including original posts, reposts and, replies) daily across the different platforms. With updates streaming in from various sources spread out over different times of the day, it is not surprising that readers feel especially familiar to and connected with commercial bloggers despite not being actual friends in ‘real life’. I use the phrase ‘in real life’ to demarcate an off the web ‘physical world’ presence without evaluating claims of authenticity (see also Abidin, 2013). This sense of familiarity has led some readers to develop what I term a ‘perceived interconnectedness’ with these commercial bloggers. While ‘perceived interconnectedness’ – as elaborated later in the paper – is similar to the notion of ‘parasocial relations’ (Horton & Wohl, 1956), I later detail how the concepts are related, but distinct.

Between blogger and reader, the basis of the relationships forged is an intimacy – albeit a ‘commercial intimacy’ that thinly veils the consumerist exchange between blogger and reader – based on the blogger’s personal life as the commodity that is being traded and vicariously consumed. This ‘commercial intimacy’ maintains a seemingly close-knit relationship and makes bloggers out to be accessible personas, in a bid to capture readers’ attention and interest. For example, many of these bloggers are taken as hegemonic females whose performative femininities (see Abidin & Thompson, 2012) are the yardstick against which other bloggers and readers police each other in the homosocial industry. Despite its commercial nature, it is important to note that the blogger’s priority is to forge a relationship with her readers. Only bloggers with a good following, or those with the potential to grow their following, are approached by advertisers and sponsors. And those who have gained advertisers and sponsorship have been known to lose readers when they fail to maintain their intimacies with readers. Indeed there are many ‘small time’ bloggers who hardly earn any revenue from blogging and are not perceived as ‘commercial’ bloggers because their web presence does not command attention from readers. While there are interesting discussions about the ethics of a possible exploitative ‘intimacy’ or false ‘advertising’ (see Lenhart, 2005: 54-59 for similar discussions on ‘authenticity’), this paper steers away from the commerciality and ethics of these intimacies to look at the ways in which the bloggers experiences tensions and disorder in their lives in an industry that is heavily reliant on social media and communicative technology.

‘Perceived interconnectedness’ is enacted and experienced by readers as a result of having followed these commercial bloggers closely over a long period, and having received continuous bite-sized updates about their daily affairs. Readers who assume the role of cyber-BFFs – tween lingo for ‘best friends forever’ – appear to impose expectations on commercial bloggers, which has in turn disrupted the latter’s lives outside of their ‘working hours’. This paper illustrates facets of this ‘perceived interconnectedness’, and examines commercial bloggers’ reactions to this disordering of their lives. Lastly, it discusses commercial bloggers’ motivations for staying in the industry despite the physical and emotional toil it has taken on them.

Commercial bloggers & methodology

Full-time bloggers are not uncommon in Singapore with many young women taking on commercial blogging as proper careers. In fact, this business has expanded so quickly that at least two digital advertising companies, Nuffnang (<http://www.nuffnang.com.sg/>) and Gushcloud (<http://gushcloud.com/>), were launched in Singapore in 2007 (Nuffnang, 2013) and 2011 (Gushcloud, 2013) respectively to match corporate advertisers to bloggers. Although there are no firm statistics on the profits of such firms, their rapid growth within just a few years indicates the industry is doing well – the Singaporean ‘model’ has now been adopted in regional countries including Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Australia (Gushcloud, 2013; Nuffnang, 2013). Despite the lack of scholarship in this area, newspaper reports (Ng, 2007) and one study (Fletcher & Greenhill, 2009) date the emergence of commercial blogs and ‘blogshops’ in Singapore and South East Asia to the mid-2000s. This is corroborated in my personal correspondence with bloggers who similarly place pioneers around 2005. Since then, the Singaporean blogosphere has flourished into a vibrant scene with themes including beauty (<http://bunbunmakeuptips.com/>), blogshops (<http://www.ohvola.com/blog.php>), fashion (<http://www.missingavenue.com/>), food (<http://ieatishootipost.sg/>), lifestyle (<http://www.beatricetan.com/>), parenting (<http://www.oureverydaythings.com/>), photography (<http://www.hendralauw.com/>), politics (<http://yawningbread.wordpress.com/>), and technology (<http://www.thetechblogger.com/>).

