

Roundtable:


The future of culture in more-than-human worlds of being

Editor's note:

The roundtable published in CSJ volume 14 generated significant interest. Consequently, we have decided to extend the discussion in a special section of CSJ volume 15.

The Matrix of Authenticity in Influencer Cultures

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Abstract: This brief retrospect on the matrix of authenticity in Influencer cultures considers the 'What', the 'How', and the 'So What' of being authentic online. Firstly, it traces the changing parameters of what constitutes Influencer authenticity over almost two decades, looking at 'the real', 'the template', and 'the juxtaposition'. Secondly, it queries the qualities used to benchmark and assess authenticity performance as 'ordinariness and intimacy', 'opinion leadership and community building', and 'self-branding techniques'. Thirdly, it contemplates the enduring significance of authenticity fault lines, where the elements of visual, embodied, and communicative performance are constantly remade and challenged across the fast-changing eras of the industry including 'professionalization', 'monetization', 'platformization', 'post-humanism'. Drawing from longitudinal traditional and digital ethnography rooted in anthropological epistemology, this piece offers ways of thinking about what we really mean when we talk about 'authenticity' and 'Influencer cultures' today.



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Influencers and 'Authenticity'

I often say that the beauty of longitudinal and comparative ethnographic fieldwork across multiple fieldsites is that one is able to answer the same research questions in multiple, varied, and even contradicting ways. I also often say that the magic of being an anthropologist invested in prolonged studies of dedicated fieldsites is that one is able to scientifically explain (away) the contradictions by weaving between power dynamics across standpoints, growing in personal maturity and gaining introspection, and attentively archiving in-situ evidence of volatile temporalities and temperaments. And so, instead of simply asking 'What does something mean?', we can pivot to the more nuanced questions of 'How have the meanings changed?', 'Who gets to assign meanings at different points in time?', 'Do the meanings even matter?', 'To whom do the meanings matter?'

I had two recent opportunities to import such a questioning stance when producing retrospectives of some of my scholarship. In 2021, my article 'From "networked publics" to "refracted publics": A companion framework for researching "below the radar" studies' provided an allowance to review how we have been shifting the ways our research questions isolate specific frames and units of analysis in our study of Influencers. For instance, shifting from studies of 'Influencer cultures as a job description and culture of practice' to 'Influencer cultures as a concept and role' to 'Influencer cultures as an amplification platform' (Abidin 2021a: 2).

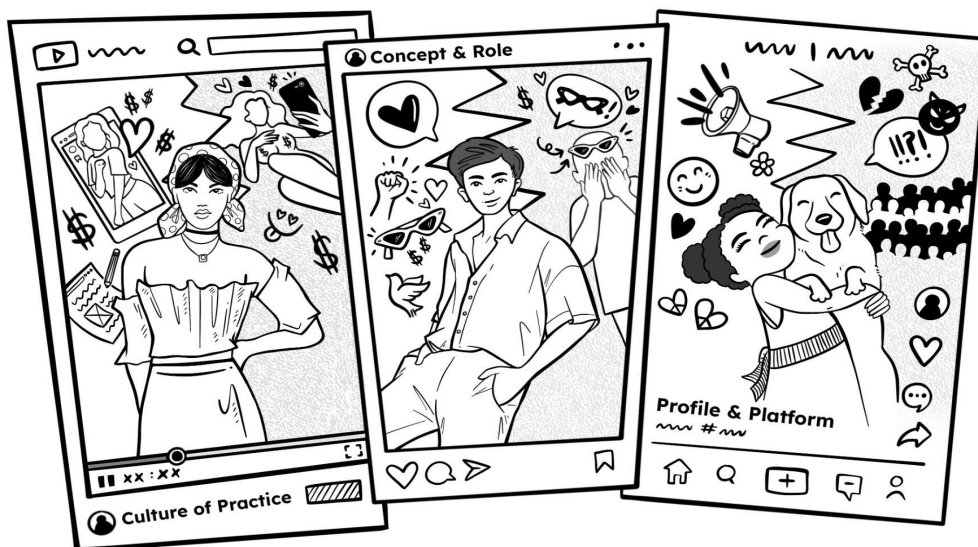


Figure 1: Progression of research questions, focusing on Influencers as a 'Culture of Practice', to a 'Concept & Role', to a 'Profile & platform'. Original sketchwork commissioned by and copyrighted to Crystal Abidin, produced by Ardine Keyla.

