The Influencer's dilemma: The shaping of new brand professions between credibility and commerce

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Abstract

The new "liquid" media environment involves a range of new professions, practices and practitioners (Deuze 2011). Based on a rich ethnographic study containing personal interviews and participant observation, this paper looks at semi-professional Influencers in the social media marketing industry and asks how these new branding professions and their practices emerge and institutionalize. Specifically, the material draws on data collected between 2011 and 2015 among women Influencers in the 'lifestyle' genre in Singapore who advertise products and services in the industry verticals of Fashion, Beauty, and Electronic goods on blogs, Twitter, and Instagram.

The paper is an exploratory effort, looking at how scandals (telecom scandal & mobile phone company scandal) reveal the lack of procedures and guidelines in the industry, since this is a new landscape. Based on interview material we identify pre-emptive voluntary pressure and reactive coercive pressure that shape the behaviors of the semi-professional Influencers. The larger impact of this is that the industry professionalizes organically, in a manner that is bottom-up, and consumer-generated.

Introduction

The digital environment poses a whole new set of opportunities and challenges for brand management. Researchers have accordingly noted that social media is replacing traditional media as the main platforms of brand communication (Bruhn, Schoenmueller, & Schäfer, 2012), and that brand management practices themselves are looking to be networked, open to external stakeholders (Ind, 2014), embracing and facilitating the co-creative interplay between stakeholders (Singh & Sonnenburg 2012). Many of these challenges concern the loss of control of the branding process that brand owners experience in a world where consumers are interconnected (Christodoulides, 2008, 2009; Fournier & Lee, 2009). Along with this loss of power of the traditional corporate brand manager, researchers are taking interest in how new groups of stakeholders, or brand authors (Fournier & Avery, 2011), are contributing to the shaping of brand meanings, institutions, branding practices, brand innovations and eventually the value and equity of brands (Füller, Matzler, & Hoppe, 2008; Holt, 2004; Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009; Ots & Hartmann, 2015; Malmelin & Villi, 2015).

Continuing along this line of reasoning, research has recently seen an increasing interest in how new markets emerge, how existing ones transform, and how they evolve as a social negotiation between stakeholders rather than being singlehandedly "designed" by the works of the professionals we traditionally know as "marketers" (Giesler, 2008, 2012; Humphreys, 2010). Frequently, examples given are of the active agency of consumers – driven by their love for brands (Martin & Schouten, 2014) or their desire to challenge the market (Giesler 2008). In this sense, users now are not only participating in building brands and brand equity, but they are also gaining the power and initiative to actively influence, shape and form the various institutional fields of marketing and branding that they engage in (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015).

Much prior research focused on consumers that can be classified as "brand enthusiasts", and how their non-commercial activities on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter or other social media, make companies change and adapt their branding practices to the new environment. In research they are often being portrayed as being driven mainly by their love for brands like Apple or Harley Davidson. Accordingly, "branding" or "brand management" is transforming, since it is one such field where consumers are now co-creating the norms and logics of that which in the past were restricted to professionals (e.g. Dolbec & Fischer 2015). However, in this transformation process we also see existing brand management activities and professions transform and new ones emerge. This goes hand in hand with a generally shifting notion about what constitutes media industry work (Deuze, 2007). Some of these new activities are conducted by trained branding professionals, whereas others are run by new groups of brand workers who enter the market either with a commercial intent, or start as enthusiasts and over time derive revenues from their branding actions.

In this paper we aim to explore how these new brand professions are institutionalized. Based on a study of semi-professional bloggers/Instagrammers as commercial brand Influencers, we analyse the professionalization of the "new" brand workers that enter the branding field. In the relative absence of formal descriptions and organizational routines we aim to explore how these new brand professionals see (and are shaped by) the rules of their emerging trades, what different forms of institutional pressures they experience (coercive, normative, legislative), and particularly how they internally balance the dualities between different and potentially conflicting institutional logics – on the one hand the rules of the online communities that form their audience bases and on the other hand the rules commercial corporate brand management world that are their clients.

In summary, this paper looks at the everyday tensions of semi-professional Influencers between credibility and commerce and how they institutionalize solutions to these split loyalties. Just like traditional media they need to cater both for their audiences/followers and their business customers/branding partners. The major difference is that in the world of Influencer commerce, the boundaries between sponsored content and editorial content is blurring, making their personal taste difficult to distinguish from their commercial pursuits.

