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Repository Citation

Morais, D., Hemme, F., & Reyes, C. (*In press*). Tap 'Follow' #FitFam: A process of social media microcelebrity. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*. doi: 10.1080/2159676X.2021.1904441

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Tap “Follow” #FitFam: A Process of Social Media Microcelebrity

The practice of microcelebrity in social media has become part of the internet’s mainstream, and has led to the rise of influencers – trusted tastemakers in an industry niche – who are playing increasingly larger cultural and economic roles. Scholars have examined this topic since Senft introduced it in 2001, shedding light on strategies and practices of popular influencers, as well as the cultural milieu contributing to microcelebrity practices. Missing from the literature, however, is an explanation of how these popular microcelebrities reached their social media influencer status. Thus, through phenomenological interviews with 24 participants in multiple areas of the fitness sector, this study presents a general seven-step process by which these individuals became microcelebrities and leveraged their followings. Three findings are particularly noteworthy. First, a process detailing how influencers reached their status contributes to our theoretical understanding of microcelebrity by offering contextual factors and general steps experienced by influencers. Second, although microcelebrity practices are characterized by intentional self-commodification, most influencers in this study began their careers accidentally. Third, social media may be altering the traditional career paths of fitness professionals, especially as it relates to educations and credentials, which can be substituted with body capital. Future research may utilize this process as a framework to investigate specific influencer strategies over time or at certain career stages, the meaning ascribed to influencers and microcelebrity practices, and influencer motivation related to individual context. Findings also encourage continued examination of social media’s effects on the fitness industry as a whole.

Keywords: microcelebrity, influencer, social media, process, fitness,

Word count: 8,136

Spurred by the accelerated popularity of social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, among others, the practice of microcelebrity has become part of the internet's mainstream (Senft 2013), and is defined as “a self-presentation technique in which people view themselves as a public persona to be consumed by others, use strategic intimacy to appeal to followers, and regard their audience as fans,” (Marwick 2016, 333). These practices are employed most notably by ‘influencers,’ or usually young people who begin as ordinary, everyday social media users who document their everyday lives, accrue a mass of ‘followers,’ and then monetize that following through different means such as payments for endorsing products in their social media posts (Abidin 2017).

Considered a form of microcelebrity, influencers have proven effective, as the billion-dollar influencer marketing industry has impacted strategic decision making and prompted agencies to shift their processes in seeking effective implementation (Childers, Lemon, and Hoy 2019). Deploying influencers in brand campaigns has become a defining element of social media marketing (Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017), due in large part to the amount of users on social media platforms, and because of the persuasive power influencers can wield (Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget 2020). Considering that Instagram boasted 1 billion users in 2018, while YouTube logged 1.68 billion users in 2019 (Clement 2020b; 2020a), influencers will likely play an increasingly larger role in our society and economy in the future.

At present, microcelebrity practices by influencers have been studied to some extent through various lenses, including anthropology (Abidin 2016a), sociology (Djafarova and Trofimenko 2019), advertising (Lou and Yuan 2019), marketing

(Veirman et al. 2017), public relations (Freberg et al. 2011), communication (Page 2012), and media studies (Raun 2018). While our understanding of these concepts has deepened, scholars have yet to document a process by which individuals establish themselves as social media influencers while leveraging microcelebrity practices.

The current study fills that gap. Using a phenomenological approach, we interviewed 24 influencers in the fitness realm related to their experiences of establishing their social media presences. Through semi-structured interviews, we inducted a seven-step process these individuals generally followed in reaching their influencer status, thus providing one way of heeding Usher's recent call to rethink the concept of microcelebrity (2020).

Influencers interviewed in this study come from the fitness industry, which provides a context ripe for examination. The fitness industry today is characterized by simultaneous production and consumption (Millington 2016), and consumers are no longer passive recipients who seek advice by flipping through magazines or becoming a member of their closest gym. They, instead, pursue active engagement and opportunities to personalize their experience (Williams and Chinn 2010). A significant portion of this pursuit takes place online, as fitness and health consumers seek knowledge from blogs and forums (Andreasson and Johansson 2013a; 2013b), mobile technology applications (Lee and Cho 2017), and social media platforms (Basch et al. 2016; Camacho-Miñano, MacIsaac, and Rich 2019; Raggatt et al. 2018).

Fitness influencers have capitalized on this shift by establishing prominent roles in the dissemination of health and fitness advice, services, and products (Lutkenhaus, Jansz, and Bouman 2019). Additionally, the aesthetic nature of some social media

platforms, such as Instagram, allows users to display status symbols such as luxury goods, and, as this study will show, their bodies. In our current ‘attention economy,’ where something’s, or someone’s, value is often assigned based on its ability to attract ‘eyeballs’ (Marwick 2016), the fitness industry is fertile ground from which influencers can sprout (Lewallen 2016).

This study contributes to scholarship in three primary ways. First, to date, this study is the first to forward a process by which influencers use microcelebrity practices to achieve, or create, that social media status, allowing for increased understanding of microcelebrity practices in a longer-term context. Second, as will be shown, many of the influencers interviewed did not begin their social media presence with the intention to become an influencer, suggesting scholars revisit the theoretical tenets of microcelebrity practices. Third, findings demonstrate that social media has altered the entire fitness industry, specifically due to social media popularity serving as a substitute to traditional education and credentialing in the eyes of followers/consumers.

