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SOMEWHERE BETWEEN HERE AND THERE: NEGOTIATING RESEARCHER VISIBILITY IN A DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE INFLUENCER INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

Despite our preparation for fieldwork, a majority of what ethnographers actually do in the field is based on 'gut-feeling', 'sensing', and 'whim'. This paper is a piece of reflexive ethnography detailing a series of minor but important methodological decisions pertaining to researcher visibility throughout fieldwork in a digital community of social media Influencers. It details one anthropologist's private negotiations during the foray into the Influencer industry by situating the self along various spectrums of conspicuousness. These confessional anecdotes of 'behind the scenes' labour can be taken as suggestions on how to negotiate one's positionalities during ethnographic encounters between and betwixt physical and digital fieldsites. I detail these through six experiences from the field – as the esteemed guest, the exotic inbetweener, the willing apprentice, the trophy acquaintance, the concealed consultant, and the passing confidante – in which I negotiate being 'seen', being on 'show', and 'seeing' from somewhere between here and there.

Keywords: digital ethnography; visibility; influencers; microcelebrity; fieldwork

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1   INTRODUCTION

At the very beginning of my PhD research into internet celebrity in Singapore in 2011, I had expected that sending out officious invitation emails with the University letterhead (in colour, no less), my supervisor's signature and contact details (a clearly non-Singaporean, foreign-sounding name with the status-elevating designation, 'Professor'), and documentation of my ethics clearance (in bureaucratic legalese peppered with strings of numbers) would signpost my legitimacy as an academic researcher. After all, I did as I was told after spending weeks being instructed at workshops on research methodologies and ethics; surely this would be the golden ticket for access into the field. These would-be informants were ordinary internet users who had accumulated such sizable followings that they could monetise their viewership by embedding sponsored advertorials into the narratives of their social media updates. As 'microcelebrities' (Senft 2008) who had become full-fledged 'Influencers' (Abidin 2015), they of all people appreciate the value of self-posturing via identity markers as status symbols, having done so with romantic relationships (Abidin 2016b) and even 'girl talk' (Abidin 2015). Further, Singapore was a country that prized the value of higher education (Mok 2000) and especially one that comprised some international certification as a mark of legitimacy (Olds 2007). But I could not have been more wrong. My initial posturing had very little currency among the prospective informants, for what we had each valued as status symbols were different. For instance, during a return visit to some of my informants in 2017, I learnt that they were more thrilled by the fact that a blogpost of mine was cited by the international social news website Buzzfeed, than by the fact that I had published dozens of scholarly articles on their life stories in the last six years. Identifying the status symbols – or the visual, discursive, and behavioural icons that could represent my 'status sets' (Merton 1972) – that lubricated my interactions with my informants, either through tools of proximity or distancing, became a constant exercise as the yardsticks fluctuated with the times.

To groom the trust and acceptance of my informants as I spent prolonged periods in their presence, it was crucial that I enacted my visibility – via both physical interactions and digital traces – as an ethnographer who was curious, sincere, and invested in their work. In positioning ourselves in relation to our informants, anthropologists often adopt the dichotomic framework of 'insider/outsider' (Merton 1972) or 'emic/etic' to find our footing. In his cornerstone work on the sociology of knowledge, Robert K. Merton posited that 'as a matter of epistemological principle… particular groups in each moment of history have *monopolistic access* to particular kinds of knowledge… some groups have *privileged access,* with other groups also being able to acquire that knowledge for themselves but at greater risk and cost' (Merton 1972, p. 11). Anthropologists often toe the line between being 'insiders' with empathetic knowledge and intimate access to their community, and 'outsiders' with more neutrality and a natural curiosity to critically examine cultural repertoire that is otherwise overlooked or presumed to be

mundane. Yet, these demarcations are not always so cleanly distinguished as 'there is a good bit of slippage and fluidity between these two states' (Merriam et al. 2001, p. 405); further, ethnographic tales from the field usually reveal tender negotiations betwixt and between (Ergun and Erdemir 2010, Innes 2009, Kerstetter 2012, Mercer 2007, Merriam et al. 2001, Shahbazi 2004). In my fieldwork among these highly visible internet-based celebrities, navigating the 'insider' and 'outsider' scapes necessitated the continuous reinscribing of my body visually, discursively, emotively, and symbolically as I felt – literally and figuratively – my way around. In other words, alongside my constant 'seeing' and witnessing of the scene, it was also important for me to manage my decorum, and specifically how intensely each part of my intersectional identity should be 'seen' or audience.

Early on in my fieldwork, I coped with such tensions by imagining these visibility labours and literacies as 'spectrums of conspicuousness' that simultaneously operate in parallel. In this setting, each aspect of a researcher's intersectional identity corresponds to a dial scale. In my case, my (mixed) race, gender, age, class, education background, vocation, migrant status, and marital status were some of the demographic markers that stood out to my informants and were dialed on a scale, in order to personalise a specific version of my self-identity and persona for different audiences (Figures 1 & 2). Like the Influencers who used social media prolifically for their commerce, I too used social media to self-brand my academic work, and my digital personae, technology competence, and social media currency became important elements to consider. The performance of each of these elements operates in a gradient from low visibility to high visibility. By mixing and matching and managing simultaneous dials, I could tailor make versions of myself with small variants in identity inscriptions to be flexible and adaptable, rather than be forced into a rigid master status. For instance, I could exaggerate my gender while obscuring my race, or emphasise my generational competence with social media use while only hinting at my vocational status. Much like the role of an audio mixer or soundboard for a band of instruments, 'spectrums of conspicuousness' is the visual culmination of one's public persona as a result of conscientiously mobilising and performing selective aspects of one's identity inscriptions (see Figures 1 & 2). As a research strategy, playing with spectrums of conspicuousness enables researchers to present ourselves genuinely, while selectively dialing up or down facets of our identity that could facilitate or parlay our entry into the field, and lubricate our interactions with informants. This focus on mixing and remixing a cocktail of externally visible and performable attributes and 'conspicuousness' is unlike Goffman's (1956) 'facework' that is focused on a dichotomous presentability, in which actors construct front and backstages in order for some persona labour to be hidden from an audience; and unlike Hochschild's (1983) 'emotional labour' that is focused on an actor's internal negotiations, in which corporeal performances for an audience guide and are guided by one's actual felt emotions.