At present, commercial bloggers can earn up to SGD\$100,000 for a sponsored blogpost (personal communication) although most ‘A-list’ bloggers are able to earn at least SGD\$10,000 in profits monthly from their commercial blog business alone. ‘B-list’ bloggers can average a monthly income of SGD\$3,000 to \$5,000 (personal communication). While related and often run in tandem by top bloggers, I distinguish ‘commercial blogs’ from ‘blogshops’ and focus on the former in this paper. ‘Blogshops’ (Fletcher & Greenshill, 2009; Abidin & Thompson, 2012) are blog interfaces on which women publicise products – predominantly women’s apparel and accessories – for sale. While they first begun as a site for women to sell their ‘preloved’ – a euphemism for second-hand – items, most blogshops presently trade brand new items specially manufactured and imported from around the region (*The Straits Times*, 2010). ‘Commercial blogs’, however, are primarily blogs in the style of a personal diary where these women recount daily happenings ‘as lived’ and pen their thoughts, often also embedding advertisements and endorsements into these running narratives. The combined earnings of the ‘blogshop’ and ‘commercial blog’ ventures have been known to bring in more than a million Singapore dollars for some bloggers annually (personal communication). Online activity is usually mediated in English although some of these women code-switched to other Singaporean languages during our face-to-face interactions.

My fieldwork included prolonged virtual and physical interactions and observation, and I focus on female commercial lifestyle bloggers. I identified myself as a researcher from the start, and have obtained the bloggers’ consent to catalogue their web presence. Although there are some bloglinks embedded in this article, these are generally popular articles on the Internet that are easily searchable. In this paper, the women I studied and their blogs are identified only by pseudonyms. The first 10 months were spent immersed in their virtual world as a fellow non-commercial blogger and reader while the next eight months were spent in their physical world communities in a wide capacity of positions including a personal assistant, a fashion intern, a copywriter, a copyeditor, a shadow blog manager, and a friend. The ‘physical world’ leg of my fieldwork was especially significant because readers are commonly known to follow bloggers on the streets or interrupt them at events

to ask to have photographs taken with them (see also Abidin, 2013). In some extreme cases, readers have also been known to stake out at bloggers' regular haunts in order to catch a glimpse of their idol or hand them gifts.

While most are in their early teens to mid-20s, the 10 bloggers I include in this paper were between the ages of 21 to 28. Seven were full-time bloggers, two were pursuing their studies in tertiary institutes while earning pocket money from their blogs, while one decided to keep her day job and work on her blog in the evenings and on weekends for supplementary income. In addition, seven of these commercial bloggers were also running their own blogshops, while three were engaged as ambassadors or models to other blogshops. As such, they occasionally referred to 'readers' and 'customers' interchangeably. As customers who purchase from them are almost always readers as well, I collectively refer to their audience as 'readers'. Individually, these 10 women report their daily readership to average between 2,000 to 10,000 unique views. Remaining relatable to such a huge readership is part of the daily grind of a typical commercial blog career. While the women tell of hardship and setbacks in their line of business, they attribute a portion of these problems to some readers' intimate sense of attachment to them. I term this 'perceived interconnectedness' and explain facets of this attraction in the next section.

'Perceived interconnectedness'

In their work on 'parasocial relations', Horton & Wohl (1956) discuss popular characters on television and radio who develop one-sided interpersonal relationships with individual members of their audience, producing an 'illusion of intimacy' through informal conversational style casualness, responsive small talk, projecting supporting casts as close intimates, blending and mingling with the audience, and the use of technical devices of the media – all of which result in the audience's extensive knowing of the persona with little actual reciprocity. These relationships are backed through a 'general propaganda' which flows from the persona and the media in a bid to sustain the illusion of 'reciprocity and rapport' between a sincere persona and a loyal audience.

Fast forward half a century and bloggers are engaging with fans in similar ways via blogs and social media platforms. However, unlike radio and television which can elect to reveal the 'expressive information' of groups' 'backstage regions' (Meyrowitz, 1985: 135), this medium of social interaction carries in itself the implicit expectations of intimacy especially given the extent of reveals into the 'backstage' and the 'personal voice' that is characteristic of social media (boyd, 2006; Lövheim, 2010) due to rampant personal posts and the need to create marketable intimacy. Unlike previous mediations via a broadcasting radio set or television screen, readers perceive their interactions with these bloggers as more direct, personal, and authentic than previously, with social media interaction now seemingly stripped of barriers or bureaucracy (boyd, 2006). They are able to provide input to bloggers via these channels with a high chance of garnering a response even if bloggers respond via generic or collated FAQs. A large pool of bloggers, and indeed all 10 in this paper, even reply to 'personal' emails from readers on a regular basis, thus appearing more accessible than other mainstream media celebrities today (see also Lenhart, 2005:67-69; boyd, 2006). In other words, readers are able to receive feedback directly from bloggers with 'propaganda' and 'feedback' flows in both directions (Lövheim, 2010), not only because the medium they interact on enables it, but also because of the expectant norms and appropriate degrees of intimate interaction shared and internalised by a cohort of youth who literally grew up with the internet (Turkle, 2008).

