



#lifeisgood:

Understanding Social Currency in the Female Commercial Blog Industry in Singapore

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Abstract

Commercial bloggers in Singapore, predominantly self-taught young women who weave advertorials and advertisements into personal blog entries, have proliferated and have been making good money. In essence, they are selling a lifestyle to their readers, seemingly attainable through the goods and services marketed. As an effective means of youth advertising for local and international corporations, commercial blogging is becoming a professional industry with blog talent agencies and managers surfacing in recent years.

Apart from the goods and money circulated, commercial bloggers seem to depend and trade on 'social currency', that is, their virtual world reputation taken as a unit of trade in the commercial blog industry. On the surface, the number of 'Likes', 'Follows', 'ReTweets', 'Favourites', 'Friends' and 'Readers' that these bloggers boast on their blogs and various social media accounts measure this. Whereas business and marketing research have examined the impact of such 'social currency' in terms of numbers and audience reach, this paper focuses on the bloggers' individual construction and circulation of this form of social capital.

Within a Singaporean context situated in the mid-2000s to mid-2010s, this paper traces the manufacturing of social currency by deconstructing female

commercial bloggers' readership and analysing their digital dissemination of content. It argues that it is the translation of 'material embodiment' in the physical world to 'material presence' on the web that allows these women's social currency to travel as a unit of taste in encouraging conspicuous consumption. This occurs when the women's appearance, dress, and possessions are digitally archived and broadcasted on their social media feeds, thereby inciting desire and envy among a mass audience. Finally, hinging on their brand image as online micro-celebrities and capitalising on the mass audience's admiration and aspiration to emulate them through advertorials, I trace commercial bloggers' circulation of social currency across interfaces, geographies, images, persons, and values.

Keywords Commercial blogging, Social currency, Consumption, Taste

1 Commercial Blog Industry and Social Currency

It is a simple concept. You see a young, feminine, rich and successful woman living a glamorous life and envy her lifestyle. On her blog, she raves about the exclusive events she has attended, the most advanced products in the market, and the latest fashion tips from insiders. Plus, she hangs out with all the other gorgeous and desirable women in the scene too. She

also broadcasts her life on various social media feeds and appears to be intimate in her communication with thousands of anonymous readers. Through constant bite-sized updates and after some exchanges, it feels like you have become friends. She tells readers that these products and services make her the woman she is and that you too can get a taste of the life she has, if only you purchase these things too. You are hooked.

The commercial blog industry has been an explosive phenomenon throughout South East Asia in recent years, and is especially lucrative in Singapore. Commercial bloggers profit from selling advertising space, writing personalised editorial style advertisements known as 'advertorials', and hawking products to their massive following (Chiew 2009). In essence, they are selling a lifestyle or persona to their readers, seemingly attainable through the goods and services marketed, thus driving conspicuous consumption. The more successful commercial bloggers eventually become celebrities (Trammel & Keshelashvili 2005) or brand names (Cross 2011: 125) themselves. Their ability to market goods effectively depends on their level of 'social currency', that is, their virtual world reputation taken as a unit of trade in the commercial blog industry.

At present, commercial blogs – like blogshops (Abidin & Thompson 2012) – are a phenomenon exceedingly popular and lucrative in Singapore, with the first few emerging in the mid-2000s (Fletcher & Greenhill 2009). Full-time bloggers are not uncommon in Singapore with many taking on blogging (Ng 2009) as proper careers. In fact, this business has expanded so quickly that two blog advertising companies, Nuffnang and Gushcloud, were launched in 2007 (Nuffnang 2013) and 2011 (Gushcloud 2013) respectively to manage commercial bloggers and cater to advertisers. While not a homosocial industry, women dominate the commercial blogosphere forming at least 90% of the trade with the majority aged between 18 and 30. Singapore's most popular Commercial blogger, Xiaxue, garners up to 40,000 unique views daily (Cheng 2013). This strong following is also reflected in the infocomm Development Authority's (iDA) 2012 report that 'Reading blogs that are

created by others' was documented the third most popular activity after 'Social Networking' and 'Instant Messaging' (iDA 2012).

Although commercial bloggers also frequently publish bite-sized updates on social media networks such as Twitter, Instagram, Foursquare, Formspring (now defunct) and askfm, these serve to complement their blogs that remain the dominant social media publishing platform in which they engage. It should be noted that while other types of web personalities focusing solely on vlogs, Twitter, and Instagram have surfaced in the last three years, this paper focuses primarily on commercial bloggers who also adopt social media platforms to complement their blogs.

