

“We Connect With People Through Stories”: Gender and Affective Labor in Momblogging

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Social media influencers are an increasingly ubiquitous part of users’ online experience and epitomize some of the central tenets of post-Fordist economics such as immaterial labor and the global diversification of production. They deploy affective labor to develop extended parasocial relations with networks of followers and enroll them into relations with brands. This article focuses on the commercialization of social media use in Malaysia and Singapore to argue that momblogging is a post-Fordist manifestation of domestic labor that foregrounds affective labor and articulates the discursive tension between the brand and the commodity actualized in their different economic values, with the restricted utilitarian value of the commodity receding in the face of relational brands animated by affective labor. Inequalities in the global digital economy are explored through an analysis of the feminization of social media influencer labor and the different values of globally sourced paid backlinks and locally embedded advertorials.

Keywords: advertising, blogs, gender, inequality, influencers, labor, social media

Social media influencers (SMIs) are becoming an increasingly ubiquitous part of users’ online experience and represent the leading edge of digital advertising and marketing. Focusing primarily on their parenting experiences, “mombloggers” adapt the lifestyle blog genre, leveraging authenticity through a strategic sharing of aspects of their lives and activities and using affective labor to encourage parasocial interactions with their followers. This article discusses the evolution of digital labor patterns by exploring how Malaysian mombloggers’ labor relates to constructs of motherhood and at times integrates into global flows of transnational labor that bypass state controls.

Advances in digital technologies mean that digital media production is globally dispersed and decentralized, whereas social media offer personalized interactive media and quantifiable audiences that enable the monetization of personalized media content. SMIs are explored here as exemplars of the post-

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Date submitted: 2018–11–24

¹ This research was funded by Global Asia in the 21st Century, a Monash University Malaysia research priority area. My sincere thanks to the editors and anonymous reviewers for their valuable advice and patience, as well as the organizers and attendees of the Digital Inequality in Southeast Asia seminar at the Digital Media Research Centre, Queensland University of Technology.

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Fordist economy (R. Graham, 2017), in which sociocultural symbolism and affective labor underwrite value creation, particularly in the form of *relational brands* sustained by shared aesthetic and symbolic practices and enhanced by SMIs' affective labor. However, the digital economy also allows for the commoditization of media content that is aimed at leveraging the networked web of hyperlinks and the algorithms that determine visibility on the global Google monopoly. Older patterns of gender and regional inequalities are also reproduced in the digital economy, with a possible feminization of the field of social media labor (Duffy & Schwartz, 2017) and a continuation of global labor cost differentials sustaining consumerist lifestyles in high-income countries.

Building on more than a decade of research and engagement with the Malaysian blogosphere using participant observation and quantitative and qualitative data gathering (Hopkins, 2019; Hopkins & Thomas, 2011), this article uses a combination of textual and content analysis supplemented by interviews to explore intersections of national, regional, and global digital economies and contribute to the growing pool of data that goes beyond Euro-American paradigms and experiences (Baulch & Pramiyanti, 2018).

Emergence of the Lifestyle Blog and Social Media Influencers in Malaysia

Growing in popularity since the turn of the century, by 2004 the ability of personal bloggers to attract thousands of daily readers also attracted advertising interest. In 2004, Google AdSense became available in Malaysia—this uses a semantic analysis of Web page content as a proxy for the reader's interest, delivering third-party advertisements via a plug-in and sharing the payment between Google and the blogger (Levy, 2011, pp. 102–107). This worked best for blogs focused on specific niche topics, and personal blogs that cover bloggers' daily lives—rather than a particular consumer category—were less suitable for AdSense. This lack of relevance to Malaysian bloggers was compounded by a lack of Malaysian advertisers, Malay-language services, and convenient money-transfer facilities.

However, a market for paid backlinks emerged because of the important Google PageRank metric that calculates the relative importance of Web pages based on the number and relevance of incoming links (Levy, 2011, pp. 20–21). Malaysian bloggers started to use companies such as PayPerPost and ReviewMe that paid from US\$5 to more than US\$100, depending on the blog's PageRank, for short blog posts with links. In spite of ethical debates about proper disclosure and authenticity, these relatively small amounts were nevertheless attractive in Malaysia because of favorable exchange rates. However, in 2007, Google responded to these perceived distortions by reducing the PageRank of participating blogs (Cutts, 2007), and many Malaysian bloggers removed the offending posts, sometimes opening different blogs to diversify their opportunities. Companies continued to find ways to reverse-engineer the opaque Google algorithms, and in 2012 Google moved against "link networks" with the "Penguin update" (Mendez, 2012; see also Hallan, 2012).

