

Micro-microcelebrity: Famous babies and business on the Internet

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Crystal Abidin explores lifestyle Influencers and babies as the new 'micro-microcelebrity'. Crystal is an anthropologist and ethnographer who studies vernacular internet culture. She is a Postdoctoral Fellow in Sociology at the National University of Singapore, Affiliated Researcher at Media Management and Transformation Centre (MMTC) at Jönköping University, and co-investigator with the Science, Technology and Society (STS) cluster at the Asia Research Institute (ARI). [Header image credit: C. Rahanmetan, CC BY 2.0]

Ten years ago, as a teenager in junior college, I often heard my peers exchanging updates of what a group of girls had recently purchased, worn or experienced. They could recall the names of their boyfriends, the restaurants they'd been to over the weekend, and details of their latest fashion purchases. I soon learned that these girls did not go to my college, nor were they friends of my peers. In fact, my peers had never met these girls in the flesh; they were simply bloggers writing about their lives on the internet. The allure of such bloggers and the intimacies their followers expressed towards them and among each other intrigued me so much, that, when I became an anthropologist later on in life, I made these internet personalities the focus of **my research**.

In 2005 these were primarily young girls known as '**lifestyle bloggers**' because they started documenting their lives on blog platforms such as **OpenDiary**, **LiveJournal** and **Blogger**. Today, **lifestyle 'Influencers'** are usually young people who start off as ordinary everyday users of social media and the internet, who document their daily lives and experiences, amass a sizable readership and then turn their web traffic into a commercial endeavour by taking on **advertorials**. They are a form of '**microcelebrity**', using self-branding techniques to cultivate relationships with a niche audience on the internet, and who are perceived as more genuine and easy to emulate than traditional celebrities.

Such Influencers have broadened their digital estates to incorporate various social media, and expanded their businesses from internet-based advertising to more traditional businesses including fashion, cosmetics, food and beverage, and even housing. Although younger cohorts of girls have since become Influencers themselves, many have progressed along their life **course** to

become wives and mothers while maintaining their visibility. Their young children have also accumulated prominence to become 'internet famous'. Enter the 'micro-microcelebrity'.

Digital estates

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Micro-microcelebrities are the children of influencers who have themselves become proximate microcelebrities, having derived exposure and fame from their prominent Influencer mothers. Although some parents engage in 'sharenting', or sharing images and stories about their children in digital spaces, Influencer mothers are more prolific, deliberate and commercial.

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Micro-microcelebrities inherit celebrity from the womb – the moment Influencer mothers begin posting sonograms. Although these have been studied as a 'rite of passage' among mothers, Influencer mothers publish them to claim digital estates for their micro-celebrities to-be, by reserving handles and usernames on various social media. One Influencer known as bongqiuqiu debuted her baby Meredith's dedicated hashtag #MereGoRound on Instagram when she was three months pregnant. Shortly after, she announced a new Instagram account dedicated to her child, @MereGoRound, which amassed over 5.5k followers prior to her birth.

Follower engagement

Continuous milestone updates throughout gestation also serve to foster anticipation among followers, many of whom have been known to set up fan accounts, tribute sites and gossip forums to discuss 'the bump' and the upcoming celebrity baby. In the six months leading up to Meredith's birth, various family, friends and fans shared images of their gifts to her, and even held a welcome party documented on Instagram. Influencer mother bongqiuqiu frequently updated followers on her progress, and incorporated narratives of her (presumably sponsored) gynecologists and hospital stay in her pregnancy diaries. When another Influencer, xiaxue, gave birth to Baby Dash, followers sent her digital gifts such as a compilation of her pregnancy #OOTDs (Outfit Of The Days).

Advertorials

The @MereGoRound Instagram exclusively publishes images of Meredith as she navigates childhood, but these also incorporate advertorials as Meredith is photographed with sponsored products and services. Some of these include the nappy brand for which she is an ambassador, as well as clothing and toys. Not all micro-microcelebrity advertorials are necessarily baby-related, however. Baby Dash was incorporated into his Influencer mother's car sponsorship when over 20 large decals of one of his viral photos – dubbed 'pineapple Dash' among followers – was plastered all over her vehicle. Followers who spot the car in public are encouraged to photograph and upload the image using its dedicated hashtag #xiaxuecar as part of the Influencer mother's car sponsorship.

Young labour

Although there are some laws in place regarding the employment of children in Singapore, the focus has been on those over the age of 13 engaged in family businesses. The most notable of regulations governing children's work in the media is the US Californian Coogan Law that restricts work hours, ensures rest hour quotas and instills mandatory schooling. A similar policy has not been instilled for micro-microcelebrities engaged in creative digital ecologies, whose work on social media has not yet been formally recognised as labour, or regulated by authority.

Brief snippets from my ethnographic fieldwork with Influencer management agencies in Singapore similarly reveal that micro-microcelebrities' labour engagements and control of their earnings are entirely at their parents' discretion. These grey areas are currently difficult to investigate as the first generation of micro-microcelebrities are just emerging and still under the age of five. And contractual agreements between clients, management agencies and Influencers are not easily accessible, guarded by intellectual property or privacy and corporate guidelines. Future research should look into safeguards for micro-microcelebrities for whom commercial work and personal

documentation are not always distinct, but in fact deliberately intertwined in order to better engage with followers for relatability.

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