

The background of the image is a stylized representation of the Earth, showing the continents of North and South America. Overlaid on the globe is a complex network of glowing lines and nodes, primarily in shades of blue and orange, which symbolizes global communication, data flow, or social media connections. The lines radiate from various points across the globe, creating a sense of dynamic activity and interconnectedness.

# SERMIO

THE CULTURAL ATLAS –  
THE APAC INFLUENCER  
NOTEBOOK



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# 1 INTRODUCTION



Welcome to the Cultural Atlas, the first in a SERMO series designed to bring you the most interesting news and intel from the communications world. Tapping into our invaluable global network of 15 independent agencies across 18 countries, this forum will be a platform to share information on the macro and micro trends in local markets and territories impacting our industry and the sectors we specialise in.

In 2019, Kantar predicted that Chinese leadership in social media and its analytics would be ‘fast-followed’ by the west. If we are to learn from the progressive strides of the east, we must first analyse what they are doing, why it’s working and how we can adapt as communications experts for those of looking east, and for those of us across the rest of the globe as patterns ripple out. As we entered a new decade, we spoke to our SERMO partners about what had been developing in their markets over the past 12 months. Then COVID-19 hit and dramatically impacted the pace of these changes and developments, encouraging fresh talks and sharing of experiences.

Through access to M&C Intelligence, interviews, close consultation with three of our APAC partners – Adventi Communication, Flare Communications and R.S.V.P Singapore & Malaysia and our SERMO Spotlight APAC Webinar held June 2020 – we have looked at the media, influencer and content landscapes throughout China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore. Some of the findings are therefore based upon qualitative know-how only available from these locally embedded partners.

We explore the themes that these markets all share, as the content landscape shifts and what this means for communications, PR and brands alike. Video content platforms and gamification are upping the ante for brands when it comes to connecting with audiences and have quickly become key considerations when it comes to social marketing efforts and maintaining contact whilst bricks and mortar retail and physical events came to a standstill. Whilst direct purchasing through livestreams has transformed the way Asian audiences shop – it’s something Instagram is only toying with in beta in the US. These developments are especially significant as Gen Z, who we see enter the world of work in 2020, are proficient within these digital spaces: now, more than ever we need to get to grips with connecting with them there. Furthermore, these spaces have proven crucial for brands connecting with media, influencers, and consumers of all ages in the wake of the pandemic.

We hope you enjoy it.

Signed, Jane Boardman



# GLOSSARY

A list of the abbreviations, terms and acronyms that appear throughout this report with comprehensive breakdowns for clarity.

**618** – China’s annual, month-long e-commerce shopping festival. Launched by e-commerce giant JD.com in 2004 to commemorate the company’s founding day, the online shopping bonanza involves six established e-commerce players: Tmall, JD, Pinduoduo (PDD), Suning and social media e-commerce players Douyin and Kuaishou

**ACG** – an abbreviation of Anime, Comics and Games: used in some subcultures of Greater China, the phenomenon of gaming and animation, otherwise to be translated locally as “動漫遊戲” (dòngmànyóuxì, animation, comics and games)

**AI** – Avatar Influencer: otherwise known as a virtual influencer, a virtual character designed in 3D to appear like a real influencer experiencing real situations

**APAC** – the Asia Pacific region which includes our SERMO partner markets, China, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore

**E-COMM / E-COMMERCE** – short for electronic commerce or internet commerce: the purchase or sale of goods or services online, and the transfer of money and data to execute transactions

**GEN Z** – short for Generation Z: the demographic cohort succeeding Millennials (or Generation Y). Demographers and researchers typically use the mid- to late-1990s as starting birth years

**GPS** – Global Positioning System: one of the world’s navigation satellite systems that provides geolocation and time data to a GPS receiver anywhere on, or near the Earth

