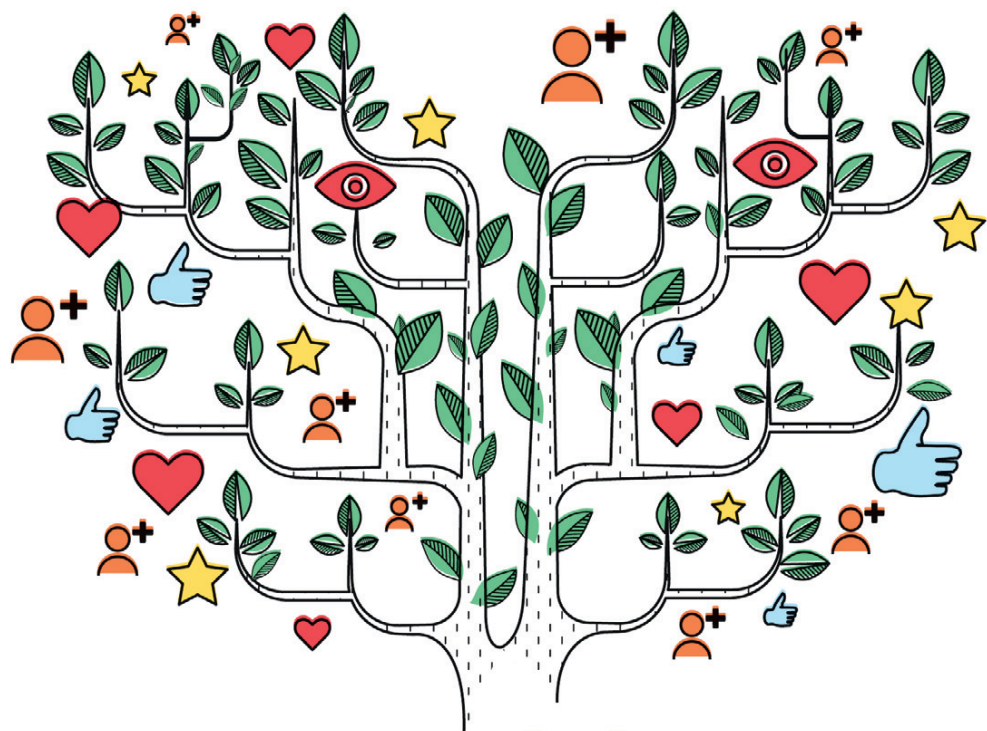
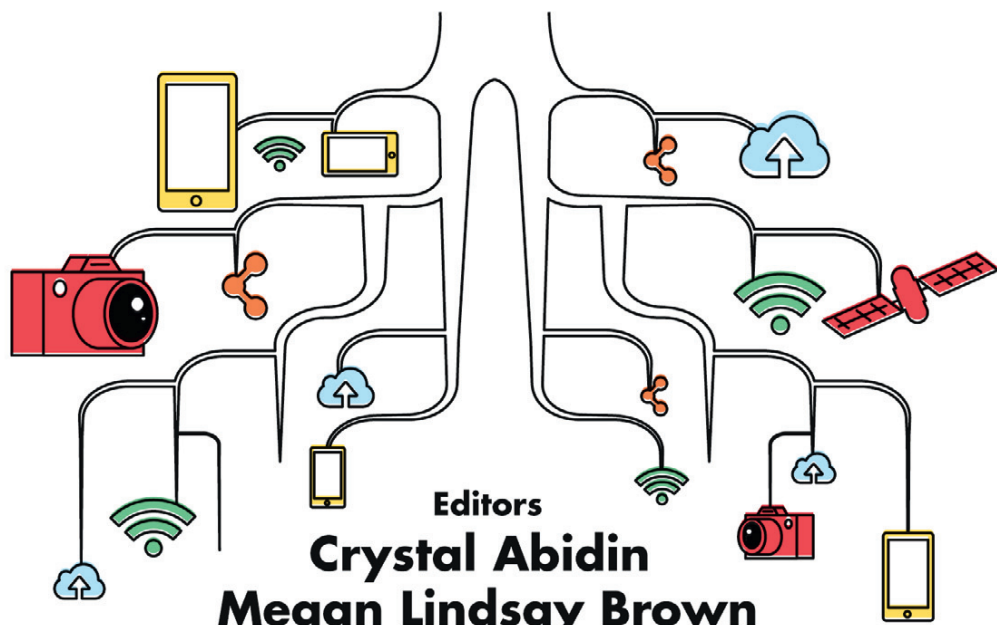




Microcelebrity Around the Globe

Approaches to Cultures of Internet Fame



Editors

Crystal Abidin

Megan Lindsay Brown

MICROCELEBRITY AROUND THE GLOBE

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MICROCELEBRITY AROUND THE GLOBE: APPROACHES TO CULTURES OF INTERNET FAME

EDITED BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Editors

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Fame, Shame, Remorse, Authenticity: A Prologue

Theresa M. Senft

This book contains essays considering how micro-celebrity works around the world. I am the person who coined the term “micro-celebrity.” This makes me an expert of sorts. It also makes me suspicious. Although much of its focus is on the present, my hope is that this book stirs questions about the past as well. Exactly how did we get to our current understanding of what this “field” is, or means? How much of what we know about micro-celebrity comes through direct experience? How much comes from stories of others? From formal education? How much are we simply guessing?

I have titled this prologue, “Fame, Shame, Remorse, Authenticity.” For academics, shame feels baked into the language we use to discuss fame. Consider the identity position “expert,” the closest thing to micro-celebrity we have in academia. In part because they are rarely the ones with the most expertise in an area (but are nonetheless center stage), experts are expected to comport themselves with a mix of enthusiasm and shame. Like Plato’s reluctant Philosopher King, or an award-nominated actress who insists it’s an honor to simply be named, a good expert knows to demonstrate some resistance to being asked to represent the collective wisdom of the academy. Fail to perform in this way, and rumors begin to circulate that she seeks fame for “the wrong reasons,” as they say on reality shows. On those shows, we never hear what the “right reasons” for gaining or keeping celebrity are. You don’t hear much about that in universities, either.

