

## **'Cya IRL': Researching digital communities online and offline**

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*This article is a reflexive account of an ethnographer's foray into digital anthropology, necessitating the formulation of collaborative research strategies. The information presented comes from yearlong fieldwork among blogshop owners and commercial bloggers in Singapore. This paper is part of an ongoing doctoral dissertation that looks into narratives of self-creation, boundaries of privacy, and vicarious consumption, and is the groundwork for the continuation of more extensive and in-depth research. The exploration between August 2011 and December 2012 reveals the need for anthropologists to assess their digital community before entering the field in order to access the community with tact. It further shows some defining features of this digital community that contributed to the shaping of the research methodology. I also analyse three points of contention born out of bringing online communications and relationships into a physical space offline. They are the ambiguous transference of intimacy, verbalizing cyber lingo, and the place of online media in face-to-face communication. Collaboration is a defining feature of this digital ethnography's methodology given the extent of networks and partnerships across a vast array of locations, vocations, and demographics throughout the community.*

*\*Internet Lingo for 'See you in real life'*

### **Introduction**

While anthropology is turning to look at online ethnography, social media, and digital cultures, technology appears to be evolving quicker than scholarship. As little attention has been paid to the budding phenomenon of blogshops and commercial blogs in Singapore, this empirical ethnographic work is relatively new. A feature of such blogshops and commercial blogs is the way in which bloggers use their lives as a tool for selling products. They appear to have a keen sense of self-awareness in the crafting of their personas and lifestyles both online and offline. Because blogshops and commercial blogs constantly shift between 'online' and 'offline' manifestations, I draw on collaborative methodologies in my research. Coming from the discipline of digital anthropology, this paper is a reflexive account of my collaborative methodological approach towards researching such communities between August 2011 and December 2012, and lays the groundwork for the continuation of my research. I begin by briefly exploring the unique context of this phenomenon before discussing my approach towards researching this digital community both on the Internet and in real<sup>1</sup> life. I also analyse the intricacies of continuing communication and relationships initially forged online in real life.

### **Context**

A Singaporean bricolage of the words 'web log' – now almost universally shortened to 'blog' – and 'shop', blogshops are online commercial businesses that occur as blogs. Alongside blogshops are commercial blogs. While blogs are customizable websites primarily designed to convey information about a certain topic<sup>2</sup>, in the blogs studied in

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<sup>1</sup>I adopt my informants' use of the term 'real' in the sense of a physical offline space, not as a measure of authenticity or genuineness, as will be discussed later in the paper.

<sup>2</sup>For a history of 'blogs' see R. Blood, 'Weblogs: A History and Perspective', 2000, retrieved 1 March 2013 from [http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog\\_history.html](http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog_history.html); see also J. W. Rettberg, *Blogging*,

this paper, authors utilise blogposts to showcase their personal lives, and this genre is popularly known as 'lifestyle blogging' throughout South East Asia. These blogs become commercial when bloggers offer advertising space or review products and services for a small fee.

Paid publicity blurbs are seamlessly interwoven throughout the bloggers' diary-like accounts, although some bloggers are better at this art than others. Because of the personal narrative and photographs weaved into every sale, both blogshops and commercial blogs are highly personalized and intimate, and thus distinct from commercial websites or online shops created entirely for purchases or viable exchanges. While there are no firm statistics, newspaper reports and informants I interviewed claim that blogshops emerged in Singapore in the mid-2000s and commercial blogs followed shortly after. Both types of blogs are mostly created and run by young women who are between the ages of 18 and 35, the majority of whom are Chinese, and have graduated with diplomas or university degrees.

Blogshops trade mainly in apparel and accessories for women.<sup>3</sup> Pictures and descriptions of products on sale are published in individual blogposts known as 'collections' or 'launches'. Customers who wish to make a purchase comment in the blogpost — that is, an individual blog entry — and wait for sellers to arrange payment and delivery. Unlike other online stores or websites, a distinctive feature of blogshops is the use of personal narratives to hawk products. This personal narrative comes through in the personal blogs of the blogshop owners and models where customers are able to interact with the 'face of the blogshop' and the women behind the business.<sup>4</sup> Whether on separate blogs or different tabs on the same blog, hyperlinks to these personal narratives are conspicuously displayed on multiple platforms including the blogshop's or commercial blog's main page, signatures in email correspondence, and Facebook and Twitter feeds. Similarly, commercial bloggers adopt a first person point of view and personal voice when promoting products and services — most popularly cosmetics, apparel, and eateries — to readers. As opposed to seemingly objective and factual accounts, commercial bloggers intersperse product reviews with subjective personal opinions, frequently draw on their past experiences, and publicly declare their biases.<sup>5</sup> Commercial bloggers are accessible to readers via comments on the blog, and a host of social media feeds including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Formspring, and Foursquare. They also customise photographs and images to showcase these products instead of adopting stock images or photographs available in press releases.

Blogshops often arrange to interact with customers in 'offline' face-to-face settings such as exclusive parties at clubs, anniversary celebrations at eateries, flea markets, and warehouse sales. Commercial bloggers too, organise mass 'meet the blogger' sessions or invite selected fans and readers to join them at exclusive events. These 'offline' interactions help to foster and sustain intimacy between the blogshop or blogger and customers, and allow the former to remain accessible to their target audience. Such personalised selling alters an otherwise detached commercial

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2008, Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity.

<sup>3</sup>E. Heng, 'Social selling', *Straits Times*, October 7 2009, DIGITAL LIFE p.8; X.H. Koh, 'Blogshops haven't closed eye to contact lens trade', *Sunday Times*, January 2 2011, p.15; X.E. Lee, 'Blogshops venture out of cyberspace', *Sunday Times*, July 5 2009, p.11.