**KOC** – Key Opinion Consumer: the latest form of influencers in China, who are considered experts in testing and reviewing brands and products. As they are considerably reliable, they play an influential role in the decision-making process of their audiences, regardless of their small follower collectives

**KOL** – Key Opinion Leader: an influencer who is considered an expert or authority in a respective field or topic

**KPI** – Key Performance Indicator: a critical indicator of progress towards an intended result. A KPI provides a focus for strategic, creative and commercial progress

**LITTLE RED BOOK** – China’s most trusted social shopping platform. Based in Shanghai, the app assists more than 100 million users, mostly young females, to find and review beauty and wellbeing products that can be difficult to locate in China

**MACRO INFLUENCERS** – successful online experts with high profiles who have built up significant followings

**MICRO INFLUENCERS** – social media content creators with significantly smaller, but more engaged followings than macro-influencers. Following size of micro-influencers varies significantly market to market, e.g. can be 50k+ in China due to larger population size when compared to Malaysia

**MILLENNIALS** – also known as Generation Y (or simply Gen Y), the demographic cohort following Generation X (those born between 1965 and 1980) and preceding Generation Z

**ROI** – Return on Investment: the ratio between net profit gained from a project or campaign and the cost of investment made on it

**SIDE HUSTLE** – informal term for a side job, another job that a person takes in addition to their primary job in order to supplement their personal income

**YT** – YouTube: an American video-sharing platform which enables users to upload, view, rate and engage on videos, and subscribe to other user channels. It offers a wide array of user-generated and brand media videos.





# THE FINDINGS

Despite considerable geographical, political and social differences between each of our four market focuses, we have identified key similarities between the regions. To understand what this means for us in the west, we have compared and contrasted the outtakes below.



# 1 GROWTH OF VIDEO



China is leading the way when it comes to the creation of video content platforms, but Asia's overall appetite for video is huge owing to the depth and quality it offers. In fact, 64% of connected consumers in Asia Pacific watch online video content daily and Singaporeans are the most active, consuming 2 hours every day. Though there are a multitude of platforms for this, including Kuaishou and Bilibili, the most popular is YouTube, with 84% of Hong Kong and 78% of China claiming to watch it daily. 80% of Malaysians engage daily with video content appearing on their social feeds, either from brands, news sources, or their friends. And these videos don't need to be slick productions created by professionals; 33% of connected consumers claim most of the content they watch online is produced by 'people like me' or celebrities.

The most noteworthy of the video platforms has to be Douyin (China's TikTok), which is exploding in popularity thanks to China's younger generations and their love of fun, quirky content. Despite concerns that its trend for mass-facing, unpolished content could diminish the prestigious image of luxury brands, it hasn't deterred leading players like Louis Vuitton and Chanel from advertising on the platform. With 400 million active users as of early 2020 and a user base of young females with high-spending power, it is too good an opportunity to miss.

But it's not just luxury players that are seeing intense engagement. The popularity of food & beverage challenges that are enjoyed by users on the platform has given several food and drinks retailers the chance to join in. One of the most innovative of these challenges was from hot pot restaurant chain Haidilao. Users could request a DIY Douyin recipe, and Haidilao's staff would demonstrate how they could "style" their hot pots themselves, allowing users to show off their individual dining prowess. Approximately 15,000 Douyin users participated and about 2,000 short videos were posted, some by food and lifestyle KOLs, resulting in nearly 50 million video views between them.

Or take Answer Tea's campaign involving a special packaging design. Users could send their tea orders along with a question in an AMA (Ask Me Anything) call to action and the answer was revealed as they opened the lid of their cup much like a fortune-telling exercise. As a result, Answer Tea's channel accumulated 345K followers, and their 30+ clips created garnered 1.1 million likes. Atop of a boom in sales, the Douyin campaign drove Answer Tea to sign with 250 franchise partners.