Of all the places an expert is expected to deploy shame, the area of apologies is perhaps the most pressing. Sometimes the expert requests apologies on behalf of harmed parties. Other times, she offers them, on behalf of parties who have injured others. In their Introduction to this collection, Crystal Abidin and Megan Lindsay Brown explain that most research on micro-celebrity skews heavily in the direction of English-speaking users hailing from the Global North. They’re not asking anyone to take responsibility for the history of this research imbalance, but as an expert, I feel moved to offer one, on behalf of others like myself who thought they were doing the best they could with what they had and were not.

Legal theorist Jeffrie Murphy breaks apologies into two types: guilt and remorse. Remorse apologies differ from guilt apologies by degree (they tend to be

given only for “grave wrongs and harms”) and performance quality. As Murphy explains, those with remorse are expected to go beyond the words “I am sorry” (Murphy, 2007: 430).

Murphy believes that remorse apologies are on the decline, mainly due to the “increasing prevalence and even celebration of public apology...” (Murphy, 2007: 433) This might sound paradoxical until we think about the number of public apologies that seem to do more harm than good. Murphy uses the example of the person who says he is “sorry that you interpreted his (presumably innocent) remark in such a way that your (probably overly sensitive) feelings were hurt” (Murphy, 2007: 449). At moments like these, he argues, the message heard is that, “I matter more than you and can use you, like a mere object or thing, for my own purposes.”

Apologies don’t mean a lot without remorse, but remorse doesn’t mean a lot without a narrative about the past that includes an understanding of culpability and a plan for a future that seems to move in the direction of justice, equity, and honest representation. To me, this book points to that future. My plan for the remaining pages is to give a personal backstory for how we got here. I invite others who were part of what I now think of as “Micro-celebrity 1.0” to do the same.

Person to Practice

In history, there are the facts we know, the ones we don’t, and then there are things that we aren’t sure matter or not. I have never been questioned about “owning” the origin of micro-celebrity (it’s hardly a burning issue on the world stage), but if I were, I could provide two historical data points. Academically, the term first appeared in my 2004 doctoral dissertation and then in my 2008 book *Camgirls*. I was also described as having come up with the term in a 2007 article on the topic in *Wired* magazine. More than anything, the *Wired* piece probably also contributed to establishing me as an expert. It’s worth noting that that author of that piece, Clive Thompson, is a friend who lived down the street from me in New York. There has never been a time on the internet when location has not mattered.

When I started studying it, it was common for reporters to ask if I thought Person X or Y was a micro-celebrity, based on the number of hits their web sites received or (later) the number of followers they had. It was a difficult question answer at the time, and an impossible one to answer in an era where everyone posts information about their daily activities on services like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and WeChat. Today, I speak of micro-celebrity as a practice, rather than a person: it’s the presentation of one’s online self as a branded good, with the expectation others are doing the same. When this presentation involves an intention to monetize, I call that person an influencer.

I decided to study micro-celebrity to figure something out about myself, my relationship to technology, and my relationship to others online. I bought my first computer and modem in 1994. I remember because that was the year I returned to graduate school. Both these things were made possible by money I received in a

lump sum after my mother's death. I share these facts because I've always seen my personal and professional life are connected: if my mother hadn't been a staunch feminist, endured a wild and abusive marriage, chosen not to attend college, insisted on papering my bedroom walls with posters donated by travel agencies, flown into a drunken rage when I said I wouldn't be coming home ever again, built a life for herself after her divorce, contracted a mind and body destroying illness shortly thereafter, and had the foresight to purchase life insurance (leaving me with a lump sum of a cash and years of unresolved psychological issues) I'd have an entirely different story than I do now.

1994 was an important year for internet history, marking the introduction of what would later be known as the World Wide Web. The introduction of visual material and hyperlinks to the internet led to the genesis of personal home pages. I guess, for many, personal home pages were the original stomping grounds of micro-celebrity (there was no blogging or micro-blogging then), but I wasn't very interested. It seemed to me that the Web in general was mostly full of corporate material, and home pages seemed to all belong to Silicon Valley dudes. Instead, I practiced micro-celebrity on Echo, a dialup New York City bulletin board service, where I went by the name Jane Doe. Echo was structured not unlike Reddit is today, except back then it was only reachable through a local phone number. People on Echo often met in the flesh for drinks and to socialize, and because the bar we drank at was in New York, lots of journalists were there.

Now that I think back on it, almost every early opportunity I had to play an expert came from someone originally connected to Echo. Talking with friends who were also journalists showed me how to set up a story that would grab attention. When I began studying "webcam girls" by sticking a camera in my own apartment, I already knew my story was odd enough to be interesting to New York journalists. I also knew I looked old enough to be credible and young enough to be digestible as an expert across the United States. I had some other advantages I detail below.

The Generational Lottery

Like every other tech expert, I first had to win a generational lottery. Winning starts by being born at the right moment in time to study a technology and looking the right age to study it. If you are (or look) overly young, people doubt academic or business-related *bonafides*. It almost goes without saying that being too old is also a problem. I am fortunate to know one of the men who helped write the operating system OS X for Apple. After retiring, he applied for and was denied a part time job at the Genius Bar at his local mall. This is a true story.

The generational lottery requires a few other things. You need to be living in a body that comports itself easily to existing norms and requires very little other technology to get around. Of course, people understand that there should be wheelchair access at speaking venues or that young mothers might need a place to breastfeed over the course of a day. Everyone wants a world where those issues

are addressed, just as they wish the viewing public would dial down the racist, homophobic, or fat shaming comments on every public video. It's just that realistically, we are told, we are *just not quite there yet*.

Two final things are necessary to claim generational lottery winnings. First, you need to be living and working in or near a city center (ideally one that wakes up and goes to sleep at the same time as the area commonly referred to as the Global North.) Second, you need to understand that as an expert, it is your job to be a translator, moving from technical to layperson's language, from pop culture to academic or business expertise. The thing is, your translations must be in written and spoken English—ideally with an American or British accent. Of course, it is possible to have all these qualities and not win the lottery, but if you miss out on even one, you probably won't even get a ticket to play.