While parasocial relations is uni-directional, hierarchical, and broadcast, 'perceived interconnectedness' is bi-directional, flat, and interactive. Unlike parasocial relations which is carefully constructed at the persona's end via theatrics and media devices as a one-to-many mode of dissemination, 'perceived interconnectedness' is a by-product of the expectancies arising from communication based on social media platforms, and is enacted by readers who envision a one-to-one mode of interaction with bloggers.

The next section highlights bloggers' everyday experiences, tensions, and stresses from the use of blogs and social media platforms to illuminate readers' enactment of 'perceived interconnectedness'. Although the disjuncture between bloggers' and readers' understanding and expectations of blogging norms and behavioural guides is emerging, this is not to say that there are no embedded cultural norms or that the community is fragmented (cf Lenhart, 2005). Instead, these fluid transitions and progressions point to the dynamic flux in which specific cultural norms for this female Singaporean lifestyle blogging community are continuously negotiated and co-created (see also Abidin & Thompson, 2012) between blogger and reader, given that the former's fame and longevity in the industry is ultimately sustained by the latter's patronage. In other words the blogger's income depends on sustaining the illusion of intimacy with people they may not have normally associated with and is, at best, precarious and prone to stress. As noted by boyd (2006: 19), there are tensions between bloggers and readers when the former sees the blog as a corporeal extension of the self while the latter assumes it as a mere space for conversation. To bridge this divide, bloggers need to strive to connect intimately with readers via the medium of their blogs (and other social media platforms) so that the audience can subsume both modes as continued performances of the bloggers' personhood. In the following examples, this bridging has been (un)successful to different degrees for different bloggers, as exemplified in the varied coping mechanisms they use to strategise against this social tension and disorder. The facets of 'perceived interconnectedness' I discuss in this paper are immediacy, constancy, exclusivity, intimacy, quality.

Immediacy

The most stressing tension commercial bloggers experienced was that their readers often expected immediacy in their interactions. Although blog publishing is asynchronous, that is, a non-instantaneous form of computer-mediated-communication (CMC), some impatient readers demand instant responses by spamming the 'comments' section of their blogs and social media platforms or sending multiple email reminders. Bloggers like Farrah express the impatience of such readers:

when I wake up the first thing I do is ... I on the comp and I start work ... Yes! Because if you don't reply by, let's say a day right, you get complaints ... – Farrah

The reactions of Farrah's readers are apparent perhaps because conventions of intimacy imply undivided attention, as reflected by the need for quick responses. Others took to tracking bloggers on their real time social media feeds such as *Twitter* and *Instagram* to seek immediate attention, and even track if these commercial bloggers were logged onto the internet. Annabelle recounts instances where fussy readers surveyed her *Twitter* feed and even tracked the time and pace of her response as evidence that she was "online but not replying" to them.

Apart from the pressure of feeling policed and having complaints from disgruntled readers accumulate publicly, Annabelle and Farrah also hinted that their quality of life has changed to meet the hassles for immediacy:

the thing is for blog industry I feel like people will require you to reply very promptly even on weekends so ... there's no "paid leave"... – Annabelle

I feel very stress because sometimes even when I sleep ... I haven't really wake up, I see my phone ... I start looking for new mails and things like that just in case ... – Farrah

As evidenced, the bloggers feel that the demands of immediacy infringes on their rest or recreational time. Despite largely communicating to readers via their asynchronous blogs and social media platforms, readers seem to feel entitled to swift replies, changing the anticipations of blogging as a communicative medium.

Constancy

While 'immediacy' pointed to the expectation of a very short response time, 'constancy' refers to the expectation for bloggers to remain constantly and continuously logged on to the Internet to correspond with readers 'after hours', and even 24/7. This often extends late into the night with disgruntled readers being upset at the lack of response in the wee hours of the morning:

... very high expectations, if they send us an email at night, even late at night and we don't respond, in the morning we would get multiple follow-up emails asking us why we haven't responded. – Elaine

There is a sense of timelessness (Greenfield, 2005) on the internet where the concept of time is hazy and standard working hours do not seem to apply. Readers who are logged on around-the-clock expect that commercial bloggers would be as well, since their business are based on the web after all (Turkle 2008: 122). Perhaps considering their capacity to work from home or 'on the go' with mobile technology, readers desire continuous interaction, reflecting this young generation's pursuit of incessant stimulation (Armstrong, Phillips & Saling, 2000).

