CHAPTER 9

Vote for My Selfie: Politician Selfies as Charismatic Engagement

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Abstract Taking Singaporean Member of Parliament (MP) Baey Yam Keng as a case study, this chapter analyses how charismatic engagement can be mediated through social media and selfie tropes. In the wake of online campaigns since the General Elections 2011, and with the ruling party garnering its lowest share of electoral votes since state independence, MP Baey, aged 47, has emerged as a press-branded 'selfie king', 'social media celebrity' and 'Twitter influencer' for engaging with the online citizenry since publishing his first selfie in March 2013. Drawing on his Instagram and Twitter feed and selfie-related engagements up till 2015, this chapter demonstrates how politician selfies can be exercised to solicit affect and mobilise public sentiment among voters.

Keywords Selfies · Politician · Charisma · Singapore · Twitter · Instagram

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Politicians taking selfies have received their fair share of praise for connecting with voters during campaign trails and flak for inappropriate displays à la the widely publicised Cameron-Thorning-Obama selfie at Nelson Mandela's funeral in December 2013. But what happens when politicians take to regularly publishing self-curated selfie streams on their personal social media accounts? When selfies are the new political photo op, the everyday and mundane can become a spectacle and a site for naturalised vernacular campaigning.

This chapter looks at Singaporean Member of Parliament (MP) Baey Yam Keng as a case study in investigating how charismatic engagement can be mediated through the repertoire of social media and popular selfie tropes. In the wake of voting campaigns taking to online ground in the most recent General Elections 2011, and with the ruling party having garnered its lowest share of electoral votes since state independence, MP Baey, who despite being 47 years old at the time of writing, has emerged as a press-branded 'selfie king', 'social media celebrity' and 'Twitter influencer' for engaging with the online citizenry since publishing his first selfie in March 2013, with a fan base to boot. Drawing on his Instagram and Twitter feed and selfie-related engagements up till 2015, this chapter demonstrates how politician selfies can be exercised to solicit affect and mobilise public sentiment among voters.

Media Climate in Singapore

Singapore has unswervingly been operated as a 'soft authoritarian' (Nasir and Turner 2011) or 'semi-authoritarian' regime (Wang and Tan 2012) with a partly free media (Freedom House 2010) due to the ruling party's draconian action against political opposition (Salimat 2013) and tight rein over the media (George 2007; Rodan 2003; Sussman 2012). Freedom House (2010) lists Singapore's 'Freedom Rating' as 4.5 (with the score of 1 being the best and 7 being the worst) while Reporters Without Borders (2013) ranks Singapore's 'Press Freedom Index' 149 out of 179 countries.

In the 2011 General Elections (GE2011), the incumbent party, the People's Action Party (PAP), received its lowest vote share since Singapore gained independence from the British in 1965. Surveying 2,000 Singaporeans including 447 youth between the ages of 21 and 34 through national telephone interviews conducted in May 2011, Lin and Hong (2013) report that youth voters' perceived credibility of media outlets in Singapore greatly affected political consciousness. New media had 'more

pull factors to engage young citizens' (2013: 5), with 28.2 % of youth posting about GE2011 on blogs, Facebook and Twitter compared to just 9.3 % in the whole sample, and 20.2 % of youth forwarding GE2011 content via email, Facebook or Twitter compared to just 9.9 % in the whole sample (2013: 5). While youth 'still trusted mass media and used them more' during the campaigning period, their 'impact on voting are decreasing' (2013: 13). New media was breaking new ground for alternative and contentious journalism: of the youth who perceived 'new media as important', 54.8 % expressed that they would vote for the opposition while only 39.8 % indicated they would vote for the PAP; of the youth who perceived 'new media as trustworthy', 52.5 % expressed that they would vote for the opposition while only 38.6 % indicated they would vote for the PAP (2013: 9). The authors concluded that 'new media will become even more vital for political parties' campaigning in future' (2013: 13)

Simultaneously, under the government's long-term initiatives to shape Singapore into an 'Intelligent Island' (Cordeiro and Al-Hawamdeh 2001), users in Singapore report an 87 % smartphone penetration rate (Media Research Asia 2013) and 123 % mobile Internet penetration rate (Singh 2014). Social media use and selfie-taking is proliferating, led by Influencers who are micro-celebrities (Senft 2008) on the Internet, and who accumulate and monetise their relatively large followings on platforms such as Instagram (Abidin 2014). Since he debut his Instagram account in December 2012, Singaporean MP Baey Yam Keng appears to be borrowing from the vernacular of Influencers to engage with voters on digital media.

