

Chapter 5

Origin Stories: An Ethnographic Account of Researching Microcelebrity

Crystal Abidin

Abstract

Depending on whether one premises academic literature, press reports, or vernacular folklore, the origin stories of microcelebrity cultures can differ greatly. As academics, we are often inclined to deem as canon and factual the descriptions detailed in refereed academic publications, viewing them as scientific truths that take precedence over other forms of written records such as traditional press or popular media reports. But what happens if the origin stories of cultural phenomena are not logged in these traditionally privileged outlets that are often in the English language, and in a vocabulary not usually accessible to the general populace? What happens if the origin stories of cultural happenings remain within the domains of material or oral folklore without ever being logged as transmittable text? How do researchers go about reading theory, applying concepts, and interpreting their data while maintaining the critical lens of cultural relativism? In this chapter I contemplate the origin stories of my research on microcelebrity cultures between 2009 and 2018 both thematically and conceptually, by biographically recounting my methodological and theoretical trajectories in studying internet celebrities. As an act of radical transparency in displaying some of my most intimate fieldnotes – such as how I came upon particular schools of thought and theories – and as a reflexive mode of transcribing from material and oral culture the earliest beginnings of microcelebrity culture in Singapore as a participant observer, I hope this methodological biography will contribute toward rethinking the politics of our knowledge production as researchers.

Keywords: Microcelebrity; internet celebrity; influencers; methodologies; theories; ethnography

Methodological Biographies

At an international research conference in 2017, I met a fellow academic who was studying the phenomenon of microcelebrity on a specific social media platform in

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the US. As we started chatting about our respective projects, I casually commented that it will soon be a decade since I started researching internet celebrities. The older male academic, in all likelihood taking into account my comparatively youthful-looking East Asian face, (jokingly) remarked that surely that must not be possible since I would have been an “infant” a decade ago, then (seriously) stated that internet celebrity must have developed only very recently in Asia after staking claim in the US. Reflecting on this encounter and considering it a springboard, in this chapter I contemplate the origin stories of my research on microcelebrity cultures between 2009 and 2018 both thematically and conceptually, by biographically recounting my methodological and theoretical trajectories in studying internet celebrities. As an act of radical transparency in displaying some of my most intimate field notes – such as how I came upon particular schools of thought and theories – and as a reflexive mode of transcribing from material and oral culture the earliest beginnings of microcelebrity culture in Singapore as a participant observer, I hope this methodological biography will contribute toward rethinking the politics of our knowledge production as researchers.

2009: Gender Studies + Content Analysis

I have been studying the internet celebrity industry in Singapore since 2009, beginning with a third-year undergraduate research module in Gender Studies that required me to formulate an independent research project over 13 weeks. At that time, as a young Singaporean, I had long been fascinated over the throngs of fellow undergrads on campus who seemed excessively preoccupied with owners and models of blogshops since their emergence in 2005 – a prelude to online shopping websites wherein blogposts doubled up as advertisement spaces for owners to hawk personal and new items. Everyone in my cohort largely referred to these women as “bloggers” or “blogshop owners.” During lectures, students were covertly scrolling through blogs and blogshops; in lunch queues, students were recounting the latest updates from bloggers flaunting their newest material possessions or favorite café spots; between toilet cubicles, students speculated over “telltale” signs of a blogger’s budding or fading romantic relationship; and during free periods, students congregated with their laptops plugged into power sockets to constantly refresh blogshop pages in anticipation of their timed product launches.

To purchase an item, customers would comment on a blogpost with the name of the item and leave their email address behind. Blogshop owners would then acknowledge their order by replying to the comment, and then manually emailing an invoice to every single customer. Customers would manually transfer the sum of money to the blogger’s bank account, either through an ATM or online banking, then send a receipt to the blogshop. Thereafter, the blogshop owner would confirm that payment has been verified either via email or back in the blogpost comments, and request for an address to post the item to. The back-and-forth correspondence meant that it usually took up to three days for even a quick transaction to be completed, much unlike the efficiency of online shopping in the late-2010s.