Local relations developed, and advertisers approached personal bloggers directly to place banner advertisements or barter free goods in return for a review. Early examples of the latter were a 2006 review of Crocs footwear by kennysia.com and a restaurant hosting a free birthday party for cheeserland.com in

2007. In 2007, an early blog advertising network (BlogAdNet²) opened in Malaysia and Singapore, registering local bloggers and connecting them with local advertisers, paving the way for a wholesale monetization of personal blogs by providing income and marketing-oriented events. From this emerged the *lifestyle blog*, a genre that continues the personal blog's focus on the blogger's everyday life but with an increased focus on consumerist topics and social events. The lifestyle blogger receives payment and material incentives for a significant proportion of their blog posts, especially "advertorials" that are written in the blogger's usual style, but are in fact commissioned reviews (Hopkins, 2019; Hopkins & Thomas, 2011).

Social Media Influencers and Mombloggers

Lifestyle bloggers developed into social media influencers, or microcelebrities, who often appeal to smaller and more niche audiences and are proficient at self-branding (Marwick, 2013; Senft, 2008, 2013), managing perceived intimacy and commodifying privacy (Abidin, 2013, 2014), performing authenticity, and leveraging the interactive affordances of social media to generate affect and encourage extended parasocial relations with their followers who may develop a sense of them as a personal friend or mentor (Hopkins, 2016; Horton & Wohl, 1956). This relationship enables them to exert a more meaningful influence on their regular followers, and they generate income by commodifying their audience and intertwining personalized accounts of sponsored products and brands into social media output.

A subcategory of SMIs are mombloggers or mommy bloggers who blog about their experiences of motherhood, family, and parenting, combining their domestic work—managing homes and raising children—with digital and self-presentation skills. Although sometimes greeted as emancipatory, enabling mothers to manage the stresses of motherhood and enhance solidarity with other mothers, doubts have also been raised about their authenticity amid increased commercial sponsorship (Hunter, 2016; Petersen, 2014). Duffy and Schwartz (2017) also emphasize the "increasingly feminized nature of social media labor, characterized by invisibility, lower pay, and marginal status within the technology sector" (p. 3), and Mäkinen (2017) argues that momblogging marks the "intensification" of characteristics of feminized occupations such as "the importance of emotional labor and public displays of subjectivity" (pp. 141–142). These observations tie in with Hardt and Negri's (2004) argument regarding the post-Fordist economy in which "labor with a high affective component is generally feminized, given less authority, and paid less" (p. 111).

Domestic, Emotional, and Affective Labor in the Post-Fordist Economy

In the 1980s, Piore and Sabel argued that the Fordist economy, epitomized by the assembly-line mass production of homogenous Model-T cars, reacted to market saturation and reduced growth in profits by fragmenting vertically integrated production models in favor of global business networks that rely on networked connections with localized and regional centers of production, and use outsourcing to take advantage of cheaper labor pools (Gartman, 1998; Pietrykowski, 1999). More recently, digital platforms have emerged as intermediaries in the global digital economy that enable access to transnational labor pools of digital laborers who offer data entry, virtual assistant support, and more (M. Graham, Hjorth, &

² A pseudonym.

Lehdonvirta, 2017). In this "post-Fordist" economy, a diversification of products enables the differentiation of consumers by preference, and consumeristic lifestyles become the dominant ideological dynamic of economic expansion. Although the advent of digital technologies challenged large corporations, Hesmondhalgh (1996) cautions against the binaristic assumptions of some post-Fordist writers, noting strong continuities in music industries in spite of technological changes that allow easier entry and distribution for new producers; Terranova (2000) also notes the ability of capitalism to mutate and incorporate cultural and technological changes.

An expression of these changing socioeconomic configurations is the reconfiguring of domestic work as seen in momblogs. Unpaid social reproductive work involving manual labor and logistical planning (i.e., "mental load") is a constant of mothers' lives. It also includes "the managing of others' affect" (Cummings, 2017, p. 2), ensuring a positive and supportive environment for children and spouse, often subordinating the mother's own happiness. This private "emotion work" that becomes "emotional labor" when it is public and remunerated (Hochschild, 2012, p. 7) is enacted online when mombloggers "perform affective labor on behalf of readers (by assuaging guilt and providing commiseration and community)" (Cummings, 2017, pp. 1–2), and when they promote consumer items for household use, they normalize expectations of mothers as guarantors of household well-being. Successful mombloggers labor to encourage parasocial relations and interactions in their followers by promising authenticity and foregrounding their shared interest in motherhood, using digital media skills to create appealing content, anticipating the desires of followers, and interacting with them either directly or by adapting to opinions expressed in comments and feedback. SMIs' labor is mediated—they may meet their audience occasionally, but most interactions are online and asynchronous. Although some become global figures with transnational reach, most have smaller local audiences, leveraging their ability to connect with the lives and experiences of their audience.