This mode of 'social selling' (Heng 2009) – that is, to sell through social media networks – is a lucrative industry. But how does a blogger come to have commercial worth? What constitutes this social clout and how does this influence travel? Within a Singaporean context situated in the mid-2000s to mid-2010s, this article traces the manufacturing of social currency by deconstructing female commercial bloggers' readership and analysing their digital dissemination of content. It argues that it is the translation of 'material embodiment' in the physical world to 'material presence' on the web that allows these women's social currency to travel as a unit of taste encouraging conspicuous consumption. This occurs when the women's appearance, dress, and possessions are digitally archived and broadcasted on their social media feeds, thereby inciting desire and envy among a mass audience. Finally, hinging on their brand image as online micro-celebrities (Powell 2009) and capitalising on the mass audience's admiration and aspiration to emulate them through advertorials, I trace commercial bloggers' circulation of social currency across interfaces, geographies, images, persons, and values. For the purposes for this paper, I refer to these women as commercial bloggers.

Commercial bloggers thrive on hype and reputation; the former being the ability to stir up and drive intense publicity, command mass attention, and create buzz on the Internet for an event, product or brand, and the latter being the public regard masses and clients have for the blogger. In order for

commercial bloggers to invoke their influence, they need to be embedded into the commercial blogosphere. The next section discusses the impact of commercial bloggers' audience on their career, their relationships with various actors in the business, and the strategies that some commercial bloggers employ to expand their readership.

2 The Following

A Numbers Game: Competence, Quality, Professionalism, and Rank

It's simple math. The higher the number of followers, friends, or fans on your social media feeds, the wider your advertising reach. Naturally, commercial bloggers with massive followings command higher pay from advertisers. In contrast to Faris' (2012) findings that status is attained through 'selective bridging' rather than 'high network connectivity', both the former and latter help to increase one's status and thus social currency among commercial bloggers in Singapore. The former is applicable to fellow colleagues in the commercial blog industry while the latter applies more to a blogger's following. When blog advertising firms negotiate payment rates and publicity packages with clients, commercial bloggers are often reduced to their 'numbers'. In her book *Bloggerati, Twitterati: How Blogs and Twitter are Transforming Popular Culture*, Mary Cross pinpoints that '[t]he whole status game is about how many people are in your camp, listed as a friend or follower' (2011:123-124), aptly summarising 'numbers' as a mark of one's reputation in the industry. I discuss this reputation as defined by competence, quality, professionalism, and rank.

A blog manager once recounted her dilemma when a blogger she was trying to market or, in industry jargon, 'push' to clients 'has the looks but doesn't have the numbers'. Even though Elisa was gorgeous with model features and would have made a suitable ambassador for a cosmetic brand – the demographic of her readers fit perfectly into the brand's target audience – the clients wanted to settle for a different blogger whose demographic reach was not entirely congruent to their target group, simply because 'her numbers are higher'.

A blogger specialist at a blog advertising firm explained that in this business, 'your numbers are everything. You can be damn good, but if your numbers are not high also no point because that's all clients want to see.' Thus in this sense, a commercial bloggers' 'numbers' become an indicator of her competence to clients, connoting the degree of attention she commands in the mass market.

Among readers and fans, a commercial bloggers' 'numbers' is taken as a marker of her distinguished taste and reputation in the industry. On one level, a strong following indicates that a blogger's publicised and curated personal lifestyle choices has earned the approval of a collective, to the extent that they take to her posts as endorsements of distinction. In the words of one reader, 'if so many people follow her then surely she must be good'. Another reader adds: 'Why do I read her blog? Because everybody reads her blog, they believe in the things she believes in... and so many people can't be wrong, right?' Hence, a blogger's 'numbers' can be interpreted as the quality of her taste and lifestyle choices, to the extent that a strong following generates envy and a desire to keep up-to-date with her.

On another level, readers take a blogger's 'numbers' as her relative reputation in the industry, which correlates to her responsibility to the audience – the better one's reputation, the greater her responsibility to her readers. Such commercial bloggers are assumed to be trusted reviewers and gatekeepers of quality products and services. Similar to findings from Trammell and Keshelashvili (2005:969), handfuls have even been approached by mainstream media and various corporations as independent experts. One self-professed fan of a blogger explains: 'Everything she posts, we are already assured that it is of a certain standard, [because] she has so many readers... she has to make sure that she only posts the best things, to be responsible to us.'

