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Epilogue

The Algorithmic Celebrity: The Future of Internet Fame and Microcelebrity Studies

Alice E. Marwick

Miquela Sousa has 1.1 million followers on Instagram. Her account, @lilmiquela, is a never-ending stream of shots that show Sousa flexing designer brands like Balenciaga and Margiela, taking photos with other influencers, posing with celebrities like producer Nile Rogers, skateboarding, and hanging out outside the 7-Eleven. Her carefully posed selfies were replaced on April 20, 2018 with a moody self-portrait. The caption read:

> I'm thinking about everything that has happened and though this
> is scary for me to do, I know I owe you guys more honesty.
> In trying to realize my truth, I'm trying to learn my fiction.
> I want to feel confident in who I am and to do that I need to figure
> out what parts of myself I should and can hold onto.

Sousa is not a person. She is the creation of Brud, a Los Angeles creative agency specializing in "robotics, artificial intelligence and their applications to media businesses." Brud is backed by major Silicon Valley investors including Sequoia Capital; Lil Miquela is simply the most successful of a number of proof of concepts of something new, the *virtual influencer*. In fact, Brud had previously orchestrated a "hack" of Lil Miquela's account by one of their other influencers, a blonde Trump supporter named BermudaIsBae (Petrarca, 2018). (Miquela, in contrast, identified as Brazilian-American and included Black Lives Matter and a link to Black Girls Code in her bio; the hack played out a very particular type of racial partisan animosity familiar in the era of Trump.)

Lil Miquela's post continued:

> I'm not sure I can comfortably identify as a woman of color.
> "Brown" was a choice made by a corporation.
> "Woman" was an option on a computer screen.
> my identity was a choice Brud made in order to sell me to brands,
> to appear "woke."
> I will never forgive them. I don't know if I will ever forgive myself.

Her crisis of conscience? A PR strategy. An anonymous Brud investor told *TechCrunch,* "People aren't going to buy that she's human, so they make it seem as if she's had an existential crisis and now she is the first in a breed of conscious AR characters that they will build a world around" (Shieber, 2018). In Lil Miquela, Brud is playing out a storyline familiar to viewers of films like *AI, Ex Machina,* and *Her:* the self-aware android rebelling against her creators (with a feminist and racially aware twist). But what are we to make of this strange confluence? How can scholars and researchers help make sense of a virtual celebrity, created by a marketing agency, posting social media promoting real luxury products and emulating the tropes of "real" influencers, while borrowing science-fiction tropes to hook viewers? Microcelebrity as augmented reality game? An update of LonelyGirl15 for the age of automation?[1]

In my first published article on microcelebrity, I took some pains to explain that microcelebrity is not an *identity,* nor is it simply "celebrity" scaled down (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Instead, I stated clearly that microcelebrity is a *practice;* it is something one does, a way to present oneself online and relate to others, regardless of how many people are actually watching. This might suggest that microcelebrity can be practiced by anyone, or, perhaps, any thing. That distinction between identity and practice is much less clear to me than it was in 2009 when, freshly returned from my fieldwork in Silicon Valley, I spent a summer obsessing over celebrities on Twitter. Is someone a microcelebrity if they are not courting fame? Is someone a microcelebrity if they are actively courting fame, but not achieving it? Is someone a microcelebrity if they are positioned, styled, and branded by a corporation? Since then, the work of many others has led me to a lack of clarity around whether microcelebrity is best described as a self-presentation strategy, a subject position, or a labor practice. Today, I believe it is all of the above. While various dull articles are yet to be written debating the finer points of what microcelebrity is or is not, this pastime seems unproductive; from my vantage point, I know microcelebrity when I see it.

Lil Miquela demonstrates two major changes in social media that will have far-reaching impacts on the tiny subfield of microcelebrity studies. First is the development of the *influencer industry,* as ably chronicled by Crystal Abidin (Abidin, 2015, 2016a, 2016c). The influencer industry is a global phenomenon with agencies popping up to partner mainstream brands like McDonald's, Starbucks and Gucci with people popular online, mostly on Instagram and blogs.[2] Even micro-influencers, those with fewer than 30,000 followers, are considered significant, as they are more "trusted" and "invested in their crafts" (Main, 2017). This suggests that microcelebrity practice will continue to trickle down, as the potential to convert social capital to economic capital becomes more widely available. This conversion, of course, is relative. Jonathan Mavroudis relates in

[1] Early YouTube star who purported to be a teenage girl inducted into a cult but was actually a fictional webseries. As with Lil Miquela, part of the appeal for fans was determining whether the character was "real" or a hoax (Hall, 2015).

[2] YouTube, according to agency Activate, has a "high barrier to entry" and "require(s) more production skill and access to video equipment" (Activate, 2018, p. 5).

this volume that as an influencer with 27,000 followers he was offered $500 for a brand deal, whereas an informant with 400,000 followers was offered $50,000 for the same deal (J. Mavroudis, 2018).

