

Social Media Influence: Performative Authenticity and the Relational Work of Audience Commodification in the Philippines

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This article examines issues linked to monetization on social media platforms through an investigation of the work of social media influence in the Philippines. Based on a series of semistructured interviews with Filipino influencers, we asked how influencers understand, engage, and commodify the audience for their content. We suggest that social media influence work in the Philippines is defined by globally connected but locally rooted practices of performed authenticity through which creators employ conscious and identifiable strategies to cultivate a local audience that mostly occupies very different socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural positions from the creators themselves. We argue that understanding authenticity as work that can be performed and negotiated between producers and their audiences offers new and interesting directions in approaching the commodification of social media audiences.

Keywords: social media influence, monetization, platform studies, Philippines, social media entertainment, cultural production

Social media influencers are individual creators with large followings who produce personal content for various online platforms and monetize that content at least in part through marketing partnerships with brands and advertisers. The brand sponsorship of media content production that is achieved through the work of social media influence is emerging as a significant, but ethically murky, driver of the advertising industry's evolving global investment in the production of content for electronic media. Analyses of the practices involved in social media influence are increasingly both consequential and generative to normative understandings of the emerging social media entertainment industry (Craig & Cunningham, 2019) and the monetization strategies of social media platforms themselves (see Gillespie, 2010). As a complex, context-specific set of practices that cut across national borders, languages, cultures, and platforms, research into social media influence requires empirical accounts that integrate local specificity into global analysis through investigations of local and regional influence economies and audiences. This study asks about social media influence work in a specific market to better understand how creators navigate their relationships with

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sponsoring brands, advertising intermediaries, and local and global audiences. Based on a series of semistructured interviews with Filipino influencers, we asked how influencers understand, engage, and commodify the audience for their content. We suggest that social media influence work in the Philippines is defined by globally connected but locally rooted practices of performed authenticity through which creators employ conscious and identifiable strategies to cultivate a local audience that mostly occupies very different socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural positions from the creators themselves. We outline how strategic relational practices are central to the performance of authenticity and to an increasingly significant form of monetization of social media entertainment.

Social Media Influencer: Advertising, Authentic Content, and Platform Politics

Advertising and marketing have long been primary models of subsidizing media content production and have shifted strategically to make the most of new media affordances (Turow, 2012). At the same time, commercial interests have largely been considered detrimental to the integrity of editorial and artistic values of media productions (Carlson, 2015; Couldry & Turow, 2014; Dijck & Nieborg, 2009) as well as capable of shaping the social environment in ways that can harm individual viewers (Couldry & Turow, 2014). These lines of critique originate in a perceived difference between the interests of marketers and those of content producers and their audiences. However, the financial support of the advertising sector has been crucial to content production. Typically, media producers get very little of their money directly from consumers but work on a business model of delivering audiences for advertising content—the origin of Dallas Smythe’s (1981) audience commodity. Advertisers, resentful of restrictions on their ability to influence editorial content that they essentially pay for, have aggressively pursued new integration of advertising content as falling publisher revenues give them the upper hand in negotiations (Brodmerkel & Carah, 2016; Turow, 2012). Strategies such as direct sponsorship of content and native advertising (Carlson, 2015; Ikonen, Luoma-aho, & Bowen, 2017; Wojdyski & Evans, 2016) and product placement (Eagle & Dahl, 2018) are becoming common on a global scale as advertisers seek relationships that allow them more direct access to audiences.

Individual creators online, unbound from broadcasting legislation or editorial policies of larger media producers, directly partner with marketing teams to make commercial content for an existing and invested audience. Analysis is clear that the perception that creators post content that is authentic to who they are is not just crucial to enthusiasm for social media entertainment’s empowering potential, but also is required to build, keep, and monetize an audience (Hunter, 2016). At the same time, sponsored content created by professional influencers as part of a transactional agreement with marketers often integrates explicit calls for specific kinds of consumption into a space that is simultaneously personal and built on community relationships (Abidin, 2014; Marwick & boyd, 2011). Attempting to frame this tension, scholars have developed theoretical frameworks that interrogate the claim that professional social media content creation is authentic to the desires, lives, and voices of creators. Duffy’s (2017) work on the concept of aspirational labor extends Marwick’s (2015; Marwick & boyd, 2011) arguments of microcelebrity practices and self-editing of online personas to suggest that many professional social media creators work to craft online versions of themselves with higher social capital in an effort to increase the status and value of their work. Drawing on what Baym (2015) refers to as relational labor, Abidin (2015) describes the practices through which social media entertainment creators prioritize intimacy over authenticity, by which she means

that creators focus on making content that will form and strengthen social bonds and relationships with their audiences over making content that is reflective of their own voice and life. Relational work on social media is reflected in a preference for unscripted content, the setting of filming or photography in living rooms and bedrooms, and behavior that reinforces an "ordinary persona" (Abidin, 2015, p. 3). "Ordinary," in this context, is a shifting category that depends on the lifestyle of the audience and often reflects the impacts of "social structures imposed on minority audiences" (Yoon, 2017, p. 2361). Concepts taken from this body of work are particularly generative for understanding social media influence as they underline the importance of understanding the power dynamics embedded in the status of creators relative to their audiences.