However, it's worth noting that in order to run a successful Douyin/TikTok content campaign, there are certain measures to be considered before wading in, according to China-focused digital agency Qumin. The three key factors for determining this are as follows:

- Make sure your brand has products that can be customised by users
- Don't focus on sales – raising brand awareness should be the priority outcome, even just for an immediate rise in conversion
- Campaigns must be tailored to a specific demographic.



With the platform in its infancy, the longevity of its success is still unknown. But as it rolls out beyond Asia and incites other platforms to respond with similar features (see Instagram's response to fight back with 'Reels') it marks a shift in content consumption that is already beginning to pick up around the globe. Since Covid-19 emerged, this pick-up has already been witnessed in Australia and the west. Local lockdowns encouraged not only Gen Z to engage significantly more with TikTok owing to more free time on their hands, but also Millennials and parents alike.

### Key takeaway

APAC, especially China, is leading the way in the video content stakes, owing to a combination of consumer appetite and a lack of age barrier when it comes to digital connectivity. Many brands have jumped on this, including braver luxury players willing to explore this new medium – but it appears success relies on key criteria; product personalisation, targeted campaigns, and an understanding it will likely lead to brand awareness versus immediate sales return. The endurance of the boom in video campaign success is yet to be determined (think of the rise and fall of the Vine app) and does not necessarily make it the right medium for all brands.

In addition, as SARS drove brands to adjust strategies in response to consumer behaviours and consumption changes so too will Covid-19. The pandemic has already shifted video consumption habits: users are looking for new experiences that meet their needs and appetites in the digital realm at a time when physical experiences have become much more limited. They're turning to video to entertain, inform and escape, presenting new opportunities and challenges for brands.

### Putting it into practice

Consumers are engaging on these platforms to be entertained and even, entertain others. Successful campaigns via these video platforms are those that have inspired and driven audience participation or personalisation such as branded hashtag challenges. Unlike other social media campaigns whose success very often depend solely on the influencers behind them, on video platforms it's the users and the content they create in response to influencers' that seems to be what predominantly drives campaign success.

Take the Japanese Red Cross with their 2019 campaign #BPM100 Dance Project. Due to Japan's low survival rate from cardiac arrests due to lack of CPR knowledge, the Japanese Red Cross set about educating young people on CPR. They worked with TBWA\Hakuhodo Inc, Tokyo, to create a dance that mimicked what a bystander should do in the event of a heart attack. A video of the dance was launched on TikTok and users were invited to perform the dance routine to a song with a tempo of 100 beats per minute – the ideal number of CPR chest compressions per minute. The campaign was a huge success, achieving a total of 1.1 billion media impressions (Source: Contagious – The World's Best Creative 2019).

So, it must be said that the campaign's call to action needs to be clear and inspirational enough to incite audience response to drive its traction.

On the other hand, whilst South East Asian brands don't have to contend with digital age barriers, when playing further afield over two thirds of TikTok's audience alone is under 25 years old (SOURCE: OMR.com). Despite recent engagement seen from older generations in lockdowns, it's too early to understand if their use will continue when lockdown measures lift or instead fade as novelty and spare time wane. It therefore remains just one avenue to consider for brands whose audiences roam elsewhere online. In addition, in a world where PR and influencer marketing consistently need to improve their metrics and evaluative measures, whilst these platforms have very quickly boomed, it remains unclear how the content generated through them impacts sales owing to their limited tracking options. With government restrictions and measures in flux as markets exit first, and enter, second waves, so too are video consumption habits and consumer behaviours. Brands will need this data to be reactive to these changes and adapt.







# 2 LIVESTREAMING CONTENT DRIVING SALES

Following on from video content, livestreaming is booming in Asia, with China once again leading the way by about 3-5 years ahead of the rest of the world. Part of this success is due to their early development of e-commerce platforms, such as WeChat and Weibo e-boutiques. The growth in livestreaming has contributed greatly to brand e-commerce sales during Covid-19. Usually a technology used by brands like Adidas and Disney, over the last few months Adventi Communication China reports seeing an increase in luxury brands, such as Louis Vuitton and Burberry using active platforms such as Little Red Book to directly impact sales.