The paper opens with a discussion on the professionalization of Influencer commerce, outlining the current climate of Influencer commerce in Singapore, and the tensions between credibility and self-disclosure. A brief methodology section describes our approach towards this thematic data. Two recent branding 'scandals' (late-2014) will be summarized as examples of triggers that push Influencers towards self-regulation and organization within the industry, as motivated by pre-emptive voluntary pressure and reactive coercive pressure. Specifically, we demonstrate how Influencers are effectively moving towards a vernacular marking of advertorials to maintain their credibility, resulting in advertorial disclosures as an emerging industry standard in Singapore.

The professionalization of Influencer commerce

This paper is focused on a specific group of stakeholders in this transforming brand management landscape – everyday Internet users who manufacture themselves into a new form of social media microcelebrity known as the 'Influencer'. Since 2005 in Singapore, many young women have taken to social media to craft 'microcelebrity personas' as a career. Theresa Senft defines microcelebrity as "a new style of online performance that involves people 'amping up' their popularity over the Web using technologies like video, blogs and social networking sites" (2008: 25). Unlike mainstream entertainment industry celebrities who are public icons with large-scale followings, microcelebrity "is a state of being famous to a niche group of people" and involves the curation of a persona that feels "authentic" to readers (Marwick 2013: 114).

Central to the success of the semi-professional Influencers is the management and growth of their personal brands. Studies have shown how they carefully aim to build awareness and audience growth (Marlow 2006), but also that central to their success is the deep and intimate relationships between their personal brands and their followers (Abidin & Thompson, 2012; Fournier, 1998). Their media brands constitute 'Lovemarks' – brands that are not simply respected, but trusted and loved (Roberts 2004). Abidin & Thompson (2012) identified four (branding) practices used by bloggers to create this intimacy with their mass audiences – endearment and personal language, authenticity through unaltered 'behind the scenes' material, commonality with readers by displaying shared mundane practices (despite a luxurious lifestyle), and real-life meetings with their followers.

Beyond mere intimacy, the success of the bloggers hinges on their own taste and credibility. McQuarrie et al (McQuarrie, Miller, & Phillips, 2013) accordingly showed how fashion bloggers' conscious selective choice of words, pictures and style led to the accumulation of social capital (building their celebrity status and personal brand) as well as economic capital (commercial success). The role of fashion bloggers as online Influencers is well recognized in marketing (Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010). The credibility and perceived trustworthiness of Influencers is also found to make them more effective promoters of brand messages (Chu & Kamal, 2008). In other words, credibility is important for the bloggers both for the growth of their own media brands and for their effectiveness commercial product brand endorsers.

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

These commercial 'lifestyle' posts are one successor of contemporary women's magazines. Kim & Ward (2004) define contemporary women's magazines as "mainstream adult magazines that are geared toward an adolescent or young adult female audience and that express the clear intention of

providing readers with advice, scripts, and information about dating and sexual relationships" (2004: 49). They also feature product placements (Frith 2009) and concealed ads (McCracken 1993). Commercial lifestyle posts bear similar offerings but with an underlying rhetoric of personalizing 'advertorials' to readers engaged in aspirational consumption patterns role-modelled by Influencers. The advertorial, Influencers' primary advertising device, is a highly personalized and opinion-laden advertisement written in the style of an opinion-editorial. Until recently, the most effective advertorials are those that are seamlessly woven into the daily narratives Influencers publish on their blogs and social media, such that readers are unable to tell apart 'paid opinions' from 'unpaid' sentiments. Often, these advertorials may take the form of complaints or praises for a product or service, that is written in a tone that is personal, emotive, casual, and informal.

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

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

In their most basic capacity, Influencers produce advertorials on blogs and social media platforms in exchange for payment or sponsored products and services. Owing to their capacity to shape purchase decisions, their clients have progressed from small home businesses to blue-chip companies including Canon, Coach, and KLM. The immense success and extensive popularity of the Influencer industry has garnered widespread attention from several other realms including private and multinational corporations (MNCs), politics, education, social and humanitarian organizations, and the mainstream media (MSM). Riding on their extensive popularity and consistent readership, these sectors often invite Influencers to make special appearances to bring publicity to the project or special cause. Influencers are also invited to events as special guests and VIPs in acknowledgement of their unique status and the social prestige they have earned. The Young Women's Leadership Connection (YWLC) invited Influencer Rachel Lim as a keynote speaker at the 'Get Inspired' workshops (Lim 2012, Young Women's Leadership Connection 2013), while Beatrice Tan was the poster girl for the Open House of the National University of Singapore of which she is an alumna as part of their 'Dream Big Campaign' (Tan 2012a).