On the question of social media authenticity, Wang and Skovira (2017) ask, "Is there authentic marketing?" (p. 8). They conclude that if marketing succeeds in informing an audience that needs to be informed, it can be authentic, but that efforts to manipulate cannot be considered authentic. This is the fundamental debate over the inclusion of commercial materials in media products, but it is frequently revised to suggest that authenticity is negotiated based on social roles and participation. In a special issue of *Discourse, Context & Media*, Leppänen, Møller, Nørreby, Stæhr, and Kytölä (2015) present detailed case studies that demonstrate how social media users mobilize linguistic strategies to make themselves authentic to their audiences, whose acceptance of the speaker remains the test of authenticity in practice (Androutsopoulos, 2013). In the Philippines, social and linguistic practices are frequently closely related to social position, and boundaries of authenticity are sometimes policed by social media users offended by "plastic" or inconsistent behaviors (Hjorth & Arnold, 2013, p. 80). Speaking directly to the commercial practices of YouTube influencers, Craig and Cunningham (2019) draw on Banet-Weiser's (2012) work on brand ambiguity to argue that understandings of authenticity must be open to interpreting participation online as more than consumption and seeing the blurred lines between the commercial and the personal as an expected and tolerated part of culture. In addition, they argue that hand-wringing over authenticity is largely confined to the West and does not figure, for example, in Chinese social media entertainment or online content production in India. In Abidin's (2016) work on fashion blog shops, authentic and commercial content are closely tied to homosocial desires—reflective of gendered social practices that are incorporated into online personas as part of complex arrangements of self-branding and self-commodification (Marwick, 2015)—to fuel consumerist practices.

Through online influence campaigns, advertisers are developing strategies for using the authentic voices of creators to leverage intimate emotional relationships with audiences (Segev, Villar, & Fiske, 2012; Solis & Breakenridge, 2009). These practices were first evident as so-called blogger relations emerged as a focus of advertising firms and have evolved from there as creators on platforms such as Instagram and YouTube have become high-profile elements of the contemporary media landscape (Abidin, 2014; Carah & Shaul, 2016). Abidin (2014) argues that ad-friendly content and brand partnerships are required for creators to benefit financially and that relational practices are necessary to maintain the connection between creators and their audiences. The relational practices noted by Abidin are designed to encourage the formation of parasocial relationships. Parasocial relations are perceptions of intimacy in indirect interactions, such as between viewers and characters on television. Research has connected parasocial relationships to YouTubers navigating self-presentation on YouTube (Chen, 2016) and in the creation of brand loyalty online (Labrecque, 2014), as well as in how Filipinos view celebrities (Centeno, 2010). Low-fi, personality-centered channels that air uncut footage—video blogs, or vlogs—are an increasingly important part of YouTube's

talent pool (Burgess & Green, 2018) and have become prime candidates for advertising campaigns attempting to reach online audiences. It is precisely the perception that creators communicate authentically in their voices to their audiences and not in the high-gloss packaging typical of professional advertising media content that is perceived to make influence marketing resonate with consumers.

Method and Research Design

Pointing out that research on social media production has tended to focus on primarily Western contexts, Craig and Cunningham (2019) and Kumar (2016) argue that online cultural production is so widespread and disparate that there is not yet a monolithic or generalizable answer to questions of the power imbalances attendant on the role of advertising in online production. We respond to their call for scholars to empirically map specific relationships of power, agency, and culture from diverse local contexts as part of a programmatic task of comparing insights into global patterns within these industries. Researchers have identified patterns in which certain languages are privileged and global genres are shaped to local contexts (e.g., Androutsopoulos, 2013; Dovchin, 2015). Crystal Abidin (2014, 2015) and a handful of other scholars (Kumar, 2016; Zhao, 2016) have conducted context-specific investigations of local influencer work in non-Western, nonanglophone environments. These examinations have contributed to understanding influence work as embedded in local cultural contexts. Taken alongside work such as Ganti's (2016) study of the use of Hindi and English in Bollywood, these studies demonstrate how content creators' decisions are deeply embedded in social hierarchies that reflect not only local points of friction, but also global patterns that privilege some groups, languages, and practices over others. In this vein, the Philippines presents a revealing and unexplored case study.