Besides these commercial exchanges, this homosocial community of blogshop enthusiasts were also cultivating interpersonal forms of intimacy. While commenting to indicate interest in an item, it was not uncommon for customers to also leave messages of encouragement and envy or personal queries to blogshop owners. These early queries often pertained to the mundane details around fashion (i.e., “what kind of blouse would you pair with these pants?”, “where is your bag from?”, “are your shoes for sale?”) or personal curiosities around the blogger’s private life (i.e., “is that man in the photo your boyfriend?”, “you’re so skinny, what is your diet like?”, “how was the café and what on the menu would you recommend?”). As many blogshop owners exploded in popularity and comment exchanges grew overwhelming, bloggers would tend to reply only to selected comments and messages. Given the new scarcity of their public reciprocity, the rare display of communicative intimacies became a desired commodity, with some customers/fans celebrating the reciprocity gifted to them from blogshop owners, who were viewed in increasingly high regard.

I was so intrigued with these bloggers’ apparent leadership on feminine self-fashioning – albeit disseminated at a distance via blogs to dispersed audiences around the country – that I conducted a content analysis of the eight most popular blogs/bloggers who posted between 2005 and 2009, and wrote up my project on the types of feminine representations that these bloggers were discursively propagating through their blog narrations, as inspired by milestone works in gender studies (Friedan, 1963; Wolf, 1990). I would later further develop part of this analysis to focus on how these bloggers were wrestling with the notion of cuteness as vulnerability and agency, especially in relation to material possessions, girl friendship groups, and their romantic partners (Abidin, 2016a).

2010: Sociology + Content Analysis, Participant Observation

In the following year, I embarked on a yearlong honors research thesis to study these popular bloggers in greater detail. Informed by my three years of training for a Sociology major by this time, I chose to study the dynamics of class and power between “role-model” bloggers and their “follower” readers as negotiated through feelings of intimacy (Hochschild, 1983; Zelizer, 2007). The blogshop industry was rapidly expanding, and competition from newer entrants in the scene in swamps pressured the early cohort of blogshops to professionalize and mature. Blogshop owners were now simultaneously running personal blogs on which they would narrate their daily happenings and use their lifestyles as a canvas to showcase their own wares to customers and readers.

These blogshop owners initially began by selling used clothing which they promoted through photographs of themselves in the outfit while engaging in revelries with their friends, or while specially modeled in the makeshift spaces of their bedrooms and homes. They even developed a nuanced vocabulary to hierarchize and inscribe value to their old clothes, with “preloved” use to indicate that an item of clothing has been worn several times; and “vintage” used to describe clothing that may not be actually from a different era but instead just out of the current fashion cycle and probably carrying light damage. In some cases, the

lifestyle narratives of blogshop owners inspired so much envy that describing a used item of clothing as having been “personally worn” by a certain blogger would instigate throngs of customers to engage in bidding wars just to “own a piece” of a top blogger’s life. Eventually, the desire and demand for clothing filtered through the ownership or aesthetic choices of these women would lead blogshop owners to import brand new but low-cost clothing from Bangkok and Shenzhen for sale, and later, manufacture their own wares in small batches from factories in Guangzhou. Although some of them continued to showcase their wares on their personal blogs, many blogshop owners retired from modeling for their blogshops and instead hired young women who were “unknown faces” to do so. These fresh faces were usually scouted “off the street” from university campuses and secondary schools, from their customer base when they held flea markets or “mass meetups” (see below) or from blogs or social networks such as Friendster. As a result, many aspiring blogshop models would set up personal blogs and narrate their lifestyles in the vein of blogshop owners in order to be spotted. At this juncture, the vocabulary in the budding industry progressed to differentiate blogshop “owners” from blogshop “models,” “customers” of blogshops from “readers” of blogs, and “commercial” bloggers who were monetizing their blogs from “aspiring” bloggers who were producing content for free in the hopes of being talent scouted (see Duffy, 2016 on “aspirational labor”).

