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PERCEIVED ENTITLEMENT AND OBLIGATION BETWEEN TIKTOK CREATORS AND THEIR FANS

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Introduction

In 2020 TikTok saw an influx of new users, many of whom were looking for a sense of relief in the face of overwhelming loneliness, and found some palliative comfort in the sense of intimacy entailed in engaging with the works of microcelebrities. At the same time many new users became creators on TikTok, saw incredible growth, and quickly found themselves navigating a larger scale of demands on their attention and on their affects than they'd ever experienced, or, usually, expected.

The purpose of this paper is to examine and describe the specific demands on the affective labor and attention of content creators on TikTok, the ways in which those demands tend to exceed what the creators themselves are comfortable with or capable of sustaining, and the challenges and limitations that prevent creators from setting, communicating, or maintaining boundaries around their labor, relationships, or personal and professional lives. I investigated these questions by participant observation and a series of interviews and explore answers in an ethnographic and autoethnographic framework.

Methods and Frameworks

In *Camgirls*, Theresa Senft posits the label of microcelebrities, a smaller scale and more platform-specific form of fame than traditional media. One quality that distinguishes microcelebrities from traditional celebrities is that microcelebrities' professional lives revolve around a performance of intimacy with their audiences, whereas traditional celebrities' perceived entitlement to status is defined in terms of their talents or skills in a given form of performance. (Senft 2008; Abidin 2018)

Crystal Abidin terms the relationship between microcelebrities and their audiences “perceived interconnectedness,” (2015) contrasting with Horton and Wohl’s (1956) “parasocial relationship.” Where parasocial relationships are classically one-sided, with

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the audience having no access to the performer whatsoever, in perceived interconnectedness creators engage frequently with audience members in low-stakes, casual interactions, such as liking or replying to comments, shoutouts in posts, and in-person meetups. A significant elevation of audience access is nearly ubiquitous in internet-based media forms, though specific platforms afford very different kinds of relationships. On TikTok features like duets and stitches, which allow any user to incorporate another user's work into their own videos, make it much easier to cultivate the impression of a reciprocal relationship, where an actual experience of mutuality does not tend to exist.

To explore this phenomenon of interconnectedness, I combined my ongoing participation observation with my experiences as a content creator and six semi-structured one-hour interviews with content creators. Most community among TikTok creators centers around off-app sites, such as Discord, a chatroom-style instant messaging platform, where the majority of my relationships with other TikTok creators take place. I became an administrator for several servers, spent a lot of time in private and semiprivate conversations with creators, and collaborated on a wide variety of projects with these creators, both on TikTok and elsewhere online.

I began a period of participant observation for this study beginning in January 2022. I watched these creators' content, including Friends Only videos (TikToks published so that they're only viewable by that creator's mutuals), and continued to interact with them, both on and off platform, as frequently as before.

I interviewed all six creators in June 2022, discussing their experiences of their audiences from a set of prepared questions, and bringing in things we'd talked about in the past, as well as things they'd discussed in both public and Friends Only videos. These were creators with whom I have ongoing relationships, and with whom I've collaborated on a variety of projects, both on and off platform. The interviews were conducted in Google's video conferencing platform, Meet. I recorded each interview and used a browser extension, Meet Transcript, to save the live auto-generated captions to Google Docs. Where necessary I used the video recordings to correct errors in the transcript.

I synthesized the interviews, ethnographic data from participant observation, and autoethnographic knowledge of my own experience as a professional creator on TikTok to identify the most common themes. I identified two tendencies in audience treatment of creators, connected by a common theme of entitlement to the emotional lives of those creators: externalization of the audience members' emotions, and extraction of specific affective performance from creators. Both of these tendencies consistently exceed the bounds of creators' comfort with these kinds of engagement.

Vending Machines for Intimacy

TikTok creators offer a limited, mediated intimacy with their audiences as a core aspect of their work. However, whatever limits a creator might personally prefer to hold, they will be asked by their audiences to exceed those limits, not because individual audience members are incapable of learning a boundary and respecting it, but because their

overall audience's exposure to their content is deeply fragmented, and there will always be people who simply have not yet encountered the boundary. Unlike the parasocial relationships of talk show hosts, in which the performer could be confident that the audience would receive a relatively complete continuity of messaging and was rarely exposed to audience feedback or interaction, TikTok creators cannot reasonably expect that any particular video will reach any particular segment of their audiences, and we directly experience all attempts by their audience to contact them by default. In particular, videos that center the creator's needs and may make audience members feel guilty or bad about themselves get poor engagement, and are not distributed by the platform as widely as other content.

Creators experience audience overreach in ways that vary from superficial but high-scale to specific and intimate, which I organize in terms of emotional and relational labor, respectively. I also separate some of the experiences as "horror stories," which are examples of severe overreach that damage creators' ability to trust their audiences and make creators feel unsafe in a much broader range of audience interactions.

All of the creators I spoke with described harm they'd experienced as a direct result of their audience's using them as resources in this manner, and several expressed fear for the well-being of those audience members for whom they don't fulfill this impossible role perfectly enough. Everyone I spoke with talked about types of content they used to make, but stopped because their audiences took it as an invitation to pursue unwanted intimacy. Half of them had been lied to by an audience member who was attempting to get closer to them. All of them suggested therapy as a prerequisite for content creation, although some also expressed skepticism in the ability of therapists to help with this kind of problem.

The dehumanizing experience of being treated as vending machines for intimacy is an ongoing psychological harm that, to some extent, all microcelebrities endure, for as long as they choose to keep their platforms and their careers.

References

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