The popularity of social media platforms in the Philippines has led to the country being referred to as the "social media capital of the world," a label that was repeated by many of our interview respondents. This claim is supported by academic reports of the outsized use of social media by the Filipino population (Hjorth & Arnold, 2013; Soriano, Roldan, Cheng, & Oco, 2016) and industry coverage that places the Philippines at the top of global rankings for social media use (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2017). Other scholars have noted the importance of media and entertainment products to life in the Philippines, even suggesting that "one can't theorize Philippine modernity or politics without including a deep analysis of television and entertainment industries" (Pertierra, 2016, p. 296). Filipino audiences have tended to be interested in cultural products that mimic or hybridize content from more-affluent societies including OECD Western countries, South Korea, and Japan. In this, the Philippines is in a similar position to other Southeast Asian countries, including Indonesia and Singapore, where hybridization, Westernization, class dynamics, and the tokenization of cultural mores are hotly contested (Coutas, 2006; Hjorth & Arnold, 2013). In addition, the realities of income disparities in the Philippines deeply affect how media are used and by whom, for instance, by normalizing the practice of sharing media devices (Soriano, Cao, & Sison, 2018). Analysis of social media use affirms the importance of celebrities to Filipino culture (Soriano et al., 2016). However, new genres, developed online, have attracted audience attention to content, such as social media video and photography, that directly reflects local social realities. At the same time, the global nature of online viewership has created a radically different context for creators, as international audiences become a significant part of the market for content (Coutas, 2006; Pertierra, 2013; Yoon, 2017). Filipino creators also face a complex social environment at home, where social hierarchies surrounding English proficiency

reproduce existing class tensions (Tupas & Salonga, 2016). English has pride of place among upper class and upwardly mobile Filipinos, and Tagalog remains the vernacular of the largest proportion of the population, especially in and around the capital, Manila (Abinales & Amoroso, 2017; Hjorth & Arnold, 2013; Philippines Statistics Authority, 2017). Filipino creators must navigate a complex overlap of content styles and audience demands that reflect global and local preferences and changing attitudes toward celebrity and status. The empirical details of this process and of how the creators themselves perceive their audiences are significant to understanding not only the questions we have raised about the social media influence economy in the Philippines, but to using this local example to contribute to filling gaps in the general theories of social media creation outlined above.

This study centers on a series of 20 semistructured interviews conducted with influencers, audiences, and industry professionals in the Philippines. The majority of the respondents were creators working as influencers, primarily YouTubers (for details on the respondents, see Table 1). Both targeted and snowball sampling were used: initially, participants were approached based on their perceived significance to the Filipino influencer scene, and subsequent interview subjects were found through recommendations from respondents. Efforts were made to recruit creators working in a variety of content areas and at a diversity of stages of professional development and audience following. All interviews were recruited and conducted by a Filipino, Tagalog/English bilingual member of the research team. We have intentionally left certain Tagalog words in our discussion section when we felt that the original provides an important point of emphasis or when it was contextually significant that the respondent had code-switched from English to Tagalog to express that specific point. In those cases, translations of the Tagalog words are provided within parentheses. The major themes of the interview protocol included

- description of the respondents' role in the Filipino influencer economy and their perspective on the social media landscape in the Philippines,
- accounts of the relationships among influencer content and brands and companies,
- respondents' understandings of the audience in the Philippines for social media entertainment content and evaluation of the perceived benefits and drawbacks of sponsored content for Internet users,
- the nature of relationships between content creators and professional service intermediaries such as advertising agencies, and
- relationships between local Philippines influence work and influence work for the global Internet and/or other regional/cultural audiences.

We thematically analyzed the interviews; results were compared and discussed within the research team.

Table 1. Interview Participant Profiles.

Name	Platform	Follower count	Industry/area	Type	Background
Nena	Blog	1,665 (Instagram)	Beauty/lifestyle	Influencer	2 years as lifestyle blogger; previous experience in communications, journalism, and broadcasting
Flordeliza	Blog and YouTube	17,700 (YouTube)	Beauty/lifestyle	Influencer	3 years as a beauty blogger, 2 years as vlogger
Imee	Blog	77,700 (Instagram)	Beauty/lifestyle	Influencer	11 years as lifestyle blogger, previous experience as TV host and broadcaster
Maricar	Blog and YouTube	8,418 (YouTube)	Beauty/lifestyle	Influencer	6 years as a lifestyle blogger, 2 years as vlogger, previous experience as TV and events host
Luzviminda	Blog and YouTube	15,300	Beauty/lifestyle	Influencer	4 years as fashion blogger, 3 years as vlogger
Lito	YouTube	14,000	Daily vlogger	Influencer	Less than 1 year as lifestyle/daily vlogger, previous experience in modeling
Danilo	YouTube	21,511 (YouTube)	Daily vlogger	Influencer	1 year as lifestyle/daily vlogger
Ligaya	YouTube	7,947 (YouTube)	Beauty/lifestyle	Influencer	Less than 1 year as fashion/beauty/lifestyle vlogger
Riza	Blog and YouTube	3,764 (YouTube)	Beauty/lifestyle	Influencer and strategist	3 years as fashion blogger, less than 1 year as vlogger, previous experience in digital marketing and hosting