Digital Presence

As an MP, Baey Yam Keng's official digital presence is foremost his profile on the Parliament of Singapore website (Parliament of Singapore 2015). However, Google autocomplete prompts for 'Baey Yam Keng' reveal popular searches to include the MP's 'wife', 'Instagram', 'profile' and 'selfie'. A Google image search for 'Baey Yam Keng Instagram' brings up primarily selfies. In early 2015, Baey posted a screenshot on Instagram announcing that his Twitter account had been 'verified' to assure voters that his digital platforms were genuine. This was also an important signal that he was personally managing his social media instead of using ghostwriters.

All screenshots in this paper were taken on 1 April 2015, when the MP boasted over 8,000 followers on his Instagram account, @baeyyamkeng, and over 14,000 followers on his Twitter account, @YamKeng. As of April 2016, these figures have risen to over 14,000 and 28,000 respectively.

Strategic Selfies

On Twitter, Baey curates several hashtags in which he uses selfies to engage with voters across platforms. '#FBchatwithBYK' advertises his 'monthly chat' with voters on Facebook, while '#BYKcolumn' promotes his newspaper columns in mainstream press. On a lighter note and in expression of his grasp of Internet vernacular – specifically, the 'look alike' meme – Baey uses '#BYKlookalike' on Instagram to collate voter-submitted images of men who bear an uncanny resemblance to him.

Perhaps the initiative that has received the most engaging response from voters is '#runwithBYK' on Twitter. On this channel, Baey announces the date, time and venue of his next run, inviting voters to join him (Fig. 9.1). He makes the effort to rotate locations around Singapore and usually posts brief profiles of the voters who come down, usually comprising men in their early 1920s to late 1940s. Some are even regular running companions. On days when no one shows up for #runwithBYK, Baey appropriates the moment to display his social media savvy. Mimicking the pose of the Sir Stanford Raffles statue in the background (Fig. 9.2), Baey captions his photograph – albeit not a selfie – in the style of hashtags as a paralanguage for linguistic humour and metacommentary. Shifting away from plainly hashtagging his Tweets with '#runwithBYK' as a form of 'searchable talk' (Zappavigna 2012: 1), he uses five hashtags to construct a narrative. While his first two hashtags '#keepingfit #ownresponsibility' may come across as didactic especially when read in the vein of the PAP's paternalism, his subsequent hashtags '#noone #runwithBYK #runbymyself' reveal a playful self-satire on his failed efforts.

Charismatic Engagement

In his study of forms of legitimate rule, Sociologist Max Weber (1962) describes charismatic authority as situated in a leader's right to lead out of followers' personal devotion to unique qualities or exemplary behaviour. This is unlike legal authority in which leadership is enshrined through a system of rules applied administratively and judicially, nor traditional

Fig. 9.1 '#runwithBYK' – Baey Yam Keng on Instagram. *Source*: twitter.com/YamKeng

Fig. 9.2 'Waiting' – Baey Yam Keng on Instagram. *Source*: twitter.com/YamKeng

authority in which leadership is inherited. Baey takes on charismatic leadership, conveyed through a personal branding strategy that relies on selfies to give the impression of accessibility and relatability, premised on how he visibilises the backstage (Goffman 1956) of his daily work to voters.

Selfies featuring Baey in the office, at home preparing for a work day, with voters during ministerial sessions, with other politicians during state visits, at press interviews and with mainstream media celebrities at functions where he is an official guest have a levelling effect as Baey appears to forgo the privacy and distance usually adopted by politicians for a 'perceived interconnectedness' (Abidin 2015) – an aesthetic he adopts from Influencers who continuously stream their personal lives in a bid for followers to feel emotionally connected to them.