<sup>4</sup>K. Chiew, 'From blog to riches', *Straits Times*, April 28 2009, INS p.8; G. Chung, 'Net Worth', *Straits Times*, June 25 2010, URBAN p.13, p.14; G. Chung, "Plastic fantastic", *Straits Times*, July 2 2010, URBAN p.15; M. Ng, "Model owners", *Straits Times*, September 27 2009, LIFE p.6.

<sup>5</sup>H.H. Chian, 'Bloggers who get gifts or money may have to own up', *Straits Times*, October 12 2009, p.A1, A7; [no author], 'Stricter rules for bloggers?', *New Paper*, August 25 2010, p.11.

transaction into a friendly exchange hinged on emotional attachments. Although disparate industries, the blogshop economy and commercial blog economy operate in similar ways, share almost the same target audience, and sustain each others' businesses through collaborations and mutual advertising. For the purposes of this paper, I collectively refer to both industries as a Community. Having understood the main operations of the industry and identified key players who would make potential informants, I proceeded to study some distinct features of the blogshop and commercial blog industry in preparation for fieldwork.

### **Assessing the Community**

In order to successfully access the Community, I first had to understand the peculiarities of the blogshop and commercial blog industry. Even in our initial communications, almost all bloggers seemed to assume that I shared the communal knowledge of their local generation, such as being Internet savvy and understanding colloquial terminology, and of their industries, such as cyber lingo and behavioral norms on the Internet and in real life. In other words, they saw me as 'one of them' and never felt the need to formally introduce or explain business operations, terminology, or social norms to me. Although informants knew that I was brought up in Singapore and had undergone the same IT-infused national education system as they had, I had never explicitly identified myself as being a part of the blogshop or commercial blogging industries. In order to draw out the nuances in these women's activities, I was aware of the need to conspicuously position myself as an 'outsider' whenever necessary in order to question the obvious, deconstruct publicly accepted norms, and understand what one would otherwise have assumed to be natural or given.

Of the peculiarities observed in this industry, four were especially crucial in informing my methodology. They are the high Information Technology (IT) uptake in Singapore, the unique language adopted, the intentionally public nature of the industries, and its multiple layers of collaboration.

Firstly, the Community is exceptionally savvy with IT, the Internet, and the blogosphere. Singapore is at present a country with very high IT uptake thanks to the government's concerted effort and central role in making long term plans to harness the potential of IT for national development.<sup>6</sup> In a bid to nurture computer-literate citizens, computer skills have been institutionalised into the state-regulated educational curriculum<sup>7</sup> beginning in Primary School and continuing all through to tertiary levels. As such, all my informants could skillfully maneuver the Internet and were confident in blogging and website building even though very few had actually taken formal classes to learn these skills. Although not professionally trained, these bloggers managed their online businesses through trial and error, or by modeling themselves after their predecessors.

Secondly, the Community has crafted their own unique language over the years. They seemed to draw from Singaporean colloquial English and Internet slang such as abbreviations, acronyms, bricolage, emoticons, keyboard symbols, leetspeak<sup>8</sup>, and onomatopoeic spellings. Singapore is a multicultural society whose

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<sup>6</sup>S.H. Wong, 'Exploiting Information Technology: A Case Study of Singapore', *World Development*, vol. 20, no. 12, 1992, pp.1817-1828.

<sup>7</sup>P.S. Tang & P.H. Ang, 'The diffusion of information technology in Singapore schools: a process framework', *New Media & Society*, vol. 4, no. 4, 2002, pp.457-478.

<sup>8</sup>Also known as '1337' or '133t', leetspeak is a stylised web-writing alphabet that appropriates a combination of upper and lower case letters and numerals to replace Latin letters. See N. Ross, 'Writing in the Information Age', *English Today*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2006, pp.29-45; K. Blashki & S. Nichol, 'Game Geek's Goss: Linguistic Creativity in Young Males within an Online University Forum (94/ /3

citizens use a wide range of languages such as Malay, Tamil, Punjabi, Mandarin, and Chinese dialects including Cantonese, Hokkien, Teochew, and Hakka. As such, Singaporeans commonly intersperse English — the national business language that is dominantly used — with words or bricolages from these other languages. Expressive interjections such as ‘lah’, ‘leh’, ‘mah’, and ‘meh’ among many others, are also distinctive features of ‘Singlish’ or Singaporean English.<sup>9</sup> In order to effectively communicate with the Community, I learnt and adopted their language from the onset. I was well versed in Singlish although their Internet slang required some learning.

However, I soon discovered many words that were ambiguous in usage and bore no ‘communal’ or consistent meaning throughout the Community. For example, the majority of my informants felt the term ‘real’ in the catch-phrase ‘in real life’ denoted an ‘offline’ experience while a smaller handful felt ‘real’ referred to some measure of genuineness or authenticity. In this paper, I use the term ‘real’ with deference to the majority, which is to mark a physical space offline. Without a go-to glossary list, I found the need to clarify individual users’ imbued meanings and intentions with the use of ambiguous terms, and had to keep up with newly created and evolving ones as well.

Thirdly, bloggers are intentionally public with their blogposts and social media feeds. Since an increase in readership corresponds with an increase in revenue, bloggers publish to reach the widest audience possible, and would request to have interview quotes and references attributed and linked to their blogs and other social media feeds. Indeed many of them mentioned either explicitly or in passing that my research would most certainly bring publicity to their blogs and increase their readership. This was a key challenge in formulating my methodology as some bloggers did not see the need for anonymity or pseudonymity regardless of the potential backlash their comments or actions may result in. As a compromise, I decided to keep my informants anonymous unless otherwise requested. Although the majority of them frequently chose to be publicly identified, I reminded them of the anonymity option for particular quotes that appeared contentious. In occasions where their comments were clearly controversial or potentially damaging, I chose to anonymise or pseudonymise informants on their behalf.