In 2022, my essay 'What I Talk About When I Talk About Authenticity: An Auto-bibliographic inquiry' accommodated space to consider how my body of work – spanning mid-2000s blogshop cultures in Southeast Asia, to early-2010s Influencer cultures in the Asia Pacific, to mid-2010s Influencer industries in the Nordic, to early-2020s Influencer economies in East Asia – has honed fine distinctions as to what we really mean when we talk about 'authenticity' and Influencer cultures. In it, I provided some brief thoughts on 'the what of authenticity', 'the how of authenticity', and 'the so what of authenticity' (Abidin 2022a: 210).

Communication scholar Emily Hund's 2023 book *The influencer industry: The quest for authenticity on social media* offered a different cross-cut of Influencer history, focusing specifically on tracing the 'industrializing' of authenticity in the American Influencer economy (Hund 2023: 33). In it, she offers that 'as their industrial definition of authenticity shifted along with the needs of marketers, so too did the tools we use to communicate and the social norms and values that animated them' (Hund 2023: 6).

Hund posits that the 'influencer industry's core business is continually reassessing, redefining, and revaluing authenticity' (Hund 2023: 13), and walks readers through the process of how meanings of 'authenticity' have been shaped and reshaped by the advertising industry, alongside brands and corporations, and some rhetoric by Influencers. This essay focuses on how Influencers themselves reify meanings attached to 'authenticity' in their craft.

In May 2023 at the International Communication Association Conference in Toronto, I was grateful to be part of a roundtable 'Keeping it Real: Contested meanings of authenticity on social media' (Malholtra et al. 2023) in which I was able to further my thoughts on the longitudinal evolution of how Influencers talk about authenticity. And now, I am honoured by the invitation from the Cultural Science Journal to put these thoughts on paper, producing a brief retrospect on the matrix of authenticity in Influencer cultures: The 'What', the 'How', and the 'So What'.

The 'What' of Authenticity

THE 'WHAT' OF AUTHENTICITY'



Figure 2: The 'What' of Authenticity in the Influencer industry, comprising the 'Real', the 'Template', and the 'Juxtaposition'. Original sketchwork commissioned by and copyrighted to Crystal Abidin, produced by Ardine Keyla.

The 'What' of Influencer authenticity has focused on three elements. Firstly, the real. Questions of this trajectory consider whether Influencers and their self-presentations are literally real or not, thus often requiring evaluative comparisons between online/offline versions of the person(a). Such

studies are challenging to conduct in media studies, unless triangulated against primary data from firsthand observation or interdisciplinary methods like anthropological participant observation. The earliest iteration of Influencer and creator culture theory can be traced back to 'microcelebrity', in which media studies scholar Theresa Senft (2008) studied American camgirls on livestreams to offer that ordinary people use internet platforms and technologies to establish celebrity among niche groups of followers, and by branding themselves as 'authentic' via raw and transparent displays of themselves. Further scholarship on microcelebrity, such as communication scholar Alice Marwick's study on Silicon Valley entrepreneurs who use social media to self-brand and promote to potential investors, reiterate that microcelebrity performance involves the curation of online persona that 'feels authentic' to users (Marwick 2013: 114).