Mass meetups were impromptu gatherings in which masses of customers could collect their goods at physical locations as opposed to awaiting their packages by post. They were held by blogshops around festive periods when the local postal service would be overwhelmed with an influx of parcels, causing delivery delays that extended beyond the usual three business days. As a popular solution around the Chinese New Year, Christmas, and New Year periods, such pickups ensured that customers could adorn their new wares at celebrations and parties in time. Initially, mass meetups were held in centrally located and accessible public spaces such as the Starbucks coffee shop at Raffles City shopping center or the gantries at Mass Rapid Transit train stops. While it was a mild inconvenience to the coffee shops and cafes, and while usually no official permission to use the space was sought, these gatherings were not curtailed or penalized. Eventually, the more popular blogshops who had office spaces, warehouse spaces, or even brick-and-mortar stores would organize their mass meetups in these confined locations instead. Other blogshops would also partner with hotels and large eateries to organize closed door mass meetups in conjunction with the promotion of other brands’ products and wares. In addition to being logistically practical, mass meetups were conceptually the first iteration of “fan meetings,” in which customers and readers who were fans of blogshop owners and models would queue in line for a photo opportunity with their role models, often bearing gifts, flowers, and personal letters in kind.

My honors thesis project initially tracked 30 blogshops and affiliated personal blogs selected based on their unique visitor counts, the size of their blogshop’s mailing list, and their mentions in the mainstream media. In addition to content analysis, I had also conducted short stints of participant observation in physical locations including various flea markets and mass meetups, and in digital

locations when I observed fellow undergraduates’ online shopping habits over the year. I eventually wrote up my Sociological analysis based on five blogshops and eight affiliated blogs run by blogshop owners, owner-models, and models, looking at how commercial intimacies were enacted (Abidin, 2015a; Abidin & Thompson, 2012).

2011: Anthropology, Media Studies, Cultural Studies + Participant Observation, Personal Interviews, Focus Groups, Web Archeology, Archival Research, Content Analysis

By the time I began my PhD research in 2011, the earliest cohort of successful blogshops were migrating to websites as online stores, and prolific owners and models were expanding from blog platforms to popular social media such as Ask.fm, Facebook, and Twitter and becoming grouped under the general umbrella of “social media celebrities” or “Influencers.” Housed in a department of Anthropology and Sociology at an Australian institute, my four-year program generously enabled me to take on long-term ethnographic fieldwork, comprising participant observation in physical and digital sites, personal interviews and focus groups, web archeology, and archival research. My theoretical understandings developed as I studied both traditional (Malinowski, 1992) and contemporary (Boellstorff, 2008) anthropological works on communities and human cultures, and I relied primarily on the principles of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to inductively develop new theory and concepts from my empirical data.

This time, I wanted to trace the relationship among blogshops, blogs, and social media; and between producers and consumers of this content, focusing specifically on how Influencer–follower relationships are constructed and maintained from the micro perspective of the individual and the macro view of the industry. The fieldwork for this project would eventually culminate in 190 informants between the blogshop and Influencer industries, across the front- and back end of the businesses, and include the personal and professional networks of these internet stars. Specifically, “blogshop” informants comprised owners, models, suppliers, photographers, clients, and customers; and “Influencer” informants comprised Influencers, their close family and friends, managers, photographers, clients, and followers (including superfans and anti-fans). My fieldsite had also branched out from Singapore to include Bangkok, where many blogshops retrieved their supplies, and Kuala Lumpur, into which many minority race Influencers and local Influencer agencies were expanding.