SMIs exemplify the hegemonic form of labor in the post-Fordist economy: immaterial labor that is "flexible, mobile and precarious," differing from industrial labor in that the product is "social and common [such as] communication, affective relationships, and knowledges" (Hardt & Negri, 2004, pp. 112, 114). As presaged by Hochschild (2003), service provision is increasingly dominant and the domestic labor embodied in momblogging epitomizes the shift to affective labor in immaterial production and the "indefinite division between work time and leisure time" (Hardt & Negri, 2004, p. 111) that is integral to the post-Fordist economy. This postmodern economy is echoed by Featherstone (2007), who notes an "aestheticization of everyday life through advertising, marketing, design and lifestyle imagery . . . the increasing centrality of marketing and information . . . and the increasing 'dematerialization' of commodities" (p. 175). These trends are demonstrated in mombloggers' deployment of affective labor that "directly produces social relationships" (Hardt & Negri, 2004, p. 110) to enhance the value of brands.

Brands, Content Marketing, and Native Advertising

As the Internet's importance for marketing became evident at the turn of the century, an influential work argued that the Internet was transforming the marketplace by ushering in "the pure sound of the human voice, not the elevated, empty speech of the corporate hierarchy" (Searles & Weinberger, 1999, para. 43). In marketing, "word of mouth" is prized and online buyers are more likely to trust information from an "average user" rather than an expert, and information from the manufacturer is the least trusted

(Hazari, Bergiel, & Sethna, 2017, p. 573). As media users increasingly avoid advertisements through on-demand media and ad-blocking software, advertisers focus on "ads [that] are harder to avoid" (Neff, 2016, p. 11). Content marketing and native advertising both use content that "blends in with the look and format of the surrounding content" (Walters & Rose, 2015, p. 3); whereas native advertising is on third-party media sites, content marketing is produced and distributed on advertisers' own media sites (Sebastian, 2013). Native advertising has seen an exponential spending growth in the United States, and overall content and native advertising accounted for 22% of display ad spending in 2014 (Leonie, 2016; Walters & Rose, 2015).

Searles and Weinberger's (1999) predictions of a withering away of corporate speech were not borne out, as the growth in native and content marketing attests, but their insight into the importance of online conversations was pertinent. In 2006, *Advertising Age* reported that there was a need to go beyond "traditional celebrities" and instead work with "celebrities who are influencers and connectors" (Schwab, 2006, p. 22). Although there was skepticism in 2011 about the value of "social influencers" (Dumenco, 2011), in 2013 blogs were ranked by marketing experts as being "their most effective content marketing tool" (Olson, 2013, p. 13). In 2015, global advertising agency Ogilvy and Mather advocated working with SMIs and slotting advertising "into the creator's own stream transparently and authentically [where the brand is] part of the fabric of existence rather than [used] through scripted and controlled messaging" (Katz, Davis, Sparling, & Chen, 2015, pp. 86–87). By 2018, "influencer marketing" was used by 75% of marketers, with 43% planning on spending more on it (Neff, 2018). Spending on influencers in the United States was expected to reach \$2 billion by 2019, amid reports that they have a significant impact on purchasing decisions, especially for YouTube, where 60% of the subscribers report being influenced, and also for Millennials, 69% of whom report following recommendations of influencers (Tobin, 2018). Due to the possibility of fraudulently manipulating the number of followers, corporations such as Unilever and Procter & Gamble base their payments on the "influencers' engagements with followers" (Neff, 2018), which is usually measured through a ratio of measured responses such as "likes" and comments to the number of followers.

In the globalized marketplace, the ease of moving production to leverage lower labor costs and the availability of generic alternatives mean that corporations invest in branding to avoid the "commodification of their products and services" (Foster, 2007, p. 716) whereby price is the only distinguishing factor for consumers. Branding distinguishes products based on symbolic values associated with social prestige and identity, inspiring "loyalty beyond reason" (Roberts, qtd. in Foster, 2005). The value of these relational brands comes from the shared meanings produced when "consumers use branded goods to create social relations and shared meanings and affect" (Foster, 2007, p. 717). The growth of social media has put this valuable "consumption work" (Foster, 2005) within reach of commercial interests that have "quantified and commodified" online interactions (Doyle, 2015, p. 55), and there is a recognition that social media have "transformed the landscape of marketing communications" (Taecharungroj, 2017, p. 553). Matic and Booth (2011) note how "consumers are impacting brand equity as never before" and the need to identify "activist influencers" (pp. 184–185) to enable marketers to enter these online conversations. In 2016, Schivinski and Dabrowski found that user-generated content "positively affect[s] both brand equity and brand attitude" (p. 202). Hazari et al. (2017) found that perusing reviews adds to their pleasurable experience of shopping (p. 573), and marketing research has emphasized the value of affective stimuli, saying that "affect is the major determinant that predicts attitudinal outcomes [in consumers]" (Chen, Kim, & Lin, 2015, p. 215).

SIMs and mombloggers' work involves self-branding; as such, they are intimately familiar with the need to develop consistent performances, associate themselves with values, and generate the affect that ensures loyalty among their followers. They encourage engagement in the form of quantifiable interactions (Mäkinen, 2017, p. 134). SMI advertorials and sponsored posts are thus a form of native advertising in which they incorporate and translate these brand messages into the social networks of which they are important articulatory nodes, animating these brands with their affective labor.