Theoretical framework and literature review

Central to our theoretical framework is the idea that individuals acting as properties or brands can be characterized as influencers or microcelebrities (Khamis, Ang, and Welling 2017; Hearn and Schoenhoff 2016). While the former was defined in the previous section, the latter are those who engage in a ‘set of practices in which audience is viewed as a fan base; popularity is maintained through ongoing fan management; and self-presentation is carefully constructed to be consumed by others’

(Marwick and boyd 2011, 140). To be an influencer, in other words, requires, microcelebrity status.

In the context of fitness, influencers have emerged in the form of people shoring up followers via their images and personalities who then monetizing their following, resulting engagements and interactions, as well as sponsored promotions of third-party products. Typically, these exchange relationships take the form of training, nutrition, and lifestyle advice, with basic information provided for free and more ‘advanced’ knowledge at a price. These individuals, ‘just like commercially branded products, [...] benefit from having a unique selling point, or a public identity that is singularly charismatic and responsive to the needs and interests of target audiences’ (Khamis, Ang, and Welling 2017, 191), an advantage they in turn attempt to further leverage by promoting other companies’ products or services.

Scholars have discussed at length what makes microcelebrities successful (Marwick 2010; Senft 2008). Senft coined the term microcelebrity in 2001 while studying ‘camgirls’ who used webcam videos of themselves to achieve some measure of fame. Marwick and boyd (2011), in another example, suggested that pursuing ‘microcelebrity involves viewing friends or followers as a fan base; acknowledging popularity as a goal; managing the fan base using a variety of affiliative techniques; and constructing an image of self that can be easily consumed by others’ (141). Those endeavouring to similarly leverage their audiences thus must carefully craft a mediated identity that is palatable to a large enough audience to be leveraged for economic gains.

Through microcelebrity practices, ‘celebrity becomes something a person does rather than something a person is, and exists as a continuum rather than a binary quality

(Marwick 2016, 334). Marwick's continuum is an important piece of the theoretical framework we use to make sense of how influencers use technology to create and foster interactions with followers. At one pole, traditional, Hollywood-level celebrities use social media to seemingly create less mediated interactions; and at the other end, microcelebrities use 'strategic intimacy' online to present and commodify themselves (333-334). Techniques between the actors at the pole positions are similar, despite the vast difference in the number of followers.

Another important difference between micro- and traditional celebrities is that microcelebrities, such as the ones studied here, are typically tailoring their self-presentations to the previously mentioned niche audiences that would not otherwise be supported by broadcast media, which require mass audiences. Marwick (2016) also observed that microcelebrities are often more willing to be vulnerable, be held accountable, and to work harder for less.

Microcelebrities also see themselves as a persona online rather than a person (Marwick 2017), "influenced by the infiltration of celebrity and branding rhetoric into day-to-day life" (Marwick 2016, 338). Using social media for audience development and outreach is also a distinguishing characteristic between celebrities and microcelebrities. The latter emerged from a shared cultural currency, and practice mediated distance from their fans, rather than remaining afar, like celebrities. The dark side of microcelebrity, then, is a kind of performativity over self (Marwick 2016).

Any work engaging with theories of microcelebrity must consider self-branding as part and parcel with neoliberalism—specifically that piece that mandates one pull themselves up by their own bootstraps to address economic inequality rather than

examining a system that steals said boots and punishes collective action (e.g., labor unions). This neoliberal maneuver, or commodification of self, is essential to all forms of celebrity. As Senft (2013) asserted, “stars don’t accumulate capital because they get attention; they accumulate capital because they have managed to turn themselves from citizens to corporations” (p. 5).

The push to incorporate the self relates to the assertion that the currency of the branded self is becoming more compulsory for many seemingly empowered, often further marginalized individuals (Gamson 2011). Social media, both in this study, and in general, have escalated the importance of self-branding despite the fact that the branding and attention-seeking practices predate the technology (Khamis, Ang, and Welling 2017).

Strategies

Scholars have also examined the strategies employed via microcelebrity practices. A fundamental aspect of these practices is the perception of authenticity, characterized by viewers feeling accessibility to, and intimacy with, the microcelebrity, especially via interactions with fans and looks into their life offline (Marwick 2015). More recent literature, however, challenges the authenticity forwarded by these influencers (Jerslev 2016; Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Guidry Moulard 2020), and demonstrates that microcelebrities may exaggerate characteristics of, or their entire, persona (Song 2018).

Or, as in the context of transgender video blogging, microcelebrities may view aspects of authenticity, such as intimacy, as ‘affective labour’ (Raun, 2018). Fulfilling the expectations of viewers, these microcelebrities also embraced self-commodification more than documented previously. Abidin (2017) termed the phrase ‘calibrated amateurism,’ in

her study of family influencers, to describe ‘crafting contrived authenticity,’ displayed by many of her subjects.

Similar studies, such as Abidin’s ethnographic analysis of ‘selfies’ by influencers in Singapore (2016a), and Lewis’s examination of political and ideological influencers on YouTube (Lewis 2020), further demonstrate the cultural significance, as well as the labour, often sexualized (Drenten, Gurrieri, and Tyler 2020), inherent within these practices. Together, the literature supports the self-branded (Khamis, Ang, and Welling 2017), or presentational nature (Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Guidry Moulard 2020), of these practices, yet no study contextualizes them in the achievement of ‘influencer’ status.