Several Influencer award ceremonies have also emerged since the late 2000s, the most renown being the Singapore Blog Awards (SBA) first launched in 2008 (omy.sg 2010), and the Nuffnang Asia-Pacific Blog Awards (NAPBAS) (Nuffnang 2009) which has included nominees from Malaysia, Singapore, China, Thailand, the Philippines, Australia, Hong Kong, and the United Kingdom since its launch in 2009. More recently in 2013, London-based social media analytics firm, Starcount, launched its inaugural Social Star Awards in Singapore at the Marina Bay Sands. The ceremony was streamed live on YouTube and honoured the most popular personalities on the web from the sporting, gaming, music, film, and television industry. Over 280 winners were "decided by the activities of 1.7 billion Internet users around the world who use 11 major social media sites including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Sina and Weibo from China and VK from Russia" (STcommunities 2013). The Awards also saw performances and guest appearances by the most popular trends of the year such as Internet memes 'Star Trek helmsman' George Takei and 'Overly Attached Girlfriend' Laina Walker, and popular musicians Psy and Carly Rae Jepson who went viral for their songs 'Gangnam Style' and 'Call Me Baby' respectively. The YouTube Fan Fest, which celebrates and awards the most popular YouTubers in the region was also held in Singapore in 2014 and 2015, where Influencers such as Naomi Neo and Tan Jian Hao were honoured for their craft.

Methodology

The data in this chapter draws on a larger study of social media microcelebrity in Singapore since mid-2010, including a year of intensive participant observation conducted with these Influencers in the flesh in the capacity of various roles. These interactions and observations were archived in extensively detailed field diaries. 120 personal interviews were conducted with Influencers, Influencer management agencies, (prospective) clients, readers, and friends and family of Influencers between December 2011 and July 2013. The interviews were recorded on small digital devices and transcribed in full. Social media content from blogs, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, AskFM, and popular public forums was archived until December 2014 and hand-coded. Fieldwork entailed continued interaction with other actors involved in the Influencers' social milieu, including their peers, backend production management, sponsors and advertisers, and readers. As such, although the data is drawn mainly from the textual and visual content of publically accessed blogs and associated social media platforms including Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, the analysis is highly contextualised and shaped by long-term ethnographic work among these Influencers. This paper focuses on ethnographic data from 25 Influencers and features two types of ethnographic data from which our analysis is triangulated. The material presented in the non-disclosure case studies are obtained from viral blogposts and mainstream media reports, and the data presented in the discussion on how Influencers curate credibility was obtained by Abidin through personal in-depth interviews. Material from the first data set is publicly disseminated by Influencers and pitched for public consumption, while material in the second data set is confidential. For this reason, Influencers will be identified by their public Twitter and Instagram handles in the first instance, but by pseudonyms where interview data is concerned. A grounded theory approach (Glaser 1978) was adopted in the thematic coding of all content.

Findings

The following empirical chapter is divided in two sections. Each one covers a different perspective on the pressures that Influencers experience when negotiating the demands for credibility (media brand) and commerce (product brands). The first section showcases the effects for Influencers of having their "hidden" commercial intents publicly revealed. The second section contains material based on interviews that discusses the internal processes and norms that Influencers develop in order not to compromise credibility.

Section 1: The case of Singtel/M1/StarHub incident – Influencers' brand opinions revealed as inauthentic

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

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

customers can make purchases, suggested narratives based on the Influencer's lifestyle for crafting believable advertorials). However, in Singapore the contents of each advertorial and the approach towards content dissemination is still largely the Influencer's prerogative, and has not yet been standardized nor regulated by any industry guidelines. The 'scandal' looks at how a group of six Influencers were 'exposed' for non-credible branding work of three local telecoms (i.e. Singtel, M1, StarHub).

Two rival Influencer-management agencies are mentioned – Gushcloud and Nuffnang. Akin to modelling agencies that groom model talents and broker deals on their behalf, Gushcloud and Nuffnang function as intermediaries promoting port folios of contracted Influencers to prospective clients who wish to advertise with them. Influencer Xiaxue is contracted to Nuffnang, while the others are contracted to Gushcloud. Such 'scandals' are usually framed by mainstream media as mere 'blogger spats' – a regular occurrence in the industry's history of a decade – as opposed to orchestrated controversies between rival agencies. As such, it is tempting to trivialize the incidents that unfold and overlook the productive work they do for the industry.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

> "I, Xavier Ong APOLOGIZE to anyone affected for posting negative comments towards M1 (while on a SingTel campaign) and not explicitly stating or revealing that I was on a campaign with SingTel. However, I would also like to add that during that period and even before, I was indeed unhappy and unsatisfied with the network and service M1 provided me with therefore I DID NOT lie. I understand that I should have stated clearly that I was on a campaign or at least inform that certain postings are advertorial/ sponsored posts and I am sorry for that."