While I generally felt welcome by my informants, I had to engage in varying extents of 'visibility labour' (Abidin 2016a) among these young women whose craft

was contingent upon their own presence on social media in the public eye. Visibility labour is 'the work enacted to flexibly demonstrate gradients of self-conspicuousness' (Abidin 2016a, p. 90) in order to win favour among your audience. In other words, despite the attention economy (Goldhaber 1997) of social media, here actors are not aiming for maximum visibility. In the context of my fieldwork, the nuance was in negotiating what visibility literacies I had, how much visibility currency I held, when to display and conceal visibility, and what types of visibility were appropriate for specific contexts. For starters, displaying an overt visibility (such as dressing too similarly to my informants or being too outspoken at social gatherings) might be misconstrued as a threatening aspiration to emulate my informants' microcelebrity, or that I was competing with them for attention or 'stealing their thunder'; I would risk a festering sense of threat and distrust towards myself within our homosocial settings. Yet, being under visible (such as underdressing for exclusive events or not participating in social media conversations) might also be read as a general disinterest in the craft of my informants, or worst still, that my apparent inability to acquire the appropriate insider literacies would permanently mark me as an outlier who would never qualify to inhabit their life worlds. Like the Goldilocks of ethnographers (Miller 2016), I had to be visible towards and among my informants, but not too little and not too much. In navigating the spectrums of conspicuousness, I had to glide along the gradient of low to high visibilities, and hop between the spectrums corresponding to specific facets of my intersectional identity (Figures 1 & 2).
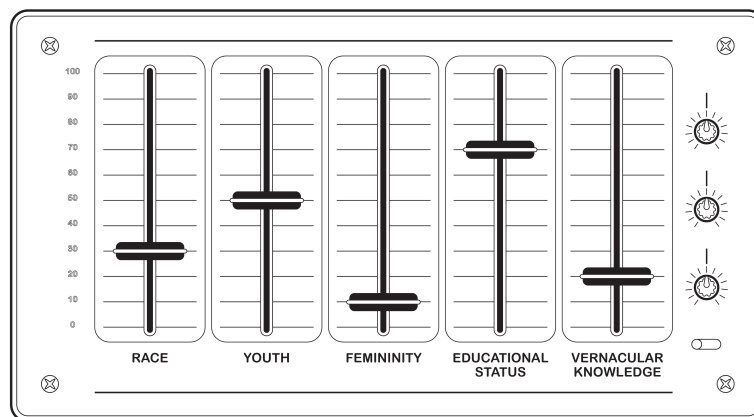

Figure 1: Example of one permutation of low to high visibilities for a researcher's performative intersectional identity.
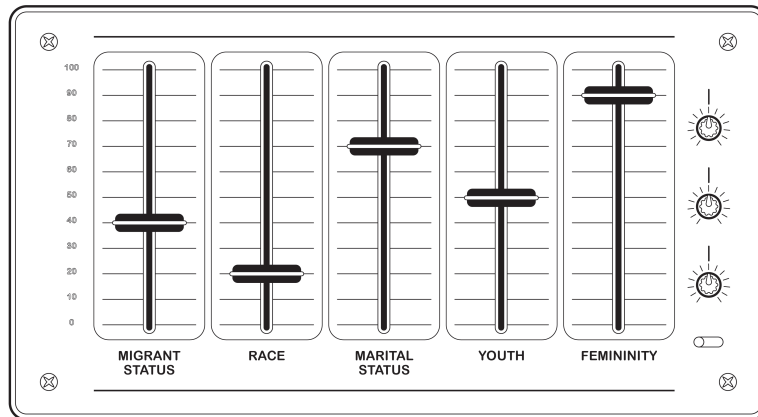
Figure 2: Example of another permutation of low to high visibilities for a researcher's performative intersectional identity.

This paper is a piece of reflexive ethnography detailing a series of minor but important methodological decisions pertaining to researcher visibility throughout fieldwork in a digital community of social media Influencers. Specifically, I detail how a series of seemingly minor but eventually critical decisions during fieldwork came to shape the presentation of my visibility, literacies, and trustworthiness to informants by negotiating placement along various spectrums of conspicuousness. These involved adopting tropic roles including: The esteemed guest, the exotic inbetweener, the willing apprentice, the trophy acquaintance, the concealed consultant, and the passing confidante. I hope that these confessional anecdotes of 'behind the scenes' labour can be taken as suggestions on how to negotiate positionalities during ethnographic encounters between and betwixt physical and digital fieldsites, embodiment, interactions, and intimacies.

2   THE ESTEEMED GUEST

My initial visits to 25-year-old Jane's office were cordial but distant. Like many of the Influencers I was studying, Jane was also an owner of a 'blogshop', a predecessor economy to the Influencer industry in Singapore, and a vernacular form of online commerce in which these women modelled and sold used, imported, or manufactured clothing on blog platforms (Abidin & Thompson 2012). Besides working with Influencers, I also assisted at their blogshops in various roles. One such experience involved me visiting a few blogshop warehouse-cum-offices every week to assist blogshop owners and Influencers with their operations.