Jocelyn	YouTube	2,664 (YouTube)	Daily vlogger	Influencer	6 years as vlogger
Analyn	YouTube	8,666	Beauty/lifestyle	Influencer	8 years as vlogger, went to film school
Arnel	N/A	N/A	Industry	Strategist	Director, producer, filmmaker (primarily commercial, corporate)
Isagani	YouTube	2,854 (YouTube)	Daily vlogger	Influencer	Less than 1 year as lifestyle/daily vlogger
Rommel	N/A	N/A	N/A	Influencer	Film student
Lilibeth	Blog and YouTube	4,856 (Instagram)	Beauty/lifestyle	Influencer	12 years as fashion blogger, 2 years as vlogger
Jessa	N/A	N/A	Industry	Strategist	Digital strategist at major international advertising firm
Marisol	N/A	N/A	Industry	Strategist	Network manager at prominent multichannel network, previous experience in blogger relations
Gener	N/A	N/A	Industry	Strategist	Partner manager for Philippines and other regional countries at major social media platform company
Marlon	N/A	N/A	Industry	Strategist	Digital strategist at Philippines office of major international advertising firm
Rodel	YouTube	2,135 (YouTube)	Daily vlogger	Influencer	1 year as vlogger; previous experience as model, filmmaker

When possible, Table 1 includes interviewees' follower counts as shorthand for their significance within the Philippine influencer scene and the responsiveness of audiences to their content. Follower counts were not the only metric we used to gauge the quality of our sample. These numbers are more easily obtained on certain platforms (e.g., YouTube subscribers) than others (e.g., blog readerships). In the case of blogger interviewees (who also operate on multiple social media platforms), Instagram consistently

proved to be the platform on which they had the largest following. As such, we use Instagram follower counts to represent their general following. For industry stakeholders who are not influencers, we evaluated their suitability based on their affiliation with well-established, well-recognized Philippine or international businesses in the telecommunications, media, and entertainment industries.

In terms of the general demographics and professional practices of the participants, all participants were based in the Philippines at the time of the interviews. Many of the influencers we spoke to began their channels speaking nearly entirely in English to create content that would be accessible for a pan-Asian or international audience. Although a significant number still primarily speak English in their videos (and all primarily speak English in their lives outside social media), more than a quarter of our respondents—more than half of those whose primary social media activity was YouTube—had self-consciously inserted Tagalog into their videos. Those who had done so universally cited the linguistic habits and preferences of their audience—identified through analytics or face-to-face conversations—as the reason to include more Tagalog content.

In addition, a significant percentage of respondents (roughly a quarter) identified substantial differences in the audiences for text and photo content and audiences for video. Flordeliza backed up her observations with analytics:

80% of the viewership on my channel is from the Philippines. . . . Conversely on my blog . . . the Philippines would be 40% and the U.S. and Canada together would be another 40% and the rest of Southeast Asia share the rest of the pie.

Maricar noted that “bloggers are more ‘sosyal’ . . . they speak English,” whereas vloggers tended to be more down to earth and frequently spoke Tagalog. Lilibeth put this trend more specifically in terms of class: “[the] blogging community is mostly A, B. YouTubers are diverse—A, B, C, D—but a large chunk of audience are from the C, D market.” This characterization contrasted with the situation of our respondents, who consistently identified themselves as middle class and upper middle class.

The Influence Economy in “the Social Media Capital of the World”

Reflecting observations on the work of influence in other national/regional contexts (see Craig & Cunningham, 2019), the Filipino social content creators interviewed participated in bespoke partnership arrangements with marketing agencies and brands. In relation to other influence economies, perceptions of the local practice in the Philippines are distinguished by two key themes: the marketability of Filipino audiences to sponsored content and a fundamental gap in socioeconomic position separating most creators from their audiences.

Respondents stressed to us that Filipino audiences are extremely heavy users of social media and that they are highly engaged fans. The recent availability of cheaper smartphones and mobile Internet plans have made the Internet more accessible to Filipino audiences and increased the popularity of video platforms, particularly YouTube. The result has been the emergence of a vibrant audience for social media content. As one respondent put it, “More and more people are uploading onto YouTube in the Philippines,

and yes, that's because of the democratization of . . . access and smartphones and cheap smartphones" (Gener, a project manager at a major platform). As a result, the Philippines has become a visible and emerging market for digital content. Well-established companies in telecommunications and broadcast media are investing resources in cultivating a robust audience for online video in the Philippines. Corporations are eager to mobilize Filipino fan bases. Gener noted that his company is "prioritizing" the Philippines market for growth, citing not just the amount of content consumption by Filipino social media audiences, but their "viewer behavior" as well as the "wealth of talent in the Philippines." "We feel," Gener continued, "like the Philippines is a very, very immature market that could become and is becoming like a hotbed of content and talent."