Subsequent studies of how Influencers utilize microcelebrity techniques to become professional, careerist internet celebrities begin to tease out how 'authenticity' can be differentiated from other proximate qualities. For instance, my own early ethnographies of blogshops, commercial bloggers, and Influencers in Singapore offered a five-prong framework of 'relatability', comprising the elements of 'authenticity' as 'how genuine an Influencer's actual lifestyle and sentiment is', as opposed to their 'intimacy' or 'how familiar and close followers feel to an Influencer'; 'accessibility' or 'how easy it is to approach an Influencer in digital and physical spaces'; 'believability' or 'how convincing and realistic an Influencer's depicted lifestyle and sentiment is'; and 'emulatability' or 'how easy it is for followers to model themselves after an Influencer's lifestyle' (Abidin 2015). In other words, for many Influencers, authenticity literally signifies the real, unmediated, offline self (Frowijn et al. 2022).

However, there are some minor concessions with some light augmentation of Influencer selfies (Abidin 2016), where the image-enhancing features of photo-editing apps and platforms are a norm, as long as they are used in good faith. This is unlike the belief that any use of artifice makes for 'inauthentic selfies' (Lobinger & Brantner 2015). In contrast, Influencers have been exposed for over-editing or over-enhancing their online photographs beyond recognition, violating the shared community values that while some light touching up is expected and embraced, and anything more should be disclosed in the captions. This can be conducted in variety of tonal discourses, whether sincerely ('thanks to a good camera angle'), in jest ('the filters saved me!'), or indicated through platform features ('filters used' flare on the top left of Instagram Stories). Barring these disclosures, Influencers risk being exposed by fellow others for violating 'the real' of authenticity (Abidin 2020a: 38).

Secondly, the template. Perspectives in this trajectory offer that authenticity is scripted, including displays of a messy background, crying in front of camera, or unkempt hair, to give the impression of not being staged, of coming 'as you are'. Early Influencers have long established these as the 'behind-the-scenes' genre of contents (Abidin 2016), taking effort to include snippets of dressing up scenes, camera set-up scenes, and casual mirror selfies in the midst of a professional fashion magazine editorial shoot. The pervasiveness of Influencer authenticity scripts is so pervasive that they have fostered memetic scripts and template discourses for how to publicly grieve on the internet, whether for personal loss or mass tragedies, such as the '#ThoughtsAndPrayers' genre of aestheticized grief sharing on Instagram (Abidin 2022b). This highly performative nature of authenticity has mutated with so much cynicism that the sincerity of grief-sharing is often treated with skepticism, questioned for its authenticity and relevance (Abidin 2018a). This is a consequence of Influencers commodifying all aspects of their personal lives, down to the previously sacred terrain of mourning and grief tributes (Abidin 2022b).

As such, while once upon a time, the staging of 'leaked' sex tapes as 'sex bait' was an effective strategy to shock and lure in viewers for promotional agenda such as advertising condom brands

(Abidin 2017a: 498-500), the barometers of shocking disclosure as authenticity have shifted so quickly over time that disclosure needs to be increasingly dramatized to continue attracting attention and value. In other words, authenticity involves calculating status and position within online communities, in order to ascertain the socially appropriate behaviours abiding by unspoken rules (Heřmanová 2022), or conversely, knowing which unspoken rules to flaunt to challenge the boundaries of authenticity.

To explicate, in their study of 'coming out' vlogs by gay and lesbian YouTubers, media studies scholar Michael Lovelock (2017: 87) offers that the discourse is fostered by 'the specific tropes, conventions and commercial rationale of YouTube fame itself', where the 'authentic self' (2017: 88) is tied to a 'regime of entrepreneurialism', 'self-branding', and 'commodification'. However, this only tends to apply to Influencer genres that rely more on lifestyle contents of self-disclosure, over-sharing, and the like. Other genres on YouTube like gaming and beauty may have their craft and strategy 'evaluated by followers less on any authenticity disclosure and more on the excellence and professionalism of their content' (Abidin 2020b: 220).

Thirdly, the juxtaposition. Recent evolutions of Influencers' authenticity performance have plainly been about the skill of Influencers in showing distinction and difference, to reveal a pipeline between the 'front stage' and 'back stage', a la Goffman (1956). This fosters in audiences the feeling of being 'let into a secret', and thus juxtapositional authenticity is when users are adept in moving between performances of distinct qualities (Wang et al. 2022). Sociologists have observed 'the increasing ways in which our identities online are bound up in markers of the offline' (Dyer & Abidin 2022: 179), and this is marked by several milestones in platform developments. One of the most significant of these was Instagram's formalization of the vernacular of Finstagram.

