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"Aren't These Just Young, Rich Women Doing Vain Things Online?": Influencer Selfies as Subversive Frivolity

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Abstract

Taking seriously the global trend of selfies becoming marketable and entangled in ecologies of commerce, this article looks at Influencers who have emerged as (semi-)professional selfie-producers and for whom taking selfies is a purposively commercial, thoughtful, and subversive endeavor. Based on in-depth ethnographic fieldwork and grounded theory analysis, I examine Influencers' engagements with selfies on Instagram and their appropriations of selfies as salable objects, as tacit labor, and as an expression of contrived authenticity and reflexivity. Through these practices, Influencers achieve "subversive frivolity," which I define as the under-visibilized and under-estimated generative power of an object or practice arising from its (populist) discursive framing as marginal, inconsequential, and unproductive.

Keywords

selfies, social media, Instagram, Influencer, gendered labor, Singapore

Introduction

At a conference I once attended, an academic, having briefly heard about my research topic, bemoaned, "Aren't these just young, rich women doing vain things online?" I share Banet-Weiser's (1999) lament that scholars may "overlook" the "complicated production and articulation" of some types of research, such as when her work on beauty pageants was diminutively classified by colleagues as mere "fun" (p. 4). Banet-Weiser (1999) cautions that these are "dangerous dismissal[s], because [they] immediately and apparently unselfconsciously defin[e] particular cultural sites as worthy of intellectual attention and others . . . [as] junk" (p. 4). This made me self-conscious as a researcher and as a selfie-taker, and I decided not to hand the academic my business card—DIY Instagram prints my selfie on one side and my contact details on the other (Figure 1).

But are selfies merely frivolous? Ellen DeGeneres' infamous "Twitter-breaking" Oscar selfie in 2014—retweeted over 3.3 million times and "favorited" over 2 million times in over 151 different countries (Maxwell, 2014)—was likely the most high-profile commercial selfie of the year. Samsung, the company that produces the Galaxy Phone prominently featured as the selfie-taking device at the Oscars, reportedly invested "an estimated SGD20 million on ads" (Vranica, 2014) in exchange for one of its devices to get airtime. However, the specifics of this arrangement have been hotly debated—perhaps this ambiguity was strategic as a selfie believed to have gone viral "organically" as opposed to being "orchestrated" would tend to be perceived as more "authentic."

Since then, selfie-based marketing has become so ubiquitous that it has inspired "best of" ads that feature selfies (Donald, 2014). For example, a popular Tumblr, "Your Selfie Idea Is Not Original. It's Shit," run by an "anonymous ad agency creative" (Pathak, 2014), also collects "worst of" examples of such campaigns. In scholarly research, commercial selfies have been examined by Deller and Tilton (2015) in the form of "charitable meme" selfies and their propensity to "mutat[e] from a (possibly naïve) notion of raising awareness to becoming a multimillion-pound fund-raiser" (p. 1789). Marwick (2015) has also examined luxury selfies produced by some of the most popular Instagram users (by number of followers), including Instagram famous high

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Figure 1. Author's own image, screengrabbed, September 2015.

schoolers, personal friends of mainstream media celebrities who receive fame by association, "luxury enthusiasts" (p. 153), aspiring actors, models, and tattoo artists. While she notes that these luxury selfies document "what many young people dream of having and the lifestyle they dream of living" (Marwick, 2015, p. 155), it is unclear in her analysis whether these Instagrammers are remunerated for their selfies featuring luxury products or whether these selfies were sponsored from the start.

This article follows from the entanglement of selfies with commerce and as a pushback to the discourse that selfies are mere frivolous acts. As noted by Senft and Baym (2015), "for all its usage, the term [selfies]—and more so the practice(s)—remain fundamentally ambiguous, fraught, and caught in a stubborn and morally loaded hype cycle" (p. 1588). However, an in-depth engagement and understanding of one group of selfie-takers, namely, Influencers in Singapore, and the ways in which they relate to their selfies as products and practices reveal an undercurrent of subversive frivolity at work. I define subversive frivolity as the under-visibilized and under-estimated generative power of an object or practice arising from its (populist) discursive framing as marginal, inconsequential, and unproductive. I contemplate how Influencers are using selfies to reap personal gains—both monetary and self-actualizing—and shape the social media ecology in Singapore through their highly gendered labor. Despite populist discursive framing of selfies as mere frivolity, this has allowed the labor in which Influencers engage to slide under the radar, in the ways they subvert affordances of Instagram, the expectations of female entrepreneurs, the gaze of the camera, and representations of authenticity.

I draw on a larger research project on social media micro-celebrities known as *Influencers* in Singapore. The prior project included participant observation conducted with 190 Influencers and related backend actors in the capacity of various roles since mid-2010. In total, 173 interviews lasting between 10 min and 3 hr were conducted between December 2012 and July 2013, in addition to digital participant observation, archival research, web archaeology, and visual and textual analysis to cover physical and digital platforms on which Influencers operate (see Abidin, 2015b).

Fieldwork entailed continued interaction with other actors involved in the Influencers' social milieus, including their peers, backend production management, sponsors and advertisers, and followers. As such, although the data are drawn mainly from the textual and visual content of publicly accessed blogs and associated social media platforms including Twitter and Instagram between December 2011 and January 2015, the analysis is influenced by long-term ethnographic work among these Influencers. A grounded theory approach (Glaser, 1978) was adopted in the thematic coding of all content.

Influencers and Selfies

Since 2005 in Singapore, many young women have begun using social media to craft "microcelebrity personas" as a career. Theresa Senft (2008) 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" (p. 25). Unlike mainstream entertainment industry celebrities, who can become public icons with large-scale followings, microcelebrity "is a state of being famous to a niche group of people" (Marwick, 2013, p. 114) and involves the curation of a persona that feels authentic to readers.

In Singapore, social media microcelebrities began as commercial lifestyle bloggers on Internet platforms including LiveJournal, Blogger, and WordPress. As "lifestyle" bloggers, their blog posts are premised on the everyday, ordinary, and mundane recounts of their lives "as lived." Commercial lifestyle bloggers are generally young women between the ages of 18 and 35 years, among whom Influencer labor and commerce is a self-taught endeavor (Abidin, 2015b). Followers are generally 70% female and 30% male between the ages of 15 and 35 years (Abidin, 2015b). Since their debut, these commercial lifestyle bloggers have since diversified into several social media platforms (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, AskFM, Formspring, YouTube, Snapchat). At the time of writing, Instagram is the most proliferate and viable social medium for selfie advertorials and thus the primary source for the following case studies (Abidin, 2014).

Commercial lifestyle bloggers quickly garnered mainstream popularity in the larger collective imaginary, assisted by several high-profile mainstream news reports on these young women as savvy entrepreneurs, highlighting their earning power and impact among young Internet users. @melisapro (presently @melissackoh) and @naomineo_ are two of the many microcelebrities who frequently appear in the mainstream news. In particular, @melisapro was featured for her unconventional decision to leave her job in the banking industry to pursue her social media advertorials fulltime (Figure 2), while @naomineo_ was featured for earning up to SGD45,000 a year despite being only 18 years old (Figure 3).