The influencer industry has upended many of the amateur techniques established by early bloggers, camgirls, and Twitter comedians. Microcelebrity practices have ossified into familiar patterns: the haul video, the shirtless beach selfie, the beautifully lit vacation picture, the plea to "subscribe to my channel." Unpacking these tropes *as industrial practices* is just as important as is understanding the family sitcom, the romance novel, or the action film; they are imbricated not only with the technology industry and the platforms that host their content, but the vast industry of sponsorship and advertisement that has alighted upon influencers as the most effective way to reach young people.

The second change has to do with the emergence of algorithms as a key factor in how attention is distributed.

Theresa Senft and myself conducted our early work on microcelebrity in very specific, US-centric contexts, with populations that might be characterized as "early adopters" (Marwick, 2013a; Senft, 2008). Senft's camgirls used LiveJournal, online chat, and personal homepages to create small networks of fans, while my informants, Silicon Valley Web 2.0 aficionados, used Twitter, Flickr, and Dodgeball. In both cases our participants' practices were deeply influenced by the affordances and norms of the digital tools they used. For example, I examined how the values of Silicon Valley movers and shakers, who built the first generation of Web 2.0 sites, affected the *status affordances* of these technologies. When you to go to someone's Instagram page, the very first thing you see is their number of followers; this is quite different from a blog or personal homepage, where there is no easy way for an observer to quantify the audience. Audience size is not only built into social media, it is emphasized. Just as Silicon Valley denizens used funding rounds and valuations to suss each other out, the affordances of social technologies converted audience into metrics and encouraged people to compete for attention on social media.

Today, the ever-more important currency of attention is tied up in social media algorithms, the platform software that prioritizes certain content creators while making others invisible (Rieder, Matamoros-Fernández, & Coromina, 2018). Sophie Bishop has written about the influence that YouTube's recommendation algorithm has on beauty vloggers (Bishop, 2018a; 2018b). Like broadcast television before it, YouTube is delivering eyeballs to advertisers. These audiences, according to Bishop, are deeply gendered, with feminine-gendered channels focusing on beauty, fashion, cosmetics, and lifestyle. Noncompliance to these standards risks the symbolic violence of platform invisibility (Bishop, 2018a, p. 70). In this volume, Bishop chronicles how the speech recognition algorithms that YouTube uses for closed-captioning are utilized to determine searchable keywords for each video. A beauty guru who wishes her videos to be easily findable must slow down her speech and clearly enunciate: *smoky eye. MAC Cosmetics. Urban Decay Naked Eye Palette* (Bishop, 2018b). Thus, we must ask to what extent algorithms are *shaping* not only celebrity online, but self-presentation itself.

For another example, look at the world of children's YouTube videos. Ryan, the six-year-old star of the *Ryan's Toy Review* YouTube channel, earned an estimated 11 million dollars in 2017, making him the eighth highest paid You-Tuber in the world (Berg, 2017; Schmidt, 2017). Ryan's channel is an anodyne, candy-colored combination of unboxing videos, goofy family clips, amateurish kiddie songs, and science experiments. It has more than 13 million subscribers; one of his videos has been viewed 878 million times. Not only has YouTube made Ryan's family wealthy, but the toy industry carefully watches how he and other unboxing video creators affect toy sales, and, naturally, sends Ryan free toys (Schmidt, 2017). In 2018, Ryan's family signed a deal with pocket.watch, a kids' entertainment conglomerate backed by a who's who list of Hollywood big shots like Robert Downey Jr. and Les Moonves. Pocket.watch has since announced a line of Ryan toys, clothes, and a new book about the "lives behind the camera" of young YouTube stars (Gutelle, 2018).

By any definition Ryan is famous, just as Shirley Temple and the Olsen Twins were famous before they entered elementary school. And, just as Mary Kate and Ashley Olsen lent their likenesses to fashion dolls, clothes, books, fragrances, and video games (and later luxury brands Elizabeth and James and The Row), Ryan's brand is expanding beyond homemade YouTube videos. So what makes Ryan a *microcelebrity*? Is it YouTube? Surely not, given the social media origins of mainstream celebrities like Justin Bieber and Kate Upton. Is it the fact that he is unheard of by anyone who is not a parent or elementary-school age child? Is it the relationship that he has with his fans, many of whom are inspired to create their own YouTube channels after watching him? (Ryan himself asked his parents to start his YouTube channel at the tender age of three after watching another kid's toy video.) The industrialization of microcelebrity has made many of the differences between *celebrity* and *microcelebrity* uneasy; more than ever, celebrity is a continuum.