Method and Overview

BlogAdNet is the biggest blog advertising network in Malaysia and Singapore, and its website profiles leading bloggers and their genres. This was used to identify leading parent bloggers in April 2016, and further blogs found through Google searches using relevant terms (e.g., *mommy blog*, *parenting blog*, etc.) supplemented these data. The final sample was based on whether the blogger used mainly English, derived an income from social media, was a "social media native" (i.e., their source of celebrity was not extraneous to blogs/social media), and was a parent who posts about their children. Thirty-four profile pages from Malaysian and Singaporean bloggers were downloaded for textual analysis and emergent coding in NVivo 11,³ and this was followed up by contacting profiled bloggers. When consent for interviewing was obtained, a content analysis of the preceding two months of social media activity was carried out to enable a more informed interview and to choose exemplary posts as elicitation aids. Six mombloggers responded, one of whom chose to answer questions by e-mail rather than meeting for an interview. Some details of the interviewees are outlined in Table 1.⁴ They were all ethnic Malaysian Chinese and married with husbands in full-time employment. All names and brands are pseudonymized, and extracts from blog posts are paraphrased to keep the original meaning but prevent their identification through an online search.

Table 1. Interviewee Details.

Pseudonym	Age (years)	Mother tongue	Children	Profession	Education
Magdalene	32	English	2; infant and preschool	Homemaker/ self-employed	Bachelor's
Amanda	27	English	1; infant	Self-employed	Bachelor's
Yvonne	Early 40s	Chinese	3; 8–13 years of age	Self-employed	Diploma
Wendy	46	Chinese	1; preteen	Employed	Diploma
Jing Yi	Late 30s	Chinese	2; preschool	Self-employed	PhD

The content analysis of their blog posts and Instagram and Facebook posts used exclusive categories according to whether the posts were commercially oriented (advertorials, events, paid links, business) or related to family, personal, parenting, children, outfit of the day, consumer, and miscellaneous.

³ <https://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo/home>

⁴ Abigail preferred to answer questions via e-mail, and I did not have the opportunity to check her demographic details. However, she was not in full-time employment, had three young children, and was pregnant with a fourth.

There was a significant amount of monetized content, and the more popular mombloggers had a larger multiplatform presence across blogs and social network sites. In the brief discussion below, the types of content are grouped into four broad categories of commercial, family, personal, and other. Magdalene and Amanda also used Dayre (a now defunct local social network site) and Snapchat almost daily, but these were not tracked because of the ephemeral nature of Snapchat and the absence of commercial activity on Dayre. Twitter use was not significant.

Magdalene was the most successful momblogger, with more than 100,000 Instagram followers and more than 10,000 Facebook followers. She blogged two or three times a week, and used Instagram and Facebook most days. Most content (57%) was dedicated to family, 24% was commercial, and 17% was personal. She was quite active on YouTube, with one or two weekly posts of mostly family and daily activities and one makeup tutorial.

Amanda was also successfully gathering a monetizable audience and had 15,000 Instagram followers and more than 8,000 Facebook page likes. She used Instagram and Facebook more than Magdalene, with approximately two daily posts in April, but she blogged less and rarely used YouTube. Commercial content made up 64%, although this was influenced by a sponsored trip to Australia in April resulting in more "event" posts. Family content made up 23%, and personal content was 13%.

Yvonne had three blogs and reported having 10,000–12,000 monthly readers; the first blog had about four weekly posts, the second three, and the third approximately one. She had a Facebook page with more than 6,000 followers used for posts related to selling clothes, with two or three posts a week. Her blogs were also used to support her multilevel marketing activities, and the content was roughly split four ways among commercial, family, personal, and other content, although the commercial content was the lowest at 21%. This spread was influenced by one blog being exclusively devoted to health issues that came under the other category.

Wendy had one blog with 200–300 daily readers where she posted two or three times a week; she reserved her Facebook account for personal use. Most of the content on her blog was personal (56%), 24% was commercial, and 15% was family content. In the interview, she explained that she had an Instagram account, but did not use it much after trying unsuccessfully to monetize it. Jing Yi was an outlier who posted less frequently, but her interview revealed ways in which a less commercially minded momblogger reacted to monetizing opportunities and the attention that her blog generated.

Lifestyle Blogs and Baby Blogs: Blogging, Identity, and Authenticity

Blog templates typically include an "about" page for bloggers to introduce themselves to their reader, and they articulate their motivations for blogging, providing insight into their subjective identity (Cummings, 2017, p. 7). The textual analysis revealed two broad types of parent blogs⁵: What can be termed *baby blogs* were those started during or soon after pregnancy; *lifestyle blogs* already existed but

⁵ Most of them were momblogs, although some were written by fathers too.

became predominantly about parenting after having children. The motivation for baby blogs was indicated by comments such as

My intent was to blog about my time through my pregnancy, being a mother and parent, hoping that it will be a good way for her to find out about her childhood when she is older and can read. (steviesmom)

