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Groundhog Day: Influencers Are Just Vain

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On September 11, 2023, the Influencer Ethnography Research Lab (IERLab) at Curtin University hosted "Groundhog Day"—a one-day online-only open-access collection of roundtables on the cyclical nature of academic spotlights and hot topics, and some of the frustrations related to the ahistoricity of the discussions and moral panics. Over four panels, the event addressed the cycles, patterns, templates, and related fatigue on digital media discourse. Find out more at ierlab.com/groundhogday.

This article is an edited and truncated version of the highlights for panel one: "Influencers Are Just Vain." The panel was hosted and moderated by Professor Crystal Abidin, and features Dr. Srikanth Nayaka, Dr. Earvin Charles B. Cabalquinto, and Dr. Jia Guo.

Crystal Abidin:
I first started studying influencers in 2008, back when they used to be called "bloggers," and even in those days, popular media would circulate discourse about how these were just young skinny girls and pretty boys selling us things on the Internet while "living their best life." Almost 20 years on, news articles published about influencers still often reiterate the same sentiments, despite the fact that there has been an explosion in the scholarship that tells us about the importance and the power of influencers across *diverse geographical regions*. To kick us off, I invite the panelists to introduce their research in one minute.

Srikanth Nayaka:
In my PhD thesis, "YouTube Online Videos: Creator Labour in Rural South India," I explored how a group of people went viral and tried to platformize their creative labor. I started this research in 2018 when I came across this viral video called "Kiki Challenge," and wondered what happened to these people. I

ended up doing a PhD on that topic, looking at how these rural creators are professionalizing. So in my project, I argue that this has become a kind of a platformized, monetized, digital labor, unlike other arguments that state that digital labor is exploitative and free.

Earvin Charles B. Cabalquinto:
I look at the impacts of digital communication technologies and online platforms on the lives of migrants and their networks overseas. What gravitated me toward understanding this phenomenon of content creation is the context of the public or transnational public. I am also thinking about the kind of complexity and nuances in that particular space, like agency, disinformation, and other unregulated content. I am also unpacking how these practices tell us about the kind of inequalities in a global digital economy, wherein there are individuals, like migrant influencers, connecting not only to a public in their host country but also connecting to people dispersed across the world, such as in the case of Filipino migrants.

Jia Guo:
In my research, I mostly study influencers on Chinese social media and also influencers with a Chinese background, especially from Mainland China, on Western social media. I focus on women, young men, and also queer groups. I focus on the influencers who engage with beauty, fashion, and lifestyle content. Also, I am interested in influencers who talk about gender-related topics on social media. In my research, I focus on the very special, unique Chinese context and the complexities of influencers and their culture and practice.

Pushing Back on Popular Myths

Crystal Abidin:
To transit to our discussion about the Groundhog Day of influencers, please allow me to share some insight from my survey of popular discourse on social media. Here are the top 5 popular myths about influencers: First, *influencers are very rich*; this is despite the scholarship that documents the inequities for different influencers beyond those in the 1%. Second, *influencers are narcissists*; the media tracks various psychological consequences of an industry fixated on appearance. Third, *being an influencer is a lazy job*; this is despite the reality of the heavy labor involved in content production. Fourth, *influencers are just useless mouthpieces*; this is a contentious claim especially in the age of misinformation and content amplification. Finally, *influencers are bad for young children*; this discourse focuses on the rise of child influencers who we are told should not aspire to be influencers. To the panelists, what are the popular myths about the influencers you study? Is there pushback?

Srikanth Nayaka:
I study rural content creators, and many people think that they emerged through blogs. But in the media ecology in India in the 1970s and 1980s, there was a very popular subculture of content creation through cassettes, CDs, and later on, DVDs. So, a popular myth is that rural content creators produce just one kind of creative content that is low in production value. But in my case studies, many of them have *fully professionalized* on par with other mainstream media industries. I have discovered that they are building studios in their villages, acquiring the latest high-end technologies, and deploying very sophisticated

formats, especially in South India. For example, one filming instance can produce an Instagram reel, a YouTube short, or a Web series.