Jane had instructed me to devise branding strategies and advertising campaigns for her business; we would have long chats about vision planning for her business before I was left on my own to draw up drafts on Jane's laptop. Often, these conversations took place on a comfortable couch while three other women were spread out on the floor between boxes and stacks of folded clothes in plastic

wrappers, profusely packaging parcels to be posted to their customers. When I had completed my task, I usually volunteered to help with the parcels since the blogshop regularly received a high volume of orders and the women were rushing to get to the post office by the close of business hours. In the first two weeks, Jane would politely turn down my offer, explaining in a pastiche of English and Mandarin that 'someone who is doing a PhD' like myself was more suited to *yòng nǎo* (trans. 'use my brain', or to do intellectual work) than to perform *shǒu gōng* (trans. 'handiwork', or to do manual labour). She was worried that the 'manual labour' they needed help with was beneath me: 'Are you sure? I feel like it's such a waste… you've studied for so long and now you're packing parcels, doing like "no brain" work.' It took some gentle persuasion before Jane accepted that I was sincere about experiencing her daily work life 'as is', and she eventually released the imagined hierarchy of 'intellectual work' and 'manual work' that she had upheld out of courtesy towards me.

In a similar instance, another 25-year-old blogshop owner with whom I was working was concerned for my face work and reputation (Goffman 2003) as a researcher. A group of eight of us, five young women and three young men, had accompanied Christine and her business partner to the Central Business District (CBD) area to hand out flyers for her blogshop business. It was a couple of weeks to the Lunar New Year and her flyers had discount codes to entice prospective customers to make an online purchase. Christine brought along eight brightly coloured cotton t-shirts (four each in neon orange and lime green respectively) for the 'helpers' to wear as a uniform of sorts while we walked around the CBD. She handed out the orange t-shirts to the four young female helpers, and gave me and the young male helpers the green ones. Those in orange were to hand out flyers at the busiest pedestrian square of the CBD, while those in green were stationed at a smaller square a distance away with much lower human traffic. I had presumed the four young women had known each other before this and did not question Christine's arrangement. As Christine and I were crossing the road to the smaller square while the three young men were trailing behind, she hinted that she was experiencing vicarious embarrassment on my behalf: 'Crystal, the green is not as eye-catching as the orange yah, so I thought you will prefer green… [this square] also has fewer people so maybe you won't meet people you know.' Christine had pre-empted that I would be averse to the 'dirty work' of her business, and took preventive measures to mediate my face work (Goffman 2003) by reducing my visibility as a flyer distributor in public. I expressed my gratitude for her care, but also asserted that I did not perceive or experience the 'groundwork' with stigma.

For some ethnographers (Ergun and Erdemir 2010, p. 30), being granted 'the status of a guest' accorded them care from their informants that would not otherwise have been extended to others of the same demographic. In my fieldwork among women who shared the same nationality and age cohort as I did, I was initially deemed a 'guest' because my informants demarcated my work as a researcher as 'intellectual labour' and the groundwork they were performing as 'manual labour'.

Where I had assumed that my cultural familiarity and similar age would endear me to my informants, they instead read my educational background and vocation as a class marker that distinguished us, and thus showered me with more respect than I had anticipated. Further still, this care and respect was gifted because informants like Christine wanted to protect and maintain my visibility and reputation as an academic in public spaces. Sociologist Katherine Irwin (2006) wrote a beautifully gripping account of how a key informant of hers – whom she had dated, married, and later divorced – expended labour and effort to help maintain her research project, to the extent of putting off their breakup so that she could continue with her fieldwork. To a lesser degree, Jane and Christine's consideration of my supposed 'status' meant that they momentarily valued my research work above the personal interest of their businesses – I was after all hired as an in-house 'intern' to assist with their company, but they discounted and reduced my duties and responsibilities to maintain my 'face'. Rather than interpreting their goodwill as mere kindness, I saw early on that these were genuine peers of mine (all of us were born in the same year) who sincerely wanted me to do well in my work. I often wondered if I would ever be able to reciprocate this care, and this early experience motivated me to cultivate sincere relationships throughout fieldwork as much as possible.

It was pertinent that I quickly shed this impression of an esteemed guest and give them the confidence that I did not mind 'being seen' doing 'dirty work', even when in public. I learnt that to the Influencers with whom I was working, this was seen as a significant concession on my part because so much of the actual labour behind their craft is consistently obscured by the apparent glitz and glamour carefully orchestrated, curated, and publicised on their social media feeds, and that such aspirational labour was largely invisible (Duffy 2017). As their new acquaintance, I needed to signpost my acknowledgement of this behind-the-scenes labour, and my willingness to experience it alongside my informants.

3   THE EXOTIC INBETWEENER

When I began fieldwork I did not see myself as an outsider because I believed that my informants and I shared many biographical experiences, but I soon realised that I was perceived as one nevertheless. Feeling 'exotic' was a consistent mode for me throughout fieldwork, which was equal parts bewildering and contentious, given that I had lived in Singapore for twenty years by the time I began fieldwork. I was in the same age cohort as my informants, had received the same public schooling that they did, and spoke the same creolised Singaporean English. As a young anthropologist, I thought I had ticked most of the boxes on the 'insider' card. Yet, in retrospect, I now see that it was my acceptance of the process of being exoticised, my positive response during these exchanges, and my later emphasis on the minor 'exotic' differences, that warmed my informants up to me on most occasions. These also proved to be important conversation starters as I was introduced to friends and friends of friends as part of snowball sampling.