I was never a fan of blogging until my child was born in March 2014. The reason for creating this blog is so that I can share the wonderful journey of parenting with everyone out there. (papachong)

Explanations for the lifestyle blogs included

It all started with my "online diary," built from scratch on Microsoft Frontpage and hosted on Geocities (RIP, Geocities). I had no idea what blogs were till I stumbled upon a series of, hmmm, sexy stories published on this personal publishing platform called Xanga. The rest, as they say, is history. (natalie)

My vision for the long-term (wow . . .) of my blog is that I will eventually be able to look back at all my posts when I'm older and gray. This space will aid the future old and forgetful woman remember all the blessings, ups and downs, and milestones of the life that God has sent to her. I mean, me. (Amanda)

These demonstrate how personal history and identity are intertwined with the production of the blog, often felt to be an extension of the blogger's self (Reed, 2005) and underpinning the authentic performance essential to attracting and maintaining a regular following. Lifestyle bloggers mine their life experiences for authentic content to share, and Magdalene expressed how moving to blogging about parenting felt inevitable, saying,

I was so used to posting pictures of myself and my family and . . . then when [my children] were born, I didn't even think about it, you know, it was just like natural to me [to include them].

Sometimes a baby blog's genesis also coincides with the mother leaving a paid job. Abigail's first blog post explains how she quit her paid job to devote herself to her "new profession":

I've just left my job [four days ago] and today is my first day as a full-time mummy. . . . Izaiah got up this morning smiling cheekily—I wonder whether he knew that from today on his mummy is going to be there for him full time.

I will blog whenever there is time, writing my joy and life with hubby and Izaiah now, my new profession as a full time mom, experiences of the past and working life, pregnancy etc. etc., whatever comes to mind.

Seven years later, she explained to me that she did not earn a lot from her blogging, although she does "get to keep almost all of the products that [she] reviewed." Her self-identity now includes blogging, calling herself a "mummy blogger . . . [an] Amateur. Just a blogger who blogs for passion and to keep myself sane." In this she differed from Magdalene, Amanda, and Yvonne, who described themselves as "self-employed" because of their online work. The profile page can also reveal degrees of professional self-identification, such as when it is used partially as a resumé:

Taylor is also highly regarded in the fields of skin care, fashion, e-commerce, and social media. She has been invited on a few occasions to collaborate with brands as a model, ambassador, and social media. Taylor's high sense of beauty and fashion as well as her strong base of followers have made her highly sought after on social media. (Taylor)

However, the importance of framing momblogging as pleasurable and authentic (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017) can be seen in the following:

I have even done a series of advertorials for Nappies in *Mother & Baby* magazine. Below are just a few of the articles which featured mainly Nurul and Naini, and their growth from little newborns to 1 year old toddlers! It was a lot of fun doing these. Thank you Nappies once again for this great opportunity which serves as lovely keepsakes for me and my twins. (Cardolle)

Petersen (2014, p. 285) recounts frequent ambivalence about becoming a mother, and Abigail's above reference to keeping herself "sane" shows how a blog can also be a means to reflexively manage the isolation and frustration that mothers who withdraw from the labor force may experience, such as when melonmama says, "I started this blog to have an outlet to scream as a frustrated and bored Stay At Home Mom almost a decade ago." Wendy also recounted a similar experience:

'Cos I was a stay at home mom that time and I was bored so I read blogs and everything. Then I started trying out myself to blog. Started with just blogging about personal things, you know, then comes the monetizing.

The above discussion reveals blogs as sites of intersection of different identities as mother, blogger, and professional. Mombloggers publicly embrace motherhood, but ambivalence about becoming defined by the private domestic sphere means that the blog serves as an outlet for personally meaningful activity and to reclaim a public role. Nonetheless, this public role is circumscribed by the exigencies of a commercially oriented discourse of motherhood suitable for marketing and advertising.

Self-Branding

The interviewees were conscious of the need for a consistent and positive performance to maintain a regular readership, and some spoke about this in terms of branding, echoing Senft's (2013) definition of microcelebrity and Marwick's (2013) discussion of how social media enable a reflexive performance conforming

to post-Fordist parameters of value creation. Both Magdalene and Amanda worked in close concert with the corporate marketing apparatus, and Amanda described how her managers positioned her to clients:

They will say that I'm a mother, a new mom. And my followers are mostly new moms as well, who have dual income, so they have spending power. An urban mom who . . . puts a priority on the quality of the stuff that the kids use. . . . I used to run an online boutique selling clothes. So they will add in that I'm an entrepreneur as well. . . . That's the sales pitch part.

As aspirant SMIs seek to develop a presence, they can draw on examples of successful SMIs as well as the "ideologies and practices of self-branding" (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017, p. 4654) that overlap with corporate marketing strategies. Magdalene remarked on some new entrants, saying,

I think most of the eager bloggers in Malaysia are always very focused on fashion. . . . They try to brand themselves. They try to solely attend the events for all, like the high-end brands and all that so that clients will think of them like a premium kind of blogger.