The Seen, the Unseen, and Unseeable

Generational lottery winners have a knack for seeing some things and missing many others. In 2000, "Jenny from the JenniCam" had about the same cultural cachet a YouTube personality like Logan Paul has today, which meant there were plenty of people who would nod their head when I mentioned her name. When I asked, "What is the JenniCam of Asia?" it was hard for me to get answers. There were a few reasons for this. First and foremost, I didn't speak any Asian languages. I was told Japanese internet users enjoyed photo beauty contests and could find sites devoted to "idols," but I struggled to get anyone to help me read the Kanji characters on my screen. I spent a little time in *Camgirls* discussing how my questions about the "Japanese JennyCam" changed after I discovered Japanese internet use was metered by the minute, which would obviously impact who would choose to broadcast their lives 24/7 online. I spent a little thinking about webcamming in South America. I spent a little time thinking about webcamming as an African American. I could have done more. I remember revising my PhD dissertation into a book manuscript and having an editor strike every instance of "it is beyond the scope of this project to..." Once it's in a book, you are expected to write what you know and leave the rest, hopefully, to others.

Revisions to the histories we carry are easy to make when new information can be made to correspond in some way with what we already respect and value about ourselves. A live music enthusiast might laugh at people holding up camera phones at concerts, but should you offer him the opportunity for a private Skype session with his favorite musician, he suddenly sees how "live" can mean many things. Likewise, a certain sort of history buff understands why taking a selfie with a politician now holds the same cultural value securing an autograph once did. She might even argue that the selfie holds *more* potential value than the autograph—especially if it resides on the politician's camera (perhaps one day finding its way into an archive.)

Historical revisions are harder to swallow when shame is involved. If you are like me, you've seen your fair share of private arguments made public through

online video. Some of these needed to see the light of day; others make me weep with joy that I loved through my twenties without social media. The same can be said for stories of partners victimizing one another by sharing images from private sex acts, or even people with opposing political views who feel like it is a good idea to share another person's mobile number or address with the greater world for reasons we can't discern. Online and off it, most of us say knowledge and forethought keep us safe, when the truth is, the only protection anyone real has is pure dumb luck.

To focus deeply, we involve ourselves in a process that involves seeing and not seeing. As we work to link seeing to thought, we find ourselves understanding (or thinking we understand) some things and being baffled by others things (some of which are deeply self-evident to other parties.) I did not come to know the internet as a child. I don't know what it means to have strangers view sonograms of me in the womb, witness my birth via remote camera, or grab awkward childhood photos out of context to circulate as memes. When I hear about such things, I can feel my body recoil at the thought of so many images and so little agency, but I also understand I am reacting within my own historical context. People used to debate things like chastity, too—once upon a time. In terms of expertise on where shame should or should not be deployed, I have none: I can try to empathize with those directly affected, but my imagination is limited in ways that it wouldn't be, were to be I born five years from now.

From Remorse to Game Change

Experts often regret their blind spots. Live long enough, and regret turns into remorse. The Latin root of remorse is *mordere*, which means to bite. "Thus, remorse is something that 'gnaws' at you over and over," explains my Merriam-Webster. At my university, I work with a woman named Kate Rossmanith, who wrote a book called *Small Wrongs: How We Really Say Sorry in Love, Life and Law*. In that book, Kate interviews judges and other members of the court about how criminal sentencing works in Australia. An important part of the book's structure is that it features Kate as a nonexpert in legal affairs, posing questions that ordinarily go unasked in legal writing. For instance, as she was watching sentencing hearings, Kate figured out that the judge's determination of a defendant's remorse was a major factor. She also learned there were no published guidelines or protocol used to determine who was apologizing insincerely and who was experiencing their past remorsefully—that is, as something that gnawed at them over and over.

Legal scholars Proeve and Tudor, classify remorse in four different ways (Proeve & Tudor, 2010: 96 in Rossmanith, 2015: 100). In their first category—cooperative remorse—the defendant shows sincere regret by acting early to signal her own shame and blame, in hopes of being treated more leniently for transgressions. Marching into a police station to confess a crime would be an example of cooperative remorse. Cooperative remorse makes it easier for a defendant to argue the original offense was spontaneous and unplanned and thus more deserving of mercy.

In cultures of internet fame, cooperative remorse is almost a way of life. Many (though not all) celebrities and influencers understand that it behooves them to say early and often, “My bad, everyone.” Almost no hill of argument is worth dying on if it means being seen by fans as deliberately difficult (or even socially tone deaf) in online exchanges. We likewise practice cooperative remorse in academia when we write the words, “it is beyond the scope of this study.” From one perspective, declarations like this are practices rooted in the ideological position known as scholarly rigor: I know I can’t know everything, and explaining this up front, I throw myself on the mercy of the court. From another perspective, it seems rich to expect mercy, while declaring our premeditated choice not to move beyond our personal scholarly comfort zones regarding cohorts, geographies, methods, languages, etc.

The second form of remorse discussed by Prove and Tudor occurs when the defendant indicates she is prepared to make reparations. In court, reparations can include financial, administrative, or other payouts made to victims. Sometimes these are directed toward a single wronged party in response to a single transgression. Other times they are meant to serve the symbolic function of addressing a larger group, or a larger constellation of concerns. Recipients of these sorts of payouts tend to be aware of two things. The first is that they personally represent a tiny fraction of people these reparations are supposed to be for. The second is that the payout probably won’t last long before attention moves to the next thing.

In academia, where we are paid to make choices about which topics and perspectives we think should matter, which should appear in the footnotes (and which should be cut entirely), reparations occur in a much subtler way. Every academic who has worked longer than a year has made some poor decisions, and many of us think about how to make reparations to those we’ve harmed with regard to positions we’ve rethought or discarded entirely. Under these conditions, it seems harsh to disparage anyone (an influencer, a young academic, etc.) in a “hot until it’s not” population for taking their moment in the sun. It’s the system that needs changing, not the students or the objects of study.