For instance, I had permanently immigrated to Australia a couple of years prior to fieldwork, and was often asked about my experiences about having left Singapore. Different informants would query about this milestone in my personal life for aspirational knowledge towards their own potential moves or out of simple curiosity, but never in disdain or to question my patriotism; this was most likely because as young twenty-somethings during those years, immigration among our peers for education, work opportunities, or lifestyle choices was a common occurrence. We spoke about where our lives had diverged, despite us having undergone the same mainstream national education system. Given Singapore's notorious reputation of overwork culture (Saadan 2017), the women were also curious about the myths of my newfound 'Anglo-cised life', 'work-life balance', and 'quality of life', which made for easy conversation starters when they were introducing me to their social circles: 'This is Crystal. She lives in Australia! That's why her Mandarin is so lousy…'; 'She looks so relaxed right? It's cos the Aussies have good work-life balance…' – for the record, I thought my Mandarin was passable and my 'Australian' work-life balance a mere work-in-progress.

As fieldwork progressed, most of us had slowly but surely adapted to integrating 'work talk' with 'girl talk', and 'girl talk' often featured 'the boys'; there were informants who had same-sex partners but for the most part it was the heterosexual women who often initiated conversations about our romantic relationships, perhaps because public displays of love have been productive and even lucrative in the Influencer industry (Abidin 2016b). My informants grew increasingly curious about my living arrangements abroad, and I revealed that I had immigrated with my partner. We were living together and had been in a relationship for almost ten years when I first began fieldwork. I soon noticed that this 'fairy tale' romance easily gained traction and solicited much affection from the informants who asked about my 'lifestyle', not unlike the experience of anthropologist Anna Cristina Pertierra who fell in love and got married during fieldwork in Cuba, then soon learnt that "acquiring a husband was a useful fieldwork strategy (2007)". After all, in my case it was rare for unmarried couples to be able to move in together because of the extremely expensive rental market in Singapore and because the heavily subsidised public housing was only available to married couples or singles above the age of 35. And thus I channelled these personal experiences into conversational 'props' (Goffman 1956) during fieldwork.

I was also learning that unabashedly displaying my fringed femininity and engaging in homosocial intimacy accumulated more currency for me than academic posturing. In other words, the spectrum of 'girl sociality' often had more legitimacy than that of a 'career woman'. Although I was primarily researching an ecology of Influencers who predominantly peddled their craft on the internet, physical corporeal inscriptions still mattered and gatekept access and sociality. Like anthropologist Mohammad Shahbazi who had returned to her home country Iran from the US to conduct research, having lived abroad and my higher educational status 'interrupted the growth of my social circles' (2004, p. 599) in my field. I did

not set out to emphasise my demographic distinction, but I found myself following in the footsteps of many anthropologists who 'not only can present themselves as different but can use the difference as a way of stimulating discussion' (Abu-Lughod 1985, p. 18).

An ethnographer's identity shifts in flux and flows over time, depending on the place and time of research, one's demographic and cultural affiliations (Narayan 1993), and the quirks of individual informants (Mercer 2007). In order to overcome this 'gap of the exotic', in the metanarrative of hyper-reflexivity, I had to become my fieldwork, by exoticising the mundane and brandishing the ordinary – in other words, I had to take after my informants by commodifying my everyday life. This entailed cultivating an active willingness to divulge personal stories of my own, invest in the interests of my informants, and eventually trading life experiences as equals. Girl sociality necessitated an undercurrent of selective disclosure, during which secrets freely given and closely guarded formed a baseline of risk and trust within my homosocial circles.

It took me some time to acculturate myself into the intricate intimacies of exotica and the mundane. The demarcation between the exotic researcher and the familiar friend was not always clear, as my relationships with these Influencers instigated new affective ties over time. This is perhaps especially true for anthropologists for whom rapport and empathy with our informants shape our framing, understanding, and analysis of their life worlds (Glesne 1989). As I continue to research my field in more depth post-PhD, moving between Perth (where I live) and Singapore (where I conduct fieldwork), I regularly inhabit the role of the exotic inbetweener whenever the situation calls for it. Yet, this visibility labour has begun to feel less like work and more like variants of kinship as my informants have come to embrace me as the returning visitor with regular homecomings over the years.

4   THE WILLING APPRENTICE

While spending extended periods of time with young women who were perceived as role models and opinion leaders by hundreds of thousands of followers, I realised that much of the social currency I needed to access my field was tied to performing a very particular type of femininity. Growing up, I had only ever put on makeup twice in my life during choir competitions in primary school. But in my second week of fieldwork in Singapore, I begrudgingly acquired my first cosmetic products. I was catching up with three old friends and discussing my game plan for fieldwork, when they became convinced I would never 'pass' in the Influencer industry without any cosmetic skills and other associated 'girl literacies'. The next thing I knew, I was whisked into a pharmacy and accumulated a basket full of feminine face-care products: Concealer, sun block, facial toner, facial masks, and anti-blemish cream. Later that evening, I spent two agonising hours with my friends at an ice-cream parlour attempting to negotiate a horrifying device known as an 'eyelash curler': My

friends took turns trying to hold my head still by cupping my chin with one hand and tilting my forehead with another; another pair of hands stretched the skin around my eye socket while delicately bringing the eyelash curler towards my lashes. My fashionable friends were under the belief that learning to look as glamorous and stylish as my informants would earn me their favour. Yet, just like the *faux pas* of my initial officious email invitation, my friends could not have been more wrong. (PS: Amz, Auds, and Yins, thank you for our shopping adventure, even though I shortly misplaced every single cosmetic item I was cornered into purchasing!)

