Singaporean Influencers and Covid-19 on Instagram Stories

Crystal Abidin

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

FORUM

Singaporean Influencers and Covid-19 on Instagram Stories

Crystal Abidin

Internet Studies, Curtin University, Perth, Australia

ABSTRACT

This essay considers how Influencers in Singapore were responding to COVID-19 on Instagram Stories. Specifically, this extract of the study focuses on six phenomena to have emerged including: Live chats and parasociality, communion and 'collective effervescence' (Durkheim 1912), branded content and topical coherence, persuasion and normalising practices, charity and the harnessing of a follow base, and infodemic and the amplification of causes. The paper then considers three major industry and systemic shifts in relation to the parasociality between Influencers and followers, the aesthetics of content from Influencers, and the accessibility of Influencers towards followers.

Introduction

In this essay, I reflect on how Influencers in Singapore responded to Covid-19 on Instagram Stories, in light of the Circuit Breaker period (Abu Baker 2020) of mass imposed self-isolation in Singapore, and of foreign workers in dormitories experiencing a disproportionate impact of Covid-19 that eventually inspired charity activity online (Phua 2020). This data presented in this study was collected in March–June 2020 and drawn from a mixed methodology approach that focused primarily on in-depth digital ethnography. This involved following, observing and making fieldnotes of the Instagram activity of a select group of Influencers on a daily basis and checking for updates between one to four times daily. This time-intensive method necessitated discipline to maintain a continuous diary of ethnographic observations and regular check-ins, as some Stories are transient.

Digital ethnographic data was triangulated against personal interviews with a selection of these Influencers via voice or video call during this period and situated in a larger decade-long anthropological study of Influencer cultures in Singapore (Abidin 2017a), as well as a rapid response to the impacts of Covid-19 on the (South)East Asian Influencer industry as part of another project (DE190100789). The analyses in this essay were generated from a juxtaposition of long-term ethnographic and interview data pre-Covid -19 and during Covid-19, allowing for commentary on convention or novelty, if present.

CONTACT Crystal Abidin ✉ crystalabidin@gmail.com ⊙ Internet Studies, MCASI, Curtin University, GPO Box U1987, WA6845, Australia

A YouTube video 'Panel One, Asian Celebrity and the Pandemic: Misreading the Room? with Crystal Abidin' (Asian Media and Cultural Studies Network 2020) contains visual examples of the case studies discussed and is recommended to complement this paper.

Instagram Stories in the time of Covid-19

In this section, I focus on six phenomena to have emerged among Singaporean Influencers on Instagram Stories during Covid-19 and their impact on followers.

Live chats x parasociality

Some Influencers partook in a higher volume and frequency of AMAs (Ask Me Anything) and Q&As (Question & Answer) with followers, albeit not topically focused on Covid-19. Such was the case of @yoyokulala's AMA hosted by *Elle Magazine*. These practices took advantage of the general increase in Instagram spectatorship and digital engagement with followers in the wake of extended self-isolation. Other Influencers pivoted their content towards how they were coping with the pandemic and its extended impacts. For instance, @jamieqqwu collaborated with magazine *Female Singapore* to discuss 'what content creators like her can and should roll out' in times of Covid-19. Such practices still prize Influencers as opinion leaders, and attempt to sustain their leadership and contextualise their relevance through careful and meaningful disclosures with followers. For Influencers who are grassroots activists and leaders in civil society, their Instagram Stories focused on fostering productive discussions and role modelling active citizenship. For instance, advocate @yinzjoee participated in AMAs about making positive changes during Covid-19, especially for migrant workers in Singapore.

Communion x 'collective effervescence'

Influencers took to Instagram Stories to commune with followers and cultivate 'collective effervescence' (Durkheim 1912). Technology company Hepmil Media Group – which focuses on content creation and cultivating Influencers and talents – initiated a series of virtual get-togethers that was promoted via its extensive network of staff and talents via Instagram Stories. These included a group karaoke singing event on Google Hangouts promoted by CEO @karlmak and a mass high intensity workout tutorial led by one of its talents 'xiaoming'. In another instance, Influencer @umeandhara promoted brand partner Sennheiser Singapore's '#DontStopTheMusic' concert on Instagram Live.