Our respondents qualified Filipinos as a highly engaged, celebrity-driven audience. "Filipinos are fans. Filipinos are crazy fans," noted Imee. Another respondent, Arnel, suggested that "every fan page becomes a kind of shrine to an online personality." The effect that this quantity and quality of engagement with social media audiences has on the marketability of Filipino audiences to sponsored content was cited by a few influencers as crucial to understanding the local influence scene. Influencers are acutely aware of the potential benefits to be gained from leveraging cultural affinities to engage with a highly receptive viewership. "Something that can generate that much interaction," Arnel told us, "is lightning in a bottle. Big brands know this and they're hoping to cash in on the action." Another echoed that sentiment: "I'm gonna ride that wave. The wave's small, but when it gets big, I'm gonna be there, I'm gonna ride that wave" (Rodel). And they do ride the wave. Respondents reported on sponsorship arrangements with content creators that are supporting the emergence of a community of professional influencers and an emerging social media entertainment industry in the Philippines. However, in discussing how they understand their audiences and approach the delicate task of monetizing them through sponsored influence content creation, many respondents' descriptions underlined the presence of significant socioeconomic and cultural gaps between creators and audiences that must be seen as one of the defining features of the Filipino context. This gap in social capital and worldview was perhaps most evident when the influencers were asked to describe the attributes of Filipino audiences.

Some creators dismissively referred to the "immaturity" of Filipino tastes. Jessa told us, "I guess the Filipinos are still in the phase of . . . 'third world advertising.' You know how we like jingles, we like dance." Having lived in Canada for most of her adolescence before returning to the Philippines, Imee contrasted North American viewership culture with Philippine viewership culture. Her view is that Canadians are "very cynical" and treat famous figures with a degree of indifference, whereas audiences in the Philippines are more receptive to the glamor associated with highly visible personalities, leading to a situation in which marketing campaigns in the Philippines are "run at very different level." Jessa echoed this comparison by suggesting that Filipino audiences need to be "spoon fed" and that "creative, smart" content has to be "dumbed down a bit." The influencers certainly appreciate that the Filipino audience contains many elements that make it an ideal market for influencer content, but also seem to paint themselves as somehow distinct, more sophisticated and worldly than that audience. Evaluated in the context of other themes and discussions included in our interviews, these comments underline the presence of a significant socioeconomic and cultural gap between Filipino creators and audiences, understanding of which is, in our view, crucial to understanding the work of influence in this context.

The *Elitistas* and the Fans: Status Gaps Between Creators and Audiences

Our interviewees largely occupy a higher social position than their audience and strategically construct content that incorporates the preferences and habits of that mass audience. In the Filipino context, obvious markers of these differences include education, language, and unique local tensions around race and ethnicity. For example, the most prominent fashion bloggers in the Philippines are Chinese Filipino women, most of whom are from Manila, and most of whom studied at the same set of elite universities (Hau, 2014). Many of our interviewees considered Wil Dasovich, an American of Filipino heritage, as among the early and trend-setting Filipino vloggers.

The class dynamics hinted at above manifest themselves most visibly in the choice of language vloggers use when addressing their audiences. Interviewees were asked whether they spoke English or Tagalog in their videos, and whether there was a conscious decision behind this choice. There was a general consensus among interviewees that Filipino vloggers who create content in English are seen as intimidating or pretentious, and this diminishes the degree to which their mainly Tagalog-speaking viewership can relate to them and engage with them. One vlogger, Lilibeth, conceded, "That's their biggest criticism about me. Like, 'Oh, that girl, she's so *arte* (pretentious), she talks in English.'" Another, Danilo, was able to encapsulate how the prevalence of English-language social media content must seem to many in the audience: "If you speak Tagalog normally . . . your view of somebody who . . . speaks English all the time is *elitista* (elitist) . . . so there is that divide."

The celebrity status of many social media creators implies a power differential that is both reinforced and complicated by the use of familial honorifics in conversations between fans and social media stars. As with many Asian cultures, Filipinos have traditionally made use of an extensive system of honorifics, the most common of which include personal titles such as *ate* (older sister) and *kuya* (older brother). These are used as general terms of respect and are often applied to friends, neighbors, and others in the community. This practice is carried over onto social media platforms, where interactions between creators and fans are peppered with these titles. When describing their viewership, some influencers commented on how honorifics used by fans to address them indicate the relative youth or social position of their audience: "I get messages from them and they always call me *Ate* Riza and that." In spite of awareness of this wide gap in circumstances and status between many of the influencers and their audiences in the Philippines, until relatively recently, much of social media entertainment content production was done in English, in globally identifiable forms and genres and around aspirational themes that do not necessarily translate to the lived experience of most Filipinos. However, our respondents reported that new realities are not necessarily closing the gap between creators and audiences but demanding that creators work to be more relatable to their audience.