As fieldwork progressed, it became clear to me that my very lack of feminine 'beautifying' skills endeared me to the women whom I was studying. I sometimes wondered if their selective downplaying of my local 'nativeness' and feminine 'naturalness' helped them make sense of – or even negate – my more privileged and highly-skilled profession as an academic, and so I often laughed along with productive self-mockery in a bid to cultivate rapport (Swinkels & de Koning 2016). With this in mind, I was always candidly honest about my lack of cosmetic expertise, and my informants almost always subconsciously and patiently took me under their wing, and educated me about the wonders of makeup and dress up. Live demonstrations took place in the privacy of their homes and offices, as well as in many not-so-private cafés and food courts. I also bought my first pair of high heels during fieldwork, under the coaxing of 23-year-old Influencer Charmaine who had first let me try hers on. With very clear hand gestures, she bent down to my knees and explained how the high heels straightened my posture, gave my leg muscles 'more definition', and made my body more 'proportionate'. I felt much like an inept prepubescent girl, attempting to master the basics of femininity before I could graduate into glamorous womanhood – *My Fair Lady* style. Charmaine chuckled at my attempts, and recounted her teenage memories of learning to walk in heels, while I reflected on what it meant to learn about my informants' life worlds through imitation (Fiske 1997).

My corporeal experiments had won the favour of some Influencers, who in turn signposted their approval of my attempts in person and on social media. It seemed to matter to them that I was invested and sincere enough to 'try' out their worlds – not too little that I was merely a dispassionate auditor, and not too much that I was attempting to emulate and compete with them in their 'game'. Their exchanges with me in digital spaces contributed to raising my profile and prominence among other Influencers, who later warmed up to me when we met in person. Discursively, my new acquaintances signalled that it was the new in-group visibility accorded to me by the gatekeeper Influencers that facilitated the expansion of my networks: 'Oh yah I saw your picture with Charmaine'; 'You're the one who's working with Jane right?'; 'I think I've seen your comments on Instagram'. Much like Abu-Lughod's (1985, p. 20) experience of being accepted as a guest and daughter of a Bedouin household, being acknowledged as an 'us' by different groups of people brought me a sense of comfort and accomplishment. In fact, this rhetoric of an 'us versus them' was more evident when I accompanied Influencers and their

management agencies to bigger events with a more diverse assortment of peoples. Despite extending hospitality to me as a guest in our daily interactions, at events where we had to meet with several other groups of people such as sponsors, clients, followers, and the press, the Influencer agencies and Influencers with whom I worked would introduce me as a staff member (my official titles included 'Research Scientist', 'Intern', 'Customer Service Assistant', and 'Marketing Assistant', among others). This integration into the Influencers' institutional system and vocabulary made me feel formally accepted into the community, much like anthropologist Liza Dalby's foray and subsequent acceptance into the community of *geisha* she was studying as a young American woman in Japan (2008). On occasion, Influencer managers would put Influencers under my care and assign me with duties, such as safekeeping their valuables or lubricating introductions to clients on their behalf until the managers were freed up. A couple of Influencers with whom I worked adjusted differently: When we were at such large-scale public events they would ignore my presence completely, so I responded to their cues and faded into the crowd as a faceless stranger.

These experiences taught me how to visibly posture myself as a willing apprentice. In the field, I learnt to selectively put my lack and inferiorities on display as an invitation for my informants to guide me and role model the 'right' way. As a living work-in-progress, entrusting my informants with the access to witness my learning and growth while risking the fear of scrutiny solicited their care and affirmation.

5   THE TROPHY ACQUAINTANCE

Initially, my snowball sampling was slow but steady. By endorsing their interview and/or observation experience with others, some Influencers became my gatekeepers to other Influencers; many of the latter turned out to be prospective informants I had initially emailed to no avail. Upon making my acquaintance via a gatekeeper who had lent me their credibility, these women often apologised for not having responded. They variously explained that they had been doubtful of my intentions, that they were not interested, or that they had simply forgotten about my email or social media comment or instant message. In a key turn in my fieldwork, at the midway mark my snowball sampling had shifted from 'personal endorsement' to 'friendly competition' – a small surge of Influencers approached me and offered to be interviewed. I later learnt that word had spread among small factions of the industry that some Influencers had been interviewed by an academic researcher, while others had not. Like ethnographers Ergun and Erdemir (2010, p. 32) who were attentive to the status, reputation, and feelings of their informants in Azerbaijan and Turkey, being interviewed gave my informants 'a sense of self-respect... as the recognition of their personalities and the treatment of their views as valuable'. This was a coming together of academic and Influencer literacies, meeting at the convergence of pragmatism and visibility labour: I wanted to

interview Influencers for my research and career as much as some of them wanted to be interviewed by me to acquire validity for their reputation and prestige among their peers. And thus was a lesson that exchanges between an anthropologist and informants during fieldwork are 'bidirectional' processes, where each of us carries our own agendas and intentions (Ashkenazi 1997).

At that time, I was selectively documenting (non-confidential) snippets of interviews and observations with high-profile Influencers (with their permission) on my blog throughout fieldwork, and this archive turned out to be a useful reference for potential informants to gauge their interest in my project. Additionally, after each interview I would add my informants as 'friends' on my research Facebook and Instagram accounts, and prospective informants could trace these digital networks to ascertain my credibility. These social media biographies served as avatars that reflected my 'social life inworld' identity (Boellstorff et al. 2012, p. 75) and my membership and conspicuousness in these digital spaces (2012, p. 76), which my informants could use to assess and validate my status. In other words, my social media accounts became vehicles for entry into the terrain of Influencers, and also the interfaces on which I interacted with them in their native spaces (Jarvis 2011). I found myself in a favourable position because the small but friendly competition that broke out among my (potential) informants meant that many of them did not want to be left out of this experience, thus echoing Senft (2008, p. 100–101) who notes that such 'explicit affirmation' from a trusted circle on social networks solicits a 'social autopilot' among secondary circles of friends.