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

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

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

Although some of Xavier's readers rallied behind him after this clarification by expressing support and solidarity on Twitter, many others remain unconvinced of the truth of his claims (i.e. the genuine complaints about M1) despite his predated evidence, simply because the Influencer had failed to disclose that some of these complaint-Tweets were motivated by a monetary incentive. In the wake of these events, a Singtel issued a statement to say that Gushcloud "did not adhere to SingTel's marketing standards", and their Vice-President of Consumer Marketing apologised to M1 and StarHub. A day later, the chief executive of Gushcloud issued an apology to M1 and StarHub. He added:

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

Both telecoms have accepted Singtel's and Gushcloud's apologies, although they have also announced that they were considering legal options as of March 2015.

Section 2: Curating credibility under institutional pressures

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

As earlier evidenced, both Xavier resorted to public apologies to readers, and mobilized highly emotive, personal backstories to justify what was perceived to be incongruence between the lifestyle narratives in the advertorials and the actual lives as lived. Other Influencers interviewed, however, seemed to have formulated their own measures of calibrating credibility and self-disclosure when writing advertorials.

Pressure 1a: Influencers are responsible for the quality of the product they endorse – product should be tested.

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

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

Pressure 1b: Influencers are responsible for the quality of the product/services they endorse – Influencers are responsible for promoted offerings to be transparent and non-discriminatory.

Theresa was engaged to promote a bust-enhancing service, and had produced a blog advertorial after having tried the service herself. However, the terms and conditions, as well as perks and benefits that Theresa introduced to her readers were not uniformly extended to every customer. While some readers got to experience "the full package" that Theresa raved about, others were only given "discounted versions" with fewer services at the same price. In addition, a few readers commented on Theresa's advertorial blogpost to complain that their results post-treatment did not match up to Theresa's documented experience. Although the responsibility here seemed to lie with the beauty

company's administering of the treatment, and despite the fact that Theresa had clearly signposted the blogposts as an advertorial, these readers accused Theresa of "making a quick buck", for failing to "verify the authenticity" of the product/service, and for being "irresponsible" to her readers.

Pressure 2: Non-authentic product endorsements are dishonest and violate Influencers' own moral integrity
Pressure 3: Non-authentic product endorsements will be noticed and revealed by the loyal followers

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

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

Pressure 4: In order to maintain credibility, congruency is needed between Influencer brand and endorsed product brands – incongruent products should be declined

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

Pressure 5: The Influencer has moral obligations also to the brand clients – personal opinions are allowed flexibility within boundaries

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

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

Christine expresses similar sentiment:

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

These interview insights reveal how some Influencers calibrate their internal tensions between producing quality advertorials for monetary earnings and maintaining their credibility with readers. Lucy and Jane owe it to their own conscience to personally try out every product/service before

producing an advertorial, and Jane adds that astute readers will be able to pinpoint any incongruences should she stray from her personalized, natural tone of a 'lifestyle' narrative that feels more authentic. Based on Theresa's bad experience, Brenda has refused to produce advertorials for products/services that she does not believe in, while Regina emphasizes this by publicly visiblizing the 'behind-the-stage' negotiations and rejections with prospective clients. Jennifer and Christine, however, adopt a more subtle strategy of highlighting a product's positive features over its negative features, and have developed a vocabulary for delicately signposting the drawbacks of the featured product in ways that do not offend their paying client.

Discussion and conclusion

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

We consider these Influencers to be the new breed of media brands. Central to our discussion in this paper has this been how Influencers accommodate the different external tensions and demands, and how they internalize them as norms, preferences and strategies. In fact, responding to pressure from Influencers, advertising standard authorities and Influencer management agencies are beginning to formalize and institutionalize guidelines for this new form of social media advertising – In March 2014, the Advertising Standards Authority of Singapore (Asas) announced that it was working with Gushcloud and Nuffnang, and major players in the mainstream media industry, Singapore Press Holdings and MediaCorp, to formulate a first draft (Lee 2015).

When starting to accommodate commercial brands and contents in blogposts, Influencers are constantly at risk of breaching their contract of trust with their followers. The first case study displayed common campaign structures and the involvement of Influencer agencies that mediate Influencers and brand clients. It also showed how Influencers, followers, and eventually also the brand clients, are sensitive to what they experience as deceptive and unethical behaviours that will exert normative pressures onto the Influencers to conform to certain ethical standards.

In the second section we use interview material with Influencers to exemplify a number of emerging normative and coercive pressures concerning the brand management practices. In essence these "hidden" norms follow a few well-known themes:

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

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

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