The imperative to relate and to be relatable has increased as vlogging has gradually outstripped blogging as the preferred social media vehicle in the Philippines. Given this push toward video, established bloggers—especially those who have turned their platforms into full-time careers and had successfully cultivated followings on other photo-based platforms, such as Instagram—are expanding their activities onto YouTube. Many undoubtedly hoped to leverage their existing following and engage with a new and lucrative

audience. However, as a significant number of interviewees observed, success in blogging or on Instagram does not translate to success in vlogging:

Everyone was starting to get into YouTube. But I noticed a lot of them weren't making it. I mean, in the sense that, for example, you have an influencer Instagrammer with 100,000 followers. On YouTube, she'd only have like, 300. Like, no matter what she would do, she would never make it. (Lito)

It appears that in the Philippines, readerships for blogs or Instagram are not necessarily the same as viewership for vlog content, and skill with photography and writing does not necessarily translate to skill in front of a camera. As an economy has emerged around influence on social media, successful channels have used video to create a coherent brand around the creator's personality and on-camera behavior. In the Philippine social media entertainment industry, culturally specific tensions in class and language create specific challenges for influencers who wish to add video to their repertoire. Discussing well-known social media fashion influencers Tricia Gosingtian and Camille Co, Flordeliza told us, "The popular influencers were already very popular. But, I think what they really lack in essence was the relatability. You can't relate to somebody who vacations every day and does it in full clad, branded outfits." These sentiments were echoed by other respondents, such as Marisol:

With blogs, I guess, with the types of blogs that really gain traction . . . show you less of the flaws and most of the aspirational things about the people . . . they give you more of the more scripted or more posed side of their lives. But when it comes to YouTube, most of the bigger influencers are actually the ones who are spontaneous. And usually vlogs about their lives, or they actually show more of themselves.

Success in lifestyle, fashion, and beauty blogging, although to a degree centered on the personality of the creator, hinges on the blogger's access to branded clothes, makeup, and the visual conventions of commercial photography, such as high production values and good lighting. In essence, a blogger's legitimacy and ability to attract a following require clear signifiers of social capital. By contrast, vloggers were described by Maricar as being more "down to earth" and less "glossy." As such, the growth of their popularity in recent years can also be theorized as a response to fashion bloggers' espousal of glamorous but unattainable lifestyles as well as reflecting an appetite for content that reflects the lives and lifestyles of the Filipino audience.

The Rise of Vlogging and of the Value of Local Language and Place

As vlogging has replaced blogging as the focus of social media content distribution in the Philippines, our interviews identified how creators have moved away from glamorized, aspirational forms of celebrity to more relational, personal content in order to continue to influence audiences and attract brand partnership deals. These processes are taking place in a space that has received considerable attention from both domestic and international companies that are keenly aware of the marketability of Filipino audiences. In short, the rise of vlogging presents a shift in how influencers address their audiences but may not reflect a closure of the wide socioeconomic and cultural gaps that exist between most influencers and their audiences. We describe the

self-conscious incorporation of certain linguistic habits or content as a form of performed authenticity that middle- and upper-class creators are taking to seem more relatable to audiences. In the Philippines, this performed authenticity is primarily reflected in the tensions around language and in the connotations of class and social capital that attend the use of Tagalog versus English.

The Filipino vloggers who are gaining the most traction on YouTube are those who create content that has broad appeal to Filipino audiences from a variety of social backgrounds. This is frequently accomplished through the conspicuous incorporation of content in Tagalog by creators who had previously produced content only in English. The previously introduced example of Wil Dasovich, a Filipino American daily vlogger, is a case in point. He gained prominence in 2015 for creating videos documenting his attempts to learn Tagalog. Many of Dasovich's early videos revolve around this and similar conceits, such as filming himself and his American father conversing with Filipinos using the vernacular language.

Tagalog has been a key strategy for Filipino vloggers of varying backgrounds and language abilities to carve out a space for themselves online, and the degree to which it facilitates identification, engagement, and relatability between creator and audience is significant. Many of our respondents reported that they code-switch between the two languages in their vlogs, allowing them to hedge their bets between the perceived global sophistication of English and the local vernacular of Tagalog. As Isagani described it, "I can sound *kanto* (street) if I wanted to." Others whose Tagalog is not fluent will regardless throw in words and phrases here and there amid English content. On balance, most vloggers we talked to brought up some variation on the theme that successful Filipino influencers cannot be seen to be "an *Englishera*," but also "don't want to be made fun of for the way [they] speak Filipino" (Analyn). The idea is that it is important to credibly seem like a Tagalog speaker even if one's primary language is English.

A complicating factor for a Filipino vlogger's decision to use English versus Tagalog is the limitations of each in reaching an audience. Many vloggers said that they would like to grow their following beyond the Philippines. However, this desire to reach a more diverse audience must be balanced against the need to maintain their connection to their Filipino audiences, a connection maintained through localized, relatable content. As Riza put it, "Of course I want to grow an international following. That's my goal. But I'm really not sure how to do it right now. Because I know that my followers are mostly Filipinos, so I need to find a way to transition that or to make it work to my advantage. I'm really not sure yet." On the other hand, some interviewees noted how Tagalog vlog content is important for OFWs (Overseas Filipino Workers) to cope with homesickness and to maintain a psychological connection to the Philippines. To Rommel, this represents a valid strategy for the growth of a channel:

Like when [a vlogger] speaks Tagalog, [the OFW audience] is more comfortable because it's close to home. I think that's why they get bigger. And the fact that the whole celebrity ideal here is way bigger. So the following is way more . . . it's way closer, in a sense. When people speak the language, the native language, people get to relate more.