Another loyal reader rationalises that high 'numbers' encourage blogger responsibility: 'Last time when she wasn't so [popular] her photos were okay only, and very normal like the ones we take everyday. But now that she has like 50k followers, surely she must feel very watched, so naturally all the posts are

better now'. This reader astutely points out the correlation between commercial bloggers' public fame and the pressure to maintain responsible broadcasts and endorsements. It works in the reverse as well – commercial bloggers believed to be more responsible to their readership naturally draw in an increasing crowd over time.

In early 2013, blogger Rosie had endorsed and blogged about her experience with a bust enhancement service. She even included a special discount voucher that they could use by simply quoting her name. Within a few weeks, throngs of angry readers were leaving her publically visible nasty comments critiquing her ethics (see also Champoux 2012) because the beauty service was not as effective as she claimed and the discount codes were rejected by the store. They were indignant that she was not 'using [her] fame responsibly, especially when so many people read [her] blog'. They expected a higher level of 'service' from her given her reputation, and felt her work did not match up to her high readership. Hence, a blogger's 'numbers' can also be read off as her degree of responsibility and thus professionalism in the industry.

Among fellow commercial bloggers, one's 'numbers' are sometimes discussed as a blogger's relative rank within the industry. Similar to Hollywood's Ulmer Scale of A- to D-listers, commercial bloggers tend to distinguish their status with markers ranging from 'low hundreds' to 'mid 10ks'. One blogger with readership in the low thousands recounted an occasion where she felt uneasy mingling with another whose following was into the mid-10ks: '... compared to her I was a nobody, it would be weird if we hung out cos I'm not as popular, she has like 20k hits I think'. Similarly, throughout my conversations with commercial bloggers individually or in a group, a common query whenever an unfamiliar commercial blogger was mentioned was the strength of her readership. Hence, a commercial blogger's 'numbers' can also connote her relative rank within the blogosphere.

Friends with/for Benefits: Cliques and Alliances

The make-up of a commercial blogger's following usually comprises fans and haters, as well as fellow

commercial bloggers. While it is the former that forms the core, the latter is important in building up one's social currency. Two prominent commercial blogger relationships are 'cliques' and 'alliances'. As mentioned earlier, such 'selective bridging' (Faris 2012) or a tightly linked closed network increases a blogger's status and social currency.

'Cliques' are usually small groups of bloggers who share similar interests and thus spend time together, excluding others as a result. As an exclusive unit, these bloggers often preserve personal, intimate friendships even outside of the commercial blog scene, with some 'cliques' being more prominent than others. These groups have been referred to by their similar appearances ('... that group of small, skinny, *xiao mei mei*' [little girls]); by the genre of their blogs ('... yeah all those bloggers who also own shops...'); and at times by the most prominent blogger in the circle ('... and I bumped into Tracy that gang...').

Readership among bloggers in 'cliques' tends to circulate when bloggers hyperlink each other in blogposts, or mention each other on social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram. While usually presented as natural and subtle mentions – 'Just had a fabulous dinner with Amy [hyperlinked]!' – these hyperlinks invite readers to explore the social world of another blogger with a simple click, thus generating more publicity and hype for the latter.

'Alliances' are similar to 'cliques' in the ways they share their readership, but a handful of bloggers explained that these were less based on friendship, and more intentional and interest-driven. A conversation I had with one blogger was especially telling:

Crystal: You girls look like great friends; I always see you in photos together.

June: Oh we're not really friends la... It's mutual benefits – I tag you, you tag me, our readers will check each [blogger] out... everyone does it loh, you think they are all really good friends? Not everyone... At events only... It's a business...

Blogger June reveals that some bloggers astutely capitalise on each other's fame and audience to expand their readership, and thus 'follow' each other on blogs and social media feeds for mutual benefit, bonded by

their affinity in self-interest. As an act of reciprocity, mutual hyperlinking itself has become a system of digital gifting through which social relations between bloggers are illuminated (See also Komter 2007).