Magdalene expressed how she conceptualized branding and her own blogging practices, as well as the ambivalence of the reflexive performance:

A lot of readers say that they like my blog because they feel that I'm real, because I'm very honest, but in a way that is who I am but that has also become my brand. . . . So that's what I always say, "How do you know I'm really real—that I didn't just—that this is not just something that, you know, a persona that I put on?"

Amanda focused mostly on Instagram because of her younger audience that is "very visual" and explained that she always used the same camera to ensure aesthetic consistency, as well as planning regular and varied content, saying, "I plan my feed. I really plan my time." However, although she felt tempted to only post her "best . . . nicest photo," she felt a responsibility not to portray her life as perfect and—reflecting Mäkinen's (2017) observations regarding mombloggers' concerns about appearing "normal"—she would "try to post photos . . . without makeup or when I'm at home to let them know that I'm also like a normal person." Nonetheless, she expressed some ambivalence in this regard:

Yeah. As much as I try not to brand myself a certain way, I feel like I need to be consistent because, um, people who don't know the real me will really judge the photos and yeah. So I . . . try to sort of like brand myself a certain way.

Resolving a constant tension between being authentic and self-branding mostly depends on the willingness to negotiate conditional financial incentives. Jing Yi's concern with authenticity led her to reject some offers such as when she had attended an event after which the organizers shared "the information you need to blog about it," but she said, "I'm sorry, I only blog about my real experience. . . . I only want to share true, real experience." She described how she had blogged about a "steamer cum blender," and

speculated that “many people thought I was paid to write about that equipment”; but she had bought it first and shared the experience because “as a busy mother, that one I find very useful.”

A motivation to support other mothers was common to all the interviewees. After describing her manager’s branding pitch, Amanda nonetheless emphasized her desire to connect with her followers, underlining the role of affective labor: “I guess the overall feeling is that . . . I want people to know that I am approachable and they can just e-mail me if they have any questions about anything.” Similarly, Magdalene explained the importance of building a relationship with her followers and contrasted SMIs with conventional movie or music celebrities, with whom people connect through their artistic output, but “when it comes to [influencers], you connect with people through stories.” She explained that although “others get followed because they are pretty but they don’t get as much engagement—Likes, comments”—and she had realized that

it’s not so much about my face, it’s about my life you know. My whole brand is about my life. And so that’s why I [started YouTube] because I felt that video gives another insight into my life and it’s part of the whole branding thing and it’s another way to connect people. . . . I don’t know. It evokes emotions or something.

The role of affective labor in building extended parasocial relations and an effective SMI brand are central. Whereas all branding aims to engender emotional responses (the “character” of the brand), these are underwritten by the materiality of the consumable product. A Big Mac tastes the same worldwide, and an iPad works immediately out of the box. However, by producing a consistent performance in what amounts to a self-branding process, and engaging with their followers on an affective level, the SMIs’ “product” is the affect itself, which they transfer and are rewarded with quantified and monetizable attention.

Advertorials and Commodity Posts

The content analysis revealed differences between locally targeted higher value and globally sourced lower value monetized blog content. Magdalene and Amanda had regular advertorials integrated into cross-platform campaigns, as well as event posts, which were typically reports of product launches or other marketing events. However, Yvonne had only one advertorial, and both her blogs and Wendy’s distinguished themselves by having up to three monthly blog posts with paid links.

Advertorials are paid blog posts written as apparently spontaneous descriptions of a consumer experience that emphasize the pleasures of consumption and carry the assurance of being tested by the blogger. A typical example was an advertorial by Amanda that started by asking, “So you may be wondering how we finally got a nice canvas print in our bedroom, after leaving the walls bare for so long?” With a series of before and after photographs, that included her husband setting up the poster, she described how a poster printing company was “introduced” to her, the steps needed to upload and design the print via a Web page, and finished with a picture of her son on their bed below the framed poster on the wall. In the same week, she used some of these photos in her Instagram and once on Facebook. The latter included a discount coupon code, and the paid status of the blog advertorial was marked with a tag, but the Instagram posts had no formal disclosure.

Wendy's blog had a post that appeared to conform to this model, telling a story of going shopping and becoming embarrassed after seeing someone with the exact same top. It concluded that this would not have happened if "I had done my shopping online at [Portland store Guitar Centers](#) [linked in the blog]." The link to an American guitar shop was incongruous, but not all the paid links were blatantly inauthentic. Most of Yvonne's paid link posts were related to medical services, reflecting a key focus of her blogs, but they also included a link to a seafood delivery service in Florida and a U.S. company specializing in medical scrubs, for which the post suggested that purchasing children's lab coats for role playing could stimulate their interest in STEM professions.