In August 2017, users who logged onto Instagram were greeted with an in-app pop up that read: 'Share a Different Side of Yourself. Create a private account to share photos and videos with a close group of followers' (Kicher 2017). Instagram users had already long been adept at using multiple accounts, but this previously required the cumbersome action of physically logging in and out of each account, including re-entering usernames and passwords. The August 2017 update now provided users with integrated access, enabling a one-tap button to switch between multiple Instagram accounts. Curiously, this development 'contradicts its parent company Facebook's single account policy and real name policy' (Abidin 2017a), especially as founder Mark Zuckerberg was famously quoted in years prior for saying that '.. having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity' (Mark Zukerberg, in Zimmer 2010). However, this was simply another reflection of the mass impact of Influencers, who were experts in 'construct[ing] continuums of privacy by segregating their audiences', in exercising 'the freedom to curate several digital personae without the need for brand coherence', and in enacting resistance as a 'backlash against the picture-perfect pristine ecology of Instagram normativity, undoubtedly popularized by social media Influencers' (Abidin 2017a).

The 'How' of Authenticity



Figure 3: The 'How' of Authenticity in the Influencer industry, comprising the 'Ordinariness and intimacy', 'Opinion leadership and community-building', and 'Self-branding and uniqueness'. Original sketchwork commissioned by and copyrighted to Crystal Abidin, produced by Ardine Keyla.

In the 'How' of authenticity, we look at the process of how Influencers construct various enactments of authenticity. Firstly, authenticity can be conveyed through ordinariness and intimacy. In its simplest iteration, this takes us back to early theories of microcelebrity (Senft 2008), where audiences were attracted to organic internet celebrities especially because they appeared to be 'just like them'. In the vein of cultural studies scholar Graeme Turner's (2014: 92-93) offer of the 'demotic turn', media and digital technology have enhanced the 'explosion of the ordinary', facilitating public displays of increasingly ordinary snippets of daily life. Influencers on social media have accelerated these displays through their savvy appropriation of social media affordances.

Secondly, authenticity can be cultivated through opinion leadership and community building. Here, we consider the example of teachers who have used microcelebrity techniques to cultivate feelings of authenticity and to maintain online communities among groups of students (Barber 2014). On platforms like TikTok, such teachers practice authenticity techniques like Influencers do, with students responding that they prefer 'TeachTokers' who share 'contents that connect home, school, and social life' as it gives the impression of 'empathy and authenticity' (Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin 2023: 2). This also comprises 'small talk, jokes, and experiences outside of school' (2023: 6) to humanize the teacher outside of the school setting, and 'storytelling and experiences related to their career' (2023: 8) for students to better understand their teachers as three-dimensional figures.

Thirdly, authenticity can be fostered via specific self-branding techniques to enhance one's uniqueness, as a marketing strategy. Scholarship from business has highlighted how Influencers labour over authenticity as a self-branding strategy (Gurrieri et al. 2023) primarily to 'drive digital

engagement' (Chen et al. 2023), influence 'purchase decisions' (Djafarova & Rushworth 2017), and cultivate effective 'endorsements in strategic communication' (Pöyry et al. 2019). The body of work highlights also that Influencers and cognizant of the tensions between authenticity and monetization, such as processes of manufacturing authenticity (Gannon & Prothero 2016) and management of 'brand encroachment' (Gurrieri et al. 2023: 915) when authenticity is 'under threat' (Audrezet et al. 2020).

The 'So What' of Authenticity

Beyond the 'What' and the 'How' of Influencer authenticity, we can also consider the implications of authenticity evolutions across different generations of time. As audiences are increasingly familiar with scripts of authenticity, and Influencers are increasingly practiced with performances of authenticity, and evaluations of authenticity are becoming increasingly detailed, contemplating the 'So What' of authenticity allows us to consider how the faultlines have shifted, whether they still matter, how they matter, and what their potential impacts are. In this final section, we consider the 'So What' of authenticity against the eras of professionalization, monetization, platformization, and the post-human.