Alternative Headcount?: Haters and Bots

Blogger colleagues aside, the masses form the rest of a commercial blogger's audience. As evidenced earlier, because one's social currency, and thus revenue, depends on their 'numbers', bloggers are constantly striving to expand their readership. Whereas other studies have focused on social compensatory friending for a deficiency in self-esteem (Lee et al. 2012), commercial bloggers look towards friending and followers with a largely commercial intent. This segment briefly discusses two of the more unorthodox manners in which some bloggers attempt to do this with different subscribers – haters and bots.

Some bloggers have been known to ride on the wave of others' controversies in order to attract competitors' haters to their own blog. These bloggers draw in attention by attempting to give their social commentary or 'insider's view' on the matter.

For instance in early 2013, a commercial blogger was exposed for breaking up a relationship, with evidence of the third party affair posted on a public Facebook page. Almost immediately, many bloggers chanced upon this opportunity to seize attention by giving – mostly regurgitating – their two cents' worth on the issue and extensively tagging their blogposts with buzz phrases in order for their blogs to emerge as popular searches on the Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) Index. One blogger confirms this intent: '... you remember Zayna's case? These bloggers were really underhand. Even if they didn't know anything they still blogged about it to get readers. It's really bad to cash in on someone's misery like that.' Hence, some bloggers ride on the controversies of fellow bloggers to attract the latter's haters to their blog, in a bid to cash in on the audience's desire for spectacles (Richards 1990) and 'a glimpse at Real Life' (Kitzmann 2004:116), not unlike reality television.

As riding on the waves of such controversies becomes increasingly popular, a few commercial bloggers have even begun to manufacture controversies to

gain a spike in readership, only to later reveal that the incident was staged. Helen, for example, posted a video clip of an intense quarrel between herself and her partner in public that was angled to look as if a bystander secretly filmed it. Aisha also filmed and 'leaked' a sex tape that stopped at the moment she was about to undress. Both bloggers gave a couple of days for the buzz to travel and for fellow bloggers to create a frenzy on their controversies, thus channeling more readers and haters to their blogs. They eventually came out to advertise a product or service to the public, with one blogger explicitly stating: 'Now that I've got your attention, here's what I've actually wanted to say'. In general, most commercial bloggers find such staged controversies distasteful but admit that it is effective in spiking one's readership in a very short span of time.

In a desperate bid to expand their readership and increase their social currency, some dishonest bloggers have even been accused of 'buying' followers. Known as 'bots', these dummy accounts click through multiple blogs and 'follow' various social media accounts which are not actually owned or manned by a person. For instance, one public advertisement on the Internet offers 10,000 new Instagram followers for USD25 (ibuyinstagramfollowers.com 2013) while another offers 1,000 new Twitter followers for USD15 (fastfollowerz.com 2013). A handful of commercial bloggers have been called out by colleagues for such deceit, usually noted by a sudden unprovoked increase of followers overnight, or by a very large but inactive following.

As seen from the three instances, commercial bloggers feel the pressure to maintain and increase their reader headcount, as these 'numbers' are an indication of their social currency, which then translates into their earning capacity. Regardless of their status in the physical world, it is the bloggers' virtual world reputation that drives their social currency. The next section traces this translation from the physical world to the virtual world through the digital archiving of taste, as elucidated by the concepts of 'material embodiment' and 'material presence'.

3 A Digital Repository of Taste

'Material Embodiment' and 'Material Presence'

Jasmine procured exclusive jewelry from a luxury jewelry brand that was shipped from abroad. Veronica dined at a Michelin star restaurant during a holiday. Marianne partied with A-list Asian celebrities over the weekend. All three bloggers reveal that the first thing on their minds during these occasions was to commemorate the moment in a photograph, and publish it on their Instagram and Twitter feeds. A blogpost featuring an extended backstory would soon follow after the anticipation and hype generated on their social media feeds directs traffic to their blogs. As Mary Cross astutely frames it:

In this new 'generation me,' people seem to love the opportunity that social media give[s] them to display their connections and followers. More than offering everybody their Warholian 15 minutes of fame, these sites and blogs offer users the chance to enshrine themselves with a network as a go-to personality of guru. It's the high school popularity contest transmogrified to online algorithm. (2011:123)

It seems the key concern is to 'get the word out there', to circulate this byte of information from the physical world to the virtual world. I term these experiences in the physical world 'material embodiment' in that bloggers are literally in bodily contact with these emblems of conspicuous consumption, usually symbolically consumed for their status-signaling effect (Witt 2010, Patsiaouras & Fitchett 2012). These first-hand experiences, while probably exciting and fulfilling for each blogger, are unlikely to incite envy and stimulate desire among their readership unless widely publicized. As Tina explains: '... people want to know more about you and experience your life through your blog, so the main thing is to post about these things. If you meet some celebrity or get the chance to own something that is limited edition or too expensive for most people to own... but nobody knows, then what's the point?'