Taobao, which launched in 2003, has become the world's biggest e-commerce platform, with 299 million daily active users. Capitalising on Taobao's "livestreaming" element added in 2016, parent company Alibaba launched "Taobao Live" as an independent app in 2018. KOLs and micro influencers alike utilise it to open their own livestream channels to sell directly, with viewers simply clicking on the purchase links they provide to buy products while watching these channels. More than 600,000 varieties of products are sold via the platform and it enjoys an annual growth rate of 400%.

## Why Taobao Live works

- User base and frictionless payment: Alibaba claims the live shopping conversion rate is 10 to 20% on its T-mall platform and as much as 30% on its Taobao platform. Alipay and WeChat Pay, with 450 and 600 million active users respectively, make it very easy to pay while watching video on mobile – a big attraction for consumers
- Better Deals: Brands use the platform to surprise livestream audiences with incentives such as limited time discounts and lucky draws to attract a larger customer base and drive sales
- Generated Trust: Trust is crucial and Taobao maintains its content and community combined are responsible for the consumer trust they enjoy. It is also worth noting that women aged late 20s to mid-30s form are the majority pool of Taobao livestream consumers, all of whom are very concerned about the depth of knowledge a video livestream host has on their subject matter and the products they promote.

Since Covid-19, this trust has never been more vital in Hong Kong where consumers are approaching shopping with a 'buy less, but better' mindset. Consumers are increasingly doing in-depth research into products before purchase. This has also been witnessed in Singapore, where the Generation-X consumer has become more familiar with online shopping, something they seldom carried out pre-pandemic, whilst younger consumers (Gen Z and Millennials) who are digital natives, are exploring their individual selves through purchasing from smaller designers. R.S.V.P believe that Covid-19 has had an impact from macro to micro and consumers will continue using smaller boutiques and more curated experiences moving forward.

Another reason for the success of Taobao and other e-commerce platforms is the prevalent use of mobile among the whole Chinese population. There is no age barrier for mobile penetration, so brands can reach anyone from an 8 to 80-year-old, although the young generation remain the main purchasing power. Indeed, 70% of China's Gen Z audience prefer to purchase products directly from social media (compared to the 40% global average) and



livestream shopping is forecast to turn over \$413 billion worth of goods by 2022 in China alone, according to a livestream report from Canvas8.

This was further demonstrated during China's e-commerce June 2020 shopping event, 618 – launched by e-commerce giant JD.com to celebrate the company's founding day. The event was of significant importance as a metric to gauge China's economic health and an indicator of consumer confidence during the global pandemic, and yet it broke records. Taobao Live hit RMB 2 billion (288 million USD) 90 minutes after 618 was officially launched. By end of the first day alone, Taobao Live delivered 5.1 billion Yuan (734 million USD) in total sales with over 20 brands and merchants exceeding RMB 10 billion (1.4 billion USD) from livestreaming. The total transactions made via livestreams went up 250% YOY, overall livestream sessions rose by 123% and the number of merchants hosting livestreams increased by 160% versus 2019.

### Key takeaway

E-commerce players in APAC, such as WeChat and Taobao are successful in the region because of the lack of 'digital' age barrier in mobile and the sophisticated purchasing mechanics that enable frictionless transactions. In addition, the convenience of the livestreaming capabilities on these channels has incentivised a whole new wave of influencers to use the platform to create brands from the ground up. Examples include Austin and Viya, both of whom have built a huge loyal consumer following through their unique content creation. As the coronavirus has enforced local lockdowns, halting physical access to brands for consumers, accelerated development of owned e-commerce platforms has become a top priority for brands. But with an increasing consumer appetite for product knowledge and quality in the wake of the virus, brands need to clearly demonstrate both product efficacy and story clearly to their audience, alongside showing the true purpose it contributes to differentiate from competitors.