Prove and Tudor’s third category—reformatory action—speaks of remorse in terms of a demonstrated commitment to change. In the courtroom, the burden of proof is on the defendant to demonstrate a plan to change. In both micro-celebrity and academia, plans to change at individual levels can have knock-on effects at structural ones. Let me give you one example from the world of online videogame streaming. It involves a decision made by a player named Tyler “Ninja” Blevins to exclude women players (except his wife) from his Twitch broadcasts.

At 27 years, Blevins is “the multimillionaire face of Fortnite,” declares the *New York Times*. They aren’t wrong. Blevins is also a newlywed. A year ago, he married a fellow streamer named Jessica. At this point, Jessica is the only woman who appears on his channel. When asked why by reporter Allegra Frank, Blevins explained, “If I have one conversation with one female streamer where we’re playing with one another, and even if there’s a hint of flirting, that is going to be taken and going to be put on every single video and be clickbait forever...” (Frank, 2018a)

At one level, Blevins's choice to shut out female streamers beyond his wife is understandable. It's not hard to sympathize with anyone's desire to preemptively eliminate sexually oriented speculation from fans, which pulls focus from game-play and game commentary. In a follow-up interview with Frank, Blevins responds to critics, saying: "While I understand some people have implied my views mean I have something against playing with women, I want to make clear the issue I'm addressing is online harassment, and my attempt to minimize it from our life." Explains Frank, "By 'our life,' Blevins is referring to both his wife...and himself" (Frank, 2018b).

The problem is that Blevins isn't just *anyone*: he's a corporate entity to be reckoned with. As the *New York Times* explains, his media reach is "staggering": he has more than 12 million followers on Twitch, almost 12 million on Instagram and nearly four million on Twitter. He has landed on the cover of *ESPN: The Magazine*, and wherever he goes, he is mobbed by teenagers and tweens who immediately recognize his brightly hair. Blevins explains to the *Times* that he earns in excess \$500,000 per month, with YouTube and Twitch as primary income streams, and "20 percent deals and partnerships and things like that" (Draper, 2018).

Blevins is also quite aware of his cultural impact. In the *Times* profile, he explains how he used to hide the amount of money he made, but no longer:

...I kind of want everyone to know: This is how much the top guys can make. It's important that parents can see. All the contracts for professional athletes — all their salaries are public: This is how much the best quarterback makes, this is how much LeBron makes a year. That's a huge driving factor in bringing things to, "Hey this is how much Ninja might make this year or next year." That is now a bar that parents and kids can look up to (Draper, 2018).

While most of Blevins's fans seem to respect his personal choices around harassment, Allegra Frank explains, for women streamers, there remain systemic economic issues to consider. It is common knowledge on sites like Twitch that male streamers have significantly more potential to draw sponsorship money than women do. As Frank puts it, "With a platform as large as his, to shut women out of his channel is to do a disservice to them and misuse the influence he wields..." (Frank, 2018b) She also notes what we might think of as gender tone-deafness in his response to harassment, noting:

Respect is a major part of playing *Fortnite* and other games. Yet women often are the receiving end of anything but: "Twitch thots," harassment, warding off obsessive or judgmental viewers are all serious concerns for well-known female streamers. In contrast to the reality of being a woman on Twitch, Blevins' choice to draw a line feels like a conservative gesture — even a familiar, divisive one (Frank, 2018b).

Feminist labor theory uses the term “emotional labor” to describe the unwanted work of managing others’ emotional expectations that have nothing to do with our lives, ambitions, or desires. In academia, emotional labor is a constant for women. On average, female professors are assigned larger, introductory teaching intensive classes that leave us less time for research. When we ask why, we are told it is because we are “good with the students.” As students, women too often find themselves serving their advisors (of both genders) as ersatz psychotherapists, gossip conduits, emotional buffers between the advisor and more “difficult” students, etc. Just as it was on the faculty end, there are few logical reasons for this gendered division of emotional labor given to students beyond vague allusions to personal and natural propensities for listening, understanding, supporting, and so forth.

And then there is the labor of managing the fact that one’s sexuality is considered part of the public domain. On a site like Twitch, male gamers are frustrated that when they play with females, they have fans speculating on their sex life with the women in question. But female Twitch stars deal with sexual language, requests, and questions no matter who they play with. When men are frustrated, their response is not to ban fans but to exclude women and continue to make endorsement money. When women are frustrated, the response again is to keep fans and their demands at all costs. Every once in a while, a conversation transpires about the mechanics of the platforms on which the gaming and streaming transpires—a moderator here, a mute button there, etc. To a cynic, there is a certain “hush money” feel to all this, since mere attempts to even discuss these issues in a holistic way have been met by physical and sexual threats to the women involved.

You Don’t Know Who Is Sincere (and Maybe That Is Okay)

The last of Prove and Tudor’s categories is self-punitive remorse, which includes things like apologies. As I noted early, apologies can be both sincere and insincere. In her interviews with judges, Kate Rossmanith found them to be quite aware of the fact that defendants can be coached into making apologies with “no basis in feelings of contrition.” To guard against this, criminal court judges tend to spend a fair amount of time assessing not just the language and actions but the actual body of the defendant during questioning. Notes Rossmanith: “When it comes to assessing remorse, this feeling – the embodied affect felt by the judiciary – is understood by judges as indisputable evidence” (Rossmanith, 2015: 172). Sitting a face to face with a criminal, a judge’s process for determining remorse isn’t all that different from any audience member’s. As she writes, it is simply this: “I feel the person’s remorse, therefore the remorse exists”(Rossmanith, 2015: 172).

Personally, I am glad to learn that there isn’t a mechanistic recipe dictating how judges should, well, judge. Still, it is worth underscoring (as Rossmanith does) that, “cultural difference makes it especially hard to read how other people are feeling” (Rossmanith, 2015: 179). Here, she quotes a number of Australian judges at length, including this refreshingly honest admission:

It took decades for judges to be educated that the demeanour of an indigenous person might not reflect guilt... Even I had to learn

that. In the '80s when I first started doing judicial work, you thought 'Well, why isn't this young Aboriginal guy looking at me?' And [later] you [learned why]... (Rossmanith, 2015: 179).