In group settings, especially in casual contexts such as informal dinners, some Influencers would playfully ask each other if I had interviewed them. On one occasion, a particular Influencer was the only person in the group of six whom I had not yet had the chance to interview. I asked if she would like to set up a time to meet the week after, to which she immediately responded that she would prefer to speak to me right there and then, among her peers. Despite being in a rather noisy food court and cumbersomely navigating dinner utensils, I seized the opportunity and recorded our conversation on my iPhone. This turned out to be an exciting insight for me, as I observed the other Influencers eavesdropping and comparing their experiences to our interview, my questions, and their answers, in an ad hoc approximate focus group ('Hey, I also said the same thing *leh*!', 'Oh shucks! I forgot to say that.'; 'You see, she is like acting so professional, damn funny!'). Towards the end of my fieldwork, I learnt to leverage the allure of this 'group experience' when I wanted to persuade friends of fellow Influencers to be included in my study.

In fact, in a confounding reversal of roles that confirmed my transient status as a trophy acquaintance, one Influencer requested that we take a photo after we had concluded our interview. They handed their camera phone over to a friend, and grabbed a few props to stage our interview setting – I was handed a stack of blank paper and a pen, the Influencer placed my audio recorder prominently on the table, we shifted to the middle of the room where the ceiling lamp provided better lighting for the photo, and the direction given to me by the Influencer was to 'look intense…

like you're asking me a serious question'. I looked into their eyes with a slight frown as our makeshift photographer took a series of shots in portrait and landscape. This was quite unlike the actual state of our interview which was much more casual and much less glamorous, with the Influencer slurping on noodles in a takeaway box and intermittently surfing YouTube while I sat next to them comfortably conversing over snacks. The Influencer uploaded the image on Instagram, and in our next casual meeting with a group of Influencers at a back alley, announced that they had been interviewed. That evening, I managed to recruit another informant for my study and interviewed them in semi-darkness in that very back alley.

Arriving at this juncture of my journey as an ethnographer was a milestone; not only was I able to witness how my informants perform visibility labour, and the symbols, totems, and icons that were ascribed high status value, I had unwittingly become a transient status symbol for some of them. As a trophy acquaintance, I was ascribed proximate microcelebrity from my informants, and the flows of prestige by association was inversely flowing from myself to them.

6   THE CONCEALED CONSULTANT

Being immersed in my field between digital and physical spaces highlighted to me the ritualised aspects of everyday life both exotic and ordinary (Goffman 1956). I was able to observe 'ritual in relation to the operations of everyday business' (Malefyt and Morais 2012, p. 45) and investigate how seemingly mundane everyday practices were in fact crucial processes that structured the performance of Influencers – for instance, how the cross-platform announcement of new blog posts on Twitter and Instagram was a reaction to declining blog readership and had became a common practice among Influencers (Abidin 2014, p. 124).

I had also obtained a digital camera and voice recorder to use throughout fieldwork. However, I quickly realised that these instruments were not only cumbersome, but also affected my informants' composure. At various events where I accompanied Influencers, the digital camera tended to encourage others to wonder if I was a (prospective) Influencer. In those instances, I realised that my 'managerial', 'personal assistant', or 'intern' back-end position was not clearly marked at events because such 'high-tech' devices were visual symbols of Influencers who engaged in self-documentary work to produce social media content. I had inadvertently come across as a wannabe-Influencer of whom no one had heard, and prospective informants seemed hesitant to divulge much when I approached them for interviews, perhaps contemplating if I was planning to 'steal information'. As soon as I acquainted myself with the repository of status symbols among Influencers, I decided to switch to using my portable and nondescript iPhone 5 for audio recordings and to take photographs. This was not only convenient, but also allowed me to blend in with young followers in Singapore, among whom there is a high smartphone penetration rate (Media Research Asia 2013, Singh 2014). In other words, despite carrying out the same recording activities, simply changing the

device that I (conspicuously) used had reduced the visibility I drew to myself and reduced my likeness as an aspiring Influencer.

My ability to navigate the digital spaces that these Influencers inhabited without drawing too much attention to myself, and my similar ability to adopt their practices in physical spaces without presenting myself as a threat proved to be a useful skillset. In a memorable incident, I found myself as a co-chaperone for three Influencers at the Social Star Awards, the inaugural awards show held in Singapore in 2013 to acknowledge the most popular stars in social media. Prior to their red carpet debut, the Influencers whom I was accompanying were moving between changing rooms and waiting venues at the posh Marina Bay Sands, in full view of followers who had gathered in designated barricaded areas; many of them were yielding placards and banners in support of their favourite Influencer. I assisted the Influencers as they changed out of streetwear into glamorous gowns and suits, and the hierarchy of our status became instantly reinscribed the moment they stepped out of the changing room; I was clad in a plain dress and sneakers, having been reminded by the Influencer manager whom I was shadowing the night before to dress casually in preparation for 'a long day'.