Rural influencers are adapting to and embedding themselves in the *production logics* of YouTube, learning algorithms, and pushing original content. This is unlike the perception that they simply "take" copyrighted content from elsewhere. In this professionalization, many creators identify as actors or cameramen. Within the creator group that I did my PhD on, only a few identified as influencers, and for those who do, it is because the market is approaching them for product promotions. However, despite having a lot of subscribers, very few of them actually have sponsors or promote products. So in my project, I ask, "Who becomes an influencer? Is it the market who decides, or the creator themselves?"

Earvin Charles B. Cabalquinto:
In my work, stepping back when we start thinking about migrant workers, particularly Filipino migrant workers, there is a *specific subjectivity* attached to that particular figure. In the context of the Philippines, that figure is expected to become self-sacrificing, entrepreneurial, and docile, particularly in employment conditions. But what is interesting is when that migrant becomes an influencer—because they are showing off their lives overseas, curated in titbits or pockets—and these become a stepping point for viewers to engage with particular content through a moral compass.

So, for example, if a migrant is showcasing buying shoes or having all of these clothes for that particular video, then the audience is kind of criticizing that as "these people are just probably rich," and "they're not doing their job because they're spending their money on this lavish thing." So that is an issue. But then again, the migrant will be pushing back with, "Actually, you don't understand the context." This is the *context collapse* aspect, that you have so many viewers on your platform that the audience does not actually understand that that migrant might actually have bought that particular outfit for a particular celebration or a moment or something like that. When it is just being interpreted as being lavish, it is contradictory to the idea that migrants just send money back home.

Jia Guo:
In my project, there are two popular myths. Because I focus on beauty, fashion, and lifestyle influencers—as Crystal has mentioned—there is always a saying that "These are just young women who are just pretty, doing vain things." Also, in the Western media and in some people's minds, there is a perception that all Chinese people, especially women, including those online, are just controlled by the large party state machine. They believe there is no way that influencers in China can talk about any progressive issues related to gender or feminism or LGBTQ rights online because they are all *sensitive topics*.

In my research, I see that neither myth is true. Chinese women and LGBTQ groups are always trying to have their own voice and have more visibility on social media. In reality, gender related topics are attracting more and more attention, with more and more discussions on Chinese social media. Of course, many influencers are engaged with these topics too. In my own feminist beliefs, feminism should be plural—*feminisms*. There are different aspects of patriarchal structures and different aspects of gender discipline that women are facing in their real, everyday life. In my project, I look at how these young women influencers bring those discussions, topics, or their own reflections online.

Truths to the Popular Myths

Crystal Abidin:
Let's take a step back. Is there any truth to the popular myths in your field of influencer research? Are they actually vain? Are any of the perceptions true?

Jia Guo:
I want to respond to this question by focusing on *class*, because I look at beauty, fashion, and lifestyle influencers. Not only in China but also around the world, there is this stereotype that these influencers represent middle-class femininity and beauty standards, and that they really promote consumerism. This stereotype is true even in my own study, but the influencers are still always negotiating with these norms—beauty, gender, and class—through their online personas.

In China, many women are from the so-called lower classes, from the rural small towns, who are like migrant workers in big cities. They make beauty and fashion content, and host e-commerce livestreams. There are interactions between class and femininity, impacting aspirations and consumer cultures in China. They all have their own voice and entrepreneurial pursuits in their online practice, but it does not mean we should blindly celebrate this phenomenon or that the femininity they represent and their comments about are not problematic. From my perspective as a feminist scholar, our critiques should always be toward the *structure*, such as the gender discipline, the party state governance in China, and also the platform economy. I would focus less on judgment on the individual women or LGBTQ groups who are trying to achieve self-actualization through social media.

Earvin Charles B. Cabalquinto:
For me, I look at how migrant influencers create a space for *visibilization*, and also agency, in a foreign country. For example, some of the videos I have been examining for the past months depict migrant influencers showcasing their hardships overseas, the challenges of being away from their family, the gift boxes filled with consumer goods for their family members back home. These depictions represent the ideal figure of a Filipino migrant worker: caring for the family, caring for the community.