Branded content x topical coherence

The pandemic and changing social norms forced Influencers to consider how to maintain income by considering the topical coherence of their posts – that is, how best to integrate Covid-19 contents into their feed. Some Influencers, like drag queen Influencer @thatericboy (who turned a post by customer @suprafye into a Story), managed to import scarce resources such as hand sanitiser from abroad and sold them on Instagram Stories; for this, many followers expressed gratitude. Other Influencers focused on sharing branded content, like Hepmil Media Group's @fauziazzhar who, with the aim of advertising online

grocer RedMart's services, reposted fellow talent @sgagxiaoming's video rant about the elderly breaching social distancing measures. In another example, @preetipls and others congregated in a virtual Zoom party sponsored by alcohol brand Martell to promote the brand while role-modelling an exemplar of virtual gatherings in the age of mass self-isolation.

Persuasions x normalising practices

Influencers also used Instagram Stories to share persuasive content and normalise new practices during the pandemic. This highlights their role as shapers and disseminators of specific discourse. One of Hempil Media Group's Influencers @leeshuhadah is known for portraying an angsty character 'Pam' who often posts rants calling out '*bodohs*' (Malay trans: silly, foolish people). One such rant had called people out for selfishly breaching social distancing guidelines; @leeshuhadah's iconic clip was shared widely on Instagram Stories to entertain as well as encourage citizens to stay at home. Other Influencers focused more on normalising the emergent feelings and tensions that arose from extended self-isolation, like Influencer @hirziofficial who collaborated with others in a series of Instagram Lives to entertain followers while conveying key information about Covid-19's rapid evolution. While these used to take the form of high production YouTube parody videos pre-Covid-19, as a compromise, @hirziofficial is seen 'making do' with his ad hoc bedroom rendition of one of his characters 'Syasya'. Other Influencers like Dee Kosh (posted as a Story by @hiriziofficial) engaged in similar practices via podcasts and YouTube livestreams cross-promoted on Instagram Stories.

Charity x harnessing a follower base

Above all, some of the most encouraging content pivots during Covid-19 was when Influencers actively engaged in and promoted charity initiatives. This included @preetipls, who spearheaded fundraising efforts to raise over SGD140,000 for migrant workers who were trapped in unsanitary living conditions with limited food and hygiene supplies. Such initiatives swiftly went viral on social media with the help of @preetipls' extensive following and persuasive authority, and eventually contributed to awareness raising, more press coverage from mainstream news outlets and more citizens calling upon the state to be accountable. Likewise, three of the four 'epic minah' characters in @hirziofficial's then-retired YouTube series had also regrouped for a performance on Instagram Live to raise funds to provide migrant workers with supplies during Ramandan. Advocate @yinzjoee used his Instagram Stories as a broadcasting platform, sharing consistent reports about the immediate needs and interventions 'on the ground', specifically focusing on fundraising to purchase and deliver supplies to the migrant worker quarantined under unsatisfactory conditions in dormitories.

Infodemic x amplification of causes

Finally, in light of the infodemic accompanying the Covid-19 pandemic, some Influencers used their Instagram Stories to amplify or signal boost specific causes. Among the most prolific of the Influencers studied was @hirziofficial, who from the early months of Covid-19 regularly took to Instagram Stories to share various thoughts and updates about the evolving pandemic. His posts often remixed and recontextualized snippets from popular culture – such as short clips from the reality show Rupaul's Drag Race – to solicit the interest of young people to keep up with the news. Other Influencers would repost digital posters and announcements from official and verified sources like the WHO, to signal boost and redirect followers' attention to trustworthy content. @hirziofficial was also known to cross-post content from Facebook, to curate and introduce new information to the ecology of Instagram Stories.

Industry and systemic shifts

In light of the changing demands, tensions and norms of Covid-19, Influencers in Singapore have utilised Instagram Stories to restrategize their content and engagement with followers. Together, the six phenomena observed on Instagram Stories collectively demonstrate three major industry and systemic shifts (Figure 1).

Firstly, the parasociality (cf. 'para-social interactions' by Horton and Wohl 1956) between Influencers and followers – which is contingent upon a framework of 'communicative intimacies' (Abidin 2015) and audience feedback – now relies more on relatability while aspiration has become less important. With the sudden onset of mass precarity, comments and feedback from followers sighted on Instagram indicate that interest in aspirational consumption has dipped in favour of more interactive and personalised interactions. In this sense, Influencers have to depend more on 'calibrated amateurism' (Abidin 2017b) to underscore their ordinariness and humility to sustain follower interest.