The Era of Professionalization

THE 'SO WHAT' OF AUTHENTICITY
1 The Era of Professionalization

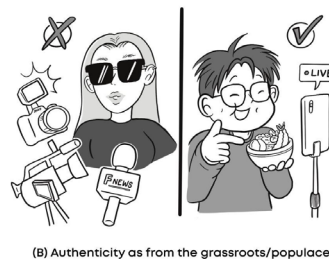
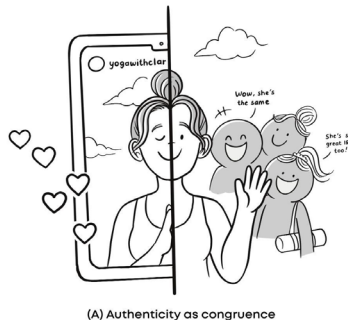


Figure 4: The 'So How' of Authenticity in the Influencer industry in the 'Era of Professionalization', comprising the 'Authenticity as congruence' and 'Authenticity as from the grassroots/populace'. Original sketchwork commissioned by and copyrighted to Crystal Abidin, produced by Ardine Keyla.

Notions of authenticity have evolved and matured immensely over the years. But in the 'Era of Professionalization', authenticity may still matter to audiences on two fronts. Firstly, for some audiences authenticity is about congruence: Do audiences' expectations of Influencers match what

they perceive? Is the construct of Influencer performance successful to audiences? Most of my research focuses on the Asia Pacific region, and in crowded urban cities across Southeast Asia, Influencers appear particularly aware of being watched not just while being 'online' but also 'offline', when being out in public places or while being 'on the job' while attending events. As such, Influencers take their 'role-play' in offline spaces seriously, to ensure that there is congruence to 'online representations of [their] persona', to 'produce a reality in which the online-offline persona of the [Influencer] appears fused, one-in-the same, and therefore authentic' (Abidin & Thompson 2012: 471).

Secondly, for some audiences, authenticity is about being from the grassroots or populace. As the Influencer industry is growing saturated and more professionalized, obvious rifts, fractures, and hierarchies intrude into the ecology. In differentiating the authenticity of the myriad of Influencers, audiences tend to assess if Influencers still pay homage to the traditional microcelebrity values of being ordinary, everyday, and accessible, in juxtaposition to the more polished versions of fellows of the craft.

The Era of Monetization



Figure 5: The 'So How' of Authenticity in the Influencer industry in the 'Era of Monetization, comprising the 'Mere disclosure of sponsorship', 'A personal authorship of the content', 'Transparent authorship not astroturfing', and 'Not sponsored'. Original sketchwork commissioned by and copyrighted to Crystal Abidin, produced by Ardine Keyla.

Although evolutions of authenticity performance and meaning-making have progressed quickly, in general Influencers still tend to avoid talking about money matters: Their rate cards, their investments, their income, and the details of financial exchange. In the 'Era of Monetization', authenticity is important to audiences and can be ascertained via four ways. Firstly, the mere disclosure of sponsorship gives the impression of authenticity, as Influencers are venturing into the uncomfortable territory of discussing a taboo subject. This was more the case in the earlier days of Influencer commerce, where astroturfing was still common, and before conventions of sponsorship disclosure were required and regulated by law. The voluntary disclosure of this information was thus viewed as an act of good faith on the part of the Influencers, which audiences held in high regard.