Social media and fitness industry

Research aimed at understanding social media in the area of fitness and exercise has shown that a significant portion of fitness and health consumers have begun to seek knowledge from blogs and forums (Andreasson and Johansson 2013a, 2013b), and social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube (Basch et al. 2016; Camacho-Miñano, MacIsaac, and Rich 2019; Raggatt et al. 2018).

Scholarship on social media in the fitness industry is primarily sociological or psychological in nature. Most is concerned with how the content of social media posts relate to ideas of body image, self-esteem, behaviour, and/or gender in those consuming the content (Andreasson and Johansson 2013a; Baker and Walsh 2018; Camacho-Miñano, MacIsaac, and Rich 2019; Deighton-Smith and Bell 2018). Some studies have examined how organisations interact with clientele via social media (Achen 2018; Kang

et al. 2019; Williams and Wright 2016) and how consumers are seeking health information through social media (Basch et al. 2016; Raggatt et al. 2018). The sole study related to current social media fitness personalities examined the use of Twitter by a single celebrity fitness trainer, and found that interaction, organic fandom, and functional fandom were positively associated with brand loyalty (Williams, Wright, & Blaszka, 2017). No studies were found that investigate the perspective of the producer of fitness content on social media.

Methodology

To study the concept of microcelebrity practices, we employed an interpretive phenomenological approach. Expressed simply, phenomenology ‘is the study of human experience and of the ways things present themselves to us in and through such experience’ (Sokolowski 2000, 2). Interpretive phenomenology, however, is grounded in the epistemological belief that the researcher and the participants cannot divorce themselves from their respective understandings and truths, based on their respective backgrounds, and thus, the researcher and the participant “cogenerate” an understanding of the phenomenon under examination (Wojnar and Swanson, 2007).

Put another way, “one cannot understand the process of validating knowledge as one of comparing theoretical assertions against objectively represented events: The verification of social knowledge must occur within an interexperiential space” (Mascolo and Kallio 2020, 2; Husserl 1970). This intersubjective framework provides an alternative to objectivist epistemology, and supports the production of rigorous knowledge (Mascolo 2017).

Personal knowledge is therefore useful and necessary in this approach, as the purpose is to understand the phenomena in context (Wojnar and Swanson 2007). The concept of researcher as instrument (Tufford and Newman 2012), then, was apparent throughout the entire qualitative research process. Following the procedure of Hemme et al. (2017), we used our knowledge and experience to help “cogenerate” an understanding of the relayed experience. We prioritized self-awareness to the degree that it allowed participants to guide interviews and researchers to remain aware of seemingly insignificant or off-topic details, while simultaneously reducing projection of our own narratives onto their experiences. Finally, the tenets of interpretive phenomenology call for gathering data from other relevant sources, which researchers heeded, in order to deepen the richness of participant experience interpretations (Wojnar and Swanson 2007).

Data collection and analysis

We followed the interpretive phenomenological process detailed by Patterson and Williams (2002), and the data coding guidelines laid out by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2013). Interviewing is one of the recognized techniques within this tradition used to understand shared meanings and experiences within a given group, in this case influencers. The majority of our semi-structured interview questions (see appendix A) sought to uncover the participants lived experiences following Lindlof and Taylor (2011): ‘For phenomenologists, the primary *scientific* problem is how things get to be that way: *how* the life world acquires its natural quality’ (37).

Because we desired a deep understanding of the social media microcelebrity

process in this study, we used a combination of purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling (Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim 2016; Tongco 2007). Specifically, we purposively sought individuals who earned revenue through their association with some element of the fitness industry via social media. At the same time, many participants were recruited through individuals with whom researchers already had established relationships (i.e. convenience). Finally, we asked interviewees to connect us with other potential participants.

One researcher conducted 21 semi-structured interviews with 24 influencers (four participants were part of one company and interviewed together). Considering recent critiques of the concept of ‘saturation’ (Braun and Clarke 2019), a combination of factors coalesced in settling on this sample size. First, Creswell (2014) observed that the typical phenomenological study involves a range of 3 – 10 participants in the sample (189). We wanted to ensure an above average size, according to Creswell, in an effort to address what Geertz (1973) called the paradox of ‘blank descriptivism or vacant generality,’ of too much detail to be useful or too much utility to be grounded in lived experience (313). Second, we sought data from influencers with various demographic profiles and from various fitness niches. The sample size grew to include these factors. Finally, though it has been noted that interpretation can never stop providing new meanings (Braun and Clarke 2019), we stopped data collection once *we* could no longer interpret new plausible meanings from new interviews (Charmaz 2006).

Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, and all were conducted via video chat, save for two, which occurred over the phone. The audio portion of all interviews was digitally recorded. Participants included 11 women and 13 men. In order to provide

robust data, participants included general health and wellness coaches, physique coaches, strength coaches, a Ninja Warrior participant, a yogi, a clothing manufacturer, and physical therapists, among others. Their occupational knowledge combined with their Instagram marketing skills produced relevant, thick descriptions following Geertz. We concur that, ‘the best informants are socially savvy actors’ (Lindlof and Taylor 2011, 178). For more details about the participants/informants, please see appendix B.

When recruiting participants, we assessed their ‘success’ via the number of their Instagram followers. The lowest number of followers by any influencer at the time was roughly 10,000, while the highest number approached 500,000. The majority of participants, or their company, had between approximately 25,000 and 100,000 followers. Upon completion of each interview, researchers asked the participant(s) how much revenue they earned in the last year and/or what their predicted revenue was for 2018, the year in which they were interviewed. The results are provided in Table 1 in order to buttress the idea of ‘success’.