Having attained multimedia microcelebrity in both digital and print media and both digital and physical endeavors (Abidin, 2015a, 2015b), they became known as *Influencers*—everyday, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in "digital" and "physical" spaces, and monetize their following by integrating "advertorials" into their blogs or social media posts and making physical paid-guest appearances at events. A portmanteau term combining "advertisement" and "editorial," advertorials in the Influencer industry are highly personalized, opinion-laden promotions of products/services that Influencers appear to personally experience and endorse for a fee (Abidin, 2015a). A majority of Influencers in Singapore are contracted to management agencies, such as Nuffnang, established in 2007 (Nuffnang Asia-Pacific Blog Awards [NAPBAS], 2009), and Gushcloud, established in 2011 ("Something Exciting Is Brewing," 2013), whose managers broker their collaborations and endorsements in exchange for a commission. Managers are in turn responsible for ensuring Influencers deliver timely work to clients under the stipulated requirements and that Influencers are fairly compensated for their work.

Selfies are central to the work that Influencers do. Focusing on populist understandings, Oxford Dictionaries define selfies as "[a] photograph that one has taken of oneself, taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website" ("Selfie," 2015). As scholars who have spearheaded academic research on selfies, Senft and Baym (2015) contextualize and expand the definition of selfies as a "cultural artifact" or "object" and "social practice" or "gesture" (pp. 1588-1589). Most notably circulated on social media, selfies as objects transmit "human feeling in the form of a relationship," and selfies as gestures send "different messages to different individuals, communities, and audiences" (pp. 1588-1589). Among Influencers in Singapore, selfies are creatively appropriated as a platform to feature products and services in advertorials and are also a medium through which phatic communion (Malinowski, 1923; Miller, 2008), a ritual strategy for fostering interpersonal relationships through the medium of small talk, is expressed between Influencers and their followers.

Additionally, selfies are affective and authenticating "visual artifacts" through which followers can claim witness when they meet with Influencers in the flesh. The follower/influencer selfie functions discursively as evidence of the "being there" at exclusive events and having interacted in physical proximity (Koliska & Roberts, 2015); after all, a distinctive feature of Influencers in Singapore is their extensive integration of face-to-face meet-ups with followers on a regular basis in formal and informal settings, in which selfie-taking is a key event, mediated through "mobile witnessing" on smartphones that "capture, circulate, and engage with data [such as selfies] on the move" (Reading in Koliska &

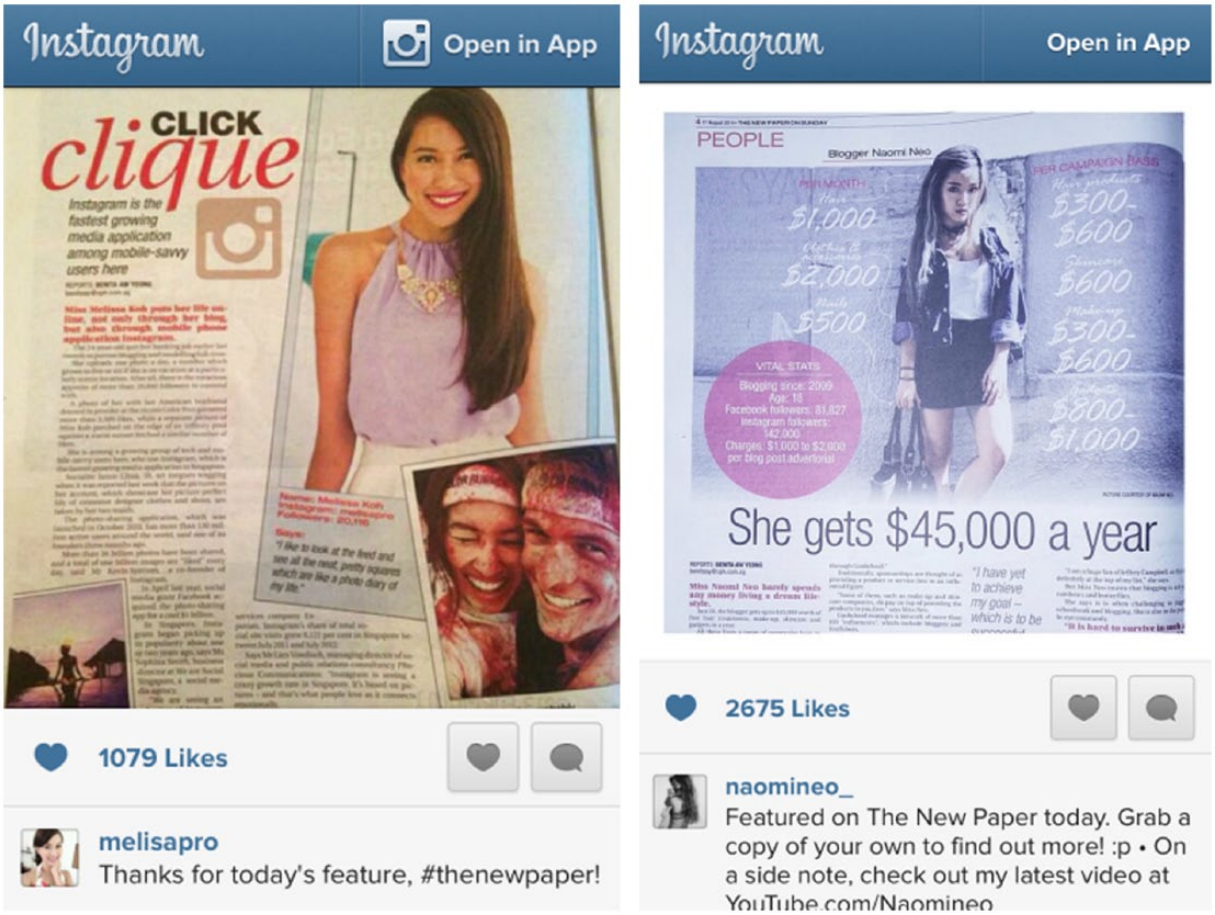

Figure 2 & 3. @melisapro & @naomineo_, screengrabbed, September 2015.

Roberts, 2015, p. 1647). Influencers regularly meet with followers at formal and informal events to sustain and amplify their shared sense of intimacy through practices such as selfie-taking (see Abidin, 2015a).

Good selfie-taking skills comprise the ability to capture a well-framed digital self-portrait *and* the ability to edit the selfie to maximize "likeability"—using the number of "Likes" on a post as a way to quantify its popularity, and thus the potential to monetize audience reception through this measure of attention on-screen. In fact, good selfie-taking skills are such a prized asset that Influencers have been recognized for their craft through an expanding base of followers and an increasing number of sponsorship and advertorial engagements in the form of "product placement" selfies. Although selfie-takers are mostly non-professional photographers (Koliska & Roberts, 2015), as microcelebrities for whom (self-taught) selfie-taking is tied to their income, Influencers have emerged as a genre of (semi-)professional selfie-takers. One of Singapore's pioneer Influencers, @xiaxue, was even invited to give a live demonstration of her "expert" selfie-editing skills on national television (Figure 4). In response to populist discourses that dismiss selfies as a narcissistic epidemic (Burns, 2015), the program adopted a tone that celebrated the (technological) savvy of Influencers like @xiaxue. Thus, within the sphere of Influencer commerce, the "assumed association [of selfies] with feminine vanity and triviality" (Burns, 2015, p. 1718) does not devalue the practice of selfie-taking, unlike the critiques of selfies and selfie-takers in the (selective) corpus of memes (i.e., photographs, videos, cartoons) studied by Burns (2015): Instead, these selfies are rewarded in a system that pegs a price tag to the number of "likes" a selfie is able to garner, and in this game, vanity selfies are unabashedly admired for their aesthetic ideals and commercial value.