Secondly, the personal authorship of the content by Influencers themselves registers as being authentic to audiences, especially in the climate when it has become an industry norm for public relations (PR) teams to craft press releases or entire posts for Influencers to simply parrot. This facet of authenticity has become more valued each time another controversy breaks out. For instance, in my Singaporean fieldwork in the early-2010s, a group of Influencers were exposed for not disclosing that the tweets they posted expressing frustration with a specific telco company were in fact sponsored sentiments from PR scripts provided by an agency (Abidin & Ots 2016). These were posted over a period of time, before the Influencers segued to outrightly promoting the new services and products of a rival telco company (Abidin & Ots 2016), as an 'anti-advertising' campaign also known as 'Black PR'. In a second example, a Singaporean Influencer on Instagram committed a faux pas when the front text of one of her Instagram captions revealed a careless 'copy and pasted' instructions from a PR team, advising that her caption has been edited, vetted, and approved for posting (Abidin 2016: 14). Although the post was quickly deleted, edited, and reposted, the longtail of conversations that followed indicated that a new barometer for measuring Influencer authenticity was that Influencers had to personally – and if aided by a team, at least primarily control – the authorship of their work.

Thirdly, for many followers Influencer authenticity is when they are transparent about the struggles with authoring their contents rather than succumbing to astroturfing. The current climate of social media is proliferate with bot and click farms, with scholarship outlining the praxis of China's 'Fifty Cent Army' (Han 2015), Malaysia's 'Cyber-Troopers' (Johns & Cheong 2019), Russia's 'Internet Research Agency' (DiResta et al. 2019), and Singapore's 'Internet Brigade' (Tan 1010), among others. Influencers around the world have also been exposed for purchasing engagement metrics through artificial inflation of following counts, like counts, comment counts, and the like. Against this backdrop, Influencers who openly plead for followers to interact and engage with their contents – to 'stay a while', 'click a few buttons', 'leave a comment', 'please subscribe' and the like – and who also go through the pains of explaining how this human/analogous effort is directly important for their income, appeal to audiences who read authenticity into their sincerity.

Finally, in the 'Era of Monetization' where every aspect of life is up for commodification, many audiences ascertain that Influencer content is authentic simply because it is not sponsored. Some Influencers take the effort to emphasize that a piece of content is not sponsored to indicate that they treat a particular topic, issue, product, or service with more reverence, care, and respect, more so than anything else previously mentioned in their streams of content. In one case study, I noted how one Singaporean Influencer included in a non-sponsored Instagram post a reflexive preamble: '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' (Abidin 2016: 14-15). In another case study, we observed a Korean Influencer indicating in various videos that they will be featuring 'items that I purchase with my money', indicating that she is 'independent from sponsorships and [therefore underscoring] authenticity in their recommendations of products' (Lee & Abidin: 2021: 9). In light of the 'cynical perspectives of the commercial underpinnings of the influencer industry', there is now a 'proliferation of vernacular indicating degrees of authenticity and sincerity, such as "not sponsored", "spon con", "pro bono", and "genuine" posts' (Gurrieri et al. 2023: 914).

The Era of Platformization

THE 'SO WHAT' OF AUTHENTICITY 3 The Era of Platformization

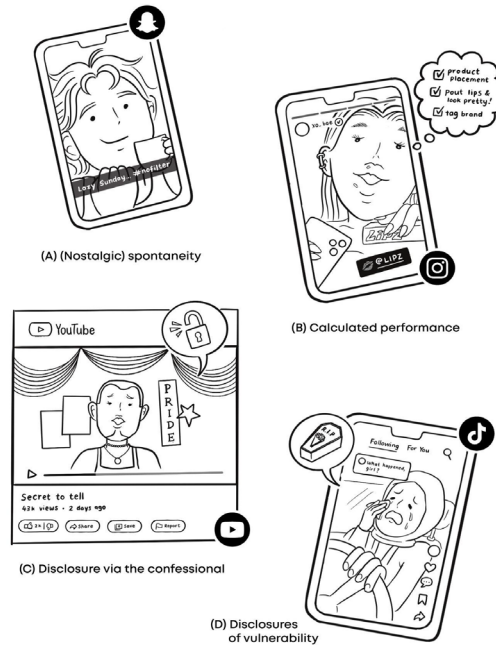


Figure 6: The 'So How' of Authenticity in the Influencer industry in the 'Era of Platformization, comprising the '(Nostalgic) spontaneity', 'Calculated performance', 'Disclosure via the confessional', an 'Disclosures of vulnerability'. Original sketchwork commissioned by and copyrighted to Crystal Abidin, produced by Ardine Keyla.