And, like Bishop's beauty bloggers, Ryan's video-making practices are deeply interwoven with the platform on which he became famous. Videos made for kids and toddlers are an enormous market on YouTube, as much as You-Tube likes to pretend they are not (Peters, 2018). Kids tend to watch videos right until the end, and watch them over and over, which are exactly the type of behaviors that YouTube's algorithm values the most (Popper, 2016). In 2017, YouTube came under fire for hosting a vast array of disturbing videos aimed at kids (Maheshwari, 2017). Another popular kids channel, *Toy Freaks,* was shut down after multiple complaints that the owner of the channel, Greg Chisam, was putting his two children in borderline abusive situations (Spangler & Spangler, 2017). However, Chisam claims that the channel's focus on pranks and gross-outs was based on what he believed the algorithm prioritized: "I started seeing a pattern – these certain videos were getting more views than the others... So I focused on that, I analyzed each video, the description, the titles, the tags, everything involved in making that video and just what made these a success, and I tried to repeat it, and I've had some good luck with that" (Smidt, 2017). Platform algorithms are shaping content in ways big and small, with unsettling results.

In addition to these two changes – which I think will have far-reaching impacts on both our work and our theories – I want to talk about two long-overdue and much welcome developments that are already taking place in microcelebrity studies. The first has to do with the Anglocentrism of internet studies (Goggin, 2012; Goggin & McLelland, 2010; Szulc, 2014) and adjacent fields, including but by no means limited to cultural studies (Shome, 2009), media studies (Thussu, 2009), and social computing (Philip, Irani, & Dourish, 2012). This bias is easily confirmed simply by scanning any major internet studies journal. Research conducted outside the US usually states its context in the title (for instance, "Information, Opinion, or Rumor? The Role of Twitter During the Post-Electoral Crisis in Côte d'Ivoire" (Schreiner, 2018)), while research in the US does not ("Moral Monday Is More Than a Hashtag: The Strong Ties of Social Movement Emergence in the Digital Era," which is about North Carolina (Schradie, 2018)).

I use these examples not to shame the authors or the journal, but to show how strongly the United States has been centered and *unmarked* in internet research. This is a significant problem. It means that many phenomena are considered universal that may actually be local to the US (or the UK or Australia, to a lesser extent). In turn, this means that many of the presumptions on which we base our research may simply be incorrect. In order to fully understand microcelebrity, we must examine how it plays out in a wide variety of cultural contexts, nations, and diasporic conditions. Happily, this work has begun, as shown in research conducted by Crystal Abidin (Abidin, 2016a, 2016b; Abidin & Gwynne, 2017), Minh-ha Pham (2015), and Detta Rahmawan (2014). This volume represents a significant step toward truly global theories of micro-celebrity, with case studies drawn from Turkey (Şimşek, 2018), China (De Seta & Ge Zhang, 2018), Thailand (Limkangvanmongkol & Abidin, 2018), Brazil (Lana, 2018), Pakistan (Aziz, 2018), and India (Pande, 2018). By carefully attending to the specifics of microcelebrity practice in cultural contexts, we can build on our foundational theories of microcelebrity to better understand contemporary developments, identities, and technologies.

The second development has to do with the theoretical apparatus we use to understand microcelebrity in the context of contemporary industrial capitalism. In my work in Silicon Valley and with fashion bloggers, virtually all my partic-ipants drew from techniques developed by marketers, advertisers, and publicists to curate their self-presentation and promote themselves (Marwick, 2013b). Today, for people pursuing online fame through aspirational labor – the difficult and usually unpaid work that brings with it the promise of a future creative, independent career path (Duffy, 2017) – gaining attention is not only about social status but about economic success. However, this is a form of Lauren Berlant's *cruel optimism:* it is a fantasy of the good life that does not play out. Evidence of the "instability, fragility, and dear cost" of microcelebrity is abundant (2011, p. 2). Yet internet fame remains an aspiration for many young people.

In addition to its precarity, we must also look at the structural differences in who benefits from attention. Emma Maguire writes about Peaches Monroee, the American teenager who coined the phrase "on fleek" in a popular Vine video that

garnered 116 million views (Maguire, 2018). Taken up by companies like Taco Bell and celebrities like Ariana Grande and Kim Kardashian, *on fleek* became a permanent addition to the lexicon of internet slang. Yet Monroee herself saw no financial benefit from her creative success. Maguire contextualizes this appropriation within a long history of Black American culture borrowed and monetized by white-owned businesses with few of the proceeds flowing back to the Black community. Monroee criticized the use of the phrase by brands and attempted to capitalize on its success, to no avail. She joins many other minority content creators who have seen their work go viral without compensation. In fact, many of Vine's most popular creators were Black comedians who explicitly addressed African-American experience in their videos; Kendra Calhoun describes such videos as *Vine racial comedies* (Calhoun, 2017). Despite Vine's status as a space for creative and often transgressive racial commentary, the site was shut down by Twitter in January 2017. The last video posted was by Peaches Monroee, adding to her iconic clip the words "You were all, truly, on fleek" (Huddleston, 2017).

So we come full circle to Lil Miquela, whose persona as a Brazilian-American influencer was carefully constructed to draw from the creativity and cultural capital of Black and Latino youth online, yet benefited only a corporation and the brands who paid to advertise with it. Microcelebrity researchers may be best positioned to tackle such an uncanny valley, given our deep interest in the presentation of the self as a commodity within the gendered and racialized structures of late capitalism. Miquela will not be the last of her kind; let us be prepared.

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