But what is actually interesting is these platforms are open for *surveillance and policing*. Very few actually critique the government for the hardships that they experience. Often, the blaming of oneself is focused on family members, community members, and that is quite problematic in that space because we are not really thinking about what is actually causing all of these issues—the lack of support with the government back home, or even in the host country.

What is also interesting is that people see migrants romanticize their lives overseas when they show the "good life," and it creates *backlash* for these influencers. Obviously, in our everyday life, it is really challenging, it is full of hardship, but then TikTok creates a space where migrant influencers can dance to a tune, use a hashtag, create different kind of narratives.

Srikanth Nayaka:

In my study, most of the rural creators undergo a certain *tension*. We think influencers are quite rich, they show off things, and that they have a different kind of lifestyle. But when it comes to rural creators, this may not be true, and still they have a huge online fandom. When I spent time with the creators, I discovered that fans often ask them: "Hey, you don't have car? Why are you walking on this road?" Fans are curious. Rural influencers became famous because of their ordinary lives, but the fans want them to be "something else," to show off a very rich and luxurious lifestyle.

As I mentioned earlier, there are very few women in my fieldwork, but one of them in my research is an older woman—60-year-old Gangawa. When I asked why women are not active participants in this culture, most creators say there are still certain taboos across genders. So, certain *social norms* are dictating digital participation. However, I would say that there is still a certain element of democratization, with more creators emerging, but this visibility is quite limited. Rural creative cultures are still dominated by men.

On Precarity

Crystal Abidin:
All three of our panelists have very beautifully highlighted the dynamic of going beyond the individual to look at systems, structure, and the macro. So, it is at this point that I would like to you to talk to us specifically about the bigger "system" governing the influencer industry, in terms of precarity. Thus far, Srikanth has spoken to us a lot about platforms and precarity, Earvin about information and precarity, and Jia about gender and precarity.

Srikanth Nayaka:
My research highlights the platform precarity within the binaries of rural and urban. During my interviews, a lot of rural creators told me that they are underpaid when compared to urban creators, even though they do the same labor in promoting products, so most of these creators are quite frustrated with *sponsors*. As such, these creators are trying to bargain or develop different strategies. For example, creators have set rates. But they are still missing out on a lot of sponsors, who are not coming to them.

However, it is also difficult to rely on YouTube due to *platform precarity*, where the monetization program is not consistent, and it is uncertain how much money you get every month. So, creators still have to depend on sponsors and go beyond platform monetization so that they can supplement their income.

Jia Guo:
In the context of China, influencers take on precarious work as a way to actually get some *control* over their life. Because they are like these "standard" Chinese middle-class women, to their parents the ideal kind of "stable life" for them is just to get a stable job in government or become a school teacher, get married, and have a heterosexual family. But that kind of life is not what these women want.

The *job market* in China, especially during COVID-19, has also become precarious. Women say that doing this creative labor on social media becomes a way that they can—or at least they imagine that they can—control their life. So in this case, what we may think of as precarity is actually *not* precarity. It is interesting. It is not like this is not problematic; of course, the women all know it themselves. They also acknowledge that this career might not be very realistic—not every can get success on social media and that success does not last long. But this is the women's agency, to think of their life choices when they live in China as a middle-class daughter and to negotiate the options they have. In this case, I think that only seeing precarity might be a male-dominant, or a Western-dominant, perspective. It is interesting to see the tensions here.

Earvin Charles B. Cabalquinto:
For me, there are two layers of precarity: the everyday precarities experienced in everyday life but also the informational precarity. *Informational precarity* is pertaining to the information provided by, for example, agencies and governments on how to migrate to the country, what the country is about, what they are offering, and stuff like that. But what is interesting with migrant influencers is that they talk about the nitty gritty, the information that is not covered in those official channels. And they are basically showing the everyday life in the host country. This is information not shown in any sanitized, glossy website or platform. The migrants are actually exposing those kinds of lives that they have.