So, normative and viable are commercial selfies that the prestige of good selfie-taking skills extends across genders. Selfies have been argued to be a gendered object and practice in which "negative feminine stereotypes" are perpetuated to "legitimize the discipline of women's behaviours and identities" (Burns, 2015, p. 1716) anchored on moral panics over the safety and wellbeing of women (Dobson & Coffey, 2015). However, in Singapore, dozens of male Influencers (successfully) partake in commercial selfies as a normative practice in the industry. @yutakis is one of several dozen male Influencers whose commercial selfies are very well-received by his growing following—followers' comments on

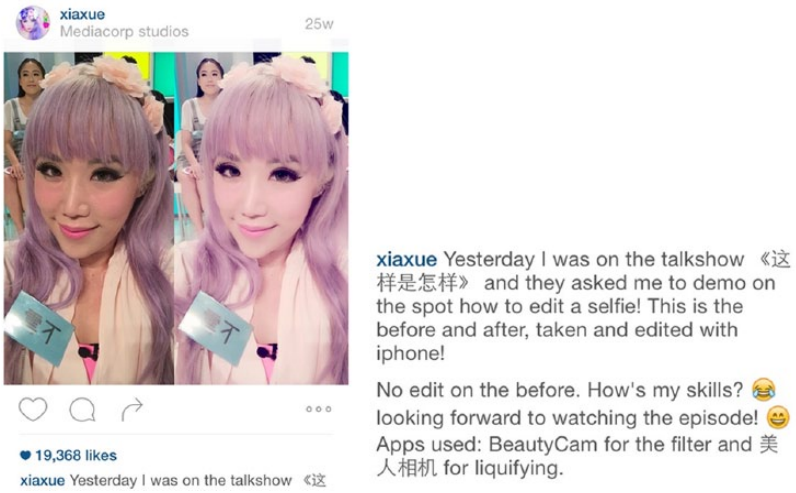

Figure 4. @xiaxue, screengrabbed, September 2015.

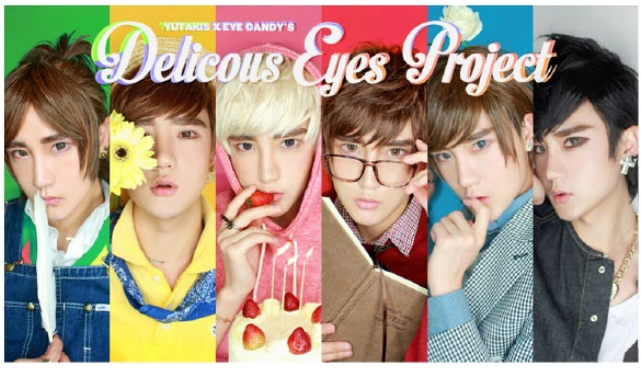

Figure 5. @yutakis, screengrabbed, September 2015.

Instagram reveal fawning over his appearance ("So handsomeeee"; "Omg you're so pretty"), specifically focusing on particular facial features ("That flawless eyebrows"; "Look at that jawline!"), and his ability to photograph, edit, and produce good selfies in the aesthetic of Japanese anime ("wow legit anime"; "It's like anime has come to life!!"). In other words, like @xiaxue's public sharing of her selfie-editing prowess, Influencers are not chided for "photoshopping" and producing "inauthentic" selfies (see Lobinger & Brantner, 2015), but are instead celebrated for their ability to produce and curate good selfies.

Additionally, despite engaging in a practice thought to be predominantly feminine (while occasionally criticized for his vanity), @yutakis does not seem to have lost his hetero sex appeal with numerous female followers who highlight his desirability ("Omg u look so hot"; "I think the girl that u choose for ur future, is really a lucky girl"). Capitalizing on his "expert" selfie-taking skills, @yutakis has also been producing photobooks of his selfies and self-timed photographs for sale since 2013 (predating Kim Kardashian's 2015 selfie photobook, *Selfish*), which feature various location, apparel, and printing sponsors as a creative form of advertorial (Figure 5).

Evidently, commercial selfies are objects over which Influencers labor and commodify, but what goes on behind-the-scenes? Turning to the backstage work (Goffman, 1956) involved in producing selfies with high commercial value, this article situates selfies as latent commodities. Having contextualized the work selfies do for Influencers, the article now turns to situating the use of Instagram among Influencers in Singapore. In the next two sections, I demonstrate how selfies are presented on Instagram and offer a repository of how selfies become salable objects. The last two sections focus on the tacit labor behind selfie production and the mobilization of selfies to negotiate contrived authenticity and reflexivity. The final section contemplates selfies as a form of subversive frivolity through a culmination of the above practices.

Selfies on Instagram

Among Influencers, Selfies are most prolific on Instagram and mediated via smartphones. Young people are increasingly

reliant on smartphones for leisurely connecting to the Internet (Galambos & Abrahamson, 2002), while desktop and laptop usage has dropped and become limited to the more formal spheres of school and work life. Some research indicates an 87% smartphone penetration (Media Research Asia, 2013) and 123% mobile Internet penetration (Singh, 2014) in Singapore. In 2013, Instagram was reported to be the "fastest growing media application among mobile-savvy users" (Aw Yeong, 2013) and has been used extensively by Influencers to curate taste displays, publish advertorials, and wrestle for followers (Abidin, 2014).

Although an ecology of selfie work across different platforms is beyond the scope of this article, Influencers in Singapore tend to curate a range of slightly different types of selfies on Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat. Instagram primarily features the most professional and stylized selfies with thoughtful captions and only on the rare occasions included "behind-the-scenes" selfies (Figure 6) with deliberately reflexive captions, suggesting what I will elaborate on later as a contrived authenticity.

Twitter was for selfies "not making the Instagram cut," as @naomineo_ tells me that Twitter is "less serious" in terms of photography aesthetic and that she feels "less pressure" to post "only perfect" images there. @rchlwngx (Figure 7) and @euniceannabel (Figure 8) similarly post more candid selfies to Twitter throughout the day, reserving Instagram for only the most pristine selfies.

In a similar vein, Snapchat was a space in which Influencers could deliberately curate and post what they describe as "fun selfies," "ugly selfies," or "more authentic selfies" in which they were photographed or videoed goofing around "behind-the-scenes" "without long-term consequences" (Katz & Crocker, 2015, p. 1862) given the platform's ephemerality. As a result of these different uses of various social media, Instagram has emerged as a repository for the most stylized and overtly commercial selfies in Singapore (Abidin, 2014). This tendency is echoed in Marwick's (2015) work on

Figure 6. @euniceannabel, screengrabbed, September 2015.

Figure 7 & 8. @rchlwngx & @EuniceAnnabel, screengrabbed, September 2015.

Figure 9. @xiaxue, screengrabbed, September 2015.

"Instafame" where she notes Instagram for its "convergence of cultural forces" including "a mania for digital documentation, the proliferation of celebrity and microcelebrity culture, and conspicuous consumption" (p. 139).

Since its launch in 2010, Instagram has become an aesthetically stylized site for photo sharing, microblogging, networking, and commercial exchange. Instagram's philosophy is listed on its FAQ (2013) page:

> What is Instagram? Instagram is a fun and quirky way to share your life with friends through a series of pictures. Snap a photo with your mobile phone, then choose a filter to transform the image into a memory to keep around forever. We're building Instagram to allow you to experience moments in your friends' lives through pictures as they happen. We imagine a world more connected through photos.

