Before You Click

This is how it often goes: a notification sound, a curious mind, and blue light projected onto cheeks still bursting with baby fat. The loading screen glows. It goes in circles and circles and circles until the Wi-Fi actually does its job. Words woven together in all their 280-character glory, stirring up a hot pot of controversy.

Curiosity. Ten thousand retweets and a number of likes twice that amount eventually kills the cat. Ten stubbly little fingers that don't know what they've gotten into. The clock glares, signaling an hour well past bedtime. These said stubbly fingers and fat filled cheeks tuck themselves back into bed, sleeping peacefully under a Pokémon-printed blanket, while the wonder that we call the Internet spreads its little clicks into a hundred other screens.

The process repeats. Like a loading screen going in circles and circles, except no exuberant Wi-Fi speed will ever get it to stop anymore.

#MyFirstTweet

I still remember the very moment I made my first Twitter account. I didn't really read all the terms and conditions, nor did I read the privacy policy, but I did know that you had to be thirteen years old to register, so I did what an eleven year old had to do: lie about my age and make myself a decade older than I actually was. I kept it a secret from my dad, trying to erase all possible traces, though that wasn't exactly easy to do when the iPad I was using belonged to him.

The idea seemed vague to me at first – to pretty much spit out words into the indifferent social media air and expect something "cool" to happen. But my eleven-year-old self went along with it anyway, knowing that my favorite game *Pucca's Restaurant* would give me extra game credits for sharing my level on Twitter. The next day, like the eleven-year-old I was, I went around

bragging to my friends that I finally made an account on the said platform, asking what their usernames were so we could start "following" each other.

At that time, social networking sites had begun to take the world by storm. Everyone knew what *Farmville* was, and having an aesthetic Instagram feed was a major concern. Grown-ups told us time and time again that we've got to be careful on the Internet, that we've got to think before we click, but we didn't think too much of it at all. We aren't saying anything about our addresses, anyway. We even faked our ages. There's no way these little posts and profile pictures can put us in danger, right? *Right?*

Rather than the threat of identity fraud, or all these other intimidating big words strung together into reasons why the Internet is a scary place, all that I was really *thinking* about every time I clicked was, *how am I going to get more followers?* Insecurity hit me like an unwelcome landmine back then, seeing the hundreds of followers listed down on my classmates' profiles whereas all I had was a measly number of five. I could not help but to try to find out how – just how I can get people to press a blinking blue button that somehow tells me "you are valid".

They told us to be mindful of stalkers, but at that moment, I had turned into the stalker, myself. Stalking the accounts of people who had four-digit follower counts, trying to discover just what they did to become so recognized and vindicated, only to be greeted by a barrage of retweets and no original posts whatsoever. I could not, for the life of me, see the value of just reposting someone else's 140-character ramblings on your page, but again, eleven-year-old me went along with it anyway. More than a thousand retweets? I'll retweet it too. A tweet from someone with hundreds of thousands of followers? I've got to retweet that. For the validation.

The tea is exceptionally good today.

Perhaps it was not too long ago when I heard those words come out of my eleven-year-old

niece's mouth. I was in a state of pure shock, hearing such an innocent-looking little girl declare that one certain YouTuber was "cancelled" because "*the receipts were stacked up against him".* I could not help but to ask her – how was she so sure that he was the one who did wrong? And all I got from her was, "*Tita, everyone on Twitter is saying he's at fault,"* while proceeding to show me a live video broadcasting how the number of his subscribers is cascading down.

"Fake" news

Of course, there had been a large handful of other times where misinformation went much further than the aforementioned situation – ranging from celebrity news to political controversy. Involvement in the drug industry, hidden pregnancies, miscounted votes – you name it, and news outlets probably have it. The nation has been making its efforts to erase these kinds of malicious press releases, with the government, as well as NGOs and schools going all the way to hold seminars for the citizens to discern credible news sources from ones simply spreading lies.

And an ordinary citizen might think - *what else can I do about fake news*? They may think that it is simply out of their control if a predatory news outlet continues to post false information, that it isn't really their fault if some people fall for it. That the only thing they can do, which they are already doing, is to make sure they don't go believing news from noncredible websites.

But what we're missing is that misinformation comes in more forms than one, that fake news does not only come from badly edited screenshots and poorly designed webpages, that high follower counts do not immediately clear a profile's validity of any suspicion whatsoever. And yet, the more shared, the more liked, the more retweeted a post is, the more people believe that it is right, the more we are influenced to believe it, and the more we just buy whatever the majority of the online population has seemingly agreed with rather than trying to dig up and understand things for ourselves. We accept what the top posts tell us, instead of attempting to search for the truth.

More importantly, we're forgetting that children have also begun to take their virtual baby steps. In a world where children may be smart enough to fake their ages, they still may not be wise enough to know when people are faking their statements. A child will inevitably view a trending post as a statement of more value than anything his young mind could ever conjure, not knowing that majority of those fourteen thousand likes were just people who clicked it only because it'd make them look *woke*.

The value of a "like" or "retweet"

This is how they think it goes: an account with thousands of followers, a bio stating that they're a graduate of some famous university. A situation that was probably observed and evaluated thoroughly, and an opinion that was probably well-thought out.

This is how it actually happens: a glance at the headline, with the rest of the news article left unread. A like or heart react or sad or wow or angry button hastily pressed. A quote retweet button clicked too soon, and characters on the keyboard dancing on their own.

But we still retweet, anyway. We still write posts that affirm what they said. Because apparently, followers, likes, retweets, reacts, and shares have become indicators of what a person and his/her words are worth. And with every like and retweet, the post reaches another screen, and another, and yet another. Its value increases with each press of a heart button. Its validity grows with its popularity. Eventually words woven into sentences and sewn together into arguments bring it out of the screen and into the humid, sizzling Manila air, going around until someone runs out of justifications and simply resorts to saying "*but that's what all the woke people said online.*"

Think before you click.

We all agree that if we had a peso for every single time we were told to *think before we click*, we'd probably be rich by now. But the thing is, what does it really mean to *think*? Were these

people not thinking? They looked at the number of retweets and likes and followers, and they thought: *Oh wow, this post has got to be right*. They saw that the post was from someone they looked up to, and their brain immediately processed it as the ultimate, absolute truth, because if their favorite celebrities and YouTubers and influencers retweeted it, it could never be wrong. They were thinking.

These people were thinking. But you see, it's hard to think straight about something when your vision is being clouded. When you're choosing to see only what others want you to see. When the reality that surrounds you is discolored by the unrelenting stains of fame, power, and influence. These people were indeed thinking – albeit, they were thinking they saw what they needed to see despite being blinded. Blinded by social expectations and conformity. Blinded by the promise of fame. Blinded by admiration, or blinded by feelings of inferiority. Blinded by the dream of also being validated, of also becoming popular. So, they agree. They click, closing their eyes to their own beliefs, values, and principles, thinking only of the assurance that the rest of the online society will probably agree. It's not enough to just tell them to think.

It's about time we started telling people that thinking before you click is yesterday's news. Insisting that they use their minds is aimless, as everyone already does. What matters is how they think – whether they think hard enough to evaluate things for themselves, to see everything with their own two metaphorical eyes, or they simply blindfold their minds with the shallow assurance offered by a large quantity of heart and wow reacts. Do not let these superficial numbers blind you. Open your eyes to see what's happening around you, and only then should you think. Don't just think before you click - open your eyes before you click. Open them, so that whatever you post, whatever you tweet, whatever you like – will not be what blinds another unknowing eleven-year-old with a Pokémon blanket who lied about her age just to make a Twitter account.