Before transcribing the first interview, we decided on a two-stage coding system (Miles et al. 2013). First cycle coding was used to assign initial codes to detect reoccurring patterns. We accomplished this by reading the transcript to familiarize ourselves with it. We then coded the interview based on meaning units, or ‘chunks’ of data (Miles et al. 2013, 71), which ranged from a clause within a sentence to a few sentences (Patterson and Williams 2002). We organized the chunks by typing each one as an independent entry in a Microsoft Excel workbook. We used descriptive coding, in vivo coding (using words from the participant’s language), process coding, emotion coding, and values coding, among others (Miles et al. 2013).

The second cycle of coding occurred by clustering similar first cycle codes together which yielded themes developed in concert with the literature review, self-reflection, and the research questions. Second cycle categories evolved as we interpreted and categorized more chunks. After second cycle coding for each interview, we composed a narrative that elaborated on the code. The prosaic representation the narrative provided was essential ‘to communicate to readers how the social action we witnessed and synthesized unfolded and flowed through time’ (Miles et al. 2013, 91).

Initially, first and second cycle coding stages were completed for the same 20% of the transcripts by two authors. After comparing codes and narratives, critiquing them, and consulting with one another in order to improve the reliability of analysis (Leung 2015), one researcher completed the coding process for the remainder of the interviews.

As we built our understanding of these microcelebrities, we began to notice patterns across their experiences (nomothetic analysis), which we integrated into our findings. We made sure to take note of ambiguities or contradictions within the data in order to investigate them more fully. The concept of the hermeneutic circle of understanding also manifested via this step. In the end, our method integrated guidelines specified by Patterson and Williams (2002) and provided a systematic, replicable process that resulted in a deep understanding of the experience of the interviewed influencers.

Findings

The general process by which individuals have used microcelebrity practices in the fitness industry to become influencers consists of seven steps. The first step in this process, 1) accidental influencing, often involves a rolling start, as many participants

were already involved in their microcelebrity process far before realizing it. The second step is 2) accruing credibility within their niche. The third step is 3) realizing their persona – the phase in which social media users begin their turn to capitalize on that image. After participants understood how their followers perceive them, many began 4) cultivating a community. The next step is leveraging their popularity by 5) collaborating with other microcelebrities, companies, or organisations in the industry. In order to maximize their return, influencers 6) diversify their revenue streams through a myriad of products and services. Finally, 7) cyclical trial and error is the last step in this process, which consists of an iterative process of combining previous steps as they navigate the social media space.

Stage 1: Accidental influencing

All but three influencers stumbled upon their career unintentionally. For many, this first stage included documenting their own fitness journey until others began to notice their success and solicited advice. For instance, Callum explained that although he now has over 300,000 followers and earns over \$200,000 per year, achieving social media fame was never his intent. He said:

And the whole time...I wanted to share my progress so I could always look back and I could see if I made mistakes, or what worked and what didn't work. Other people started following. It wasn't just me. And then, people were asking me to help them...But just through sharing my journey, I was able to help a lot of people, and then people started asking me to help them in a more one-on-one type scenario, like coaching or setting up their macros.

Capitalizing on the momentum of what was originally a recreational endeavour, Callum was able quit his sales job, start his own business, and focus on his social media

following full-time.

Similarly, Bailey ‘had Instagram for years, but it was just always used as a personal scrapbook...just a way to share my life. And then the first time that Ninja Warrior aired me and did a story on me, it skyrocketed my following...’ Then she asked herself, ‘Well, is this going to become something that I can monetize?’

Cindy also shared that she initially wrote a blog post on Tumblr about her experience in the Marine Corps Reserves, which ‘caught some traction’ in the form of being asked questions about the military by other females. She said that following followed her to Tumblr, where she ‘started doing the fitness piece, like low-calorie recipes’ and ‘a few transformation pictures which also did well then.’ She eventually started an Instagram account sometime between 2012 and 2013, and her Tumblr popularity followed her to Instagram, where she made the choice to begin monetizing her following.

Many accidental influencers started with intentions to help others, and those who began with business intentions exhibited similar altruistic attitudes. Zane’s explanation of his vision statement explicitly elucidated this aspect of his business: ‘...loving, caring, patient, husband, son and brother, follower of Christ, improving the worlds of athletic performance, injury prevention and rehab...I just wanted to be a good physical therapist for the people in front of me.’ Since writing his vision, Zane said that his business has fulfilled his vision ‘without [him] even really planning on it.’ Alex’s thoughts reflected a similar attitude about her online fitness coaching, as a major motivation of her business is to serve as a rebuttal to ‘a lot of BS and bad information’ that dominate fitness discourse aimed at women. Similarly, Laura said she wanted to ‘take control and provide [nutrition

and diet] content' to others.

Whether it was posting health and fitness information, connecting with others to stay motivated on their own journeys, or using social media as a public diary, many participants had no desire to enter the fitness industry as influencers looking to commodify themselves, or as business people seeking profits. Like 'accidental entrepreneurs' described in entrepreneur literature, the participants in this study had 'personal experience with a product or service and [derived] benefit through use in addition to financial benefit from commercialization' (Shah and Tripsas 2007, 124).