As different as they are in most respects, courts, academic circles, and online fame environments do have one thing in common: they all turn on performances of authenticity. One of the ways that authenticity is performed is via expressions of remorse, great and small. In a courtroom sentencing, the successful transmission of authenticity can mean the difference between living life in freedom or dying in prison. For the rest of us, the stakes aren't usually as high, but we would be blind to miss the fact that every minute of every day, someone is being denied their money, their rights, their space, or their dignity, by someone else—someone who understands themselves as doing what any other normal, reasonable, sensible, “drama-free” person would do under the same circumstances.

Every time I wonder whether influencers bring much value to the world, I think about the fact that as even as an academic who has studied them for years, I just don't get most of their appeal, although they clearly move their audiences and communities in important ways. Sometimes I don't get them because their behaviors don't emulate Western media tropes, which are what I know best. Sometimes it's because they are chiefly known for engaging in activities (gaming and eating are two of these) where authenticity is expressed through cues that don't make much sense to outsiders. Sometimes I don't get them because they are being intentionally stupid or absurd. Sometimes I don't get them because their performance wasn't intended for me to begin with.

It is my hope that this anthology serves as an Exhibit A of sorts for the argument that global histories of online culture need revisiting, revising, and reparations, both at the level of data collection and at the level of theory. As one of the so-called pioneers of its cultural study, I understand that many things on the internet seem weird. I've been confused, tricked, swindled, lied to, manipulated, stalked, and had other unpleasant things happen to me here.

But if there is one thing I've learned from my time studying online fame, it's that we need to better ways to pause before ruling on the sincerity of behaviors we don't understand, engaged in by those we do not know. One of the strengths of this volume is that it goes “beyond the scope” of existing work regarding online fame. In so doing, it reminds us that intellectual and emotional labor doesn't end at the border. It begins there. If a criminal court judge making life and death decisions can be trained to humbly acknowledge this much, so too can students of media and cultural studies.

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Introduction

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Abstract

Although the early conversations of microcelebrity centered on Anglo-centric theories and context despite the varied backgrounds and cultural context of microcelebrity, this compilation of chapters seeks to assess and reframe the applications and uptake of microcelebrity around the world. Each of the chapters in this anthology contribute to expand the theoretical concept and contextualize the history and cultural affairs of those who are famous online. The case studies provide examples of how a microcelebrity emerges to fame because of their exposure and interaction within a group of niche users, a specific online community, or a specific cultural and geographical context through the social networks that emerge online. Academic scholarship on microcelebrity has crossed methodologies, disciplines and platforms demonstrating the wide appeal as the influence of these figures are on the rise. As preparation for the reader, this chapter offers a brief history of current scholarship, with an emphasis on shifting knowledge production away from an Anglo and Global North perspective. The introduction chapter serves as a road map for the reader breaking down each of the three sections of the book – norms, labors, and activism. Lastly, the co-editors have outlined different ways to read the text group chapters according to reader interest.

Keywords: Microcelebrity; internet celebrity; influencers

Introduction

The field of microcelebrity studies was pioneered by Global Studies scholar Theresa M. [Senft \(2008\)](#) 10 years ago and prolifically expanded upon by Alice E. [Marwick's \(2013\)](#) work on microcelebrity strategies among Silicon Valley Start-ups. In the last decade, microcelebrity studies have expanded across digital estates, populations and intensities, labor and practices, products, commodifiable entities, and national spheres. However, a vast majority of existing research

looks into instances of microcelebrity in predominantly English-speaking, middle-class, white, Anglo-centric spaces or applies Anglocentric theories to different localized case studies around the world. In this book collection, the editors introduce a ten-year anniversary update to the field of microcelebrity studies by re-theorizing microcelebrity considering the underrepresented diversity in specific ideo-geographical and sociocultural domains. Specifically, this anthology examines the practice and concept of microcelebrity through interdisciplinary in-depth case studies across the globe. Through highly contextualized cultural settings and social histories, the chapters present scholarly accounts of microcelebrity as it has proliferated and diverged in global social media networks.

Together, the chapters argue for new perspectives and theories of microcelebrity that dialogue with colonial geographies within and outside of academia, cross-media networks between Influencers and legacy media, and gendered aggression and political discourses in a social media-saturated age. Specific case studies situated in various ideo-geographical locales seek to revise the concept of microcelebrity to accommodate developments in global internet governance, the evolution of platform politics, the emergence of hybrid forms of celebrity, and the collapsing networks between old and new media.

Microcelebrity Studies to Date

As (at least one account of) the theoretical history from pre-internet to internet celebrity history has been traced in a companion text (see [Abidin, 2018](#)), this section will consider how microcelebrity cultures have been studied to date pertaining to methodologies, sites and types of empirical data, and disciplinary and conceptual standpoints.

Methodologies

The methodologies employed to understand microcelebrity cultures vary, with each offering bearing its own pros and cons. Most often, researchers tend to employ content analysis given that the material produced by public-facing and publicity-seeking microcelebrities and aspirants are most accessible in this manner. They may comprise a visual analysis of the content produced by microcelebrities (i.e., [Fuller & Jeffery, 2016](#)), a discourse analysis of their text (i.e., [Bakke, 2017](#)), and usually focus on a biography of a (few) highly prominent icons as case studies ([Meylinda, 2017](#); [Slater, 2017](#)). However these tend to focus on text in the English language and platforms arising from the Anglo-centric Silicon Valley. Other studies may draw on primary empirical data through interviews with microcelebrities (i.e., [Boxman-Shabtai, 2018](#)) or through in-depth participant observation among groups of microcelebrities as a form of culturally situated ethnography (i.e., [Abidin, 2017c](#); [Hopkins, 2019](#)), while still others sample the experiences of users and followers through surveys (i.e., [Chae, 2017](#)).