So central are selfies to Baey's personal branding as a politician – the highest circulating English newspaper *The Straits Times* (2014) described the MP as being 'known for his frequent selfies and strong presence on social media' – that he was invited to star as 'a romantic blogger' in a Mandarin play 'centred around society's obsession with social media' in December 2014 (Robert 2015). Unfortunately, on the Monday before opening night, Baey announced on Facebook that he was hospitalised for dengue fever, but eventually 'mustered the strength to return to the stage just in time for the show' (Ng 2014). However, unlike the widely publicised Cameron-Thorning-Obama selfie faux pas at Nelson Mandela's funeral in December 2013, Baey instead chose to announce his situation via a Facebook text post and a photo of his intravenous drip in hospital.

Reactions

Based on comments on Baey's Instagram, voter reactions to his strategic selfies have largely been positive, with many users complimenting his looks, thanking him for his work and expressing their support during the election campaigning period. An anonymous Tumblr, http://baeyyamkengselfies.tumblr.com/, reposting Baey's selfies also circulated on social media. Most notably, user-generated content viral sites such as mustsharenews.com began curating Baey's 'best of' selfies (Ang 2015). Several of such listicles highlight Baey's confident perception of Influencer selfie tropes and youth voters' selfie vernacular, including humorous selfies, make-up tutorial selfies (Fig. 9.3), #OOTD or Outfit Of The Day selfies (Fig. 9.4) and 'Hot Dog Legs' meme selfies.