Fourthly, the Community was distinctly marked by multiple layers of collaboration that called for an ethnography that was multi-sited.<sup>10</sup> Four key aspects of collaboration stem from the consumer, the producer, the researcher, and the social space. Consumers — that is, customers and readers — would voluntarily shower blogshops and commercial bloggers with feedback and preferences. These ranged from detailed suggestions on what types of apparel they would purchase from blogshops to pleas for bloggers to disclose more about their romantic relationships, complete with photographs. Harnessing the initiative of their active audience, blogshops and commercial bloggers began depending on the ‘wisdom of the crowd’ by crowdsourcing<sup>11</sup> from consumers, having them vote to decide the theme of the

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933k’s 9055ONEONE), *Australian Journal of Emerging Technologies and Society*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2005, pp.77-86.

<sup>9</sup>D. Forbes, ‘Singlish’, *English Today*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1993, pp.18-22.

<sup>10</sup>M. Banks, ‘Multi-sited Ethnography: Notes and Queries’ in F. Mark-Anthony (ed.), *Multi-Sited Ethnography Theory, Praxis and Locality in Contemporary Research*, Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2009, pp.181-196.

<sup>11</sup>Unlike ‘outsourcing’ where work is allocated to a defined group of contributors who are committed to the job, in ‘crowdsourcing’ tasks are loosely distributed to an undefined mass of actors who volunteer contributions. Here, Howe’s notion of the ‘wisdom of the crowd’ refers to an aggregation of information and ideas from a large and diverse collective, thereby producing a solution shaped from the mass’ collective knowledge and experience; J. Howe, *Crowdsourcing: why the power of the crowd is*

next launch or blogpost, and even design the next company logo and tagline as part of their rebranding project. Hence, apart from the owners and bloggers, I spoke to numerous consumers based locally and offshore, either in person or via the Internet.

Producers — that is, owners and models of blogshops, and commercial bloggers — would liaise with each other to produce collaborative launches or feature each other in their blog posts in a bid to share their audience. Producers also corresponded with corporate sponsors and the apparel manufacturing industry based across the East Asian region. These involved email exchanges, long-distance conference calls, and face-to-face business meetings abroad. In order to access this extended arm of the Community, I requested for accompanied short business trips during my fieldwork with these women and familiarised myself with jargon of the blog advertising and apparel manufacturing industries.

As a researcher embedded in the Community, I found myself taking on multiple roles concurrently. I was at once an academic, the blogger's publicist, an intern to the blogshop, a friend to the women in times of need, and even an occasional customer. These diverse characters were rarely segmented — their boundaries blurred as I quickly adapted to perform according to the needs of the situation. This constant switching proved to be an exercise in 'internal collaboration' as I consciously toggled between or even overlapped my various roles, remembering to pick up where I left off on a particular conversation, project, or individual so as to present myself congruently.

Lastly, as detailed above, my fieldwork while based mainly in Singapore also included regional sites of production labour in East Asia, in particular, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and China which I hope to visit in due time. The initial stages of my collaborative fieldwork involved conducting research both online and offline in Singapore, which is the focus of this paper. Having attained a sufficient level of social-cultural capital and local knowledge of the industry, I felt competent enough to approach the Community on the Internet and in real life.

### **Accessing the Community**

A cornerstone of classical ethnography is participant observation where the anthropologist is immersed in the field site and learns to appreciate the phenomenon through interactions with individuals in their natural setting.<sup>12</sup> As blogshops and commercial blogs manifest both online and offline, my dilemma was where I should situate my field site and how best to embed myself in the Community. It seemed that both realms brought their own benefits and disadvantages.

In conducting my research with informants in a physical face-to-face setting, I could easily draw on established tried-and-tested interview techniques that allow me to pick up on non-verbal cues such as body language, facial expressions, and emotional tone in voice that would enrich the interpretation of my data. This was less possible when conducting fieldwork and interviews online unless my informants were willing to engage in video chats. In real life, with our bodies sharing a physical geography and proximity, there would be more room to personalise our exchanges and receive focused individual attention as opposed to the computer-mediated-communication where users were increasingly likely to multitask.<sup>13</sup> However, as such a significant portion of this community's activity is

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*driving the future of business*, New York: Crown Business, 2008.

<sup>12</sup>See T. Boellstorff et al, *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012, pp.1-12, pp.65-91.

<sup>13</sup>S. Kenyon, 'Internet Use and Time Use: The importance of multitasking', *Time & Society*, vol. 17, no. 2-3, 2008, pp.283-318.

based online, conducting my research solely offline in real life would decontextualise the phenomenon and obscure meaning-making activity that was exclusively conducted on the Internet. I, too, did not subscribe to the notion that 'online' research is less valued than its 'offline' counterpart or that there was a hierarchy between the two.<sup>14</sup> In fact, it was necessary for me to pursue both angles given the scope of my fieldwork and my research design.

In conducting my research with informants within the confines of cyberspace, I would be situated on the forefront of digital anthropology's experimentation with online research methods. Being less bound by geography and time, I could explore a variant multi-sited ethnography to the one originally envisioned by Banks<sup>15</sup>, where all that is required is a desktop and Internet connection in order for me to 'travel'. Online research was also a pragmatic approach to my textual analysis of these blogs where large volumes of data were being added and updated daily. However, I was aware of two pitfalls. Firstly, the transience of online media where entire databases and digital communities can be taken off overnight, and secondly, the contentious nature of online content where previously published material could be surreptitiously edited without the public's knowledge. Print media publications, however, enjoyed a degree of permanence.

In a pre-fieldwork interview that I had conducted to test out my proposed methodology, one informant's revelations reassured my budding preferences towards a dual-pronged approach in studying this community:

Commercial blogger, 23: Who I am online is who I am offline. I won't lie online. But I can't possibly post every single thing about myself on my blog too, so if you don't know me personally, you won't know my true personality.