Disciplines

While originally pioneered in the domain of communications (i.e., [Marwick, 2013](#); [Senft, 2008](#)), microcelebrity cultures are now being studied across a variety of disciplines, including anthropology (i.e., [Abidin, 2017c](#); [Hopkins, 2019](#)) and sociology (i.e., [Bakke, 2017](#); [Mavroudis & Milne, 2016](#)), cultural studies ([Brydges & Sjöholm, 2018](#)) and gender studies (i.e., [Lovelock, 2016](#)), game studies (i.e., [Trice & Potts, 2018](#)) and digital media studies (i.e., [Arthurs, Drakopoulou, & Gandini, 2018](#); [Ashton & Patel, 2017](#)), psychology (i.e., [Ferchaud, Grzeslo, Orme, & LaGroue, 2018](#)), business and marketing (i.e., [Khamis, Lawrence, & Raymond, 2017](#); [Mardon, Molesworth, & Grigore, 2018](#)), and even law (i.e., [Slater, 2017](#)) and medicine (i.e., [Chandawarkar, Daniel, Stevens, 2018](#); [Mercer, 2018](#)).

Platforms

This diversity in cross-disciplinary interest in microcelebrity cultures has meant that scholars are looking at cultures of use across a variety of platforms. This includes early use devices and platforms such as webcams (i.e., [Bailey, 2009](#); [Senft, 2008](#)) and blogs (i.e., [Abidin, 2015a](#); [Bakke, 2017](#); [Hopkins, 2019](#); [Mcrae, 2017](#)), and commercial enterprises such as blogshops (i.e., [Abidin & Thompson, 2012](#)) and e-commerce websites (i.e., [Chen, Benbasat, & Cenfetelli, 2017](#)). Given their vast use around the world, Silicon Valley social networking sites are also popular areas of study and include Facebook (i.e., [Jin, 2018](#); [Mota, 2016](#); [Vochocová, 2018](#)), Instagram (i.e., [Abidin, 2014a, 2015b, 2016a, 2016b](#); [Marwick, 2015](#); [Neal, 2017](#)), Twitter (i.e., [Bennett & Thomas, 2014](#); [Chandawarkar et al., 2018](#); [Marwick & boyd, 2011](#); [Trice & Potts, 2018](#)), and YouTube (i.e., [Arthurs et al., 2018](#); [Ashton & Patel, 2017](#); [Bakioğlu, 2016](#); [Bishop, 2018](#); [Boxman-Shabtai, 2018](#); [Brydges & Sjöholm, 2018](#); [Ferchaud et al., 2018](#); [García-Rapp, 2016](#); [Jerslev, 2016](#); [Johnston, 2016](#); [Lovelock, 2016](#); [Mardon et al., 2018](#); [Meylinda, 2017](#); [Mustonen, 2017](#); [Sedláček, 2016](#); [Smith, 2017](#); [Tolson, 2010](#)).

With the proliferation of live video and livestreaming apps, an emergent crop of research is also focusing on Snapchat (i.e., [Gkoní, Edo, Bollen, & Ecott, 2017](#); [Phua & Kim, 2018](#)), Twitch (i.e., [Bingham, 2017](#); [Johnson & Woodcock, 2017](#)), and ecologies of livestreaming (i.e., [Blight, 2016](#)). Arising from the Chinese digital ecology, a stream of research is also now focused on cultures of internet celebrity specific to Douyu (i.e., [Zhang & Hjorth, 2017](#)), musical.ly (i.e., [van de Put, 2017](#)), and Weibo (i.e., [Li, 2018](#); [Wang, 2017](#)).

Geographical Cultures

This diversity in disciplines and platforms as modes of framing cultures of microcelebrity has also generated a slow but steady stream of research on culturally specific, place-situated, and highly contextual forms of internet celebrity. Shifting away from Anglo-centric, English-speaking, global North platforms, some research is also emerging from national scapes with distinctive internet governance and platform politics. A few examples outside of the US and UK

include Asia: China (i.e., [Li, 2018](#); [Meng, 2014](#); [Wang, 2017](#); [Zhang & Hjorth, 2017](#)), Malaysia (i.e., [Hopkins, 2019](#)), Indonesia (i.e., [Meylinda, 2017](#); [Rahmawan, 2014](#)), Singapore (i.e., [Abidin, 2017c](#)), South Korea (i.e., [Chae, 2017](#)); and in Europe: the Czech Republic (i.e., [Sedláček, 2016](#); [Vochocová, 2018](#)) and Norway (i.e., [Bakke, 2017](#)), to name a few.

Units of Analysis

Following this, the unit of analysis for understanding microcelebrity cultures has also exploded in diversity. While some time-intensive, long-term ethnographies choose to follow the intergenerational development of microcelebrity cultures in a specific place (i.e., [Abidin, 2017c](#); [Hopkins, 2019](#)), still other studies focus on a single icon as a case study, investigating either their brand biographies or the communities built around the microcelebrity. Some microcelebrities who have been studied in such detail include Americans Lonelygirl15 ([Bakioğlu, 2016](#); [Hall, 2015](#)) and Laci Green and Lindsey Doe ([Johnston, 2016](#)), Britons Hello October ([Bruijn, 2016](#)) and Zoella ([Bishop, 2018](#); [Jerslev, 2016](#)), Irish Bubzbeauty ([García-Rapp, 2016](#)), Chinese Hani8 and Nvliu ([Zhang & Hjorth, 2017](#)), and South Korean Han Yoo Ra ([Meylinda, 2017](#)). In addition to the wealth of studies focused on the biographies of female microcelebrities, some studies focus on male microcelebrities, including Swede PewDiePie ([Fägersten, 2017](#)), Australian Zyzz ([Fuller & Jeffery, 2016](#)), and American “Sad Michigan Fan” ([Slater, 2017](#)).

Still other studies choose to focus on networks and small groups of microcelebrities, such as beauty gurus (i.e., [Mardon et al., 2018](#)), commercial bloggers (i.e., [Bakke, 2017](#)), e-commerce livestreamers (i.e., [Chen et al., 2017](#)), political enthusiasts (i.e., [Vochocová, 2018](#)), and Gamergaters (i.e., [Trice & Potts, 2018](#)). Turning from producers to consumers of microcelebrity cultures, an influx of studies are now focusing on users and audience relations, giving attention to inquiries such as feelings of envy (i.e., [Chae, 2017](#)), processes of coming out to fans (i.e., [Mustonen, 2017](#)), Snapchat subcultural groups (i.e., [Gkoni et al., 2017](#)), communities on streaming platforms (i.e., [Blight, 2016](#)), aspirational teen interest around Influencer careers (i.e., [Sedláček, 2016](#)), and fan labor (i.e., [Bakioğlu, 2016](#)).