### Putting it into practice

The key element to campaign success on livestreaming is finding the platform 'specialists'; the influencers with already very substantial, loyal livestream audiences who therefore break through all the brand noise and instil trust to inspire brand purchase, and ultimately loyalty. Livestreaming would be a viable option for those brands whose audiences are limited geographically / physically; whose products require significant research before

purchase; or whose audiences prefer to weigh up and consider multiple options before making an informed decision as it provides consumers with the conversation and in-depth evaluation that a one to one with a consultant in-store would, without the need to leave the living room.

Adventi Communication advises that while celebrity hosts are popular, but costly for livestreams, expert KOLs such as company executives or virtual anime idols could be alternative options in China. Allowing brands to either enhance credibility and confidence, or attract Gen Z.

However, it's worth noting that right now unlike in China and the South East, western counterpart influencers like those on livestreaming platform Amazon Live are only creating content as they would on YouTube – a one-way broadcast that doesn't engage audiences as highly, failing to give them the answers to questions and considerations in real time and generate that much needed trust. And much like other influencer / brand success, consistency is a factor to consider too. Audiences want to see continuous, regular content updates and Amazon Live's streaming doesn't seem to meet this demand yet. If a brand is looking to play within this field outside of South East Asia, it's worth bearing in mind that the livestreaming tools and resources elsewhere require more honing if it's to truly take off (SOURCE: Forbes).





# 3 THE IMPACT OF GAMIFICATION



According to Accenture, “few regions of the world offer more promising territory for games-based marketing initiatives than Southeast Asia.” The popularity of ACG (Anime, Comics and Games) in South East Asia goes some way to explaining this, which has also led to a rise in Avatar Influencers (A.I.s). In Hong Kong for example, shopping mall brand Landmark HK already has its own tribe of A.I.s, Kyoko, Raf and Talita, said to have been launched as a creative ‘bridge’ between Landmark’s physical and online presence.

Popular Japanese virtual idol and singer, Hatsune Miku, joined Alibaba’s Taobao as an ambassador during China’s 618 shopping event in June 2020. Users of the e-commerce platform were able to use their own virtual images generated on Taobao to chat, dance, or take photos together with Miku. Miku has already ranked as one of the most popular celebrities on the platform, with over 10 million-page visits and virtual gifts.

So, why does gamification work? Research conducted by Nannan Xi for a Canvas8 report titled The Science of Gamification shows that exposing people to a blend of emotional, cognitive, and social gamification features can work to increase brand loyalty and engagement. Primarily then, consumers don’t want to be sold to; they want to be entertained. Add this to a sense of reward gained from the creation of a luxury virtual life for a fraction of the real cost, and you begin to see the abundance of opportunity to be explored by brands.

Whilst the content produced by these virtual players has typically played out on social channels, in April 2019 it went one step further and moved into the editorial space when Esquire Singapore published its first print issue created by an artificially intelligent bot. The cover of the issue also featured an app-less AR hologram of Nikolaj Coster-Waldau, with a detailed interview inside the magazine.

Indochine Media Ventures which houses R.S.V.P Singapore’s media clients Esquire Singapore, BURO and Robb Report – is continuously pushing the boundaries of print media through integrating new digital technologies. Their purely digital publication BURO now publishes an annual, regional print issue called BURO.Large, which not only celebrates the most influential KOLs in South East Asia, but is packed with a range of digital surprises. Examples include imagery in the print edition springing to life or turning into a video when scanned with a phone to lead readers back to the website. Whilst their website now also features pop-up windows relating to the products described ensuring richer audience interaction!

During Covid-19, 17 print media outlets in Singapore have closed meaning that this digital innovation will only continue to pick up pace as publications find new revenue opportunities in streams such as event management. On the other hand, despite this disruption in print media, Vogue is now set to launch in Singapore and China is seeing the rise of new print publications targeting a Generation-Z consumer who enjoy print media from authoritative journalists. With less media in the market now, it has never been more important for



brands to understand each media publication’s audience and ensure they are pitching story angles that are truly relevant for their title’s reader.