Stage 2: Credibility accrual

While still only using their account for personal reasons, many influencers realized the heightened perception of credibility that others perceived in them. As Callum explained, he experienced a large boost in Instagram followers after posting an image that juxtaposed his physique at two contrasting levels of body fat:

I posted a meme where I was off-season versus on-season, and it was just like they're identical pictures, but one I was shredded to the bone a week out before a contest. And it went crazy viral. At that point, I had 20,000 followers and I got 15,000 likes in just a few hours. I never had a post go crazy like that. And then, if you looked at the post that you're tagged in, the entire page was that meme because everybody was sharing it. And I gained 5,000 followers in literally a day. And then, from there, my Instagram just...I don't know. It's like I hacked the matrix.

Katy's experience further demonstrates the significance of aesthetics in accruing credibility via social capital. Due to the response it attracted for herself and the photographer, at the time of the interview, she had only paid for one photo shoot. Subsequent shoots were free due to the social media publicity her images garnered for photographers. She said, '...it went from like...I compete, you know the basics, to like

“holy cow look what [Katy’s] posting”...I mean I posted some bold stuff, but...I never really posted anything like in a bikini before, so that was like you know, that was different.’ Katy explained that despite some comments due to the raciness of her photos, it ‘really helped my career so it was money well spent.’

Aesthetics garner credibility for influencers in other ways as well. As the yogi influencer in this study explained, in promoting acceptance, she acknowledges on social media her self-described ‘fat’ and ‘black’ body as not aligning with prominent, curated images of yoga bodies, thereby garnering followers. Sherman, on the other hand, said that in the beginning, ‘you’re getting clients mainly off of your own look. Like “Hey I competed, I look good.” I mean it takes time, it’s like a snowball, building up bigger and bigger. But in the beginning, you know, I didn’t have anything and I didn’t have any degrees.’

Eventually, Sherman began to rely on the body capital of his clients in order to increase his own social capital, and, thus, clientele. After sharing that by 2016 he had worked with approximately 10,000 clients, he said:

no client has ever asked me about any degree ever. Nobody cares. They care about, ‘Holy shit look at that transformation. I feel like the gal or guy on the left and I want to look like the gal or guy on the right,’ or ‘I’m a competitor and holy shit. Everyone he posts is peeled, I need to get on that wagon,’ or whatever.

By showcasing his clients’ physique changes, Sherman is able to leverage their body capital in a way that increases his social capital.

This view aligns with comments made by Karl, a strength sport coach who created a popular strength sport social media movement. He speculated that people will trust you ‘...if you can put out stuff proving that you’re already helpful; they give you these tips or made you think about something a certain way,’ or when people can sample the coach’s

style. Individual assessments of the coach's abilities in the form of education, experience, practical application, and interpersonal relations can then be made, Karl explained.

Conversely, some interviewees noted that credentials convey the message that a fitness professional '[knows] what they are doing.' Alex said that her education has 'helped tremendously' because it 'sets [her] apart,' for example. She explained, 'Most of our clients find us on Instagram, through my Instagram. And they'll see my posts, and they'll be intrigued that way. And then they'll find out, "Oh she literally went to school for this. She has all the credentials.'" So, I kind of think it works in that way.'

Step 3: Realizing persona

In most cases, we did not detect a specific decision or plan that led to the 'launch' of influencer personalities. Rather, their 'launch' resembled a realization of their perceived, popular image, and were often accidental or unintended when they started. Along with this recognition of their image came a cautious curation of their brand and online persona.

Benson, for example, explained that he began taking his shirt off in his Instagram posts as a joke, after being prodded by friends. After that sole change, he said, 'my following started to grow pretty rapidly to the point where I was at 10,000 followers in a couple months.' By the summer of 2017, his following reached close to 50,000 by primarily displaying his extremely muscular and lean physique. Benson realized he 'could get to 100,000 pretty easily, and then maybe [he] could start making some real money...' He began building on his own self-image with hashtags like #beastmode, posting timing, and creating Youtube videos with titles that appealed to those with a hegemonically masculine mindset.

Larry's online activities, conversely, predate contemporary social media. Starting 'completely by accident' by interacting with others on internet message boards, Larry became a recognized personality due to his weight training expertise and his presence, and others began asking him for coaching. This experience led him to earn a PhD in an exercise related field, bolstering his image. Once he entered the contemporary social media realm, however, Larry realized the significance of that persona. He said, 'in just a couple of years of me kinda dabbling in some other stuff, it was kind of like my consumer didn't know what I was doing...if you try to do too many, it gets difficult to sell it to people because they go, "Wait a minute. No, you're this."'

Finally, Jamie shared that her present career of bringing the practice of yoga to others did not begin until her father learned that *People* magazine featured her. Upon hearing of her popularity in this traditional publication, Jamie's father began taking her online presence seriously, and offered to pay for her yoga training. Although she did not begin the business side of her career then, she was aware of popular 'yoga unicorn angels' where they're like, "Oh, my God. Namaste. I'm perfect and I'm always calm and happy and nice and Zen." In spreading her more authentic form of yoga, she continued a more 'real and truthful' image rather than 'this bullshit, mass-produced, completely soulless thing that is created to sell leggings and retreats.'

Our interviews suggest that participants were unintentionally building their image through their personal characteristics – by simply being themselves. Benson's hegemonically masculine physique, Larry's penchant for discussing the science behind weight training, and Jamie's non-conventional image and perspective as an admittedly overweight, black, LGBTQ+ woman were all the foundations upon which these

individuals eventually promoted their image after realizing that others perceived their image as credible, or influential; in other words, their intentional commodification of self (Khamis, Ang, and Welling 2017).