Drawing on traditional and contemporary anthropological and sociological theory spanning from decorum (Goffman, 1956) and ritual (Turner, 1969) to tourism (MacCannell, 2011) and internet research (Miller & Slater, 2000), and owing to the extensive level of detail to which I was privy with my empirical data, I concentrated on the micro-interactions of Influencers within and among themselves. The project then yielded findings around specific phenomena such as scandal and shame (Abidin, 2016b), performances of authenticity

(Abidin, 2017a), and personal struggles and failures in the industry (Abidin, 2013). However, the data set derived from my archival research into traditional media and popular press reports on Influencers seemed largely neglected as I lacked the appropriate framework to understand the data.

Press fascination on these Influencers generally highlighted their earning power, generated fictives of their “accidental” celebrity, and predicted their usurp of the mainstream entertainment industry. Headlines such as “From blog to riches,” “Net worth,” “Model owners,” and “Plastic fantastic” spoke to speculations of their apparent commercial success as coupled with relative youth and extreme beauty. Indeed some of my empirical data corroborated with these reports, since many successful Influencers had middle-class resources and higher education and could attain cultural capital to perform beauty and fashion. But still many others pursued the industry as an alternative route after having failed in the national education system, after struggling with poverty and struggles in job-hunting, or after “faking their way” and mimicking middle-class materialism and esthetics, and these stories were hardly told. It then occurred to me that such cyclic news coverage has constructed what Boorstin (1961) terms “pseudo-events,” in that the “news” generated is but a “synthetic novelty” (1961, p. 9) that is not spontaneous but staged, executed for the mere purpose of creating “newsworthy” content, bears an ambiguous representation of the reality of events, and most crucially, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy (1961, pp. 11–12). While such news coverage had further compounded the popularity of these young women, it had also inevitably obscured their esoteric discourses of their labor and their vernacular interpretations of conspicuous fame.

At this juncture, while midway through my PhD program in 2013, I belatedly enrolled in the department of Communication and Media Studies to produce an interdisciplinary thesis, and was introduced to the notion of “microcelebrity” for the first time. Global Studies scholar Theresa Senft’s seminal work on Camgirls and microcelebrity (2008) had been published for five years and Communication scholar Alice Marwick’s book on Silicon Valley start-ups and microcelebrity was to be published later in the year. Coupled with my earlier background reading into Cultural Studies literature on celebrities (Marshall, 1997; Rojek, 2012; Turner, 2010), it became clear that my project was progressing from mainly studying online community and human relationships to understanding internet celebrity cultures, albeit still rooted in anthropological principles and methodologies. As I got more acquainted with Communication and Media Studies, studying theory on interpersonal relationships (Baym, 2013), culture industries (Burgess & Green, 2009), and youth practices on social media (boyd, 2014), my project would develop to investigate specific longitudinal phenomena within the Influencer industry, such as how the first generation of social media Influencers strategize over monetizing new social media (Abidin, 2014), how Influencers’ careers shape and are shaped by their life course such as having children (Abidin, 2015b), and the intentional and accidental social justice interventions enacted by Influencers through their personal narratives (Abidin, 2017b).

2016: Questioning the Hegemony of Theoretical Canon and Empirical Globality

In my consecutive postdoctoral projects since 2016, my research on Influencers and microcelebrity, or “internet celebrity” more broadly, has expanded from Singapore to small nodes in Southeast Asia, cultural East Asia, Australia, and Scandinavia and progressed from observations at the level of the individual, community, and agency to that of industry and national and regional vernacular cultures. I also ventured outside of my home disciplines and spent time at research centers and departments dedicated to Asian Studies and Business Studies, while amassing a growing corpus of empirical data. In the midst of exposing myself to the vast interdisciplinary landscape of literature and vocabulary available, it felt at times as if any permutation of theories/frameworks and empirical data could yield an assortment of explanations and interpretations for the one phenomenon. While I had anticipated this buffet of theories/frameworks to be a liberating experience, the reverse was true if I chose to maintain my commitment toward accounting for cultural relativism. As I collected more culturally situated empirical data, it felt glib to simply transplant theories and frameworks that were founded under vastly different sociocultural climates and digital cultural norms, since “how internet celebrity has come to emerge in various parts of the world varies, depending on the cultural norms of the people, the social practices around media devices and personalities, and the structure of technological capabilities that mediate a population’s access to content” (Abidin, 2018, p. 2). I have also found that the canon theories on microcelebrity studies and even celebrities studies more broadly – largely focused on empirical from the US and UK, and conducted by researchers from the Global North – could not always adequately explain or rationalize my data.