As we readied ourselves to walk past the crowd of followers once more, one Influencer asked if I would help to carry their bags and change of clothes and if I could perhaps trail behind them as we walked past the crowd – it seemed I was tasked to appear as if I was a personal assistant or managerial staff of sorts to boost this Influencer's image for a short while. In that moment, I really treasured this Influencer's open display of vulnerability in my presence, to the extent of soliciting my compliance to help construct and sustain their ideal 'front stage' (Goffman 1956) in the view of followers. I felt as if I had been accepted into the 'backstage' (Goffman 1956), through this invitation to uphold the 'cultural intimacy' (Herzfeld 1997) of my informants' staging, by 'not revealing intimate secrets' that could shame them or cause them to lose face (Ergun and Erdemir 2010, p. 18). This act cost me little, and I was happy to oblige.

At the same event, 17-year-old Sarah began to receive Tweets from followers who had spotted her at the venue: Some of them celebratory, others contentious. One Tweet was particularly confounding, with the poster observing that Sarah's dress was far too long for her short frame, and that the tail end of the gown must have been 'sweeping the floor'. Sarah contemplated between a curt or cheeky response, and came to me for advice. We toyed with variations of responses, and eventually co-constructed the coy response, 'Did I sweep you off your feet?', which we felt displayed Sarah's confidence without coming off as arrogant. However, concerned that this prospective hater might read her response as an instigation, I suggested Sarah close her message with an emoji. After spending some time deliberating over her choice 'smiley face' emoji (she settled for a cheeky wink), Sarah thanked me, and I receded to the background until called upon again.

In these instances, I was experientially learning about the formulation, sustenance, and life cycle of backchannels among Influencers and their networks of

support and care. This was not a simple dichotomous matrix where backchannels were constructed in digital spaces to sustain 'front stage' (Goffman 1956) performances in physical spaces. Instead, backchannels were established in both physical and digital spaces through an assortment of vocabulary and solicitation of favours contingent upon affective relationships, to concoct seamless enactments of microcelebrity personae between physical and digital spaces. I had to demonstrate my capacity and willingness to 'take one for the team' by sacrificing my own self-image to maintain the reputation of an Influencer, concealing my role as just one of several actors sustaining their self-branding practices.

7   THE PASSING CONFIDANTE

While navigating Participant Information Sheets and Consent Forms with my informants, I learnt that my focus on the technical procedure of obtaining formal consent was sidelined by Influencers. The Influencers I had approached were largely unconcerned about sharing their personal lives with me through participant observation and personal interviews, much less the publicly accessible data on their blogs and social media platforms. Instead, these informants tested their confidence and trust in me and my research in different ways, such as through the guises of female friendship, like secret-keeping, engaging in small intensities of risk, and performing care labour – all under the radar and away from the watchful eyes of other actors in the ecology. Having developed close relationships with several Influencers and backend staff, many stories were revealed to me in the capacity of a personal friend. These exchanges would take place when my informants were in particularly vulnerable states, such as being inebriated at 0300hrs in the morning or being seeped in sorrow from a breakup.

Depending on my personal relationships with each informant, I learnt to read and assess when these intimate exchanges were a natural progression of reciprocal friendships, and when my informants were speaking to me as a researcher who could also put on the hat of a pragmatic intervener. As Irwin (2006, p. 158) notes, many researchers in the field 'have all expressed feelings of "inauthenticity" in their research relationships and have noted that friendships and friendliness can be false and easily manipulated to hide the true goal of the relationship: to obtain rich data'. I wanted to avoid this exploitative scenario as best as I could, and was committed to reciprocating care towards my informants; my earliest interactions with Jane and Christine, whom I noted earlier as being concerned for my face work, set the precedence for how I wanted to cultivate genuine friendships as much as possible. To do so, I very quickly learnt to glide between my roles as inquiring anthropologist and supportive female friend.

25-year-old Nicole was experiencing some frustration with her clients and her manager, and asked if I would mediate the situation by hearing her out and representing her in a conversation with them. In our three-hour long conversation one afternoon, she indicated that asking me of this favour might potentially be

detrimental to my research if her clients and managers were to deem me meddlesome or to be speaking out of line; but Nicole still sincerely hoped that I would help her, since I was merely 'passing through' and would not be around if any repercussions emerged, because I was to return 'home' to Perth after fieldwork. Nicole invoked the metaphor of a transient traveller for whom the aftereffects of such tricky interventions might not have as dire, direct, or lasting an impact than it would if she had personally negotiated the conflict. She sought my empathy and allegiance, and earned my trust and care by the heartfelt sharing of her struggles. At one point in our exchange, she took my hand, looked into my eyes, and sighed deeply as she struggled not to tear; these tangible, fleshy intersections between my body and hers moved me to commune in her pain, and I agreed to represent her in a meeting that was to take place later.

A similar exchange took place between Debra and I, who when tipsy late one night, started confessing the struggles of her impending breakup to me via text message. Prior to this, my impression of Debra was that she was an assertive, independent, and successful young entrepreneur. She hardly spoke of her relationship and often displayed impressive linguistic acrobatics when deflecting conversations about her romantic life in group settings. In her texts that night, Debra said she felt I would be able to 'understand' her 'situation' because by that point I had been spending time with her and her peers on a weekly basis for almost six months. She also said she felt 'comfortable… baring [her] soul' to me because I had not known her for as long as the other Influencers in our group have (many of them had been friends for between 2 to 10 years), and thus she would not feel 'judged' by me. Besides this, she said I was 'going to leave' in a month's time and could take her secrets away with me. I contemplated that Debra thought me a suitable audience for her romantic drama because many of the Influencers had known about my long-term partner; as earlier mentioned, this fact was one of the lubricating mediators for our small talk throughout my fieldwork. Perhaps sharing this 'common ground' of being a young twenty-something in a long-term relationship 'increased [my] perceived trustworthiness', solicited 'openness' from my informants, and facilitated 'rapport' (Ergun and Erdemir 2010, p. 18) between them and I.

