Letters to Creatives from Faiq Airudin – Navigating social media – how to deal and identify burnout

Mental health and well-being are a challenge that appears in many facets of a creative's practice. What are some of the stressors and/or challenges that are causing social media fatigue, where users experience exhaustion and overwhelm from prolonged social media use?

Hi, I am Faiq Airudin from Brunei, sharing my experience with navigating social media as a content producer. I have experienced creating social communities and online communities from the ground up and managing social media accounts with tens of thousands of followers in media and also in the creative field.

While mostly working on local projects, I feel like Brunei is a good testing ground for online social communities due to the high internet penetration rate, like on mobile use, and also high social media use in proportion to our population.

I think one thing that have stuck out to me during a presentation that I sat through by Facebook, I guess now Meta, was how attention for posts is not measured in hours, minutes, but in mere milliseconds. And this, for me, was an example of how your attention is being manipulated to stay on apps longer for better engagement. I think also this idea of how attention is being grabbed for us in short spurts over a longer period of time. So consistent exposure to these low-quality interactions can lead to burnout. And this type of attention grabbing is continually being refined across different platforms, not just through the Meta suite of products like Facebook or Instagram, but other social media platforms as well, even on LinkedIn.

Burnout is another term that we are hearing much more often in the creative and cultural industries. How do we recognise signs and symptoms of burnout?

For me, burnout is continued exposure under pressure without direction. So this could be the exposure that you could find in social media feeds or just through events. I worked on projects where I was inundated with customer messages and felt the pressure to reply to them in a timely and professional manner. And what I felt was dread opening up social media even for personal use and there was a reluctance to engage in anything in a meaningful manner. This, I think, happens for a lot of customer-facing roles, but for more creative projects, maybe there is like a longer burn and there are less times when you face the customers.

This could be related to being overwhelmed with choices. The sense of decision fatigue could be debilitating and cause you to feel like you are a deer in the headlights, unable to move. If there is an ease or tension when a choice has to be made, I think this could be the feeling of burnout. For me, this could be an indication of a lack of authority such as like a normal management structure, like the timeline is not set so it lacks the focus for when the work needs to be completed. And lack of boundaries between the personal and professional life. Like all these factors could lead to burnout in the creative and cultural fields.

What suggestions do you have in preventing burnout, particularly when it comes to the pressures of constant social media engagement and content creation?

While social media can be seen as the be- and end-all of all knowledge, I feel like do not be completely set or fall on the trap of using social media just to find ideas, research topics, or understand the industry more. Pick up a book, head to a conference or events to understand more about a topic and more importantly talk to a person or expert in charge of the area. If they are too far away from you, as now a lot of places and people are working remotely, and also you might not be in the centre of these where these conferences are, especially for me. You can still have a Zoom call since it is important to have that face-to-face meeting and face-to-face understanding. Like most conferences or talks are now online and it is easy to join just with an e-mail address. I think what I found amazing is that people are so willing to say yes and talk to you if you show the appropriate courtesy and curiosity about the topic.

I think for me, another important lesson I have taken to heart is that the community will always be there. It is important to take a break or spend time away from the screen rather than be constantly engaged and waiting on your notifications.

With so much of what you do revolving around social media, it can be quite difficult to disconnect and unplug. Could you share 3 habits that you've inculcated over the years to find a healthier relationship with social media and avoid burnout?

I think for me, these are the habits that have worked for me since work and personal life are now on social media and it is hard to create and draw those boundaries. So definitely for me, it is hard not to feel overwhelmed by enquiries, emails for long-term projects and WhatsApp group messages when it is all on one device, especially in Southeast Asia where WhatsApp with constant notifications is the way we all communicate. So these are the habits that have worked for me in the long term.

The first would be that, while it is easier said than done but limiting screen time and having a cut-off time when you go to bed to not be on the screen. A recent term is turning say your phone into a dumb phone, so limiting notifications, apps, and colourful distractions. It could be in the form of turning it into a grayscale or actively putting a night mode feature where all the colours become warmer before you go to bed.

Another method is setting a timer for app usage. For me, it really works well. You just set the timer for one hour, for example, for the social media apps.

Next is to find activities outside that limit or reduce your screen time. For me, Brunei has ample places to walk outside and exercise when it is not 30° outside. So it is important that I take this opportunity to listen to music or podcasts without those distractions on my phone, those notifications.

And finally, is to build relationships outside of social media. While social media is integral to how to keep ties and see what is happening in the world, not just online interactions, but through the one-on-one interactions you build with people around you. So if there are coffee shops or events in parks, if it is remotely through those Zoom sessions, those team sessions, those WhatsApp video calls, those notifications can wait.

So those are some things I would like to share concerning navigating social media and how to deal and identify burnout.