Secondly, the aesthetics of content from Influencers – which is contingent upon an attention economy matrix of what constitutes 'Instagrammability' (Leaver et al. 2020) – now relies more on discursive content while visual theatrics have become less important.

Figure 1. Table detailing the industry and systemic shifts of Influencers and social media during COVID-19, first published by the author in Abidin, Crystal 2021

Influencers' pivots to casual but highly interactive and conversational content on Instagram Stories signify followers' preference for more personalised engagement in place of picture-perfect content more prominent on the Instagram feed. As such, despite the pre-Covid-19 propensity for Influencers to serve as amplifiers of commercial content, during Covid-19 they were more sought after for their personal opinions and displays.

Finally, the accessibility of Influencers towards followers – which is contingent upon platform barriers of entry (e.g. metrics, trendability) and thematic barriers of entry (e.g. quality of content, relevance of content) – now allows for more diversity of presentations of self while the importance of conventionalised embodiment has decreased. Accompanying the dramatic increase of content and use of more casualised and accessible generation of content during Covid-19, is an explosion of more diversity in the types and genres of Influencers in the industry, including but not limited to body image, content genre and relational styles.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Crystal Abidin is a digital anthropologist and ethnographer of vernacular internet cultures; she researches internet celebrity, influencer cultures and social media pop cultures, especially in the Asia Pacific region. Crystal has published 5 books and over 60 articles and chapters on various aspects of internet cultures. She is Associate Professor of Internet Studies, Principal Research Fellow, and ARC DECRA Fellow at Curtin University, and the founder of the TikTok Cultures Research Network. For her public scholarship and continuous engagements with industry, Crystal was listed on ABC Top 5 Humanities Fellows, Forbes 30 Under 30 Asia, and Pacific Standard 30 Top Thinkers Under 30. Reach her at wishcrys.com

References

Abidin, C., 2015. Communicative ♥ intimacies: influencers and perceived interconnectedness. *Ada: a journal of gender, new media & technology*, 8. [online]. doi:10.7264/N3MW2FFG. [Accessed 2 Sept 2020].

Abidin, C., 2017a. Influencer extravaganza: a decade of commercial 'lifestyle' microcelebrities in Singapore. *In*: L. Hjorth, *et al*., eds. *Routledge companion to digital ethnography*. London: Routledge, 158–168.

Abidin, C., 2017b. #familygoals: family influencers, calibrated amateurism and justifying young digital labour. *Social Media + Society*, 3 (2), 1–15. doi:10.1177/2056305117707191.

Abu Baker, J., 2020. *Singapore's circuit breaker and beyond: timeline of the Covid-19 reality* [online]. Channel News Asia. Available from: https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/covid-19-circuit-breaker-chronicles-charting-evolution-12779048 [Accessed 15 Jun 2020].

Asian Media and Cultural Studies Network, 2020. *Panel One, Asian Celebrity and the Pandemic: misreading the Room? with Crystal Abidin* [online], 19 Jun. YouTube video. Available from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P3M-IMF8REI&list=PLaP9EqvapZV3KTxkVTav6JtvCDoYF4BLY [Accessed 20 June 2021].

Crystal. 2021. "Mapping Internet Celebrity on TikTok: Exploring Attention Economies and Visibility Labours." *Cultural Science Journal* 12(1): 77-103. DOI:10.5334/csci.140.

Durkheim, E., 1912. *The elementary forms of the religious life*. Mineola, New York: Dover Publications Inc.

Horton, D. and Wohl, R.R., 1956. Mass communication and para-social interaction. *Psychiatry: Journal for the Study of Interpersonal Processes*, 19 (3), 215–229. doi:10.1080/00332747.1956.11023049.

Leaver, T., Highfield, T., and Abidin, C., 2020. *Instagram: visual social media cultures*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Phua, R., 2020. *NGOs launch initiatives to help migrant workers amid Covid-19 outbreak* [online]. Channel News Asia. Available from: https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/covid19-migrant-foreign-workers-dormitory-food-coronavirus-12627032 [Accessed 10 Apr 2020].