However, four of the platform's suggested uses have been repurposed by Influencers and their use of commercial selfies. First, Instagram presupposes a *networked intimacy* in its adoption of the term "friends" to refer to one's followers and following. However, Influencers usually have high follower-to-following ratios, that is, having a *large number of (unknown) users* subscribed to their account, while themselves subscribing to only a small number of (known) users. Second, Instagram was intended to be a fuss-free "mobile phone" app that could be used on the go with a *smartphone camera*. However, Influencers are known to use *high-end digital cameras* to capture high-resolution photographs before transferring them to their smartphones for posting so that the quality of the photograph is significantly improved. Third, Instagram was crafted as a collection of "moments" as a *memory keepsake*. However, Influencers are using the stream to *disseminate and circulate information* and imagery rather than as a personal nostalgic archive. Finally, Instagram aims to capture life events *spontaneously*, "as they happen." However, Influencers are laboring over *purposefully staged* images to portray a particular persona and lifestyle aesthetic.

Selfies as Salable Objects

As noted earlier, selfies commonly take the form of advertorials on Instagram. Advertorials are thought to be more effective than dispassionate, clinical advertisements since they take the form of a personal narrative and incorporate Influencers' perspectives of having experienced the product or service first-hand (Abidin, 2013). Based on my fieldwork with Influencer management firms, I learned that Instagram advertorials may be sold as a single slot, as a series of slots situated within a strict time frame, or as part of an integrated campaign involving other social media platforms. Although pricelists are kept confidential within management agencies, some Influencers may broker selected advertorial slots to the public. One Influencer tells me that her going rate for a "package" of one blog post, one Instagram post, and one Tweet is SGD1500, although this is hardly standardized given that advertorial rates fluctuate depending on the popularity of the Influencer as measured by their follower count, the type of product featured, and the nature of the campaign.

In the following example, @xiaxue is seen advertising her Instagram slots on Instagram, no less, in which one Instagram advertorial published to "262,000 followers" on Instagram and cross-posted to "161k followers" on Twitter was being sold at a discounted price of SGD600 to blogshop (a particular genre of Singaporean online stores) owners only. The 15 comments in response to @xiaxue's caption unanimously express surprise at the unusually low rate at which her "special promotional price" was commanding (Figure 9).

The most straightforward selfie advertorials are when Influencers publish overt advertising content, prominently displaying the featured product in a selfie accompanied by information from the company. In the following example,

@rchlwngx is seen promoting jewelry store @theredbowtique's necklace (Figure 10). In her caption, she tells followers that they are entitled to "5% off" should they follow @theredbowtique's Instagram account and "quote [her] name" during the transaction.

However, certain products and services require more work on the part of the Influencer in order to be embedded into selfies, as observed in the case of @yankaykay's Instagram post (Figure 11). On first glance, the focal point in the selfie seems to be the crucifix pendent she is lightly holding between her lips. On the bottom left corner is a second focal point—a small image of a red, orange, and white logo, juxtaposed against her jet-black tank top and hair and the dark gray backdrop. It is ambiguous whether the logo on her right chest is a sticker on her tank top or a superimposed image photoshopped in after the selfie was taken, or whether it was even meant to be a focal point in the selfie. Only on reading the caption can one ascertain that @yankaykay is advertising for the television entertainment channel, "cHK," on behalf of her client, media operator "mioTV." The "-sp" on which her caption ends is an abbreviation for "sponsored post." Although her selfie and advertorial caption appear incongruent on closer inspection, in general @yankaykay seems to have managed to incorporate the client's logo into her selfie in a manner so subtle that followers' attention is still focused on her selfie, such that her advertorial does not come off as being too much of a "hard sell."

The most labored and convincing commercial selfies occur when Influencers are photographed actually using the product or service, especially if it is in the aesthetic of a "how to" tutorial, such as in the case of @ongxavier. Within the span of a week, @ongxavier uploaded two Instagram images of himself with a facial wash product. In the first image, his face is off-focus in the background, clasped between his

Figure 10. @rchlwngx, screengrabbed, September 2015.

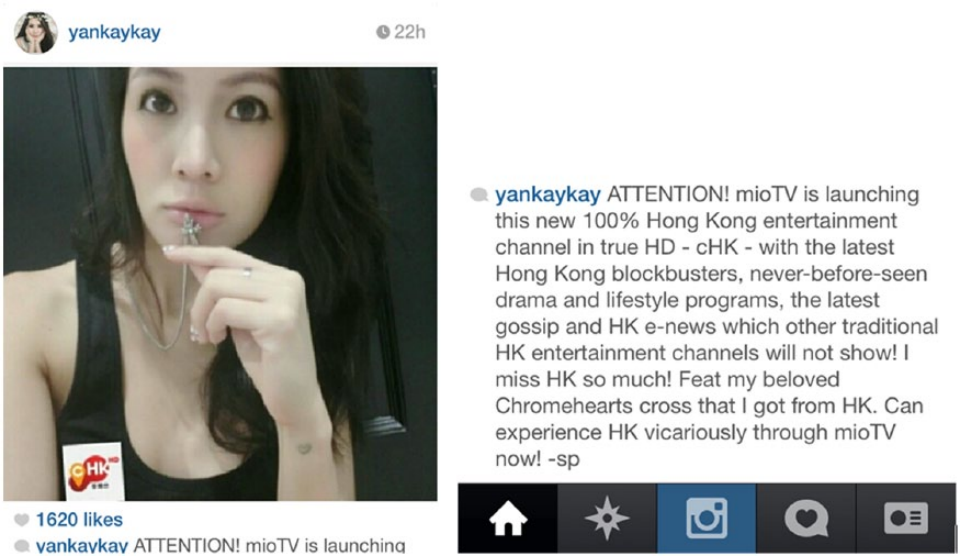

Figure 11. @yankaykay, screengrabbed, September 2015.