Although most respondents reported that they learned their audiences' preferences and demographic situation from comments and interactions on social media—in which broken English or use of Tagalog indicated that significant portions of their audience do not share their comfort with English—occasionally those points

were driven home by in-person interactions. Danilo shifted the language use in his vlogs after meeting audience members who, he noticed, “really speak Tagalog.” Ligaya, similarly, noticed the difference and found that shifting her language changed her relationship with her followers:

When we were talking to her, we noticed that she was really, really shy. I was with Danilo, and he texted me, “You’re intimidating her.” Because I was speaking in English. . . . I tried to speak in Tagalog, but I really do suck. I think the girl was amused, though. She was like, “You’re so cute!”

Ligaya later tried making fully Tagalog videos: “And I tried to speak in full Tagalog. And, yeah, they liked it—you can check the comments.”

Another strategy for performing local authenticity is conspicuously centering stories around local habits and geographic markers. One of the vloggers who most successfully adopts this strategy is Anne Clutario, a beauty vlogger whose channel description summarizes her content as “All Filipina-friendly videos!” (Clutario, n.d.). Clutario’s success epitomizes the growth of a Filipino audience from lower income brackets, interested in content that features the lives and lifestyles of Tagalog-speaking Filipinos. Some of her most popular videos are shopping haul videos centered on products purchased at Divisoria, a famous Manila bazaar. The success of this vlog topic has encouraged new vloggers starting out in this space to adopt similar strategies. Riza emulated that strategy by putting out her own Divisoria haul video and described the impact it had on her following:

But before I put that out, my views were, let’s say, 100 per video. After the Divisoria video, it became 500 per video. Which means, the people who watch my videos watch consistently. That’s why my strategy with YouTube is, always put out a Divisoria video once a month.

Divisoria haul videos are a local inflection on the genre of the haul videos popularized by fashion and beauty YouTubers. However, Divisoria is notable for its historical importance as one of Manila’s largest public markets (Boquet, 2017; McIntyre, 1955), as well as its symbolic associations with Manila’s lower-class bargain hunters. It has now adopted the conventions and amenities of a traditional shopping mall, but it has retained the *tiangge* (streetwalk) form of retail. Divisoria is infamous for the assortment of counterfeit, pirated, and cheaply priced goods its vendors offer. That reputation, combined with its geographic proximity to the slums of Manila, make it a highly recognizable marker of class that is culturally resonant, not only to residents of Manila, but also to Filipinos outside the capital. Divisoria haul videos re-create the genre of a shopping haul video, but with explicit reference to a location sure to be recognized by a Filipino audience. As such, it exemplifies the Filipino audience’s receptivity to more localized content that has encouraged many Filipino influencers to foster a more “relatable” brand that resonates with local audiences and their daily lives without sacrificing the potential for monetization.

Performative Authenticity: The Relational Work of Audience Commodification

The practices of upper-middle-class influencers make it clear that markers of relatability—whether they are products, locations, or linguistic habits—are strategically deployed to build emotional and affective

resonance with an audience. Based on our analysis, it is the relational practices, even those that belie the creator's "authentic" voice or circumstances, that are central to understanding the work of social media influence in the Philippines. Much of this conclusion is anticipated by Abidin's (2015) and Baym's (2015) conceptions of relational labor reviewed above. However, in our view, the case of the Philippines emphasizes the extent to which the process of crafting the appearance of authenticity can be a primary component of relational work. To conceptualize this connection, we draw on the concept of performative authenticity, developed by cultural studies-influenced work on tourism (see Cole, 2007; Knudsen & Waade 2010), with the aim of further articulating a theoretical framework for engaging with the work of social media influence. Knudsen and Waade's (2010) constructivist and phenomenological approach takes authenticity not as an empirical or normative reality, but as "a relational quality attributed to something out of an encounter" in which "sincerity [is] a negotiated value between local and tourist" (p. 13). Replacing local and tourist with creator and audience, we suggest that the same dynamics are at play in how the relational work of social media creators involves constant renegotiation of their "authentic" selves relative to their perception of the preferences of their audiences. Authenticity for social media creators is, thus, what Knudsen and Waade describe as "a feeling you can achieve" (p. 5). Based on this study, the task of working to craft content that stimulates a sense of authenticity in the audience, of "achieving" the feeling of authenticity, is a requisite part of the work of professional social media entertainment production.