Hence 'material embodiment' has little value to bloggers as it is not far-reaching and produces little social currency. Translating this into 'material pres-

ence', however, converts the experientially physical into the experientially visual that becomes easier to broadcast to and circulate among a wide audience. I use 'material presence' to refer to the impact and influence over readers via the visual consumption these emblems of conspicuous consumption that usually take the form of images and text circulated online. This focus on the visual follows from the work of Moore and Lee who reveal that in order for advertising to be effective, recipients must be able to 'visualise the consumption experience... [because] this imagery visualisation in turn serves as a catalyst that ignites anticipated emotions, taste anticipation, and hedonic rationalisations' (2012:107), all of which encourage conspicuous consumption. In the virtual world where there is an abundance of information and where cohorts are now seeking instant gratification and entertainment (Cross 2011:120), bloggers depend on 'strong visual stimuli' (Dittmar 2008:58) through quality photographs and text to engage their audience.

With blogs and social media feeds acting as a digital repository of a blogger's taste, this 'material presence' becomes a yardstick against which readers may compare their personal lives, often stirring up sentiments of envy, desire, and emulation (see also Kim et al. 2008). This 'halo effect' (Dittmar 2008; Nisbett & Wilson 1977) – where desirable attributes unrelated to appearance, such as rewarding personal relationships, successful careers and bliss, become associated with a well-dressed and good-looking body – allows commercial bloggers to translate their social distinction of taste (Bourdieu 1977) into economic capital (Abidin & Thompson 2012).

As 'products of disciplinary practices' (Connell 2002:37), commercial bloggers' bodies shift from producing commodities to being produced by commodities (Williams 1998:754) or for that matter becoming commodities per se, visually consumed and vicariously attained by an audience in search of feminine perfection (Abidin & Thompson 2012). It is this translation and the resultant spurring of conspicuous consumption that make commercial blogging an effective platform for advertising. Because 'commodities in themselves have no meaning other than the one shoppers give them' (Oh & Arditi 2000:77), readers buy

into advertorials in which commercial bloggers skillfully imbue their lifestyle and persona into the products and services marketed through highly personalised textual and pictorial catalogue.

Digital Dissemination: Technique and Style

Contrary to popular believe that ‘bloggers can post anything they want’, generating pictorial and textual catalogues of a one’s daily affairs and taste can be rather calculated contemplations. Bloggers reveal that crafting the perfect social media post is a considered process. This segment traces this thought process through the technique and style that most bloggers adopt for the digital dissemination of their ‘material presence’.

Many bloggers divulge that snapping photographs and taking notes on the go is a learned process that has to become second nature in order to succeed in this business. Unlike food, beauty, fashion, or tech bloggers who may focus on one aspect of their daily routines, commercial lifestyle bloggers usually attempt to be all encompassing when they document an event or a day’s happenings. An oft quoted mantra is to ‘take photo first’ at the start of every activity. Variations of this mantra often heard among bloggers include ‘Instagram first’ or ‘post first’. These include snapping shots of their outfits before leaving home, taking photographs of food before every meal, and taking a ‘selfie’ or ‘selca’ – that is, self-portraits using a portable camera or smartphone – at various places with different people.

Details such as the angle of the camera, the lighting, and the photographic treatment with filters and the use of digital stickers and captions are also important considerations. A group of nine bloggers whom I had spent some months with usually chimed ‘shadow, shadow!’ whenever they clamoured to snap a photograph of a dish at mealtime. They candidly inform me that their solution was to ‘take turns’ and ‘lean back’ to prevent overcasts in the photo. In order to prevent duplicates, these nine bloggers would also angle their shots differently with some publishing close-ups and others focusing on aerial shots. They would also use different props including utensils, floral arrangements, and other trinkets to liven up their picture.