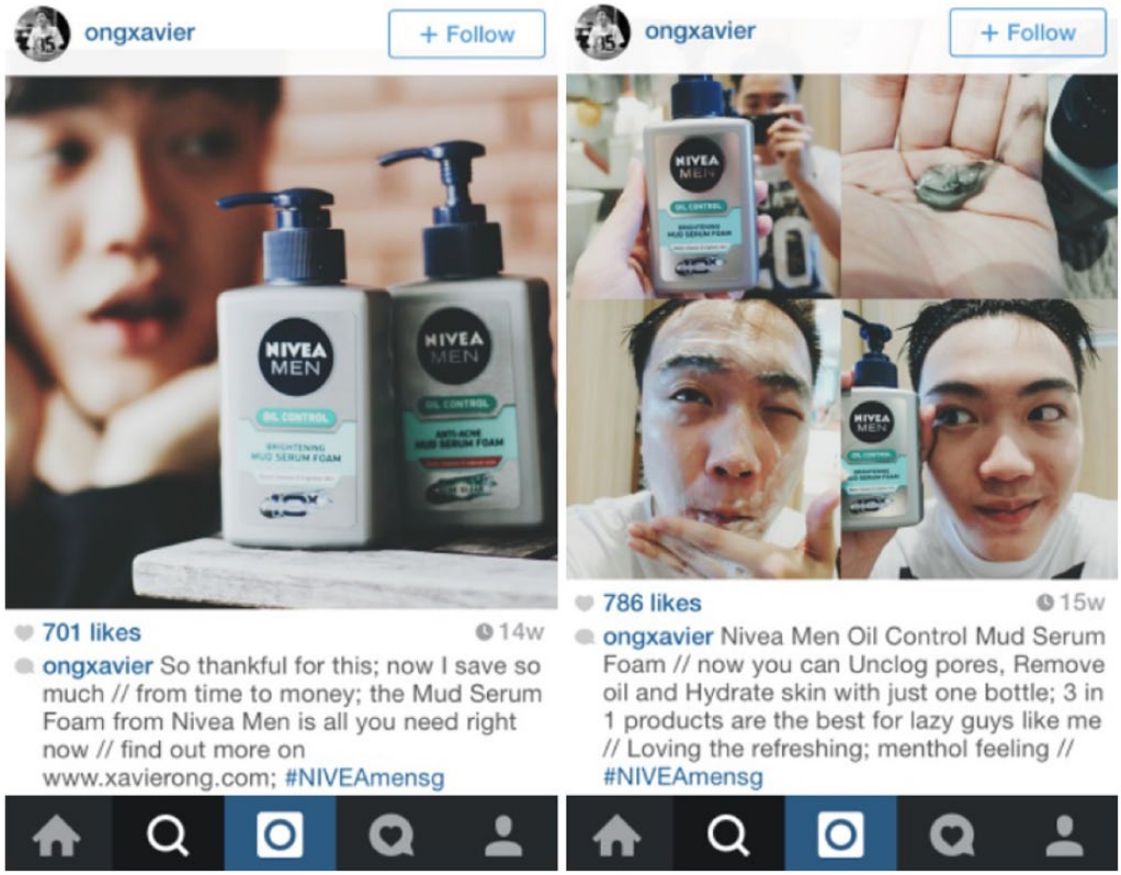

Figure 12 & 13. @ongxavier, screengrabbed, September 2015.

palms as if washing his face. In the foreground are two bottles of facial wash in focus (Figure 12). The second image is a collage of four separate images, each showing @ongxavier in the various stages of washing his face (Figure 13): an image of the bottle of facial wash, a close-up of a squirt of the wash in his palm, his hand spreading the wash all over his foam-clad face, and a fresh face with damp fringe staring at the bottle of facial wash.

At times, several Influencers may be collectively engaged in what I term a "multi-Influencer campaign," wherein a select group of Influencers from an Influencer management agency are tasked to promote a brand or product on their individual Instagram streams within a designated period of time. Nuffnang Influencers @sophiewillocq and @bongqiuqiu are seen here advertising for a company, @covermybagel. In the same week, both Influencers post a group selfie of the both of them and a third male Influencer, @yutakis, although the photos are two different versions with slightly altered poses (Figures 14 and 15). The selfies show the Influencers using the exact same cartoon phone casing, which is clearly the focus of the selfie. A few days later, @bongqiuqiu's Instagram image was reposted on the company @covermybagel's Instagram account (Figure 16), with an altered caption, followed by an additional selfie of the Influencer featuring the product again (Figure 17).

There are two advantages to this approach. First, each Influencer is given some freedom to design and personalize their Instagram ads in the aesthetic that would most appeal to their followers—@sophiewillocq and @bongqiuqiu use different filters and captions on the same selfie, and @sophiewillocq personalizes the selfie with the use of digital stickers. The second advantage is that the advertorial campaign is likely to remain in the imaginary of Instagram followers for a longer period of time—since followers of Influencers are likely to follow those within the same genre, social group, or clique, these Instagram ads have the propensity to show up on followers' feeds prominently and repeatedly over the designated campaign period, unlike one-off advertorials. This strategy is also known in the industry as a "campaign blast."

In another example, Influencers do not themselves post commercial selfies, but encourage followers to take and post selfies as part of their advertorial campaign. In two Instagram posts published 1 day apart for the selfie competition "#SunsilkCrazySnaps" organized by haircare company @SunsilkSG, @naomineo_ invites followers to "tag a crazy fun selfie or wefie" (Figure 18) for a chance to win an autographed GoPro. Her second post, although not a selfie, shows @naomineo_ scrolling through the "#SunsilkCrazySnaps"

Figure 14, 15, 16 & 17. @sophieqillocq, @bongqiuqiu, @covermybagel, screengrabbed September 2015.

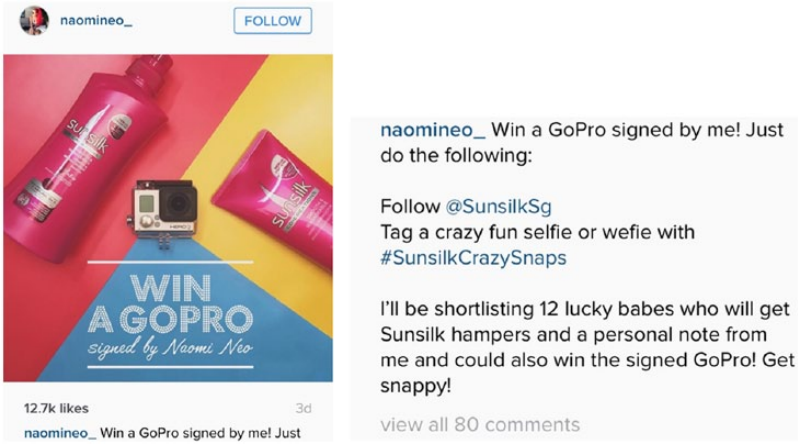

Figure 18. @naomineo_, screengrabbed, September 2015.

hashtag on Instagram, during which she is presumably "shortlisting 12 babes who will receive Sunsilk hampers and a personal note" (Figure 19).

The selfies produced by followers in such selfie competitions serve to increase publicity for the campaign and are frequently appropriated by clients for promotional material. As such, although most followers (apart from the select few prize winners) are not compensated for their creative labor, their selfies are commercial entities that are exploited by clients who derive monetary value from their circulation and exposure.

Selfies as Tacit Labor

Much of the labor in which Influencers engage to produce selfies are under-visibilized, despite being systematic and effortful. Drawing from Polanyi's (1958) notion of "tacit knowledge," I define their production and curation of selfies as a form of tacit labor: a collective practice of work that is understated and under-visibilized from being so thoroughly rehearsed that it appears as effortless and subconscious. Throughout fieldwork, I accompanied Influencers and their managers to several "meet the Influencer" events, in which selfie-taking was the highlight. The Influencers, ever obliging in the presence of followers, seem to have mastered the practice of displaying their "camera-ready" selfie face: head slightly tilted down to emphasize one's chin and elongate the face—what Marwick (2015) calls the "MySpace angle" (p. 141)—but is colloquially known as "娃娃头" or "wáwá tóu" which literally translates as "doll head"; eyebrows slightly raised and eyelids lifted to give the illusion of larger, rounder eyes; pursed lips and a tightening of the cheek muscles to accentuate one's cheekbones; shoulders slightly raised so that one's collarbones are given more prominence. "Mirror selfies" require additional labor: tummies sucked in with a hand pinched to one side of the waist to highlight a slim but hour-glass figure; one foot shifted slightly to the front with