Step 4: Cultivating community

Building on their growing popularity, the next step in this process is fostering community connection with and among their followers. George explained, ‘my stuff gets shared on Reddit,’ which is an online conglomeration of subcommunities. ‘When I see that it gets shared,’ he continued, ‘I’ll go interact with people. If someone disagrees very forcefully with what I’m saying, instead of firing back and owning them, I treat them like a person...“Let’s talk about this like humans.”’

While George meets his community where it is, Cheryl explained that she invites hers closer. ‘Polling them is one of the most rewarding things, too,’ she said. ‘...you actually get to see what they care about...I get to gauge who’s also most interactive with my account. When more [apparel] questions come in, I’m like...I don’t need to promote coaching right now.’ By presenting opportunities for follower feedback, Cheryl is able to both engage with her followers, and tailor the content she shares in order to stay on their radar.

Many of the influencers said that a powerful component of their business is the private, membership-based forum they created. Dillon, of Braingain Broadcasting, explained that their group has over 3,000 members, who are brought together by the idea of ‘personal growth.’ Members are encouraged to ‘call out’ Braingain Broadcasting if they disagree with what was said on their podcast. In addition, identification among

group members is so high that Braingain Broadcasting simply posts an image to their Instagram account to alert the community that they are fielding questions for their podcast, thus demonstrating the strength of their communal bonds.

Finally, inherent in these excerpts is the diversification of platforms. Most of the influencers experimented with multiple social media platforms in order to find the appropriate ‘marketing mix’ for connecting with the most followers and growing their community. Participants used Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and podcasts, as indicated by Karl:

...different audiences on different platforms are completely different...YouTube audience is YouTube audience... It's one thing why I started putting the podcasts out as podcasts...Some people are like, ‘No, I like video.’ Some people are like, ‘I like audio’...Some people like it written...People process information differently. If you really want to go into it and do it, you have to cover all the mediums.

George, from the beginning of this section, qualified this approach by tailoring platforms to his strengths, versus tailoring his output to the market. Seeing himself as a writer, George prefers his blog and Facebook because of his ability to share his thoughts in a written, long-form medium.

Step 5: Collaboration

While collaboration is listed after the cultivation of brand community, these two steps often occurred simultaneously in this process. Albeit, once participants secured a general understanding of their image, they were able to identify alignment with other fitness personalities and companies. Collaboration allowed microcelebrities to leverage the communities discussed in the previous section, as Ernest shared:

I had an athlete named [Mark Logun]...I coached him in 2011, and then all the way through 2013. He would have me periodically on his channel, which at the

time I think had over 100,000 subscribers...So that blew us up hugely. We had a 300-person waiting list at a certain point...

These partnerships can manifest in the form of writing e-books together, featuring others on podcasts, using the services of another social media personality or company for their own training or health pursuits, and more. As Layla explained, ‘the people who I work with are all companies that I believe in...Number one, whatever they're selling is something that I'm going to use or believe in...You have to really buckle in on okay, does this fit with my mission statement and my brand?’

Those interviewed placed much value on collaboration, in part because it seems many share George’s attitude related to competition. He said, ‘If someone's putting out good information and I like what they're saying, I'll share it and shoot them a message... “Hey, this is great. Good stuff”...And if someone's putting up bad information and I don't like what they're saying, I just keep my mouth shut.’ Thus, a physique coach may work with a bikini company, or a physical therapist may collaborate with a popular athlete; the combinations abound.

Step 6: Diversification of revenue streams

Buoyed by their popularity, the influencers in our study sought to diversify their revenues and maximize means to reach their followers. This undertaking became more pronounced after they secured a relatively stable understanding of their market/followers/community. The opportunities for new revenue streams also increased for influencers as they cycled through steps four and five: cultivating community and collaboration.

As Deborah shared, social media affords much diversification. She runs her DebbyFit Training LLC, from which she offers ‘fit guides,’ ‘online digital PDF guides,’ and ‘online coaching.’ Deborah also earns revenue through ‘social media collaborations, certain posts, certain products,’ and paid advertisements. Finally, BodyBuilding.com pays her a monthly commission, a sponsored athlete salary, and an hourly wage when she works expos.

Benson’s experience is similar. He earns revenue passively via commissions from sponsors, affiliate links, eBooks he sells through a long-standing fitness website, and an online strength training course. His active revenue streams include coaching, speaking engagements and in-person consultations, and collaborations with other social media entities.

While these two examples are presented as direct and simple, those interviewed shared an almost endless combination of revenue producing strategies. Most combinations became more complex as influencer popularity grew, while a small number of influencers strived to maintain a simple formula for cash flow. Other factors affecting these combinations include the timing of posts, collaborating with certain individuals and/or organisations, using social media features such as ‘stories,’ and more. In addition, product offerings, the persona conveyed, and the types of communities created are all based on the context and processes of each individual. This array of combinations is robust due in large part to the influencers’ non-traditional idea of ‘competition’ as well.

Step 7: Cycling trial and error

Trial and error was a major aspect of the experience of many influencers. While it is not a distinct step, per se, this iterative tinkering with existing modes of engagement, content, and platforms underpinned the experience of most influencers after they made the decision to commodify their followings.