The phenomenon of Augmented Reality (AR) also continues to progress, allowing consumers to create their own avatars, permitting them to ‘experience’ luxury on a smaller (cheaper) scale. One of these apps is Ada, co-founded by fashion experts Alexia Niedzielski and Elizabeth von Guttman, and developed with Korean gaming guru Andy Ku. It operates much like the European equivalent Drest, launched by former Porter magazine editor Lucy Yeomans, allowing users to dress photo-realistic avatars in styling challenges, in order to buy the physical versions of the clothes on Farfetch. However, Ada goes one step further, allowing consumers to choose from a series of 3D luxury interiors from brands such as Armani and Dior, as well as ‘dressing’ in the clothes from similar luxury players.

The application of AR was also one of China’s 618 festival 2020’s highlights. The use of 3D technology attracted more than 5 million visits in just the first three days of the shopping festival. The home improvement sector saw sales soar 16 times over in the first hour of the shopping festival compared to 2019. During March 2020, Shanghai Fashion Week integrated some of Alibaba’s most advanced technology, becoming the first to livestream its entire roster of runway shows via Taobao Live. Viewers were able to buy items online whilst watching and post comments in real-time. AR technology was used to boost visual effects and over 150 fashion designers and brands presented products from their current and upcoming collections via livestreams.

As Singapore is a smaller market in APAC and a tech-hub, many brands are adapting quickly to the new ‘normal’, through testing and integrating new technology such as holograms and AR to connect with their consumer at home. In fashion, Covid-19 has had a huge impact and has led the industry at large to question their current ways of working on subjects like sustainability. Therefore, the market is seeing an uptake in technologies such as digital collection shows that are zero waste.

Singapore is also seeing a shift from pure e-commerce to ‘virtual-commerce’ which allows for consumers to have more of an experience when shopping online. The creation of apps such as ‘Squadded Shopping’ which allows consumers to shop live online with friends, will be a trend they believe will grow over the next six months.







### Key takeaway

APAC's obsession with ACG makes it the prime region for brands to explore and experiment with gamification, especially in Singapore and Malaysia where market size is smaller, and experimentation incurs lower risk. A.I.s and apps that allow you to create an alternative virtual life for yourself are two avenues shaking up the way brands are engaging with audiences in new ways. Especially important is to consider the rise of the hyper-aware and wary Gen Z consumer audience who need to be truly engaged than marketed to, pushing the need for brands and communications experts to think more creatively.

Whilst AR's role has become more prevalent in this Covid-19 era where consumers are craving diverse experience and content more than ever. Along with the power of 5G, it is a tool with immense potential that adds another dimension to brand communication, from storytelling, 3D visualisation to enriching traditional marketing. It also bridges the gap for industries where sensorial engagement is now lacking in lockdowns, from events and fashion to beauty.

### Putting it into practice

For brands looking to tap into gamification, it's important to meet the merits that it brings audiences:

- Participation and community
- The sense of challenge and reward
- And exclusivity and escapism.

A great example to demonstrate this is that of Nike Brazil who increased online sales by 32% and an 80% increase in social media reach simply via shoppable street art (Source: Contagious: The World's Best Strategy 2019). In 2019, they were struggling with their e-commerce sales given that their audiences preferred to go in-stores and owing to losing share of voice to competitors like Vans and Adidas. The brand collaborated with Brazil's biggest graffiti collective to update their

existing street art characters. The artists painted the new limited-edition AirMax trainers on them and if people visited any of the murals and logged onto Nike's website through their mobile device, the GPS signal would confirm their location and grant them exclusive access to an online pre-sale.