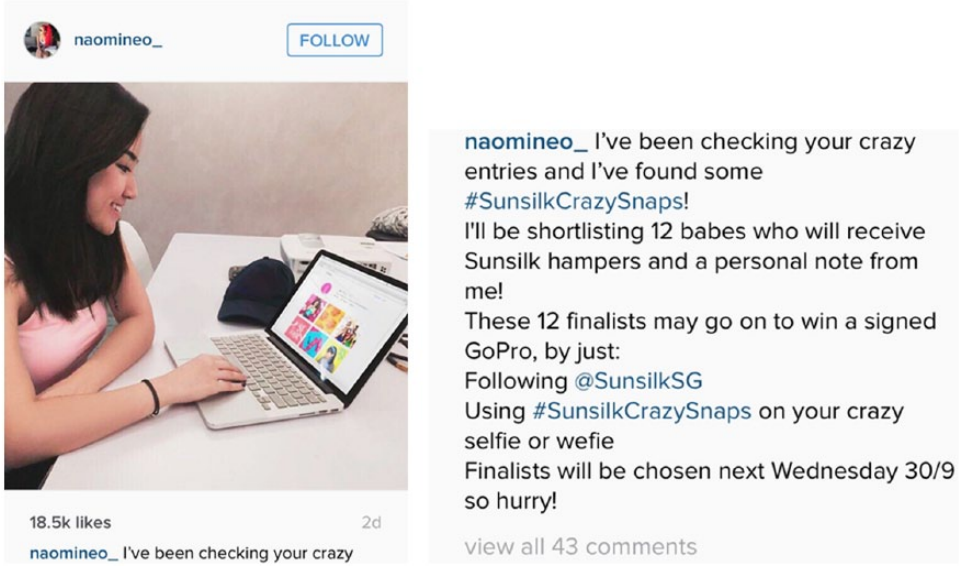

Figure 19. @naomineo_, screengrabbed, September 2015.

heels off the floor and a slight tiptoe, so the body leads forward to lengthen one's frame. All this intricate transitory bodily emotion work—when we "change somatic or other physical symptoms of emotion" (Hochschild, 2003, p. 96) in order to alter our feelings—occurred swiftly and quietly within a matter of seconds and would have gone unnoticed by the untrained eye. Intrigued, I began documenting the tacit labor involved in Influencers' selfie production through the instruments of makeup and dressing, lighting and posturing, and apps and artifice.

Makeup and Dressing

While accompanying Influencers on photo shoots, I was present for their makeup regime behind-the-scenes. They told me of the need to practice "contouring" with two different shades of foundation on their faces, where a liquid version of the cosmetic is preferred to the powered version, as it enables Influencers to "blend" lighter and darker patches on their face. Done correctly, this "basic makeup technique" can give the illusion of fuller foreheads, higher nose bridges, rounder cheeks, and sharper chins, to name a few effects. All this was described to me as intended to give the illusion of "cuteness" as a strategy to solicit favor, affect, and desire among followers and possible male partners (Abidin, in press).

Most Influencers also had two or three sets of cosmetic products for different occasions. Most had a basic makeup kit for more "natural" and "neutral" tones that they wear on a daily basis. The second kit comprised more cosmetic items for a fuller face of makeup that they used when attending events to meet with followers, clients, and fellow Influencers. The third kit usually contained the highest number of cosmetic items for a more dramatically made-up face and was only used when Influencers were going for professional photo shoots under "harsh studio lighting," or when "professional high-resolution cameras" would pick up even the smallest of details on their faces. While my informants only occasionally mentioned the prices of individual products, I estimate that each kit may cost between SGD100 and SGD300 (USD70–USD210), depending on the brands used. This is especially crucial because while Influencers are often able to make digital edits to their photographs and selfies to omit blemishes before posting them on social media, professional studio shoots are largely curated by in-house magazine or client photographers who are very unlikely to accede to such requests. Instead, any minor tweaks to these photographs are completely at the discretion of the client.

Taking eye makeup as an example, Influencer Ellen once gave me a sneak peek into her makeup kit and demonstrated the three levels of makeup intensity she would use: on normal days, she usually only relied on double eyelid tape—a thin translucent double-sided sticky tape that creased the folds of eyelids to give the impression of double eyelids—and eyeliner—a dark pencil that is used to outline one's eyes for more definition. If she were attending events, she would apply "falsies" or false eyelashes, which were synthetic eyelashes that one could stick on. On days where she had photo shoots in professional studios, Ellen would consider doubling up on her falsies, using a darker eyeliner that she would draw on more thickly, and perhaps also use iris-enlarging contact lenses to give the impression of larger eyes.

In terms of dressing, I learned that heels were often the most important apparel item for "mirror selfies." Many Influencers would bring along extra pairs of heels of different heights in their cars, or if they were at events with dressing

rooms, in their dressing bag. They explained how heels gave the illusion of longer, slimmer legs, and how heels that were thinner like stilettos, as opposed to wedges which were chunky heels, also drew the illusion of having more defined calf muscles. Influencers who knew their "body shape" and "proportions" well enough often had a favorite way of dressing. Yvette, who is often complimented for her protruding collarbones and defined shoulder blades, is fond of wearing off-shoulder tops to flaunt her slender frame, while Marianne, who sports washboard abs is often spotted in crop tops and low-waist pants to accentuate her muscles. Playing with fabrics, colors, and patterns, Brittany tells me that striped pants help to elongate her frame, Irene tells me that pastel colors help her skin to appear more milky and fair in photographs, and Angela explains that "flowy" materials like polyester-silk blends and chiffon fall off her chest and hips nicely to give the impression that she has a more shapely, feminine figure.

I often expressed doubt about such strategies and would mention that such "dressing tips" were simply regurgitations from women's magazines. However, many Influencers assured me that while they used to share my mindset, seeing someone with the naked eye and gazing at them through a selfie were two distinct practices, and that these were skills and "tricks" they had learned from trial-and-error and emulating fellow Influencers. Jacqueline once mentioned that the makeup and dressing tips that Influencers talked about were simply "tips to trick the camera into making you look better than you really are." Similarly, Jamie insisted that while we "probably see no difference" in the flesh, these "beauty illusions" would be much more prominent when photographed in selfies.

Lighting and Posturing

Good "background lighting" for selfie-taking was also a key consideration. While natural morning sunlight, around 9 a.m.–11 a.m. outdoors, was the most preferred background lighting, in indoor situations Influencers tended to prefer white lights to warmer, orange hues, since the former tended to "cast better shadows" and reflect the "true color" of their makeup and outfits more accurately. In the privacy of their own homes and offices, many Influencers owned professional "ring lights." These were doughnut-shaped white bulbs that came with a portable stand that Influencers would place on the camera lens when taking selfies or self-timed shots. They enabled Influencers to take brighter, clearer, high-resolution photographs in the comfort of their houses, and the "even" lighting did not cast unsightly shadows on their faces and bodies, as regular lighting would. This smooth lighting made it easier for Influencers to edit out blemishes or smoothen their skin tones with photo-editing apps, which I will discuss in the next segment.

For months, I watched Influencers take selfies with each other. As I was approaching the end of fieldwork and began winding down activities with these Influencers, I approached several of them for memento selfies to commemorate our time together. It was in this process that I learned, by chance, that posing in group photos is in itself a complex craft. On many occasions, not only did Influencers occupy their "preferred side" (i.e., "I look better from this angle"; "my dimple is here"; "need to see my [side-swept] fringe; if not, my forehead will look very big"), but they also tended to gently hold my shoulder and nudge me closer to the camera, such that their faces would appear smaller in comparison. In these examples, Influencers' bodies are framed as "beauty problems" that fester insecurities—bodies become "partial" in that they are "fragmented" for the pursuit of perfection and "situational" (Driscoll, 2002, p. 247) in that those individual bodies can be disciplined into proper posturing through self-improvement and consumption.

Influencers who wanted to accentuate their smaller frame—relative to mine—also angled their bodies to the side to occupy less of the photographic frame. As if second nature to their job, almost every Influencer I encountered was fond of taking multiple shots of the same scene or selfie, at times with only very small changes in their facial expressions on body angles. They would then pick the photograph in which they looked the most photogenic for their social media feeds. I also learned that when group shots or selfies were taken, it was basic etiquette for each Influencer to view a preview of the image on the camera or phone screen, often zooming in and enlarging their faces and bodies to "approve" of the photo. It was common practice for Influencers to request that "unglamorous" or badly taken photographs be deleted off each other's cameras. It was also not unusual for each Influencer to snap the photograph or selfie with their own devices, despite the group being in the same stances and postures, as every Influencer had her own preferred way of editing and processing the image before publishing on her own social media feed.