Clara, who leveraged her popularity as a former professional wrestler in starting her online fitness clothing and apparel company, for example, noted her ‘oh shit method.’ ‘You get thrown into the fire and you literally have no choice but to either find a way to succeed or you just don’t...I don’t have any knowledge running a company or anything like that, but I’m gonna figure it out as I go,’ she shared. Clara’s process boiled down to trying strategies and sticking with what worked, resulting in over four hundred thousand people following Clara’s company on Instagram, and self-reported earnings in the millions.

Trial and error was also described by the members of Braingain Broadcasting as a vital component of their process:

...we would experiment with ways to get our show out there, and so, you know, Instagram, we would have people post for us and stuff like that. We didn’t really get a return, and I don’t remember when this happened. This was early on. I got interviewed on a podcast...I got on that podcast, and we saw an immediate surge of exposure. Downloads all of a sudden went up significantly from that. And then we started to piece together, ‘Oh, that’s gotta be the best way for us to grow our podcast. We gotta stay on the same platform.’

After observing the same phenomenon once more, they decided, ‘we need to work with other podcasters because people— they don’t like to leave a medium...And that was a big strategy for us for a long time.’

Benson’s trial and error strategy began immediately after his decision to ‘start making some real money off this.’ He initially joined ‘a couple online groups that talk

about how to grow your Instagram following,’ but because he ‘didn’t get a single damn thing from that,’ he began paying attention to trends and elements that coincided with successful posts. Eventually his trial and error process became somewhat intuitive, as he explained, ‘when you post a lot, you just know the trends naturally without even maybe looking for them.’ Benson explained that he follows this model until his strategy stops working, and then he assesses and adjusts.

Few influencers mentioned an explicit end-goal or exit strategy. As Layla stated, ‘...you’ve got a good few years of what you’re doing right now, but what the hell are you doing afterwards? So, you have to build up a brand and build up a message that is going to be something that you can sustain and change through time with however that comes up.’ Thus, this last stage is a cyclical replication and revision of all the previous steps identified in the microcelebrity process.

Discussion

This study contributes to microcelebrity and influencer scholarship, as well as digital fitness scholarship, in multiple ways. First, it provides a framework that may help situate microcelebrity practices over the course of an influencer’s career, or in certain stages of their microcelebrity process. For instance, certain stages may rely more on sexualized labour (Drenten, Gurrieri, and Tyler 2020), especially in social media fitness realms, where sexualisation is ripe (Wellman 2020) while others rely more on ‘calibrated amateurism’ (Abidin 2017). Or, perhaps influencers sequence or emphasize these specific practices based on where they are in their process, the level of their popularity, or social, political, or economic factors. In addition, combining this process perspective with

examinations of influencer communication strategy (Enke and Borchers 2019), for instance, may lead to more comprehensive analyses of fitness influencers being ‘raw’ or ‘authentic,’ including the timing and/or sequencing of such practices, which could further current scholarship on such discourse (Reade 2020). In sum, this process opens the door for novel theoretical contributions related to microcelebrity literature.

The second primary microcelebrity-related contribution this study offers relates to the fundamental assumption that microcelebrity practices are used to intentionally present personas or seek a certain perception (Marwick 2016; Song 2018; Abidin 2016b; Senft 2013). That almost all participants in the current study began their online presence without the intention of being a microcelebrity calls for a re-examination of this assertion.

As demonstrated by this study, and supported by social media fitness literature, to categorize similarly all microcelebrities undermines the concept itself by not differentiating between those who began their online presence with microcelebrity intentions and those who didn't. For instance, Hockin-Boyers, Pope, and Jamie (2021) found that the use of transformation (i.e. before/after) photos on Instagram are integral to the process and practice of recovering from eating disorders among women who use weight training as a tool in their overall recovery. To claim that influencers who may have started their journey this way only in order to seek a certain outward persona, rather than to heal an inward person, is flawed. Furthermore, Toll and Norman (2021), in their analysis of women's body capital on Instagram, asserted ‘that research about Instagram must understand the complexity of relations within which users are both situated and must navigate,’ and that ‘social media is a space for self-expression that is constrained by rules and regulations’ (p. 74). Considering these arguments, a framework in the form of

the process provided by the current study may help address their description of Instagram ‘as a site of multiplicity, where cultural practice, meaning and embodiment are interwoven in a complex and evolving meshwork’ (p. 74).

As a corollary, parsing out such elements may provide a more robust theoretical understanding of microcelebrity. By acknowledging that other factors can influence a person’s decision to act on commodifying their image, the significance of individual or cultural contributors may change, potentially altering the meaning of microcelebrity as a concept, but certainly contributing to our understanding, thus heeding Usher’s (2020) call for a re-examination of the concept.

In terms of social media and fitness, this study, first, demonstrates the importance of community in the microcelebrity process. Historically, as well as in the contemporary offline context, this web of connections has played a significant role in the success of fitness brands and entrepreneurs (Hemme et al. 2017; Morais, 2015). While this study presents the use of community primarily as a mechanism for, ultimately, revenue generation, its implications can be much broader. For example, social media can be a health-related learning resource, especially among youth. Studies have shown that younger users value both the health information found in social media fitness spaces, as well as the relationships forged there (Lupton 2020), which can result in feelings of post-feminist empowerment among young women (Goodyear and Quennerstedt 2019; Camacho-Miñano, MacIsaac, and Rich 2019).

While some may consider the position that influencers hold as helpful in creating communities that inform and empower, others may feel differently for a few reasons.