Exclusivity

Despite blogging being a one-to-many broadcast, some readers interpret their interactions with commercial bloggers as exclusive dyadic exchanges. Many bloggers report having readers "complain" about not having their question personally or directly answered even if said response has already been published to a similar question asked by another reader. It seems the draw point is to command the attention and form a whole and exclusive – albeit short-lived for some readers – relationship with the blogger at some point of time. This is not to say that another relationship cannot be fostered between the same reader and blogger once an earlier 'exclusive' relationship has died down. Indeed many readers I spoke to recall such periods of serial 'exclusivity'. This is evident in instances where readers seem oblivious to the fact that they are but one of thousands of users relating to

these commercial bloggers daily, and expect priority over other users. This echoes Lenhart's work in that "[d]espite their one-to-many mode of distribution, [readers] are engaged with in a one-to-one manner" (2005: 102). For Elaine, this is a familiar plight:

There are some customers [who] ... demand immediate attention, I don't think it occurs to them that we have many other customers to tend to and we may take some time to respond to them. – Elaine

This sense of exclusivity is also reflected when readers expect to be distinctive and memorable to the commercial blogger. It is common for some to quote past interactions or a 'history log' with the commercial blogger in a bid to stand out and thus earn special treatment, perhaps in direct response to bloggers' successful portrayals of intimacy with their readers enacted through terms of endearment. These usually resound in terms of length of readership ("I've been reading your blog since your secondary school days!"); admiration of the commercial blogger ("You are so fashionable! I wish my life was like yours!"); public sightings ("I was the girl in the white top standing behind you at the road junction yesterday!"); and purchase power ("I've been buying from every collection since you started!"). These remarks are widely found in the comments section of blogs, in personal emails, and on various social media feeds, often enacted as a social grooming strategy to mark a reader's extent of loyalty to the blogger or degree of authenticity as a 'fan' or 'follower'.

Intimacy

For some readers, interacting behind a screen encourages them to be less inhibited and enables a sense of liberation and comfort in this 'backstage' where feeling work and impression management takes place is made less privy to the public (Goffman, 1990). Some even perceive a sense of intimacy when relating to commercial bloggers in a dyadic and seemingly personal manner. Unlike studies where anonymity is a key factor promoting user comfort allowing intimacy to develop over time (Joinson & Paine, 2007), readers often disclose their identities to commercial bloggers in a bid to remain memorable, as referenced above. As Belinda explains, the first way this perceived intimacy is portrayed shows through readers demanding increasing levels of disclosure on commercial bloggers' supposed "private", "unseen", "secret", or "personal" lives:

They will be very hungry for more ... asking and checking back on your blog to find out things about you. Some readers just keep wanting to know more more ... – Belinda

This constant craving for more revelations has led some 'digital stalkers' to ask very specific questions about the more sensitive aspects of the commercial blogger's life, even appearing intrusive and invasive at times (Solove, 2007). The most common of these pertained to relationships, friendships, and finances where commercial bloggers were often scrutinised in detail:

how does [name of boyfriend] turn you on? What do you think of pre-marital sex? Since you moved in together ... what do your parents think? – Reader A

are you and [name of fellow blogger] true friends? I think [name of another blogger] likes her more than you. Is she fake ... What's she like in real life? – Reader B

how much you earn one ah? [name of boyfriend] pays for you? Why you never talk about your job. Can earn at least 3k? – Reader C

The second way this perceived intimacy is displayed comes forth through readers' expectations of responsiveness and commitment from the bloggers. While some offer aid, feedback, and suggestions, many post harsh critique or criticism expecting to solicit some reaction from the women, as Elaine recounts:

Some will give us suggestions ... sometimes very rude ... and they will get offended like ... 'how come you never use my feedback' ... – Elaine