We began this article by framing authenticity as a contested but crucial notion in conceptualizing social media content production. Our analysis asserts the creators' perception of the importance of practicing behaviors authentic to their audience. Moreover, it adds dimension to the ways that homosocial desires fuel consumer and viewer or readership practices (Abidin, 2016), by relating how the rise of video-based forms have made context-specific habitual speech and local markers more relevant to creators of social media content. This is a departure from primarily text- and image-based media such as blogs, which, in their Southeast Asian incarnations could (and can) present very luxurious lifestyles with less negotiation of relatability by the authors. The rise of vlogging has facilitated more of what Knudsen and Waade (2010) label *encounters* and therefore more opportunities to negotiate sincerity or to "mobilize particular sets of linguistic and other semiotic resources with which authenticity can be made and unmade" (Leppänen et al., 2015, p. 1). Although performed authenticity can appear manipulative in that it presents a "false" version of the creator's life and habits, it also emphasizes meeting audience expectations, negotiated on linguistic and cultural levels, in order to be inclusive and more capable of building on an identified core audience.

Conclusion: Social Media Influence in the Philippines in the Global Context

This article has examined how influencers in the Philippines understand, engage, and commodify their audiences as a way of engaging with a broader theoretical conception of the impacts of the work of social media influence. We argue that influence, especially when tied to marketing, requires the commodification of relationships. Our research with Filipino influencers has indicated that in social media production, strategic relational practices are more important in many cases than content authentic to a creator's situation. Although the creators that we spoke to occupied higher socioeconomic positions than their audiences, the strategic incorporation of content that reflected the social reality of their audience was crucial to their success. We approach these behaviors as a form of highly strategic relational work—the deliberate formation of parasocial relationships—that we label a form of performative authenticity. We argue

that understanding authenticity as relational work that can be performed offers new and interesting directions in approaching the commodification of social media audiences as occurring, in this case, through emotional and affective connection to places, ways of speaking, and personas.

Like Kumar's (2016) and Abidin's (2015) studies of creators and influencers in India and Singapore, this study suggests that Filipino creators' agency over and authenticity in their content are circumscribed by the commercial imperative to be relatable to the broadest possible audience. Our findings echo the work of Senft (2008) and Marwick and boyd (2011) on self-editing practice as a form of microcelebrity and self-commodification closely related to branding. Our analysis extends that examination to an emotionally resonant, strategic practice that commodifies the audience in ways tailored to a very specific context, compatible with localizing global advertising campaigns for lucrative sponsorship deals, along with growing total audience numbers to maximize remuneration from platform-specific advertising, such as YouTube's pre- and postroll advertisements (Sinclair, 2012). Andrejevic's (2011) work on affective economics and Brodmerkel and Carah's (2016) research into how brands deploy technological "affect switches" can be read to anticipate the overlap between relational work of creators and the commodification of social media audiences. However, Andrejevic and Brodmerkel and Carah focus on sophisticated, data-driven forms of sentiment analysis and data-tracking in branding behaviors. We argue that the performed authenticity theorized in our study represents a previously neglected soft-power element of the politics of the affective economy that ought to receive serious consideration alongside the important hard-power politics of data and privacy issues.

This article's sample was drawn from upper- and middle-class content creators, and we cannot speculate on the views and engagement of audiences in the negotiation of authenticity. Rather, we underline that the creators themselves believe these practices to be important. This epistemological approach links this work closely to the work of Philippe Ross (2011a, 2011b, 2014) on the significance of how new media producers understand and respond to their audiences and more generally to the methodological approach of the research area of production studies (cf. Caldwell, 2009). Studies such as those by Lim and Soriano (2016) have shed light on some of the practices and preferences of Filipino audiences and the parasocial relations that underlie Filipino relationships with celebrities (Centeno, 2010), and studies such as those by Leppänen et al. (2015) underline the negotiation of authenticity. There remains a need for qualitative work that examines the complementary perspective of Filipino audiences, particularly how they understand their relationship to those they turn to for entertainment, and who, in turn, so often incorporate branded messages into that entertainment. Although our study suggests that creators perform authenticity in their encounters with their fans in part to commodify their audience, only deeper understanding of the audience can rule more strongly on whether audiences are being manipulated or taking part in a critical way with commercial practices that are a part of social media entertainment.

The example of the Philippines illustrates the degree to which the exercise of influence, defined by emotional connection and the engagement of communities, has emerged globally, in regionally specific ways, as a crucial and undertheorized monetization practice of social media platforms. Further research in this area could push forward theorizations of the role of influence as well as the relational work of creators and their performative authenticity. A key concern related to such questions is the process of commodification of social media audiences through affective ties. Ultimately, the case of the Philippines and

the performative authenticity that masks the socioeconomic gap between creators and audiences underlines how opaque the power relations that separate platform creators and their audiences can be. This research further hints at the extent to which the creep of advertising agendas into the editorial decisions that are being made by social media creators raises important considerations for scholars, regulators, and Internet users concerned with the politics and impacts of social media platforms.

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