Apps and Artifice

Using image-enhancing and photo-editing applications to tweak one's photographs is a widely acceptable practice in the Instagram Influencer industry, as evidenced in Influencer @xiaxue's live demonstration (Figure 4). There are a few common practices among Influencers who use smartphone apps to enhance their images, such as editing away blemishes and moles, whitening their complexion, widening their eyes, elongating their faces, sharpening their noses, smoothing creases and wrinkles, and lengthening one's frame. In this sense, looking at one's "edited self" constitutes the practice of "gazing," wherein Influencers constitute their own ego through relating to the image of themselves being watched (Mulvey, 1999, p. 837). In her studies of cinema, Laura Mulvey (1999) develops the notion of "the gaze" based on the practice of "scopophilia"

Figure 20 & 21. @rchlwngx, screengrabbed, September 2015.

in which "looking itself is a source of pleasure" (p. 835). In response to these usual practices, many photo-editing apps now come with in-built options that will automatically edit specific parts of a photo at the click of a button. At present, the most popular of these apps is "Meitu Xiuxiu," which is fuss-free and easy to negotiate, although users will require a basic command of Mandarin, as it is the app's default setting. On personal computers, Influencers prefer Adobe Photoshop editing software, especially since it allows users to store their preferred settings and apply edits to multiple photos at once.

Selfies for Contrived Authenticity and Reflexivity

Apart from the stylized and effortful selfies for sale, some Influencers also publish equally, if not more thoughtful, "behind-the-scenes" selfies in a display of contrived authenticity and reflexivity. Frosh (2015) notes that selfies are a "genre of personal reflexivity," in which they "show a self, enacting itself . . . fluctuating between the self as an image and as a body, as a constructed effect of representation and as an object and agent of representation" (p. 1621). One enactment of this is @rchlwngx's reflexive selfies in response to accusations that she was using chin implants—@rchlwngx posted a selfie of herself frowning on Twitter (Figure 20), with a caption directing followers' attention to her "wrinkly chin" as evidence that she had not had implants inserted. While her caption—"If only [there] was an implant in there so it wouldn't wrinkle"—may come off as a playful rant to most followers, those with contextual knowledge are able to read into @rchlwngx's caption that serves to playfully dispel plastic surgery rumors.

In a second Tweet (Figure 21), @rchlwngx juxtaposes two selfies taken some years apart, before and after she had become a popular Influencer. The older selfie on the left was circulating online in the rhetoric of exposé, amid accusations from Internet users that the Influencer had secretly engaged in cosmetic surgery; these Internet users noted that the Influencer's facial appearance had undergone drastic changes over the years. In this vein, Senft and Baym (2015) note the potential for selfies to be embedded in the "infrastructure of the digital superpublic" (p. 1589) in which the original context of the selfie's production, viewing, and circulation is subject to change and mutation.

In another measure of publicity savvy, @rchlwngx uses selfies reactively by passively denying these "plastic surgery" rumors—the Influencer reposted the "leaked" selfie on her Twitter account and compared it against a newer selfie. In this act, she seems to appropriate the narrative generated in the so-called exposé by reorienting followers to a sense of positive self-improvement; her caption reads "check out what [these have] done for me!" She also tells followers that her facial changes are a result of "puberty/braces/accutane/DRx/Botox/fillers," thus publicly reaffirming her belief (i.e., selling) in at least one of her sponsors, "DRx," who provides beauty enhancement services and has been featured on @rchlwngx's blog. Additionally, similar to the earlier example, followers without knowledge of the context are unlikely to read into @rchlwngx's perceptive management of damaging rumors, especially since her "compare and contrast" selfies can come across as simply another advertorial. Thus, Influencers also use selfies in a defensive manner as "a form of digital storytelling" (Koliska & Roberts, 2015, p. 1676) defined as having a voiceover, in which the narratives are subtly layered: followers who lack the context in which these playful selfies are situated may perceive these posts as frivolous, while those who are "in the know" are able to read into the implicit messages Influencers subtly embed into their subversive selfies.

In other instances, Influencers may unintentionally inspire reflexivity among their followers, as evident in the example of @xiaxue's SkinnyMint advertorial (Figure 22). In this product placement commercial selfie, @xiaxue has collaged

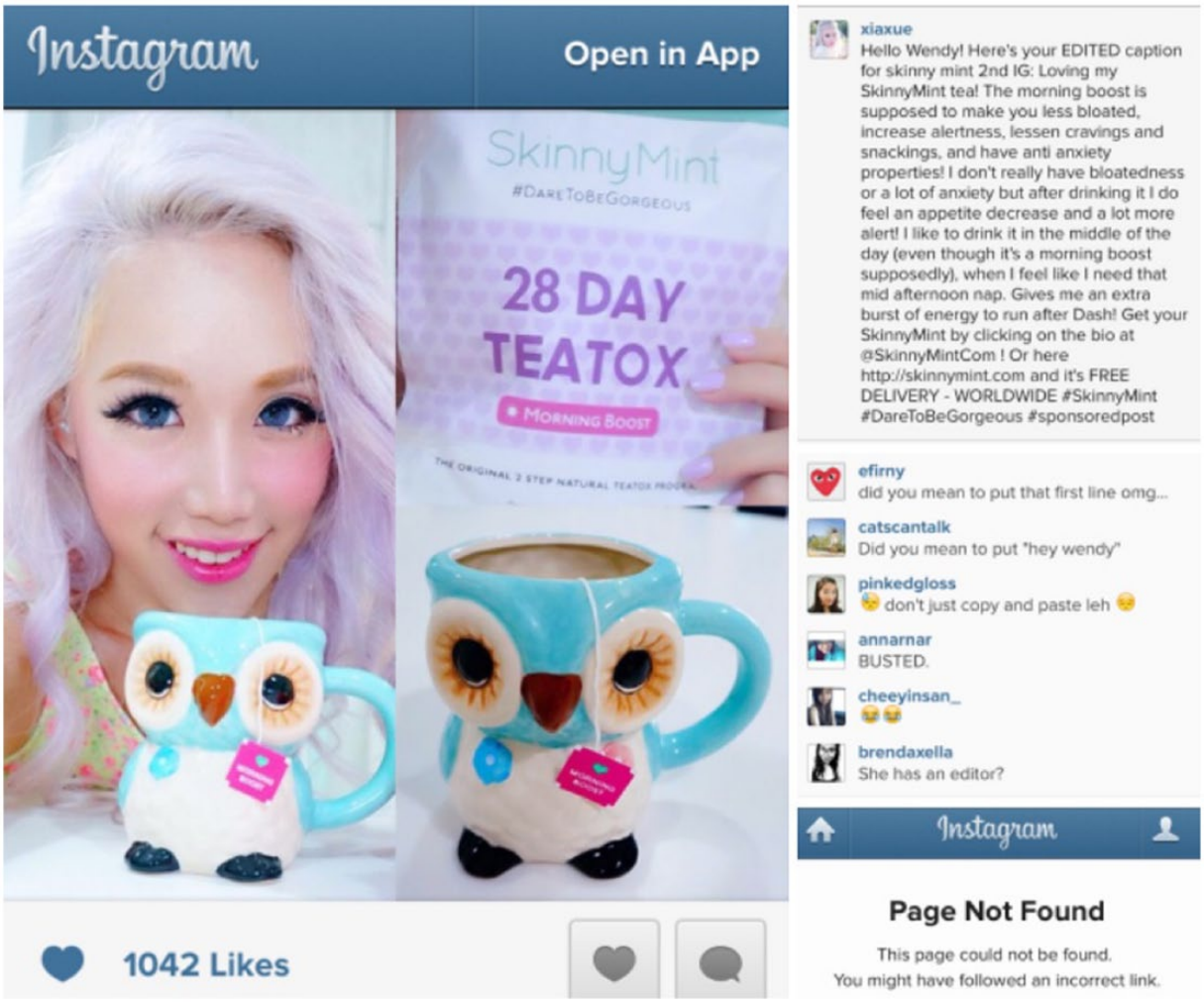

Figure 22. @xiaxue, screengrabbed, September 2015.