This expectation of a direct response to their input reflects readers' perception that commercial bloggers ought be committed to them, as if bloggers were obliged to safeguard their readers' vested interests. At times, volunteered evaluations of commercial bloggers' physical appearances (<http://bongqiuqiu.blogspot.sg/2010/12/my-boobs-my-lovely-female-body-parts.html>) ("ohmygod shouldn't you get a boob job? or a push-up?"), apparent emotional states ("urgh stop being so emo, stop acting so deep and troubled ...") and relationships ("oh please you think he really loves you?") are so personal and sharp that readers seem to be attempting to inch their way into the bloggers' most intimate circle of trusted friends – surely the mark of a blogger's success in developing intimacy and commanding attention from an audience. In some extreme of cases, commercial bloggers receive 'hate mail' (<http://www.shiberty.com/2010/10/cyber-bullying.html>), generally long spiteful rants from disgruntled readers making personal attacks, from senders who expect a reaction. Like many, Belinda has encountered such nasty readers:

they're really, really mean, super mean ... fat they complain I'm fat, skinny they complain I'm skinny... then they complain that I don't look Eurasian enough, I must be lying ... – Belinda

As evidenced, the ways in which readers attempt to solicit more and more elusive and exclusive information about commercial bloggers reveal their unending quest to break into the latter's personal and private 'circuit'. The ways in which they pressure bloggers to be committed and respond directly to all their requests underscore the expectation of intimacy.

Quality

Although commercial bloggers are untrained, self-taught individuals writing about their individual lives, readers are constantly making requests beyond the scope of these women's capabilities as if approaching them as a professional advisor or counsellor. Akin to search engines or databases, the women are always asked for advice and information relating to a wide variety of interests. However, these bloggers are less taken as a

knowledgeable acquaintance or personal friend, than sought as a micro-celebrity or role model whose seemingly ideal lifestyle is coveted. Many readers want to hear about exactly how the bloggers themselves would experience or manage situations, as if living vicariously through their blogs and social media platforms:

I will blog about the food and just give my casual remark ... but they will say I have no appetite to eat when I see your [blog] and all ... they really want very detailed info on the food ... but I'm not expert ... – Annabelle

They ask for relationship advice, but what works for me might not work for you, but they don't care ... as if I am some qualified expert to tell them what to do ... Then when it doesn't work ... am I responsible? – Jean

Commercial bloggers' projected accessibility and coverage on a wide range of topics gives readers the impression that they are available to provide instruction and advice (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y1SqdjRbiN4&list=SPAEC04AF19E913E16&index=9>) whenever necessary, and readers expect quality assistance analogous to staff in the service industry. This is also suggested in common disclaimers adopted by numerous commercial bloggers asking readers to "Google before asking", "search through the archives/tags", or simply "buzz off". As candidly phrased by one blogger, "this is not an information centre".

Despite being distinct individuals who follow commercial bloggers online in their own time as opposed to a group activity, most readers seem to hold similar anticipations of reciprocity from their idol, expecting immediacy, constancy, exclusivity, intimacy, and quality in their correspondence. Indeed my interviews with several readers confirmed this:

[A named commercial blogger is] very good 'cos her replies are very fast ... you will feel like she is giving you attention even though we know there are so many more people waiting for a reply also – Reader D

Some times (my friends and I) will compare like, eh how come she reply you she never reply me ... how come she reply you like so grumpy but with other people like so friendly ... seems quite *boliao* [colloquial dialect loosely translated to 'frivolous'] but some times we got compare one ... – Reader E

As evidenced, this creates tensions for commercial bloggers and disrupts their lives beyond the scope of work. The next section evaluates how some commercial bloggers strategise against this sense of disorder.

Reacting to disorder

Of the 10 women depicted in this paper, including a pair of sisters and a pair of best friends, all the commercial bloggers interviewed claim to manage the stresses of their job independently, seldom consulting with fellow bloggers or public relations/blog managers from their digital advertising firms for help. It should be noted that the following section details not ethical guidelines that bloggers presumably abide by as discussed in Cenite et al.'s 2009 survey of ethical blogging practice, but rather, indicate personal coping mechanisms, common across individual bloggers in one segment of the blogging

population, as a reaction towards the increasing demands from their readers. While there are some similarities in the strategies adopted by this set of commercial lifestyle bloggers based in Singapore and Lövheim's set of female top bloggers based in Sweden (2010), their motivations are different. Lövheim's bloggers engaged in different levels of disclosure with regards to their blog content and conventions of female language and discourse as a means to negotiate normative femininity and pass as "authentic selves". In contrast, these Singaporean bloggers are reacting to tensions and disorders arising from the pressure to over-share, at times even resisting readers' invasive attempts to intrude into information and communication circuits that bloggers deem sacred. Perhaps in direct contrast to Lövheim's bloggers, it could even be said that some of these Singaporean bloggers are restricting access to their whole 'authentic' selves, which they reserve for a more select personal or private circuit.