Given that I was interested in these bloggers' productions and understandings of their online and offline personas as experienced and lived, I chose to formulate a collaborative research approach comprising participant observation and personal interviews within their virtual world based on the Internet and their real life interactions in physical settings. Kennedy<sup>16</sup> astutely encapsulates this study of how technology use influences daily lives in the term 'technobiography' and explains that

If we want to understand lived experiences of the Internet, we need to study not only online, virtual representations of selves, but also lives and selves situated within the social relations of the consumption and production of information and communication technologies.<sup>17</sup>

It is important to note that unlike much earlier research that merely appropriates Internet-based platforms to substitute face-to-face communication such as email correspondence<sup>18</sup>, online surveys, instant messaging or chat rooms<sup>19</sup>, and video

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<sup>14</sup>Boellstorff et al, 'Ethnography and Virtual Worlds', 2012, pp.61-64.

<sup>15</sup>Banks, 'Multi-sited Ethnography', 2009.

<sup>16</sup>H. Kennedy, 'Technobiography: Researching Lives, Online and Off', *Biography*, vol. 26, no. 1, pp.120-139.

<sup>17</sup>Kennedy, 'Technobiography', pp.120.

<sup>18</sup>N. Olivero, & P. Lunt, 'When the Ethic Is Functional to the Method: The Case of E-Mail Qualitative Interviews', in E.A. Buchanan (ed.), *Readings in Virtual Research Ethics: Issues and Controversies*, Information Science Pub., 2004, pp.101-113.

<sup>19</sup>T. Boellstorff, *Coming of age in second life: an anthropologist explores the virtually human*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008.

conferencing, I follow Boellstorff<sup>20</sup> in completely immersing myself in the virtual community, performing and engaging as other participants do while co-(in)habiting cyberspace. In Rogers' words, I was approaching virtual world research as 'studying culture and society *with the Internet* [rather than] *on the Internet*'<sup>21</sup> (emphasis mine). I detail my research methodology in the next section.

*a. Situating the field site*

The Singaporean blogosphere is a vast economy that spans across blogs focusing on beauty, blogshops, food and beverage, lifestyle, parenting, photography, politics, and technology. Across these categories, blogs may be personal and not monetised, or commercial and profit earning. Men and women of all ages write them. My research focuses exclusively on blogshops and commercial lifestyle blogs, both of which happen to be dominantly run by young adult women. Several blog directories and local Internet databases are dedicated to cataloguing these blogshops and commercial blogs that in turn often aggregated links to other blogshops and commercial blogs. With much ease, I located my virtual field site among these blogshops, commercial blogs, and their publically linked social media feeds.

*b. Identifying potential informants*

To assemble potential informants, I sieved through the above mentioned blog directories and local Internet databases, as well as online forums where users gather to discuss blogshops and commercial bloggers. In my initial shortlist, I selected blogshops and commercial bloggers based on the popularity and/or success of their websites, measured by a combination of:

- (a) the number of visitor counts;
- (b) the number of users who subscribed to them;
- (c) the frequency of mentions and strength of presence on the Internet and/or mainstream media; and
- (d) recommendations or mentions by individuals in the Community whom I have been in contact with.

These potential informants included commercial bloggers, blogshop owners and models, readers and customers, corporate advertisers and sponsors, and journalists and magazine writers from the mainstream media. My pool of informants gradually grew through snowball sampling when these women began to introduce me to their networks.

*c. Contacting and securing informants*

The most convenient and inexpensive way for me to make initial contact with potential informants was via email correspondence, given that it was a communal norm to publish one's email address on the website as a preferred mode of communication. On some occasions, I left queries on the comments section of the blogshop or commercial blog page. Where this was not possible, or when I felt my emails or blog comments were lost among the thousand others that were posted by other users daily, I resorted to contacting these women via their social media feeds. I

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<sup>20</sup>Boellstorff, 'Coming of age', 2008.

<sup>21</sup>R. Shields, 'Introduction: Virtual Spaces, Real Histories and Living Bodies', in R. Shields (ed.), *Cultures of Internet: Virtual Spaces, Real Histories, Living Bodies*, London: Sage, pp.7.

posted queries on their Facebook wall, sent them private messages through Facebook, or mentioned them in Tweets. This last option, while seemingly the least officious avenue for initiating contact, proved to be efficient, as these young women appeared to be active and constantly connected to their social media feeds. I gave brief explanations of my research and sent them a detailed Participant Information Sheet, specified the level of commitment envisioned in this project, and answered their queries electronically. Women who were interested in participating in this research were then sent a Participant Consent Form that stated our mutual responsibilities and rights as researcher and informant.

*d. Virtual world participant observation*

Immersing myself in this digital community was not simply a matter of 'liking' a Facebook fan page to get news feeds or joining mailing lists for notifications. As Doheny-Farina writes, '[y]ou can't subscribe to a community as you subscribe to a discussion group on the net. It must be lived. It is entwined, contradictory, and involves all our senses'.<sup>22</sup>

In order to access and be socialised into the blog community, I had to 'live' within their shared social space and 'perform' as they would. This included adopting communication and behavioral norms<sup>23</sup> just as any anthropologist entering a physical field site would. Conversations with readers and customers during my pre-field preparation informed my 'performance' as a participating 'insider'. These included a repertoire of cyber lingo and localised blogosphere jargon, as well as an extensive background knowledge and social context of the local commercial blog scene.

I diligently kept up-to-date with bloggers' posts; very occasionally traded comments, compliments, and criticism of their publicised life choices; participated in reader-initiated discussions and polls; and made occasional purchases just as any member of the commercial blog industry in Singapore would have. Depending on their preference, I also maintained contact with bloggers and a handful of newfound Community friends through emails, instant messaging, video chats, or text messages.