two photographs into one—on the left is a selfie in which the Influencer is seen holding an owl mug to her face with a pink SkinnyMint tea label dangling out, while the photo on the right displays the same owl mug in the foreground with featured bag of tea "SkinnyMint 28 DAY TEATOX" in the background. The first time @xiaxue published the selfie, the caption began with instructions from her manager—"Hello Wendy! Here's your EDITED caption for skinny mint 2nd IG"—that the Influencer most likely forgot to omit. The first few Instagram followers who viewed this selfie immediately spotted this faux pas—"did you mean to put that first line omg"; "Did you mean to put 'hey wendy'"—and called the Influencer out for her work ethic—"don't just copy and paste leh"; "BUSTED." Another early viewer expressed their unawareness of the extent of crafting and curating that every commercial selfie entails—"She has an editor?"—sparking off a series of similar comments from various followers who were, through this incident, alerted to the backend management behind commercial selfies. Although @xiaxue promptly deleted this selfie within a matter of minutes (Figure 22) and replaced it with one that edited out the instructions from her manager (Figure 23), many followers made light of her mistake with gloating comments—"I saw what you did :P"; "hahahahahaha xD"; "That was too funny."

Where @xiaxue's break in frame (Goffman, 1974) has instigated reflexivity among some followers, @yankaykay's use of non-sponsored selfies in the aesthetic of commercial selfies (Figure 24) reveals her personal reflexivity in relation to the latent commerce in selfie production. In this example, @yankaykay snaps a selfie while holding a cup of Jolly Bee dessert to her face. Her caption begins in the aesthetic of a standard commercial selfie, introducing the product, its price tag, instructions for customer orders, and a short endorsement prompt. However, the second paragraph of her caption goes on to inform readers that while this post reads off as a sponsored selfie at first glance, it is actually a non-paid, personal testimonial from the Influencer—"I'm trained as a model/blogger to pose/post for ads and I know what this looks like but this isn't an ad." She goes on to explain that the client/owner is a personal friend of hers and that her "entire

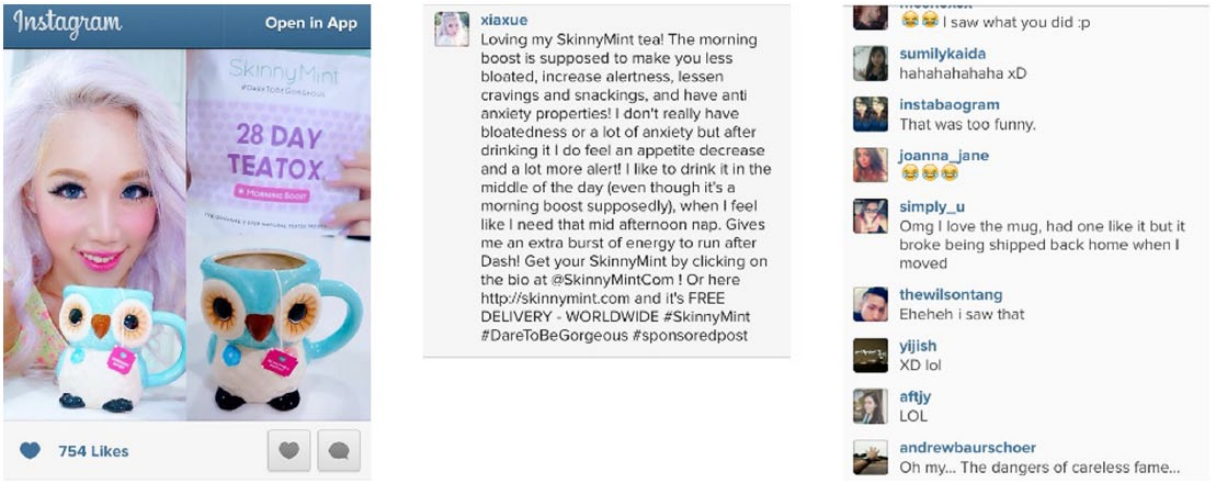

Figure 23. @xiaxue, screengrabbed, September 2015.

Figure 24. @yankaykay, screengrabbed, September 2015.

house adores" the product, which she has been consuming "with every meal since [her] first order." @yankaykay's candid display seems to add a layer of authenticity to her "performance"—a personal testimonial in the guise of a commercial selfie—since she has forgone the high advertorial fee, she would have otherwise been able to command given that she has over 86,900 followers on Instagram.

Conclusion: Selfies as Subversive Frivolity

As selfie-takers, female Influencers have been renarrativizing the moral panic surrounding selfies to such a successful extent that good selfies and selfie-taking skills are a prized asset in the Influencer industry. Some male Influencers have also subverted gendered stereotypes and effectively claimed the practice of commercial selfies without compromising public receptions of their (hetero)sexuality. As a social medium, Instagram has been creatively appropriated for commercial rewards, primarily through the vehicle of selfies that have been established as latent commodities that recast selfies as (financially) valuable forms of property. As a product for sale, advertorial selfies innovatively reframe Influencers' sense of charisma, given that the featured products draw from Influencers' relatable personae and selfies to acquire affective value through a "halo effect" (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). As a form of tacit labor, commercial selfies redirect the pathological disciplinary gaze applied from external viewers by appealing to followers and fellow Influencers for whom in-group policing is a productive power that contributes to the betterment of selfie-taking standards. As a space for contrived authenticity and reflexivity, selfies serve Influencers as instruments with which to subvert rumors, followers' perceptions, and the increasing overt commercialism of the Influencer industry.

In her study of young Australians' selfies and sexts, Albury (2015) notes that "[y]oung people's accounts of cultures of self-representation"—such as through the medium and practice of selfies—"offer a productive space for

reshaping educational, legal, and policy conversations about media, sexuality, and gender" (p. 1742), especially since they allow us to consider the context of intended uses and vernacular meaning-making. In a similar vein, Influencers' (semi-)professional selfie products and practices offer new ways of framing the selfie as a tool which has the potential to insidiously undermine prevalent discourses.

If I were ever again to be asked "Aren't these just young, rich women doing vain things online?" I hope to have the eloquence to express that it is exactly this casual dismissal of selfies as mere frivolity that has enabled Influencers to partake in quietly subversive acts, by reappropriating the selfie for self-branding, financial gains, and self-actualization pursuits. If being consistently under-visibilized and under-estimated allows for the generative power of selfies to subvert the affordances of Instagram, the expectations of female entrepreneurs, the gaze of the camera, and representations of authenticity, selfies, and their subversive frivolity may continue to thrive under the radar.

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