Nike incentivised brand fans and consumers to shop online by giving them a sense of reward to do so. They also doubled the gratification experienced: the first being when they accessed pre-purchase, then again when they finally received the trainers. And the geolocation mechanic created a feeling of exclusivity yet community: even though consumers were connecting with one another about it on social media, if they didn't visit a mural, they didn't unlock the pre-sale access. You had to be in it to win it.

Keep an eye out for brands using the same mechanic to drive the same merits in 2020 and beyond. Such as Footlocker incentivising consumers to become part of the sustainable movement, doing so via their Greenhouse app marketplace O-1, customers can support environmental causes to unlock access to ethical, sustainable footwear and streetwear brands. As events become more challenging to hold with Covid-secure measures in place, GPS can aid in bringing these experiences to audiences wherever they may be.

Flare Communications shares that the role of AR implementation in communications is to elevate brand experience and boost conversion. It connects the online world with physical stores through 3D visualisation in the consumers' own environment, changing how they view and experience the brand. It can be used to gamify an educational campaign for more accessible brand discovery, incorporated throughout an event experience to enrich storytelling and even used to transform traditional branding by making it interactive.





# 4 MORE MICRO

Micro influencers are big in Asia with nearly 80% of them falling into this category, according to Marketing Interactive. In Singapore and Malaysia, the steady rise in micro influencers comes as a result of smaller brands looking for creative ways to find the right ambassadors for their campaigns and to overcome increasing KOL fees. The perceived risk of collaborating with micro influencers is also much lower: the damage to reputation if something were to go awry in a collaboration will be far less reaching and more easily managed.

Our SERMO partner R.S.V.P reported “Most brands are more concerned about the qualities and morals of the influencers and how they can easily represent the brand as opposed to the number of followers they have.” However, since the impact of the pandemic, macro influencers have become the new sales force in Singapore for brands, leading to a more commercial partnership, as brands have no other option.

## Key takeaway

80% of Asia’s influencers are micro, and in the face of rising macro and mega KOL fees, ROI scrutiny and the ‘best fit’ ambassadors, this pool looks set to receive more brand attention. Whilst these influencers are happy to inject their own character and interpretation into brand collaborations, in turn brands should remain open to this to remain creative and avoid watering down with heavy guidelines. And as social media consumption surges owing to the pandemic, micro influencers continue to gain ground. The resonance and trust that they have earned with their followers are now proving fundamental for brands to better understand and connect with their audiences and their needs during a tumultuous time. That said, with the disruption to the media landscape and a need to find prominent social media voices to connect with audiences there, it seems brands cannot be so selective whilst the crisis is at its peak.

## Putting it into practice

No matter what region a brand is based, there seems to be a common thread the world over when it comes to micro influencers. In the face of KOL backlash where celebrities and mega influencers are consistently facing audience cynicism and being challenged for their actions and sometimes dishonesty – an issue that has only been highlighted during the virus crisis as audiences scrutinise more closely, micro influencers provide their loyal audiences with much more comfort and certainty. This is

down to two factors: their deeper engagement with their followers has earned them a different level of trust that KOLs have struggled to replicate; and their lower dependence on brand endorsement.

Many brands are platforming their staff to become micro influencers in their own right. Since the pandemic struck, Flare Communications has developed a ‘social selling’ service. As consumers can no longer access physical experiences with brands during lockdowns, the team is training client brands’ front-line employees with the skillsets to talk about efficacy, brand equity and to create content for their own social media channels. Thereby giving consumers the information and one-to-one care that they seek, to inform their purchases online and becoming the online expert influence they seek.

Nevertheless, whilst investing in micro influencers can mitigate risk – the smaller the audience and reach, the more control a brand has in order to rectify with minimal damage if something does go wrong – they remain one part of the influencer puzzle. Arguably, any healthy influencer marketing strategy should engage various levels of influence to ensure maximum reach and therefore impact through enlisting the support of a smaller, nimbler core collective but one that embraces each tier.