In her work on an analytical framework of blogging practice, Schmidt (2007) discusses rules as a guide to situation performance. Borrowing from Höflich, she discusses 'adequacy rules' and 'procedural rules'. 'Adequacy rules' guide the process of media selection through common expectancies regarding the medium's ability to provide specific gratification, while 'procedural rules' frame the actual use of blogs as the selected medium. The latter is further subdivided into three rules – 'selection rules', 'publication rules', and 'networking rules' – characterised by a blogger's preferential positioning as reader, author, or networker. 'Publication rules' involve a blog's content, presentation, and design that bloggers negotiate to manage their narratives of self-creation 'online' while preserving their less public 'offline' personas. 'Networking rules' address bloggers' semantic and social relations as a means to maintain continuous communication while expressing social ties to an extent to which they are comfortable, depending on the individual or demographic of their readers. Following from these, I identify five coping mechanisms adopted by commercial bloggers, the first three characterized as 'networking rules' and the remaining two being 'publication rules'. They are: to disregard haters, to publically shame haters, to adapt to readers' demands, to draw topical boundaries, and to demarcate work and leisure hours.

Disregarding haters

The first of commercial bloggers' coping mechanisms is to disregard 'haters'. 'Haters' is a term adopted by bloggers and readers to loosely refer to hostile individuals who leave spiteful comments or harsh criticism just to stir commotion. Instead of entertaining 'haters', most commercial bloggers would ignore them in the hope that they would leave:

part of me wants to reply and say eh, you know, mind your own business, but another part of me is like, if I reply this person, this person will think I actually give a shit about what he says lah, which is not what I want him to think ... – Christine

For Christine, disregarding haters was one their coping mechanisms in dealing with criticism. She feels that on the whole, this has decreased the amount of 'hate mail' she has received in recent years given that haters no longer derive enjoyment or entertainment from being neglected, following from the traditions of trolling.

Publically shaming haters

The second of commercial bloggers' coping mechanisms is to publicly shame haters. Bloggers would intermittently publish hate mail in a bid to solicit sympathy and support from fans who would in turn humiliate the hater in defense of their idol. Such group policing has proven to be an effective strategy for some women:

So I just um, put a dash and publish it so people can see how idiotic some people can get ... then they get hate from other readers ... – Belinda

While some commercial bloggers crowd source (Howe, 2008) for methods of revenge, a select handful of very influential bloggers have been known to retaliate aggressively against haters. They would track down and publicise the 'physical world' or 'real life' identities and social media usernames of their haters, including details of their educational, work, and family history, along with photographs. In extreme cases, fans have on the occasion joined in to ridicule and send hate mail to the hater. One such extreme instance even made national news (<http://sg.news.yahoo.com/celeb-blogger%E2%80%99s-xiaxue-name-and-shame-post-sparks-debate-.html>) (Sim, 2012) for the massive intervention rallied by readers. Indeed with a readership so large and a presence so influential, commercial bloggers have ridden on their social clout and readership to counter haters.

Adapting to readers' demands

The third of commercial bloggers' coping mechanisms is to adapt to their readers' demands. Some commercial bloggers are genuinely impacted by the criticism and feedback from their readers and strive to adapt to these demands. Annabelle, for example, has decided to diversify her blog content after readers criticised her writing as 'unexciting' and 'uninformative'. She feels pressured to be "comprehensive" and publish "quality" posts on a wide variety of topics with greater depth despite her lack of knowledge and experience on these matters. Many commercial bloggers have also become more conscientious with their diet and weight after having had their appearance scrutinised by readers. Belinda is one such blogger who has altered her lifestyle after being critiqued:

they will say I'm getting fat, I can feel it also ... and I must admit I'm becoming a little more conscious with my appearance also, need to watch myself, what I eat, exercise ... – Belinda

Annabelle confesses that she has even begun to rely on readers' critique as a feedback mechanism for self-improvement:

whenever they say that I guess there's some truth to that right, if not they won't say that ... it's kind like of a wake up call cos I wouldn't know if I'm growing fatter or not if I see myself everyday that kind of thing ... so it's good in some ways ... – Annabelle

In the same vein, Christine now polices the personality she conveys, although she is still torn between the "neutral" face her readers seem to prefer and the "opinionated" face that she claims to be more comfortable with:

some people when they are trying to be like nice ... sweet ... portray a very neutral person, they become a very boring person ... I don't want to be a neutral person ... I also want people to know my view on things ... so it's like try to do two things at one time is actually quite difficult ... – Christine

Be it blog content, physical appearance, or even personality, commercial bloggers have admitted to policing themselves more closely to adapt to their readers' preferences and sustain their following. Because the onus is on the blogger to maintain the relationship, they are ironically increasingly subject to the demands of the intimacy they first initiated with readers at the beginning. It is no wonder that many bloggers are now concerned over having to invest in more intense and prolonged relationships on a larger scale in order capture a larger slice of the audience.