Like Nicole, Debra seemed to see me as a transient person, a willing listener whose intermittent presence lubricated their affect and trust in me as a passing confidante. This trust was tested later on in group settings, when groups of Influencers queried Nicole or Debra about their situations. In the presence of proximate others, I did not divulge the information made privy to me, and performed this by expressing the polite curiosity or surprise that would be expected of anyone hearing about these incidents for the first time. I knew Nicole and Debra could observe my response in these exchanges, and I felt that it was my measured reaction (or lack thereof) that affirmed their faith in my secret-keeping skills. I was learning about the behavioural norms of my informants' social spaces (Martey and Shiflett 2012, Turkle 1995), of the Influencer ecology, and of 'girl world' more

generally, so that I could adopt the appropriate corporeal posturing to sustain our relationships. Here, performing visibility labour was less about distinction and more about integration – specifically, the ability to fade into the background on cue when necessary to corroborate with my informants' intended self-presentation among other actors and audiences.

8   SOMEWHERE BETWEEN HERE AND THERE

A common belief among scholars in academia and Influencers in social media commerce is that one should aim for maximum visibility. Surely in such industries where content production is growing, attention spans are declining, metrics culture is intensifying, and saturation fatigue is kicking in, it is the most visible of the lot who survive? Well, not quite.

Amidst the disjuncture of theory and praxis, the acrobatics of confidence and vulnerability, the politics of competition and friendship, the labour of self-promotion and self-care, we are allowed to feel multiple feelings at once, just as others around us may also be feeling multiple feelings at once. For all the bravado we academics are socialized into partaking, it is our empathy and care for each other that will carry us through the systems and structures that are turning us into mere anonymous labourers.

In this vein, learning my informants' visibility literacies and learning to perform their genre of visibility labour at the juncture of our multiple intersectional identities allowed me to present myself as a legible body, legitimate presence, and learning being. As a research strategy, playing with spectrums of conspicuousness allowed me to present myself as genuinely as I was, while giving me the allowance to selectively dial up or down specifics facets of my identity – all with the intention to better parlay my entry into the field and lubricate my interactions with my informants. As a personal politic, abandoning the master status of an academic researcher and relating to these informants on their terms enabled me to interact with them on their comfort level, and to reciprocate some of the care I had received.

In this paper, I reflected on new hybrid forms of visibility labour between digital and physical spaces that were highly embodied despite my fieldwork being focused on an online community. This required that my digital and physical presence and self-presentation frequently shift along spectrums of conspicuousness. I discussed visibility labours and literacies through six experiences from the field: As the esteemed guest navigating intellectual status and one's face work; the exotic inbetweener navigating racial corporeality and romantic displays; the willing apprentice navigating cosmetics, fashion, and touch; the trophy acquaintance navigating the exclusivity and prestige of selecting informants; the concealed consultant navigating Influencers' face work (Goffman 2003) and the researcher's voluntary one-downmanship; and the passing confidante navigating conflict and secrets. Turning away from the folkloric dictums of academia, my fieldwork with Influencers was a space in which I shed the academy's conditioning to hide my fears

and failures, and instead learnt to selectively put my lack and inferiorities on display as an invitation for my informants to guide me and role model the 'right' way. Such experiential intimacy cannot be taught in graduate classes, deportment workshops, or scholarly textbooks. These open invitations to witness and trade in each others' intersectional identities and vulnerable experiences would only succeed if my informants chose to reciprocate. Admittedly, I had experienced several unanswered calls and cold shoulders. But from the informants who did come to play with me on spectrums of conspicuousness, we learnt to shift between visibility literacies, of academics and Influencers making sense of each others' lexicon and skills, attempting to place each other within our own social realities, levelling our statuses and understanding our distances, in order to borrow social capital and maintain relational care.

Perhaps no other online or offline space solicits more relational care and exhibits more embodied performance than that of public toilets. Toilets are where I have helped Influencers dress and undress between photo-shoots, where we have struggled with zippers and hair before red carpet moments, where we go to puke or cry during a rough night of socialising, where secrets are traded and emergency phone calls are made. In toilets bodies share close proximity, our bodies are vulnerable, there are few 'props' (Goffman 1956) that serve as distractions or sustain distance, and it is here that our spectrums of conspicuousness collide and make sense of each other and inform the intimacies between two bodies.

Toilets also feel so levelling at academic events: You enter an enclosed space with strange others; You smile and nod at those who secure eye contract with you; You make small talk with people you only know by sight while queuing for the stalls and maintaining composure but bursting with pee; You hear farts and pee and poops from the next stall from anonymous bodies; Women in various dress ask each other for emergency tampons and pads; You wash your hands and prim yourself in the mirror next to a superstar scholar; You make more small talk and compliment each other on fashion and accessories and scents; You wait your turn to use the hand dryer. And then you leave the toilet and the hierarchy of official academia is reinscribed onto your body. But in the transient moments inside the liminal space of a toilet, academics suddenly suspend institutional decorum of rank and are led again by anthropological legacies of 'gut-feeling', 'sensing', and 'whim' to reach out, connect with, and care for each other. The hallmarks of legitimacy – University letterheads, signatures, designations, and documents – seem to fade into the background. All that we really 'see' in the space of toilets are equal bodies in a queue to negotiate the same stalls and sinks for everyday bodily functions. We should spend more time in toilets at conferences, where our bodies stripped bare (metaphorically and sometimes, literally) are seen by others and seeing others. Toilet breaks in public can be precious moments for the trainee ethnographer to hone their gut-feelings, for these spaces are the somewhere between here and there.

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