Conceptual Standpoints

Stemming from this spread of disciplinary frameworks and empirical corpuses, the conceptual standpoints from which scholars are theorizing microcelebrity cultures are also expanding. Perhaps most theorized is microcelebrity cultures in relation to labor, including glamor labor ([Wissinger, 2015](#)), aspirational labor ([Duffy, 2016](#)), visibility labor ([Abidin, 2016b](#)), gendered labor ([Zhang & Hjorth, 2017](#)), esthetic labor ([Brydges & Sjöholm, 2018](#)), emotional labor ([Mardon et al., 2018](#)), and algorithmic labor ([Bishop, 2018](#)). These studies collectively build on the trajectory of research on emotional labor ([Hochschild, 1983](#)), immaterial labor ([Hardt, 1999](#)), and entrepreneurial labor ([Neff, Wissinger, & Zukin, 2005](#)).

Cultures of Practice

Various cultural practices and subcultural communities of microcelebrity cultures have also caught the attention of scholars, who have investigated communities around bodybuilding (Fuller & Jeffery, 2016), LGBT activism (Lovelock, 2016; Mustonen, 2017), sexuality education (Abidin, 2017a; Johnston, 2016), politics (Tufeci, 2013; Vochocová, 2018), academia (McMillan Cottom, 2015), and practices around language (Page, 2012), humor and parody (Boxman-Shabtai, 2018), and digital artifacts such as selfies (Abidin, 2016a). A subset of studies has also begun to look at the negative subcultures and consequences of microcelebrity cultures around antagonisms and hating (Mcrae, 2017; Smith, 2017; Trice & Potts, 2018). Conceptually, emergent from this spread of studies are debates over notions of authenticity (i.e., Abidin, 2017b; Abidin & Ots, 2016; Ashton & Patel, 2017; Bruijn, 2016; Hall, 2015; Tolson, 2010), credibility (i.e., Abidin & Ots, 2016), privacy (i.e., Abidin, 2014b; Kane, 2010; Richards, 2015), copyright (i.e., Slater, 2017), and trends (i.e., Ferchaud et al., 2018).

Commerce and Industry

As an increasing number of microcelebrities are turning to parlay their online fame into commercial enterprises, a new string of works are now investigating the process of commercialism in the industry. These include studies on becoming a microcelebrity (i.e., Bakke, 2017; Li, 2018; Meylinda, 2017; van de Put, 2017; Wang, 2017), monetization (i.e., Chen et al., 2017; Hopkins, 2019), branding and self-branding (i.e., Booth & Matic, 2011; Chandawarkar et al., 2018; Khamis et al., 2017; Mercer, 2018), professionalism (i.e., Bingham, 2017), audiencing and follower engagement (i.e., Blight, 2016; Gkoni et al., 2017; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Neal, 2017; Sedláček, 2016), and the expansion of their brands to include romantic partners (i.e., Abidin, 2016c) and their young children (i.e., Abidin, 2015b).

Knowledge Production

Finally, an emergent crop of studies – including several chapters in this collection – have recently turned a critical eye to the cultures of knowledge production by reflexively mapping out or interrogating methodologies of studying microcelebrity cultures (i.e., Marshal et al., 2015; Mavroudis & Milne, 2016). Evidently, the past decade of research on microcelebrity cultures has yielded an expansive array of focal points across methodologies, disciplines, platforms, geographical cultures, units of analysis, conceptual standpoints, cultures of practices, and commerce and industries.

Ever more promising are the steady stream of prepublished/soon-to-be published MA and PhD theses by postgraduates around the world who are studying emergent and cutting-edge practices that are in dire need of being archived and analyzed. Focusing on how commerce and industry are impacting microcelebrity-audience relations are Neal's (2017) thesis on Instagram influencers and

sponsorship, [Mustonen's \(2017\)](#) thesis on YouTubers coming out to fan communities, [Sedláček's \(2016\)](#) thesis on how YouTubers' audiences are shifting away from TV practices, and [Bruijn's \(2016\)](#) thesis on how YouTubers are negotiating a balance between commercialism and authenticity. Considering the cultures of microcelebrity on newer social media platforms are [Gkoni et al.'s \(2017\)](#) thesis on Snapchat and emoji use as "fam" subcultures, [Bingham's \(2017\)](#) thesis on practices of professionalism among Twitch microcelebrities, [Blight's \(2016\)](#) thesis on community building across streaming platforms, and [van de Put's \(2017\)](#) thesis on the process of becoming a celebrity on musical.ly. Finally, looking outside of the Anglo-centric United States and Euro-centric United Kingdom are [Bakke's \(2017\)](#) thesis on commercial bloggers in Norway, [Meng's \(2014\)](#) and [Wang's \(2017\)](#) theses looking at *wanghong* on Weibo in China, [Meylinda's \(2017\)](#) thesis looking at beauty vlogs in South Korea, and [Limkangvanmongkol's \(2018\)](#) thesis looking at beauty bloggers' practices in Thailand. As newer cohorts of post-graduates and early career researchers delve deeper into the cultural and political complexities of microcelebrity practices in their parts of the world, one can be assured of generations of critical works on cultures of internet celebrity from around the globe.

"Around the Globe"

The book aims to shift the current discourse on microcelebrity studies, encouraging scholars to interrogate our citation politics, intellectual biases, personal attention ecologies, and the value of conducting microcelebrity research for public good. We consider some instances of public good as: returning to the community, generating new knowledge emically from the community, conducting translation work (language, literacies, lived experiences) for the wider academic community. We first need to acknowledge that all knowledge production is processual and political. This is especially important because the landscape of celebrity cultures is being shaped by physical and digital social networks, and reliance on such networks as their status quo often results in echo chambers of mutual amplification within in-groups, while perspectives from the margins and fringes, and alternative and subversive discourses are sidelined.