Drawing topical boundaries

The fourth of commercial bloggers' coping mechanisms is to draw topical boundaries. To deal with readers who persistently crave and pester them for more personal and intimate information, some commercial bloggers are beginning to keep certain aspects of their lives strictly off the web. These topics include their relationships:

Actually now I try not to talk too much about my boyfriend, cos the blog is about me ... my life ... not him, and sometimes if I blog too much about him then it's like ... too personal already – Annabelle

Sex and crudity:

I don't discuss about sex, that is one big no-no, I will not talk about it ... sex tips or things ... – Christine

And religion:

I don't really talk about my religion ... I think anything controversial like that that people will have something to ... you know, talk back at? – Belinda

Commercial lifestyle bloggers seem to be drawing from the Singapore state's adoption of OB (out-of-bound) markers (see Lyons & Gomez, 2005) where themes or topics that could potentially stir controversy – such as sex, religion (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2007/04/20/film-singapore-dc-idUSSIN22266420070420>), and politics– are unlikely to be sanctioned for public consumption. Although commercial lifestyle bloggers generally avoid such contentious topics, it should be noted that a select few, such as Xixue, who already have an established following are less likely to self-censor and instead use such controversial topics to stir up hype for their blogs. While not necessarily cautious of disapproval from Singapore's censorship board, the Media Development Authority (<http://www.mda.gov.sg/Pages/Home.aspx>), most commercial bloggers are more likely to play within the OB markers for their largely local readers.

Demarcating work and leisure hours

The last of commercial bloggers' coping mechanisms is to demarcate work and leisure hours. Because they are constantly faced with readers' demands for instant responses 24/7, commercial bloggers like Heather have had to be intentional in setting aside recreational time for themselves:

I built in my own offline period for my personal space and time ... I purposely force myself not to blog everyday now. – Heather

Some commercial bloggers have attempted to impose standard office hours – that being 9am to 5pm in Singapore – for a sense of normalcy, despite previously anticipating the flexibility of fluid work hours. However, many like Annabelle lament that it is usually impossible to complete their work within that given timeframe and have since given it up. Likewise, many commercial bloggers have begun posting disclaimers on their websites and email signatures informing readers that all correspondence will be handled during working hours or within a certain timeframe. In our personal interviews, they reveal that despite these disclaimers they continue to work overtime in order to manage the volume of correspondence. However, they feel that the disclaimer has indirectly advised usually impatient readers to be more understanding. These varied reactions to the disorder arisen from 'perceived interconnectedness' reveal the constant self-policing and emotional work that commercial bloggers engage in daily. While ridden with difficulties, all 10 women said that would continue in the commercial blog industry. The next section details their motivations.

Staying in the business

Despite 'perceived interconnectedness' stirring conflict in their social relations with readers and disordering their personal lives, most commercial bloggers were determined to stay in the business. Three most commonly cited reasons were accepting that these fallbacks comprise part of the job, giving in to societal expectations and pressure to perform, and deriving a genuine sense of satisfaction from their work.

It's part of the job

Some commercial bloggers have come to accept that relational conflict and a disruption of their personal lives are merely aspects of the job. Gloria, for example, laments that all jobs have their fallbacks, and that this industry's just happen to be more "social", "intimate", or "emotionally draining":

I think when we first started out we used to be quite affected la, but then the grass is always greener on the other side, and no job will be problem-free also ... so just deal with it loh ... – Gloria

Reminiscent of Hochschild's (1979) work on the emotional management of feeling, where emotions may be ordered to abide by social rules, many like Delia also display an acute awareness that restraining their reactions and performing emotional labour are economic moves adopted to maintain high levels of customer service:

The first time we will try to be understanding and go [out of the way] to make them happy... cos after all it's a service we are [providing] – Delia

By framing their struggles as typical shortcomings of work life in general, commercial bloggers seem more resigned to investing emotional labour to maintain their businesses that after all leverage on a projection and performance of intimacy towards other women in this homosocial environment (see also Lövheim 2010). This, at least in part, alleviates the strain they feel when their personal lives become intertwined with expectations and demands from readers.