As evidenced by the example of Instagram's corporate institutionalization of Finstagram above, platforms are attuned to the quick progression of authenticity yardsticks in the Influencer industry. In this 'Era of Platformization', Influencer authenticity is still perceived in four main tropes. Firstly, Influencer authenticity is still (nostalgic) spontaneity, in the vein of traditional microcelebrity effects (Senft 2008). Such Influencers continue to craft 'unfiltered, unmediated, and uncurated' contents amidst the "'picture perfect" mold of Instagram' such as appearing 'barefaced, with a bedhead, and in pajamas' (Abidin 2018b). Newer iterations of 'authenticity memes' like Instagram's 'I woke up like this' are the 'Millennial pause' (where Millennials creators tend to start recording then take a beat or breath before beginning their speech, capturing a precious snippet of their brief backend preparations) or 'Gen Z shake' (where Gen Z creators tend to start recording and begin their speech while they are still in the midst of adjusting their phones on a stable surface, resulting in a very turbulent few seconds to indicate spontaneity) on TikTok or other short video platforms.

Secondly, Influencer authenticity is a calculated performance. In the vein of sociologists Erving Goffman's (1956) 'scheduling' and Dean MacCannell's (1973) 'staged authenticity', Influencers 'separate different audiences, so that different aspects of the performer's persona can be presented as required... [which] permits performers to obscure the "routine character" of their act and stress its apparent spontaneity' (Abidin 2018b). It has been ascertained that authenticity is a 'performance ecology and parasocial strategy with its own genre and self-presentation elements' (Abidin 2018b). In an earlier discussion of the 'What' of authenticity, we have considered how to do so, Influencers 'actively juxtapose this stripped-down version of themselves against the median and normative self-presentations of glamour, to continually create and assign value to new markers — faults and flaws,

failures and fiascos — to affirm the veracity of their truth-ness.’ (Abidin 2018b). To calibrate these performances of ‘contrived authenticity’, savvy Influencers ‘rel[y] on the performance ecology of appropriate platforms, affordances, tools, cultural vernacular, and social capital.’ (Abidin 2017b: 1).

Thirdly, Influencer authenticity can be distilled as disclosure via the genre of the confessional, spanning a variety of contents including conversations about depression, illness, breakup, financial hardship, mid-life crises, and the like. This route is especially appealing to ‘controversy-seeking Influencers’ who are adept in ‘commodifying their privacy to chase drama and controversy’ (Abidin 2020a: 31-32). In a range of early case studies of Influencer blogs, confessionals were rampant as sensational diary entries with titles like ‘Confessions of a teen’, where young Influencers would recount experiences of underaged sex (Abidin 2017a: 500-503), and ‘Tell-All Exposés’, where young Influencers reflect on betrayal and hurt as a result of broken relationships and friendships (Abidin 2020a: 38-39). Confessionals are also a popular genre among ‘YouTube drama creators’ (Christin & Lewis 2021), who produce waves of videos that focus on call-outs, exposés, commentaries, and responses, where each wave attempts to out-do each other with more exclusive gossip and more controversial opinion (Abidin 2021b) to exaggerate Influencer authenticity.

Finally, for many Influencers, the heart of authenticity is still the disclosure of vulnerability. However, in the ‘Era of Platformization’, disclosures of vulnerability – like crying on video – have to be appropriate to platform norms. I have previously noted case studies of Influencers having emotional breakdowns on their Instagram accounts, only to have followers ask if they are merely trying to ‘attract attention’ (Abidin 2020b: 78) given the history of their prior posts. Over time, Influencers found ways to segment and designate different platforms for different uses, such as returning to their old blogs where they feel ‘the most comfortable’ with the oldest readership in their careers, to housekeep their emotions in times of crises (Abidin 2020b: 77-79).