In 'virtual world' platforms such as Second Life, the avatar takes the form of a 'pixelated' body that stands for the person appropriating it for interactions.<sup>24</sup> Sherry Turkle refers to avatars as 'objects to think with'.<sup>25</sup> In the sharing industry<sup>26</sup>, however, one's social media accounts become the vehicle for entry into digital communities and interactions with other users. Since commercial bloggers convey their personas and interact with others through social media accounts such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Formspring, and Foursquare, these platforms become the 'objects' through which they 'think with' and exist in their digital community.

In a bid to embed myself into the commercial blog community, I set up a new Facebook account to interact with fellow community members and a blog to host the more intimate insights into my life. On this Facebook account, I 'added' informants

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<sup>22</sup>S. Doheny-Farina, *The Wired Neighbourhood*, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 1996, p.57.

<sup>23</sup>R. M. Martey & K. Shiflett, 'Reconsidering Site and Self: Methodological Frameworks for Virtual-World Research', *International Journal of Communication* vol. 6, 2012, pp.105-126; S. Turkle, *Life on the screen: identity in the age of the Internet*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995.

<sup>24</sup>D. Chandler & Roberts-Young 1998, 'The Construction of Identity in the Personal Homepages of Adolescents', Aberystwyth University, Ceredigion: UK, viewed 1 June 2012, <  
<http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/short/strasbourg.html> >

<sup>25</sup>S. Turkle, *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007, pp.3-11.

<sup>26</sup>J. Jarvis, *Public Parts: How Sharing in the Digital Age Improves the Way We Work and Live*, Simon & Schuster, 2011.



as 'friends' and subscribed to their Fan Pages for live feeds. I shaped the blog as a chronicle of my research journey and experiences as a graduate student so that informants could keep up-to-date with the progress of my research and keep in touch through a medium less formal than email correspondence. I would also send links of my latest blogposts to some of these women and received useful feedback and reflexive commentaries from them occasionally. Some time later, a very helpful informant introduced me to the world of Instagram and suggested I sign up for an account to connect with commercial bloggers. As a commercial blogger herself, she earmarked Instagram as the next 'social media craze' in Singapore given its wide uptake by women in her industry. When I eventually set up my own account, she was among the first commercial bloggers to 'Follow' or connect with me, and that helped to put me on the 'radar' of other women in the industry.

*e. Archival research*

Given that little academic attention has been paid to this budding phenomenon, this empirical ethnographic work is relatively new. I had to rely on newspaper and magazine publications for background information on the commercial blog industry in Singapore. I utilised the media archives from the Information Resource Centre at Singapore Press Holdings Ltd to gather published material regarding the commercial blog industry from the past decade. It occurred to me that statements made by bloggers in these mainstream print publications were permanently archived. This is unlike statements published on their personal blog posts that were transient as they could be modified or deleted at will, as has happened in the past when the public deemed some bloggers' posts offensive or distasteful. For future reference, I kept in mind to look out for disparities between bloggers' viewpoints archived in mainstream print publications and those on their blogs. My intentions are not to 'call them out' or accuse them of contradictions, but rather to have bloggers talk me through their thought processes and progression throughout their career.

*f. Participant observation*

I convened with several bloggers, models, manufacturers, and customers from the commercial blog industry at mass meet-ups, flea markets, and warehouse sales in the capacities of an academic researcher and a customer. There, I sought to understand how blogshop owners and commercial bloggers shifted and managed their online businesses in real life, and how this transference effected their notions of online and offline personas. During our meetings, aspects of the industry that I was not formerly formally privy to (even during our online communications) were also revealed to me. Having seen and known me in person, these women were more likely to introduce me to friends who were fellow bloggers, thus snowballing my pool of informants.

In addition, I conducted several one-off interviews with other actors in the commercial blog/blogshop industry. The members included consumers, designers, wholesale suppliers and import agents to obtain background information. The various roles I played allowed me close and frequent access to members of the commercial blog industry and fostered trusting relationships that eventually made me privy to the inner workings of the commercial blog industry in Singapore. Having clinched access to and successfully entered the blogshop and commercial blog industry, the next section details emblematic characteristics of the mode and manner of communication within the Community.

## Communication with informants

In my attempt to adopt the language of my informants, I observed interactions across their blogshops, blogs, and social media feeds for three months before engaging in such 'blog speak' during my online and offline exchanges with them. Here, I identify three typical features of their cyber communications, namely, textual intimacy, emoticons as signifiers, and how the Internet as a medium has become the message<sup>27</sup> behind these women's intentions.

### a. Textual intimacy

Women in the Community crafted and conveyed intimacy via text in a number of ways. Most often, they tended to overuse terms of endearment in their conversations. These women freely adopted personal referents such as 'babe' and its variant 'baby', 'dear' and its variant 'dearie', 'honey' and its variants 'hunny' and 'hunn', 'sweet' and its variants 'sweetie' and 'sweetie pie', 'girl' and its variants 'gal' and 'gurl' in their exchanges. Such 'girl talk' appears to be a homosocial strategy to stimulate a sense of closeness and friendship despite these women never having met in person, and at times even being complete strangers on the Internet.

They also adopted informal words to emphasise their emotions with modifiers such as 'super duper', 'hyper', 'mega', and 'to the max' which is often abbreviated to 'ttm'. Recently added to this list is the use of 'x' followed by an intentionally long string of numbers representing a 'multiplication' and thus exaggeration of a particular feeling. For example, 'smile x7439528475' would imply that the user is exceedingly happy, while 'ate x839585 cupcakes' would imply that the user has consumed a huge volume of cupcakes. This de- and in-formalization of language tended to portray bloggers as more humorous and approachable.

### b. Emoticons as signifiers

As in many other digital communities<sup>28</sup>, emoticons were employed to either substitute or add to text, and bore many functions<sup>29</sup>. The most common of these were heart shapes, smiley faces, and sad faces. On Internet interfaces that do not support emoticons, women tended to make do with keyboard symbols:

:) or :D – happy  
:( or D: – sad  
:'( – crying  
>:( – frowning  
>.< – embarrassed

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<sup>27</sup>M. McLuhan & Q. Fiore, *The Medium Is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects - Centennial Facsimile Edition*, Gingko Press, 2011.