When microcelebrity was first theorized in the age of camgirls in the US, Senft highlighted the agency of users and the sophistication of internet technology in defining the concept as “a new style of online performance that involves people ‘amping up’ their popularity over the Web using technologies like video, blogs and social networking sites” (2008, p. 25). Subsequently, Marwick’s application of the concept as a networking tool employed by tech workers emphasized the scale of their popularity as “being famous to a niche group of people” and the crux of their practice as focused on conveying a positive persona that feels “authentic” (2013, p. 114). My subsequent work on Influencers focused on the documentary and interactive aspect and commercial and advertising prowess of this elite group of vocational microcelebrities. As social media technologies became more user-friendly and available across the globe, it appeared as if any user could try their hand at accumulating microcelebrity with niche audiences. Yet, not everyone would be equipped to successfully parlay or groom their microcelebrity into a commercial exchange, sustainable lifestyle, or full-on vocation as did Influencers (Abidin, 2018, p. 14). As such, my definitions of Influencers focused on their practice as “the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles” to engage with followers “in digital and physical spaces” in order to monetize their following

through “integrating ‘advertorials’ into their blog or social media posts” (Abidin, 2015a, 2015b) or by being used as “conduits of information to amplify messages” (Abidin, 2018, p. 71). But despite these nuanced developments in theory, as my projects expanded and internet culture evolved and diversified, I encountered more empirical data that was not congruent with the frameworks and theories of microcelebrity or Influencer cultures.

For instance, the agency implied by Senft (2008), the authenticity claimed by Marwick (2013), and the commerce studied in my earlier work (Abidin, 2015) were often privileges not accessible by different types of “internet famous” people. “Eyewitness viral stars” who are predominantly Black Americans of low socio-economic status such as Michelle Dobyne are frequently exploited by television news networks for viral sound bites and as clickbait, and the commercial revenue accumulated in the process hardly ever trickles down to them in return (Abidin, 2018, p. 38). “Meme personalities” who are iconized by networks of internet users against their will, often struggle to the point of having their personal privacy and welfare sacrificed (Abidin, 2018, p. 44). Furthermore, the internet fame of such meme personalities may arise out of feelings of exoticism, where an incompatibility of cultural capital leads to “generative frictions between the celebrity and the viewer” (Abidin, 2018, p. 22), as evidenced in the case of Taiwanese Heidi Yeh who was made an “unwilling meme” in part by Anglo- and Eurocentric audiences (Abidin, 2018, pp. 52–56).

These exemplars are forms of “internet famous” persons for whom the experience is neither beneficial nor desired, and for whom there is usually very little control and agency involved. Moving away from celebratory discourses of fame, they do not fit neatly within the frameworks of microcelebrity or Influencer cultures, but should instead be conceptualized more broadly as “internet celebrities” who are characterized by “their high visibility, whether this be attributed to fame or infamy, positive or negative attention, talent and skill or otherwise, and whether it be sustained or transient, intentional or by happenstance, monetized or not” (Abidin, 2018, pp. 15–16). Furthermore, although initially founded as internet-native popularity, some internet celebrities may have their fame parlayed into more mainstream forms of celebrity in the traditional entertainment industry and far exceed the expectations of “niche” audiences (Marwick, 2013) or popularity confined to “the Web” (Senft, 2008, p. 25). Hence, despite their beginnings that are native to the web, the “spillover effects and afterlives may include cross-border flows” (Abidin, 2018, pp. 15–16) across the social, digital, traditional, mainstream, and legacy media industries.