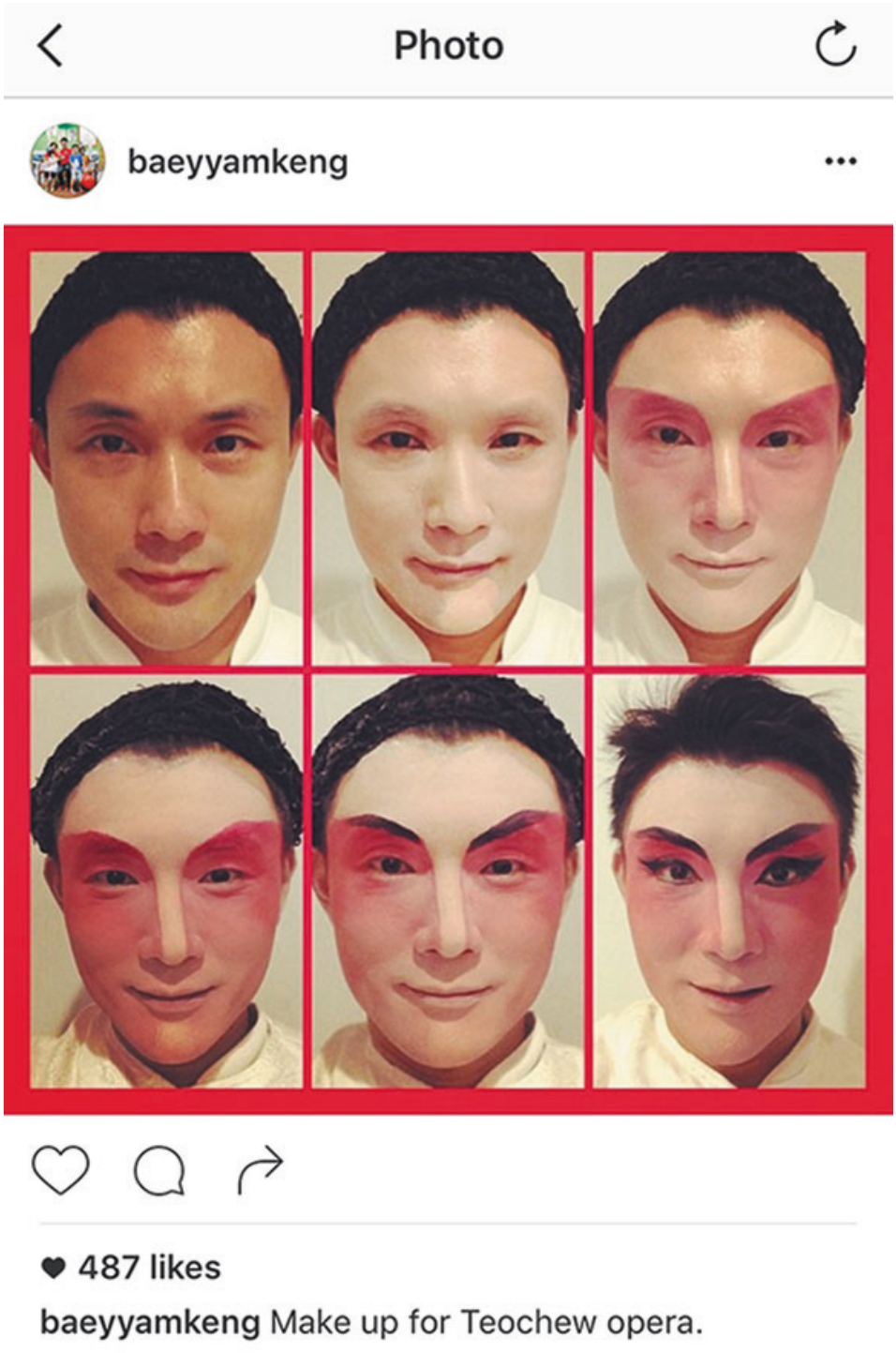

Fig. 9.3 Make-up tutorial selfie – Baey Yam Keng on Instagram. *Source*: Instagram.com/baeyyamkeng

Fig. 9.4 Outfit of the day selfie – Baey Yam Keng on Instagram. *Source*: Instagram.com/baeyyamkeng

Perhaps in anticipation of the potential backlash from older voters who may not understand youth digital vernaculars, the PAP reposted an op-ed from *The New Paper* titled 'Who are you calling narcissistic' (Ong, S. M. 2013), in which a reporter muses about Baey's selfies and added a caption to assure voters that Baey was 'on the job': 'So what do you think of MP Baey Yam Keng's series of selfies? P.S. You should check out his facebook page to see his other posts. He doesn't just do selfies all day long!'

Vote for My Selfie

In interviews to the press, Baey reveals that he posts selfies about three times a week but is aware that not everyone takes to them: 'When I first took a selfie, I was quite cautious and not sure about how the public would react' (Ong, Y. 2013). However, he sees the value of selfies in relating to his voters: 'I hear it is popular now. It could be useful as a channel of engagement with the public' (Ong, Y. 2013).

In the wake of Singapore's soft authoritarianism to weed out the opposition (Nasir and Turner 2011) and new media's usurp of traditional media's credibility and influence (Lin and Hong 2013), Baey's strategic use of selfies to manage his personal brand as a politician speaks to Postman's (1984: 4) notion that 'cosmetics has replaced ideology as the field of expertise over which a politician must have competent control'. Where President Richard Nixon and Senator Edward Kennedy depended on 'the cosmetician's art' to 'significantly enhance[e]' (1984: 4) their appearances, Baey conscientiously self-presents through relatable selfie tropes and digital media vernacular.

In response, voters interviewed also expressed that the 'human touch' is 'refreshing' when 'an MP uses social media like any other normal person would' (Ong, Y. 2013). Baey also admitted that while some voters have threatened to unfollow him because of his selfies, others have jumped to his defence: 'I was very heartened when another netizen say: "It's his own Instagram account. Of course if you don't like it, you don't follow. I mean, no one is forcing you to follow Baey Yam Keng"' (RazorTV 2013).

Baey intentionally uses selfies to manage his personal brand as a politician: 'I think these are aspects of our personal life that members of the public are quite keen. Sometimes they have this perception that politicians are not real people. They don't have a life or they're all very stuffy, you

know, very serious' (RazorTV 2013). It is precisely this relatability that constitutes Baey's charisma (Weber 1962), in contrast to other incumbent MPs who have yet to shed their image of authoritarianism, paternalism, hierarchy and distance. Additionally, through his hyper-visibilising of the 'backstage' (Goffman 1956) in his daily work, Baey constructs an auto-biography and narrative through which he is able to invite voters to identify and connect with him (Lilleker 2014: 130) through parasocial relations (Horton & Wohl 1956) as a political figure, personal brand, but above all, an ordinary person.

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