<sup>28</sup>See D. Derks, A.E.R. Bos & J. Grumbkow, 'Emoticons and social interaction on the Internet: the importance of social context', *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 23, 2007, pp.842-849; A. Garrison, D. Remley, P. Thomas & E. Wierszewski, 'Conventional Faces: Emoticons in Instant Messaging Discourse', *Computers and Composition*, vol. 28, 2011, pp.112-125; A.H. Huang, D.C. Yen & X. Zhang, 'Exploring the potential effects of emoticons', *Information & Management*, vol 45, 2008, pp.466-473; T. Luor, L. Wu, H. Lu & Y. Tao, 'The effects of emoticons in simplex and complex task-oriented communication: An empirical study of instant messaging', *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 26, 2010, pp-889-895.

<sup>29</sup>See also S. Lo, 'The Nonverbal Communication Functions of Emoticons in Computer-Mediated Communication', *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, vol. 11, no. 5, 2008, pp.595-597.

<3 – heart shape, denoting love

Like the use of terms of endearment, emoticons could serve to foster closeness among community members. Many informants mentioned that emoticons ‘made everything cheery’ and ‘made things less serious’ between users online. As creative and often colourful emblems, they livened up conversations and lubricated exchanges. Emoticons were also used as euphemisms or mild substitutes for expressions that were otherwise offensive. The most frequent ones were sad faces to indicate negative words and dollar signs to represent expensiveness:

Customer: don't buy from [name of blogshop]! quality is so :( :( !!!!

Blog reader: i don't understand why ppl [people] think she is pretty. her looks are so :(

Customer: hey babe! i really wanna buy the [name of item] but it's so \$\$\$!

Emoticons were also used to water down or negate harsh comments. This is done in two ways. Firstly, an emoticon supporting the contents or mood of a sentence is added to emphasise one's intent, elicit sympathy and thus deflect potentially negative responses:

Blogshop owner: sorry hunn it's all sold out :( :( :( not bringing in anymore stock!!

Commercial blogger: hola readers! sorry for not posting >.< i've been so so so stressed out at school :( :( !!!

Secondly, an emoticon contrasting the contents or mood of a sentence is deployed to diffuse pre-empted backlash or negative responses:

Customer: hey girl, you state that your new model is uk6 but she looks much larger. i've seen her in real life and i don't think she is that small? no offense yah :(

Blog reader: why are your recent posts all advertorials? what happened to all your personal posts? hope you're not just concerned with the money now <3

In terms of use, emoticons could substitute text such as ‘I <3 you’ to stand for ‘I love you’, or add to text such as ‘I'm upset :(’. In general, emoticons have been extensively entrenched into the daily language of the blogshop and commercial blog community to the extent that conversing online without the use of any emoticons would come across as being ‘rude’, ‘too serious’, or ‘unfriendly’. My informants emphasise that omitting emoticons could easily lead to intentions being misconstrued and misinterpreted by the receiving party. One memorable incident was when a blogger asked if I were upset with her because I responded to her text message with a mere ‘Okay.’ She had found it difficult to read off my emotions because I had not included any emoticons to signal my sentiments. From then, I was careful to construct textual responses to my informants conscientiously.

c. *The medium is the message?*

Having discussed the form of online communication in the previous two segments, this segment addresses the function of Internet exchanges within the blogshop and commercial blog community. Three aspects — time, the ability to multitask, and the control of impression management — were key motivations for women preferring online interactions to real life, face-to-face exchanges.

A striking feature is the time of day at which these women communicated online. Published posts and replies to others would come streaming in throughout the day and even stretch past the nominal working hours of 9am to 5pm. Timestamps on electronic communications such as emails, posts on social media feeds, and blogposts ran throughout the day and night, giving the impression that these women never ‘left’ their workplace — the Internet. In fact, it was not uncommon for me to receive work-related emails and text messages from bloggers as late as four in the morning, even if we were to meet in the early afternoon to work together. When asked about a typical work day, one blogshop owner comments:

Blogshop owner, 24: Uh no fixed hours ... if we got to work late at night, we will... we will make up for the sleep the next day or something ... Mmm we try to make it fixed like the office hours ... but ... sometimes when we receive a lot of orders in the night we cant help but attend to them also ... yah so actually it's 24/7 ...

A commercial blogger echoes her sentiments:

Commercial blogger, 23: The thing is ... I wanted to make it a 9 to 5 job as well, yah I wanna make it more discipline so I try to wake up in the morning like you know 8, 9 and do my blog, blog stuff until like evening or night and then off-work but the thing is for blog industry I feel like people will require you to reply very promptly even on weekends so even like, there's no paid leave ...

Like these two women, many informants add that since their businesses are conducted mostly online, owners and bloggers inevitably end up managing work-related affairs even when they log onto the Internet in their ‘personal time’ for ‘leisure’. With a stable Internet connection island-wide and portable smartphones or handheld devices, women in the Community appeared to be constantly connected to the web. Their gripes also indicated a shift from ‘working from home’ to ‘working anywhere and everywhere’, and that their work-life balance was disrupted given the collapsing of work and leisure.

Despite the challenges arising from the expectancy and group pressure to be connected ‘24/7’, a majority of the women still appreciated being unbound by normative work hours. They enjoyed the discretion and flexibility accorded by communications via online platforms but cautioned that work and leisure boundaries ought to be drawn when necessary. One strategy is to remain constantly connected to their emails and social media feeds but set aside certain hours to respond to ‘non-friends’, that is, fans, readers they are not familiar with, and customers. Some women have even begun publicly declaring that correspondence to such ‘non-friends’ will be suspended afterhours and on weekends, and resume during normative work hours.