Origin Stories

While I continue to hone my theoretical and methodological training across Anthropology and Sociology, Communication and Media Studies, and Cultural Studies, I am inspired by postcolonial theorists to be more intellectually aware and ethnographically sensitive toward my research praxis. Beginning with reassessing the canon literature drummed into me during my undergraduate and postgraduate education in postcolonial Singapore and Australia, I am learning to

be critical of what and whom I read, where and how the research was situated, and how these theories and theorists inform my own processes of knowledge reproduction (Connell, 2014, p. 218). Drawing on Edward Said’s (1978) criticism toward orientalism and ethnocentrism, Dipesh Chakrabarty’s observations of “asymmetric ignorance” when Western scholars omit non-Western perspectives from their intellectual training (Chakrabarty in Thussu, 2009, p. 6), and Spivak’s (1993, p. 76)’s rejection of the “epistemic violence” committed by intellectuals who project Anglo- and Eurocentric knowledge onto their informants thus denying them a voice to self-represent, I am further committed to building up Southern Theory which privileges intellectual perspectives originating from the Global South for a more inclusive academia (Connell, 2007, 2014), by paying attention to the “contraflows” (Thussu, 2006) of international media phenomenon, and the “recentering” (Iwanbuchi, 2002) and “decentering” of globalization (Yano, 2013). Just as the qualities of internet celebrity “do not naturally attach to or arise” (Abidin, 2018, p. 4) but are instead constructed through a process (Turner, Bonner, & David Marshall, 2000), so is knowledge production around their culture and practices an ideological and political undertaking. May we ever maintain fidelity toward the origin stories of internet celebrities, just as we critically interrogate the origin stories of our methodological and theoretical biographies.

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MICROCELEBRITY AROUND THE GLOBE: APPROACHES TO CULTURES OF INTERNET FAME

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Contributor Biographies

Editors

Dr. Crystal Abidin is a Socio-cultural Anthropologist of vernacular internet cultures, particularly young people's relationships with internet celebrity, self-curation, and vulnerability. Her forthcoming books look at the histories, cultures, and industries of Instagram, blogshops, and Influencers. She is the author of *Internet Celebrity: Understanding Fame Online* (Emerald Publishing, 2018), which critically analyzes the contemporary histories and impacts of internet-native celebrities today. Crystal is Lecturer in the School of Communication and Creative Arts (SCCA) at Deakin University, Postdoctoral Fellow with the Media, Management and Transformation Centre (MMTC) at Jönköping University, and Adjunct Research Fellow with the Centre for Culture and Technology (CCAT) at Curtin University. Reach her at wish-crys.com or @wishcrys.

Megan Lindsay Brown, MSW, PhD, is a Postdoctoral Scholar advised by Dr. Jill Messing in the Office of Gender-based Violence at Arizona State University. Dr. Brown's research focuses on the use of information communication technologies (ICT) and the impact of social media on women's lived experiences. Her work has examined young adult dating relationships, online harassment, and interventions using ICT. Currently, her research is focused on the ways that online safety planning and technology can be incorporated to improve domestic violence programs and interventions, and she has helped to test and disseminated myPlan under a grant from the National Institutes of Health (PI: Nancy Glass). Dr. Brown oversees the social media campaign for myPlan, including disseminating information about myPlan on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook.

Contributors

Fatima Aziz is a PhD Candidate at École des Hautes Études en Science Sociales, Paris. Her PhD focuses on visual digital cultures, identity, and sociality as co-constructed practices shaped by photographic production, sharing, and interpretation across social media. She has published on French students hook-up practices on Facebook and Pakistani Instagrammer's citizenship practices. Find her research at <https://ehess.academia.edu/FatimaAziz>.