This is also the case as academics are increasingly turning to literature search engines and databases such as Google Scholar, Academia.edu, and Research Gate to keep up-to-date with emergent research, and when prolific academics with extensive social media networks are better able to promote and publicize their newest works to a large-scale readership on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. Furthermore, a smaller group of academics – often those who are based at prestigious American and British universities, and those who are faculty at Departments of Media Studies and Communication Studies that are feeders for the journalism industry – are better connected than others to journalists and writers at traditional and popular media presses, as evidenced by the steady flow of exposure on their works through expert opinions and press mentions.

Even more critically, a vast majority of these “canon” works and academics tend to research and publish in the English language; survey producers or consumers of microcelebrity culture who are disproportionately middle class or filtered through the sample of an undergraduate class; or focus on social media platforms that originate from Silicon Valley. As such, “celebrity” scholars and the most publicized “canon” works continue to be read and cited as the “bare minimum” while works that generally fall outside of these Anglo-centric legacies tend to be overlooked by the attention economy of algorithmic and personal networks.

However, the co-editors take heart and inspiration from a crop of scholars whose research about online fame have been spearheading a movement toward some diversity and intersectionality within the supposed status quo. [Pham’s work \(2015\)](#) on Asian fashion bloggers, [Lewis’ work \(2015\)](#) on Muslim women and (online) fashion, and [Luvaas’ works \(2012, 2016\)](#) that draw on his fieldwork among Indonesian bloggers evidence the growing desire for understanding microcelebrity within the context of geographical and cultural networks that intersect and create new forms of online fame.

Furthermore, this collection of essays bears a larger intellectual agenda in which we respond to the calls from postcolonial scholars such as [Said \(1978\)](#), [Spivak \(1993\)](#), [Connell \(2007, 2014\)](#), [Thussu \(2006, 2009\)](#), [Iwabuchi \(2002\)](#), and [Yano \(2013\)](#) to reevaluate our processes of knowledge production and the “global” spread of culture. In his theory on production of knowledge, “facts,” and power relations between Orientalism and the Occident, postcolonial philosopher Edward Said argues that “ideas, cultures, and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force, or more precisely their configurations of power, also being studied” (1978: 13), and it is only through the process of “unlearning” the “ideological formations” ([Spivak, 1993](#): 92) underpinning the socially, culturally, and “legally programmed asymmetry” ([Spivak, 1993](#): 98) in everyday life that one can acknowledge and undo the “epistemic violence” ([Spivak, 1993](#): 76) of knowledge production. More specifically, social theorist Raewyn Connell argues through her explication of Southern Theory that such “critical unpacking of mainstream literature in a field of practice – textbooks, established paradigms and bibliographies” is necessary to reveal in this process of knowledge production a “northern dominance of the discourse, and extraversion in the global south” ([Connell, 2014](#): 218).

Media Studies scholar Daya Thussu has likewise called for scholars to interrogate the “internationalization” of conducting media research beyond “Angloblobization” (borrowed from historical Niall Ferguson) ([Thussu, 2009](#): 2), given the continued importance of the concept, boundary, and unit of “nation states” in dispersing, circulating, receiving, consuming, and shaping media flows (2009: 3). Thussu also cautions readers to not only examine “global flows” but also pay heed to the contraflows in knowledge production given that as “Western theories are tested in non-Western locales and found inadequate, a new kind of thinking is required which values ideas and perspectives emanating from non-metropolitan hubs of global knowledge centres” ([Thussu, 2006](#): 25). This disruption of the hegemonic global flows from the “core” sites of

production (Anglo- and Eurocentric sites) to “peripheral” ones (rest of the world) is also what anthropologist Christine Yano has termed the “decentering of globalization,” as the “the general direction and status hierarchy of global flows” (Yano, 2013: 9) is reversed.

In his study of Japanese popular culture, Sociologist Koichi Iwabuchi argues that such “recentering of globalization” is usually aided by the fact that many commodities are now “mukokuseki” or culturally odorless and travel on the global commodity market without a hint of their nationality and with their ethnic and cultural characteristics erased (Iwabuchi, 2002: 71). But the nature and variety of internet celebrity culture is fast changing these conceptions: In her study of contemporary internet celebrity cultures, anthropologist Crystal Abidin (co-editor and contributor) has found that one of the reasons that some internet celebrities can gain better international traction than others is exactly because they are “stained” with a distinct cultural odor, to the extent that their fame is founded entirely on feelings of exoticism derived from an incompatibility of cultural capital between celebrity and viewer (Abidin, 2018: 22), reiterating the need to take into account the sociocultural and ideo-geographical specificities of geographically bounded concepts such as nation states (Thussu, 2009: 3).

Following from these postcolonial scholars, this book pays attention to the “around” aspect of *Microcelebrity Around the Globe*, bringing in studies on microcelebrity cultures from the geographical, cultural, economic, and linguistic margins, and highlighting case studies from different regions, using localized and international scholarship, and expanding on existing theoretical framings on the online celebrity experience. It is hoped that our collection of essays will serve as a humble intrusion into the normative academic attention economies with which we struggle.

Overview of This Book

This book and each of the chapters provides a direct response to the ongoing geopolitics and the existing significant gaps in scholarship about online celebrity. The case studies give examples of how norms, labor, and activism manifest as culturally specific practices and how microcelebrities embed their contextual knowledge to connect with niche networks online. The chapters feature geographies and populations in Asia such as China (East Asia), India (South Asia), Pakistan (South Asia), Singapore (Developed Southeast Asia), and Thailand (Developing Southeast Asia); in Turkey (Eastern Europe); Brazil (Latin America); predominantly English-speaking non-American countries such as Australia and England; and nominally marginalized populations in the US such as African-Americans and Blacks.

The platforms considered include blogs, Facebook, Instagram, musical.ly, Snapchat, Tumblr, Twitter, Vine, Weibo, and YouTube, with theorizations focused on race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, popular culture and entertainment, commerce and power, and politics and activism. In addition, the case studies consider a spectrum of microcelebrity at every stage, from everyday users