A crucial advantage of communicating online was the ability to multitask. This extended mostly to women who requested being interviewed over instant messaging, so that they may ‘talk to other people at the same time’, ‘pack parcels’ for mailing, ‘reply to [their] other emails’, or attend to other administrative aspects of

their online businesses. I had initially thought that some of these women were pressed for time and suggested rescheduling the interview at their convenience. It was, however, revealed to me that such multitasking was characteristic of this community. Women said they were 'used to' multitasking, felt multitasking 'saves time', and multitasked as 'the Internet gets boring after a while'. In other words, women communicated online with the belief that it was more efficient, allowed for multiple stimuli to maintain their interest, and that multitasking has come to be a group norm when logged onto the Internet.

Be it synchronous communication such as instant messaging and video chats, or non-synchronous communication such as emails, blog posts, and forum posts, computer-mediated-communication (CMC) afforded women the opportunity to manage and shape the impressions they presented to others. As much has been written about the latter enabling users to better craft their responses<sup>30</sup>, I turn to a discussion on synchronous CMC. Women adopted a handful of expressive interjections in order to create a small time lapse to conjure a response. These textual practices have been noted important for a researcher's textual listening.<sup>31</sup> Common expressions included 'hmm', 'mmm', 'uh', 'well', and ellipses '...' which were used textually in instant messaging and verbally in video chats. Ellipses for the latter were literally vocalised as 'dot dot dot':

Interviewer: So what do you think of their latest collection?

Respondent: *Uh*, dot dot dot. It's okay only *lah*. Not fantastic?

Mimicking signposts automated by electronic software and machinery, some users convey actions within two asterisks to indicate that a response is soon approaching, such as *\*typing\**, *\*thinking\**, and *\*processing\**:

Interviewer: What is expected of models in terms of their appearance?

Respondent: *\*thinking\**

Interviewer: J take your time!

During video chats, many women appeared without makeup on and dressed more casually than usually portrayed on their blogs. This is likely because a majority of these women chose to engage in video chats in the comfort of their own homes, and often late into the night. One respondent apologised for 'dressing down' and candidly asked if I could see her pimples on my screen. This was in contrast to the 'photoshopped' or digitally enhanced photographs posted on their blogs, where women were generally dressed more glamorously with the use of cosmetics to augment their facial appearances. When asked if they were comfortable baring their au naturel look to me, most women replied that this was how they looked like 'in real life', 'offline'. They added that they were 'just lazy', or that it was 'impractical' or 'silly' to dress up 'at home'. One blogger also added that she was getting ready for bed and that I was seeing her at her 'worst time of the day'.

The backdrop of our video chats ranged from a full view of these women's entire bedrooms to small areas of their bedroom such as the vanity corner, the closet area, the study desk area, or the door. In some occasions, this framing depended on the location of power outlets in the bedroom especially since video chats tended to last over an hour and quickly drained laptops of power. In one instance, a blogger

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<sup>30</sup>J.B. Walther, 'Selective self-presentation in computer-mediated communication: Hyperpersonal dimensions of technology, language, and cognition', *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 23, 2007, pp.2538-2557.

<sup>31</sup>Boellstorff et al, 'Ethnography and Virtual Worlds', 2012, pp. 101-102.

who has written about being an ‘OCD freak’<sup>32</sup> who is neat and tidy inevitably revealed a room full of clutter to me instead. I soon realised that most of these vantage points had not yet been featured on the women’s blogs, as they usually framed photographs to showcase only the more presentable parts of their house. For example, clutter was often cropped out, pixelated, or blurred out. Hence, video chats offered me exclusive insights into these women’s ‘offline personas’ in terms of appearance and living space.

In general, textually based synchronous CMC facilitated women’s impression management with the time allowance to craft their desired response. These cues were ‘under the conscious control of the internet user to a much greater extent than are facial expressions and body language in face-to-face encounters’<sup>33</sup> and enabled them to direct their personas and better articulate their intentions. Visually based synchronous CMC such as video chats, however, appeared to be less directed in that the women inevitably revealed glimpses of their personality — intentionally or otherwise — often not portrayed on their blogs. While these interactions were akin to face-to-face chats in person in that visual cues and body language could be easily observed, communicating behind a screen rendered a physical distance that seemed to negate social faux pas. Conventionally rude gestures such as minimal eye contact, texting on the phone while conversing, awkward long pauses, and scooting off in the middle of a conversation were somewhat less appalling. In meeting with these commercial bloggers in person, however, I was soon to be immersed in a different set of communicative norms that required much negotiation.

### “Cya IRL!”

Given that my initial contact with women in the Community was via the Internet, meeting them in person for the first time was a fascinating experience that required much flexibility and adaptation on my part. This section illuminates three aspects of shifting communication from cyber world to real life, specifically, the ambiguous transference of intimacy, verbalizing cyber lingo, and the place of online media in face-to-face communication.

#### *a. Ambiguous transference of intimacy*

After having conversed with women in the Community on the Internet over half a year, I was to meet with them in real life. Like them, I had learnt to adopt terms of endearment and emoticons liberally in a bid to reciprocate the intimacy and friendliness they had shown me through the months. Apart from issues specific to my research that we had been discussing, these women had also come to talk to me about their personal lives especially in the area of romantic relationships and their personal ambition. They were extremely familiar and comfortable with meeting ‘online’ readers and customers in person at various events, but stress that these were oft one-time-off encounters that were lubricated with excessive courtesy, friendliness, and ‘smiles’. Some added that only a very small pool of these readers and customers eventually become their ‘offline’, ‘real’, ‘true’, or ‘personal’ friends, although they maintained that the majority of these friendships still continued on the Internet with occasional meet-ups in real life. In addition, there was an unequal

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<sup>32</sup>An acronym for Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, when used in this context, ‘OCD freak’ loosely refers to someone who is uptight about organization and orderliness in general, as opposed to actually being clinically diagnosed with OCD.