Yvonne also explained that she did not always write the posts:

Some of them I do, but some of them I don't. It's just a copy and paste and they pay me. Easy money. [On average] 20 U.S. dollars. To me is good—times four [i.e., the exchange rate was 4RM to US\$1]. I just spend a few minutes. (Yvonne)

In effect, they were part of a transnational supply of content marketing and native advertising designed to manipulate Google search ranking by enveloping backlinks in "natural" content, and she speculated about the source: "I think those advertisers pay content writers . . . in India." Yvonne and Wendy did not seem to be worried by concerns about authenticity and disclosure. Wendy also said, "Some are not written by me. They just give me a post to post it up. It's okay. . . . It's part of the monetizing." They had been able to make a significant income (equivalent to a starting graduate's salary), but they were affected by the global economic cycles. Yvonne said that she "used to earn like 2–3000 ringgit [US\$600–900], then it slows down . . . tremendously after 2008"; Wendy said, "I think somewhere around 2010 . . . everything's slowed down. . . . During the peak time I was making around maybe 800 U.S. dollars a month." Their work over the years enabled them to get commissions directly from companies such as PayPerPost and PayU2Blog, differing from a student in Malaysia working through an online digital labor platform who was subcontracted to provide similar search engine optimization content for "digital freelancers" with stronger profiles and direct contacts with overseas employers (M. Graham et al., 2017, p. 150). All of the paid content in Yvonne and Wendy's blogs linked to U.S. businesses, apart from one post about a Chinese wedding dress factory that was in English and probably targeted the U.S. market. However, Magdalene and Amanda leveraged their mostly local following to work with BlogAdNet, an established part of the national advertising sector. They made no mention of international contacts, apart from interactions with local branches of multinational corporations. This reflects the importance of national markets for advertisers whose revenue relies on local sales, whereas the provision of paid links takes on a more transnational character and is a purely digital commodity, aimed at search engine optimization within the United States and with a low affective labor input.

Gendered Labor

Momblogs are sites of reflexive subjectivities centered on performances of motherhood, and Abigail's explanation of how blogging was most important to her in terms of being able to store memories and "to connect with other people all over the world, share and learn from each other" reflects the altruistic and self-sacrificial disposition that is central to motherhood. Similarly, Jing Yi started her blog before giving

birth but enjoyed sharing detailed research into parenting matters, such as one of her first posts as a parent about her positive experience of giving birth in a government-run hospital. She was motivated when it became “a hit,” responded to enquiries, and felt that she had “encouraged many people to go to these hospitals” despite the apprehensions of many Malaysian middle-class parents. Amanda also explained that “after I became a mom, I realized that I want to share more to help new mothers going through the same thing.” Yvonne described a good post as being “motherhood advice on what to do . . . [such as] how to placate a wailing child, child throwing tantrums . . . and how you managed to do it successfully.” These positive experiences were tempered, however, by judgmental pressures to conform to gendered expectations of motherhood: Yvonne reported receiving “unkind comments about my children. . . . What do I hope to get by making them do something like that?” Abigail also reported being subjected to judgmental attitudes regarding her breastfeeding choices because “there are people out there who bashed mums who breastfeed children past 1 year old.”

Hochschild and Machung (2003) describe how working mothers return from their paid work only to take on a “second shift” of unpaid domestic work. Yvonne and Amanda related an effective reversal of this scenario whereby they find time after and during their domestic work to engage in the additional burden of paid labor, although Yvonne’s description contrasts with Amanda’s in terms of the concern with authenticity and exemplifies the commoditization of the paid link post:

I used to do 20 paid posts in a day and my baby was just a few months old. . . . Yes, breastfeeding her! [miming breastfeeding and typing] Sometimes she’s on a bouncer and one leg, you know, pushing the bouncer and I just type, typing like that. . . . Yes, 20 paid posts in a day, plus in between personal posts, so that’s like 50 posts in a day. I know. *I write crap. I don’t care* [emphasis added]. (Yvonne)

I felt, okay, this might be a long nap . . . let’s see what I can do with my time. So I decided, oh you know what, he just started to learn how to sit in those few days. . . . So I just find pictures and I just wrote. . . . *In between advertorials I try to share more about my own life. So that it’s not just an advertorial blog* [emphasis added]. (Amanda)

In the accounts above, we see that mombloggers not only have to be constantly available, multitasking and watching for opportunities to combine domestic tasks with emotional labor to craft affective relations with followers, but they also need to make this as invisible as possible, both key processes that Duffy and Schwartz (2017) associate with the feminization of social media labor. Duffy and Schwartz emphasize other indicators of the feminization of this sector, such as the precarity of employment, and also point to how it usually requires an initial outlay of free labor to build up a suitable online profile. Reflecting this, Amanda explained,

I get quite a lot of sponsored products . . . sometimes good expensive products. [I get asked] “Wow, you get sponsor and how do I do it? I also want to get sponsored.” But the thing is it’s very hard for them to understand *that it didn’t just happen yesterday*. . . . *Everything has been built since way back* [emphasis added].