Similarly, in their text, the same group of bloggers may choose to focus on different aspects of the event in their blogposts with some blogging about the ambience and decor, some blogging about food quality and presentation, and some blogging about their company for the day. Bloggers have also been observed diligently going through menus and noting down the names of individual dishes and ingredients, documenting interior design and décor, recording the brands and retail prices of their apparel and beauty products, and jotting down names of new faces they have been introduced to in order to produce a well-researched and comprehensive blogpost.

Pictorial and textual technique aside, bloggers are also concerned with the style of their published content and whether these can generate hype. Three bloggers, Lynette, Yvonne, and Jeanie suggest that there are scripts to follow in producing a post to maximise social currency:

Lynette: Did you see what Fiona posted on IG [Instagram]? The picture of two people... they’re not famous or anything... No one is gonna ‘like’ her photo. I won’t post things like that.

Yvonne: Omg I should totally post this (referring to a puppy we chanced upon), this kind of thing sure got at least two, three hundreds ‘likes’ one...

Jeanie: You buy a \$10 handbag you post for what, also not very special or anything. You want you blog about your atas (high end or high class) Chanel or Birkin la, this kind then people interested what.

As evidenced, bloggers tended to have techniques and style guides that they craft and abide by in the digital dissemination of their ‘material presence’. In general, posts that showcased a high degree of exclusivity, high expenditure, or lavish enjoyment were believed to garner more hype and thus generate social currency more effectively.

Hashtags and Tags: Branding and Bonding, Seen and Scene

After contemplating the content and style of a post, bloggers then plot to have these circulate as widely as possible through tagging and hashtagging. The former, appropriated on blogs and all social media feeds, involves adding hyperlinks to fellow bloggers’

blogs and feeds as discussed earlier. The latter, usually appropriated on Twitter and Instagram, involves adding a hash sign before a word or short phrase allowing relevant posts to be searchable and filtered from the mass. Some of these are generic such as '#foodporn' for meal shots and '#ootd' for outfit of the day shots, while others were event specific or exclusive groups such as '#cadburySG' and '#gushcloud'. Blog posts are similarly tagged without the hash sign.

Apart from expanding the reach of a post and encouraging readership to circulate among bloggers, hashtagging and tagging may also serve four other functions, that is, branding, bonding, seen and scene.

Hashtags can be used as a mark of product branding. Corporations who engage bloggers for advertorials usually arrange for them to hashtag their social media posts as a means to aggregate disparate posts published by multiple bloggers and to allow the public to follow the campaign. These include '#bba10makesitbetter' by Blackberry, '#sunsilkgoodtimes' by Sunsilk, and '#AddMomOnFacebook' by StarHub. Clicking on these hashtags enable users to view an archive of advertorials and publicity material posted by various bloggers.

Hashtags may also be used as a means to bond with readers. Some bloggers occasionally encourage readers to interact with them via 'shout outs' or 'follow backs'. In the former, bloggers encourage readers to publicise their social media accounts in exchange for being mentioned by the blogger in a post. In the latter, bloggers ask readers to get their friends to follow the blogger's various social media accounts in exchange for being followed by the blogger herself. Other bloggers request readers to hashtag their names on posts that they wish to share with them. A usual exchange is presented below:

#stephanieissexy! Repost and ten lucky followers will be mentioned!

Hey guys! Hashtag #huiminisfollowing! The five top posters will be followed back!

Anything you want me to see? Hashtag #limweiwei okay!

These publicity drives usually give bloggers a spike

in their readership and followers in a short span of time. In addition to branding and bonding, hashtags also allow bloggers to be 'seen' and to mark their presence at a 'scene'.

'Upload leh', 'tag me can?', 'eh I want it on my wall also' are common chimes when bloggers take group photographs and remind each other to 'tag' everyone in a photo. This allows photographs taken by others to show up or be 'seen' on the individual blogger's social media accounts as a means to publically document their presence among fellow bloggers at various events. As a visual variation of a narration of the self, being 'seen' crafts a blogger's digital personhood, allowing them to constitute their membership in a community and draw interpersonal relationships in these networks (Ochs & Caps 1996), thus elevating their social status and expanding their 'material presence'.