<sup>33</sup>C.A. Davies, *Reflexive ethnography: a guide to researching selves and others*, London; New York: Routledge, 2008.

power dynamic at such occurrences, that of customers and fans admiring and even 'fan-girling' over these blogshop owners and models and commercial bloggers when they met. Customers and fans frequently requested for photographs to be taken and, on the rare occasion, for autographs to be given.

Unlike these readers and customers, however, my relationship and face-to-face contact with these women was to be long-term, and I was approaching them as an equal attempting to understand their worldview. This was reflected in the numerous instances where these women revealed sensitive facts and figures to me, reiterating the confidentiality of issues the general public would not be privy to. To be honest, my very initial real-life meetings were uncomfortable and even 'awkward', in the words of one of these women. We had established homosocial intimacy within the spaces we shared online, but were ambiguous about the acceptable level of physical proximity for our first face-to-face meet-up. Different women responded in various ways including a formal handshake, a friendly smile, a cheeky wink, and a prolonged hug. The intimacy established through online communications was not always immediately or wholly transferred offline. Maneuvering this initial extent of bodily contact was a learned task that required a quick assessment of the woman's body language and an equal reciprocal response.

*b. Verbalising cyber lingo*

Almost all the women I spoke to in real life verbalised acronyms and emoticons usually only adopted in online conversations. In the case of the former, some women would spell out 'LOL' meaning to 'laugh out loud' in place of actually laughing at a witty remark or funny scene. It was ironic that some said it in a deadpan tone with a straight face. Some other abbreviations voiced were 'BB' for 'bye bye', 'TTFN' for 'tata for now', and 'TTYL' for 'talk to you later'. Textually, these abbreviations were birthed out of convenience and substituted the spelling out of words and phrases.

A handful of women also literally articulated emoticons in our verbal exchanges:

Interviewer: ... So were you offended?

Respondent: Huh, no *lah* ... smiley face ...

Interviewer: Haha, I see you really love floral prints

Respondent: Yah! I super heart them!

In the above, women were inserting emoticons into their speech as if our conversations were taking place on the Internet. The 'smiley face' or 'J' served to emphasise the respondent's statement and assure me that she was replying honestly. The 'heart', when used in online communication is interpreted as 'love', thus substituting the verb in her intended response, 'I super love them'.

Expressive interjections, such as 'haha' which denotes laughter, and 'sigh' which literally denotes a sigh were also adopted in verbal exchanges in place of non-verbal cues:

Respondent: Sigh, actually I'm very tired.

Respondent: She's quite witty *lah*, haha.

Verbally, many of these acronyms, emoticons, and expressive interjections contained the same or an even greater number of syllables as the phrases they replaced.

Expressing conventional non-verbal cues through these articulated thoughts also required more effort than actually conveying one's thoughts through body language. The verbalizing of cyber lingo thus did not appear to be utilised for convenience. Perhaps cyber lingo had become habitual given the time they spent communicating online. On another note, I believe these women were displaying their knowledge of the digital community and performing their competence to an audience capable of assessing their proficiency.

*c. The place of online media in face-to-face communication*

A vast majority of the women often physically depended on online media and portable devices during our conversations in real life. They would browse the Internet on their smartphones, iPads, and laptops to show me images of the articles or processes they were talking about. It was also common for them to refer to their blogshops and commercial blogs for previously formulated thoughts and opinions as opposed to spontaneously responding to me immediately. While most women were usually seeking additional information to enrich our conversations, it is interesting to note that some commercial bloggers were literally consulting their 'online catalogue' of documented thoughts — that is, their blogs — filtering through published blog posts to recall their premeditated stance on particular issues.

A handful of women have on the occasion typed out their responses on smartphones and handed them to me for viewing. This was because the issue discussed was sensitive and they did not want to verbalise their responses (even though there were sessions where the women and I were the only ones in a private area), or because the women were simply more comfortable communicating textually during some portions of the interview.

Hence, even though the mode of our in real life exchanges was offline, and that the manner of our conversations was face-to-face, women in the blogshop and commercial blog community were adept in seamlessly weaving electronics, the Internet, and online media into our communications.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have reflexively outlined my anthropological approach towards researching the Singaporean blogshop and commercial blog community both online and offline as an ethnographer's recount. I emphasise the need to assess the Community to understand its peculiarities, and adapt to the field in the most respectful and receptive manner. Of these peculiarities, the high IT uptake in Singapore, the unique language adopted by the Community, the intentionally public nature of the industries, along with its multiple layers of collaboration all informed my collaborative methodology. In accessing the Community, I have detailed both online and offline strategies for entering the field. This essentially involves a two-pronged approach that maintains participant observation both in the digital world where avatars and profiles interact, and in real life where physical bodies congregate. This ensures a more comprehensive overview of the phenomenon studied. I also discussed three typical features that emerged from my communication with women in the Community both online and offline, namely textual intimacy, emoticons as signifiers, and the Internet as a medium becoming the message. Lastly, I illuminated three points of contention when communication is shifted from the cyber world to real life, specifically, the ambiguous transference of intimacy, verbalizing cyber lingo, and the place of online media in face-to-face communication.



As evidenced, collaboration was a defining feature of my methodological approach given the requisite to manage participant observation on digital platforms and in real life. In addition, the hyper-networked nature of this community necessitated that I co-operate with multiple individuals across various locations, vocations, and demographics to foreground the phenomenon. As anthropology turns to look at online ethnography, social media, and digital cultures, researchers undoubtedly have to look to innovative research techniques in order for scholarship to keep up with technology.

With a sound assessment of the Community's peculiarities, its accessibility, and communicative norms, the groundwork prepared by this leg of my doctoral research is a milestone that will allow for a more attuned and conscientious continuation of my study as I embark on another year of fieldwork.