The Era of Post-Human

THE ‘SO WHAT’ OF AUTHENTICITY 4 The Era of Post-Human



Authenticity as being ‘of the human’

Figure 7: The ‘So How’ of Authenticity in the Influencer industry in the ‘Era of the Post-Human, comprising the ‘Authenticity as being ‘of the human’’. Original sketchwork commissioned by and copyrighted to Crystal Abidin, produced by Ardine Keyla.

We now live in the 'Era of the Post-Human', where artificial intelligent (AI) Influencers (Digital Business Lab 2023) and virtual Influencers (Berryman 2021) are flooding the Influencer landscape. In this age, the bar for Influencer authenticity has dropped to simply be of the human. While automation and algorithmic intervention is proliferating, audiences are becoming nostalgic for the analogue and organic curation, and Influencer authenticity has gone full cycle to return to the heart of mid-2000s microcelebrity culture of having a human connection.

In collaboration with Hong Kong-based Digital Business Lab – a social media company that specializes in social media management, data analytics, and digital marketing (Digital Business Lab 2022) – I once conducted market research on how AI Influencers were perceived and received in the Asia Pacific markets (Digital Business Lab 2023). Despite a keen awareness of their synthetic nature, different country markets expressed phenotypic and communicative preferences for AI Influencers who would best appeal to them.

The gender appearance of successful AI Influencers was more likely to match the cultural mores of social acceptability. For example, the Thai market appeared to embrace more gender fluidity in the construction of digital personas and AI Influencers, likely owing to the culture's long acceptance and embrace of 'third genders' like the Kathoey (Totman 2011); whereas the Vietnamese market demonstrated a preference for feminine digital personas, likely stemming from the high participation and prominent visibility of women entrepreneurs across business verticals (Gerrard et al. 2007).

Despite the ability to customize and creatively reimagine the hybrid cultural symbolism of AI Influencers, audiences appeared those whose facial features and skin tone closely represented their own ethnic and cultural backgrounds. For example, the multi-ethnic society of Malaysia – which comprises Malay, Chinese, and Indian populations – saw AI Influencers who reflected this multiracialism be more memorable and successful in the market, rather than White-presenting or 'raceless' figures. Likewise, the Philippines market saw some backlash towards their local virtual Influencer Bernilla for being too racially ambiguous and 'not looking Filipino enough' (Wong 2023).

Various Southeast Asian markets also displayed preferences for AI Influencers to use their local languages: In Indonesia, AI Influencers generally used Bahasa Indonesia but given the over 800 languages spoken across the islands, some companies are branding their AI Influencers to be attuned to highly local nuances to enhance brand resonance and foster more meaningful engagement with potential consumers. The Philippines presents a similar conundrum with over 120 local languages, but as most of the population is bilingually proficient in Filipino/Tagalog as the national language and English as the official language, AI Influencers tend to toggle between the two.

Collectively, the regional preferences for AI Influencers to display likeness to humans through gender appearance, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and the use of local languages points to the longstanding association of Influencer authenticity with homophily – we relate more to Influencers who look and act and sound like us, we perceive them to be more relatable, we are more likely to be receptive to what they have to say, because they are likely to adopt understand our points of view. But there is also distinction within the Asia Pacific region more generally.

Japan has had a long fascination with the confluence of tradition and technology. Anthropomorphic characters, mascots, avatars, and the like have been used to humanize brands to attract fans, or enhance communication strategies to best convey important messages (Wood 2019). At the same time, the most popular genre of AI Influencers in the Japanese market appears to be VTubers, which are animated avatars whose likeness resemble anime and manga characters more so than the human form.

The Era of the Post-Human tells us that while the baseline preference is that audience generally prefer phenotypic homophily and find such AI Influencers to be more authentic, market and cultural

variation informs shifts in local perceptions, and expands the possibility of who and what can be accommodated within the matrix of Influencer authenticity, as traditional and technology continue to collide.

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