It is also crucial to remain relevant and connected to the 'scene', that is, the highlights and bustle of popular activities such as grand openings, parties, concerts, and other exclusive events. Event hashtags such as '#gcweekends' and '#Nuffnangis6' indicate the blogger's presence at these functions with fellow bloggers, in a bid to show readers that one is 'at the right parties' and 'mixing with the right people'. In order to effectively enact one's presence at a 'scene', it is important to hashtag with immediacy throughout an event as a live record of a blogger's actions and thought trails (Reed 2005). This is especially so because most event hashtags become out-of-date very quickly after the occasion ends and the buzz dies down. As a mark of 'Internet street cred' or virtual world reputation, tagging and hashtagging situates bloggers in the scene, places them in the ranks of popular others and adds to their social currency.

Having translated their 'material embodiment' into 'material presence' and established the scripts for digital dissemination, the social currency that bloggers generate and possess seems to circulate across multiple interfaces, geographies, images, peoples, and values. As an overview of this calculated process, the following section traces the routes in which social currency may circulate within and outside of the local commercial blogosphere.

4 Circulating Social Currency

Commercial bloggers' social currency may circulate in five primary routes which address the type of interface, the geography, the image marketed, the people involved, and the value of social currency per se.

First, by taking photographs, writing posts and publishing these onto their blogs and social media feeds, commercial bloggers are transforming their 'material embodiment' in a physical interface into 'material presence' in a digital interface. This transforms their emblems of conspicuous consumption into byte/bite-sized consumable visuals that are easily disseminated digitally. Social currency thus circulates from the physical to the digital.

Second, by tagging and hashtagging their posts, commercial bloggers increase the searchability of their content, thus reaching out to a more extensive audience. Digitally disseminating their 'material presence' on the web also enables their posts to achieve a more global reach than the physical transmission or broadcast of 'material embodiment'. Social currency thus circulates from the local to the global.

Third, in seamlessly incorporating products and services into highly personalised advertorials, commercial bloggers shift readers' consumption focus away from the product towards the bloggers' personalities. This is only effective if commercial bloggers continually produce personal, non-commercial posts in order to capture and sustain their readers. By presenting their lifestyles or personas as vicariously attainable via the products and services marketed, readers are purportedly given the chance to upgrade their social standing via the acquisition of such 'status-signaling objects' (Mazzaocco et al. 2012). Hence, using commercial bloggers and advertorials frame the marketing more insidiously, and plays down the commerciality of advertisements. Social currency thus circulates from product to person.

Fourth, cliques and alliances place individual bloggers in networks and collectives that allow them to gain exposure when seen and tagged on each other's social media feeds. Hashtagging and situating oneself into the scene also allows less renowned bloggers to tap into the social currency and hype of the more 'hyped' or popular and exposed ones. Social

currency thus circulates from person to peer.

Lastly, by packaging their personal taste and physical experiences into vicariously consumable units that incite desire and envy, the advertorials bloggers publish translates their social currency into monetary earnings. In a literal sense, most of these bloggers are being rewarded in cash for their good looks, expensive taste, and exclusive lifestyles which plays out cyclically – the higher a blogger's social currency, the higher the price they can command from advertisers; the more earnings a blogger rakes in, the more exclusive and desirable their 'material embodiment', and thus 'material presence' can be. Social currency thus circulates between social value and economic value.

These five modes of circulation reveal the interwoven links within the commercial blog industry that aim to increase a blogger's social currency, thus vying for a greater command of a mass audience's attention.

5 Conclusion

The commercial blog industry is an exceedingly lucrative online-based trade in Singapore, trading on women's social currency or virtual world reputation. Bloggers, though young and maneuvering the industry through trial and error and by emulating their successful predecessors, are constantly developing new methods of engaging and expanding their readership to gain a mass following. Living in a generally affluent country with a strong consumerist culture (Chua 2003), bloggers appear astute in the management of their 'material embodiment' and strive to disseminate their taste and lifestyle choices as emblems of conspicuous consumption in units of 'material presence'. By stimulating desire, envy, and emulation, these micro-celebrities (Powell 2009) promise audiences a taste of their lifestyle or persona via vicarious consumption. On the whole, these networks also uncover routes in which social currency circulates across interfaces, geographies, images, persons, and values. As a relatively new industry – commercial blogging only took off in Singapore in the mid to late 2000s – bloggers are already facing stiff competition and rapid saturation despite professional institutions set up to manage these networks as a testament of their

effectiveness. As the trade matures, social currency may evolve beyond a digital mass audience and repository of taste, and circulate on other emerging routes.

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