Pressure to perform

Some commercial bloggers are driven to perform due to pressure from three sources. In the first instance, they feel pressure from themselves, and frame the challenges faced in a didactic tone often preaching character building. Delia, for instance, believes that the hardship is 'part of growing up' while Annabelle feels that this stress will make her 'become a better person'. Weighing her opportunity costs, Gloria cited her desire to maximise the resources they have invested into the business, not wanting her effort to come to naught:

It's hard lah, but we cannot give up ... put in so much time and money already, buy all our stock ... setting up the website... then some more we both gave up our jobs, so have to make it work no matter what loh ... – Gloria

In the second instance, commercial bloggers feel pressure from their readers. Farrah and Annabelle try to focus on loyal readers instead of haters, and are motivated by their encouragement to improve their blogging. However, like Elaine, Annabelle admits that more often than not, the pressure to succeed stems from the desire to confute their 'haters':

... it's very bad, I know... but the more they [haters] say [negative things] about me, the harder I wanna work to show them ... you can't bring me down ... – Annabelle

In the third instance, commercial bloggers feel the pressure to succeed from society in general. Gloria, Elaine, and Annabelle cite Singapore's harsh competitiveness and an oft-quoted East Asian rhetoric of needing to achieve a high level of success – usually pertaining to the corporate world or finances – in life:

Singapore is super cutthroat one ... if you don't make it, everyone will look down on you ... you will get left behind ... just gotta keep working hard to make this work, make it viable – Annabelle

Public reputation is of utmost importance to these women, following from the East Asian rhetoric of 'losing' and 'saving' face where personal reputation can be lost or gained as a commodity. This is in the same vein as Monkhouse et al's (2012) study of four East Asian consumer markets, where conspicuous consumption was most effectively driven when consumers felt the purchase increased their good reputation or deflected bad reputation. Despite the difficulties of working with readers' perceived interconnectedness, commercial

bloggers are determined to perform to their best of their abilities with, motivated by different social pressures. These include the need to better oneself, to improve their service to readers, and to achieve recognition in society.

Sense of satisfaction

Finally, most commercial bloggers continue to remain in this line for various reasons that ultimately give them a sense of satisfaction. These include personal interest:

I enjoy blogging, I like to share my pictures, share my interests, I think that's the most important thing ... – Belinda

A genuine enjoyment from interacting with others:

I'm personally outgoing and I like to make new friends, meet new people, even if it's just online friends ... – Annabelle

The confidence boost from receiving encouragement and compliments:

I mean who doesn't like to receive compliments right? [she laughs] quite happy when I read these compliments like, oh ... very pretty, or [my] skin is very good – Christine

And lastly, a desire to share their experiences, whether or not they unwittingly become 'agony aunts':

... you know I wish I had somebody to tell me or to share with me like all these things [facial care, make-up regime] but there wasn't any body, so I'm glad I could be like that kind of person uh, for them lah – Christine

Looking on the bright side, commercial bloggers acknowledge that the rewards of their line of work make up for the difficulties in having to manoeuvre 'perceived interconnectedness' and the constant production and performance of their emotional labour. In addition throughout their conversations with me, the different facets of their job that bring them personal gratification are almost always framed as highlights of their lives that others rarely get to experience. In the words of one blogger, "our job is very emotionally draining, but ... also very emotionally rewarding". As seen, these women's motivations for staying in the commercial blog industry were calculated decisions with a keen awareness of the opportunity costs, future prospects, and personal gains – monetary and emotional – they could accrue over time. Although 'perceived interconnectedness' has taken toll on them, the women have developed coping strategies and changed their mindsets over time in order to deal with the shortcomings of their trade.

Conclusion

Although commercial bloggers first emerged in Singapore over a decade ago, the emotional strain they feel from readers has only intensified in recent years with the advent of communicative technology like smart phones, island-wide wireless connection, and the explosive popularity of social media networks. Commercial bloggers have correspondingly published updates more frequently in bite-sized portions throughout the day. This has emboldened readers' sense of familiarity and closeness to commercial bloggers, and it is this 'perceived interconnectedness' that has disrupted and disordered the personal lives of the latter. Even though living up to readers' expectations has been emotionally and physically straining, commercial bloggers have adapted and adopted various coping mechanisms to strategise against the tension and disorder. In addition, economic incentives, social pressure, and a sense of satisfaction are their motivating factors to stay in the industry. With the increasing pervasiveness of mobile technology, social media networks and their potential to bring disorder, there's no telling if Cyber-BFFs will indeed last 'forever'.

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