First, aesthetically focused social media platforms such as Instagram (Abidin 2016a) can lead to significant accrual of credibility and/or popularity, especially when those aesthetics align with Western hegemonic ideals of masculinity and femininity (Andreasson and Johansson 2013a; 2013b), and are perhaps even sexualized (Drenten, Gurrieri, and Tyler 2020). These findings contrast with the post-feminist empowerment claims found in aforementioned literature, thus supporting Rich (2018), who asserted about digital health technologies: “while promising empowerment and democratization through individual self-care, these pedagogies fail to account for diversity among women, as different social, cultural, and political contexts, which come to limit opportunities to achieve good health” (p. 219). Considering the mental health concerns related to the use of social media (Bettmann et al. 2020), this assertion seems warranted.

Second, as this study demonstrates, social media affordances may be changing the traditional path to becoming a fitness professional. The role of bodily capital, or the social value that is generated from one’s appearance, attractiveness, and/or physical ability, is vital in growing a following in offline fitness realms, as it serves as an important competency of offline fitness professionals in terms of embodying knowledge, expertise, and authority in their field (Edmonds 2018; Harvey, Vachhani, and Williams 2014). Findings in the current study suggest that social media platforms, Instagram especially, allow for an exponential exacerbation of this body capital concept, leading to influencer body capital, or the body capital of clients, to take the place of credibility, in the minds of consumers, in the form of education, licensing, and/or certification. (De Lyon and Cushion 2013;).

Subsequently, instead of 1) attending a college and/or earning a certification, 2) working in a fitness facility, 3) establishing their business by filing legal documents, and 4) attempting to cull clients (Bower 2008; Hemme et al. 2017), those with social media savvy can jump straight to culling clients while they continue their microcelebrity pursuits, save for professionals such as physical therapists who are required to be credentialed (Furze et al. 2016). This finding is not isolated to the online context, however.

Scholarship demonstrates that customer-service related factors have been valued more than education (Palazzi Junior and Cardoso 2017), in traditional, offline fitness realms, and marketing efforts have historically played significant roles for fitness personalities (Morais 2013; Pollack and Todd 2017). Nevertheless, that consumers may consider bodily capital and/or reputation as substitutes, or even preferable, to credentials, calls for more investigations of embodied knowledge in the industry (Parviainen 2018), specifically in the digital realms of social media, or more recently branded fitness documentaries (McCarthy 2021). Altogether, this finding contrasts with recommendations in academic literature that fitness professionals should hold traditional education credentials (De Lyon and Cushion 2013; De Lyon, Neville, and Armour 2017), and calls into question the direction of public health in coming years, including the utility and effectiveness of traditional credentials.

Finally, this study suggests that social media fitness influencers conceptualize their market differently than offline fitness professionals. Whereas specific geographic locations in the form of gyms, studios, and the like can be territorialized (Hemme et al.

2017), thus embodying a scarcity approach to clients and potential business, participants in this study invited collaborations and working with other online personalities. This finding supports Hou's (2019) assertion that a zero-sum approach to competition may not pervade the social media space, thereby reflecting the concept of abundance as opposed to scarcity.

Conclusion

Microcelebrity practices saturate social media, resulting from a coalescence of cultural, economic, political, and technological factors (Marwick 2016; Senft 2013). Examinations of individuals successfully applying these practices offer insight into their strategies of displaying authenticity, accessibility, and intimacy, all with the goal of accruing and commodifying a following (Jerslev 2016; Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Guidry Moulard 2020; Aziz 2018; Raun 2018). Such research, however, provides a snapshot of strategies when the microcelebrities are at their most popular, and does so from an outside perspective. The current study extends our understanding by forwarding a general seven-step process by which 24 popular fitness influencers reached their current status, starting at the inception of their social media presence, and informed by their own experience.

While it is easy to assume that an aspiring influencer might be able to apply this process, resulting in their own social media fame, all of the participants in this study were early adopters of social media and microcelebrity practices. Considering that social media influencing has become part of the mainstream (Senft 2013), as well as algorithmic changes to social media platforms and the way they present content, the process

forwarded in this study may not be effective, or even an accurate depiction of newer influencers' experiences.

Notwithstanding, this process provides a better idea of how individuals in this study rose to social media prominence, thus providing a framework through which further research might refine our understanding of microcelebrity practices. Analysis of content related to elements such as post timing, sequencing, substance, and rhetoric offer potential avenues for this continued research, as does examination of influencers in other industry contexts. Previous scholars have demonstrated what popular social media personalities do, the context that sprung their growth, and the resulting effects. This study, a step in understanding how influencers reached their status, offers a perspective that may ultimately help inform all work related to microcelebrity practices, and those who gain popularity through their use.

Finally, while many online fitness personalities have positioned themselves to be leaders in disseminating health and fitness information, as well as cultural ideals relating to gender and the body, this study accords with previous literature demonstrating the layered, complex social media environment that is often not as democratic, empowering, and neoliberal as many hope, and some scholars have argued. Furthermore, affordances offered by social media allow for an unregulated space in which the way one's body looks may outweigh the importance of their formal education and credentials. Such a phenomenon calls into question the future direction of public health, as well as the current value of traditional education and credentialing paths. As most have experienced, social media continues to alter industries, lifestyles, and worldviews. The health and

fitness world is no exception, and continues to contribute to broader understandings of the human experience, individually as well as collectively.

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