Another layer of precarity is that the migrants are actually showing their audiences how to navigate *everyday precarity* in the host country. That is, gravitating this aspiration to migrate to another country. For example, if you are struggling in that host country, you can still survive by navigating that precarity by doing all of these steps as presented by that migrant influencer.

So there is a kind of layering when it comes to precarity with influencer culture. That aspiration to actually migrate overseas is also propelled by the obvious lack of jobs and opportunities back in the Philippines, compelling all of these Filipinos to look at what opportunities can be accessed in another country. And then they watch the videos of migrant influencers telling them that this is the life here, and this is how you navigate the precarity.

Conclusion

Crystal Abidin:
To sum up, can you please tell us in one sentence something to bear in mind to challenge the perception of influencers being just vain?

Jia Guo:
Listen to women and also LGBTQ groups. Recognize their *agency* and do not make assumptions or judgements, given the complicated nature of not only influencer culture but of everything.

Srikanth Nayaka:
I also agree with that. With rural creators [. . .], when women start trying to create content, they most often do not continue because of the trolls. Women creators need to be sustained; their digital culture production means there should be *support* within the platforms.

Earvin Charles B. Cabalquinto:
I think we need to understand that the emergence of migrant influencers is basically changing the landscape through which information is produced and distributed for aspiring migrants or migrants. We need to step back and look at the *broader picture*, at forces such as precarity, exclusion, marginality, and how those issues are actually shaping the everyday practices of what we call very creative, engaging content.

Crystal Abidin:
To wrap up, are influencers just vain? We have to bear in mind: What *locale* are we looking at? Do these generalizations apply globally? Or do we have to look in specific contexts? In this session we have highlighted the sociopolitical specificities of the Philippines and migration, China and platforms, and India and the class divide. Are influencers just vain? Well, maybe sometimes, but that is because they have to navigate *precarity*. In Srikath's case, platform precarity; in Earvin's case, information precarity; and in Jia's case, a gender precarity. Finally, behind the scenes of all this work is *labor*. In India, we have discussed the rural divide with relational labor. In the Philippines and Australia, we have discussed migrant broker labor and navigating information systems and perceptions. And finally in China, we have discussed feminist labors as we work through multiple systems of oppression and intersectionality.

Biographies

Professor Crystal Abidin (she/her) is an anthropologist and ethnographer of Internet cultures, especially in the Asia Pacific region. She is professor and ARC DECRA Fellow (DE190100789) in Internet studies at Curtin University, director of the Influencer Ethnography Research Lab (IERLab), and founder of the TikTok Cultures Research Network (TCRN). Reach her at wishcrys.com.

Dr. N. Srikanth (he/him) is an assistant professor in media studies at the Department of Media Studies, GITAM University (Deemed), Hyderabad, India. He obtained a PhD in media and cultural studies from the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Tirupati. His research interests include social media and digital culture, creator labor, and influencer and microcelebrity studies.

Dr. Earvin Charles B. Cabalquinto (he/him) is an ARC DECRA Research Fellow and senior lecturer at Monash University. His expertise lies in the intersecting fields of digital media, mobilities, and migration. His research unpacks the impacts of digital exclusion on the lives of migrants and their distant networks. He is the author of *(Im)mobile Homes: Family Life at a Distance in the Age of Mobile Media* (2022, Oxford University Press). He is a coauthor of *Philippine Digital Cultures: Brokerage Dynamics on YouTube* (2022, Amsterdam University Press), setting the foundation of his research on the emergence of migrant influencers as digital brokers.

Dr. Jia Guo (she/her) has recently been awarded her PhD in gender and cultural studies from the University of Sydney. Her doctoral thesis is titled "Contextualising Postfeminism in China: Cosmopolitan Young Women, Aesthetic Labour, and Social Media." She is working as a research assistant at IERLab, Curtin University, and a sessional lecturer at the University of Sydney. Jia's research is situated in feminist media studies, and she has published works on wanghong culture and economy.