All the interviewees were married with employed husbands, and only Wendy was in salaried employment. Although both Magdalene and Amanda earned monthly amounts equivalent to a full-time office job, all interviewees described their blogging income as complementary to their husband's income:

I would say if it's more like a supplementary income than anything, so what I have I give to my family and my parents . . . the main bulk of the spending comes from my husband. . . . [The amount is] pretty significant. It could amount to a full-time job. (Amanda)

[It was] more like pocket money for me being a stay at home mom and also something to keep me occupied. Get in touch with other people. (Wendy)

Reflecting Lupton, Pedersen, and Thomas's (2016, p. 732) findings in the United States, the Malaysian mombloggers were all middle class with further education,⁶ supported by salaried husbands, and thus able to withstand the precarity of social media work as well as devote time for the free labor needed to build an online profile (Duffy & Schwartz, 2017). Many middle-class Malaysian families are able to afford a domestic helper, and Magdalene described a dilemma that highlights idealized conceptions of motherhood and different manifestations of domestic labor:

I do feel pressured to try to hide like certain bad things that I might do as a parent. . . . I'll feel when I'm editing right now, I'll feel like I want to remove the segment of my maid . . . because I feel I will get judged that I'm not hands on . . . which is very unfair because obviously I do, like I do everything.

Taylor (2016) notes that domestic work only becomes creative labor in Canadian middle-class contexts, but not for "paid labor done . . . by often immigrant and racialised women" (Barber, 1997, cited in Taylor, 2016, p. 111). Domestic workers in Malaysia are usually women from the Philippines or Indonesia who may have their own children cared for by family and supported by their domestic labor. In this, we see how class experiences can transcend global north/south divides, and regional disparities also reveal themselves in the different ways in which the domestic work can be monetized.

Conclusions

Monetizing a blog means engaging in heterogeneous practices that enable it to be both a dialogical parasocial process resting on socialities that explicitly reject a commodity status and a commodity available in exchange for money. Momblogs are a post-Fordist manifestation of domestic labor that foregrounds affective labor and articulates the discursive tension between the brand and the commodity actualized in their different economic values, with the restricted utilitarian value of the commodity receding in the face of relational brands animated by affective labor. Exploring mombloggers' practices helps us understand how old inequalities are being perpetuated and new inequalities are emerging in a global digital economy, and

⁶ The different level of education of Yvonne and Wendy may also reflect their age: For their generation, higher education was less available and a diploma was also more likely to be an acceptable achievement for middle-class women.

SIMs emerge as new advertising vehicles with hierarchies based on the size of their audiences and the depth of affective entanglement through which they enroll their networks of followers into relations with the brand.

With this article, I hope to contribute to broader discussions on SIMs and new forms of labor by providing more data on underrepresented Asian experiences; however, this article is also limited by the sample size, the self-selection of interviewees, their uniform Chinese ethnicity, and use of English language, that do not reflect the multiethnicity of Malaysia and Singapore.

A feature of the post-Fordist economy is the blurring of personal and private (Taylor, 2016, p. 110) in an "always on" disposition aptly represented by the smartphone, also an essential tool of SIMs. Momblogging can be an effective means of managing stresses of motherhood and achieving some measure of financial independence by maintaining a professional and public life. However, this professionalization of the domestic sphere also reflects continuing gendered inequalities in an effective reversal of the "second shift" whereby mombloggers need to transform their domestic work into monetizable labor, collecting and representing anecdotes through a performance of motherhood that coincides with marketing strategies of goods and services targeted mostly at women.

Although the momblogger genre typecasts them as carers, the value of conventionally undervalued emotional work may increase as the contribution of affective labor to brand value becomes more evident. However, it is also important to note that there is a significant amount of free labor that is required before SIMs achieve a sufficient presence, and that this ability also depends on skills and time more readily available to those with more economic and cultural capital. As the shift to a post-Fordist economy includes the expansion of the capitalist market into personal space, combined with the emergence of SIMs as a new vector for marketing and advertising and the continued expansion of female employment, it is important to pay attention to the implications for gender parity and the valorization of affective labor. The suggestion that there is an ongoing feminization of the social media sector (Duffy & Schwartz, 2017) receives some support in this article, but more macro data on the demographics of SIMs and relative remuneration within the media and marketing sectors are needed to answer this question properly.

The content analysis highlighted the two most important sources of income: advertorials and paid link posts. The "commodity posts" represent examples of lower cost labor being sourced through digital networks from the United States to Malaysia and other lower income countries, whereas the advertorials are more embedded in local advertising markets by dint of their relevance to local culture. The former depend more on embedding oneself into global digital and commercial networks and securing requisite statistical digital markers, whereas the latter depend on developing parasocial relations that depend on developing familiarity and reflecting local/national interests. Paid link posts do not depend as much on the affective labor that underwrites the more lucrative advertorials, and their sourcing demonstrates how global inequalities in labor costs are leveraged through digital technologies that enable the sourcing and distribution of digital content in a global chain of content marketing that serves mostly Euro-American clients. However, we also saw how content is sourced within Asia, highlighting how analyses need to move beyond a dichotomous conception of "the West and the rest."

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