Chapter 3

musical.ly and Microcelebrity Among Girls

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Abstract

This chapter investigates the dynamics of teenage girls' musical.ly productions in relation to microcelebrity inspirations and (non)aspirations, and centrally details the mixed methodologies involved in the research process. The analysis focuses on the flow of the musical.ly app as evidenced through the walk-through method and young girls' engagements with the platform as solicited through personal observations and two small focus group discussions.

Keywords: musical.ly; girls; walk-through method; microcelebrity

Introduction

My interest in musical.ly begins with a personal observation. Holding onto a mobile phone on the one hand and performing hand signs with the other, while acting and lip-syncing a trending popular song, my thirteen-year-old daughter introduced me to the social network musical.ly while I drove her back home from school in March 2016. "In the name of love" was the song, and while the hand signs were created spontaneously in 15-second blocks, the recording session was repeated over and over until perfection was achieved. My daughter moved the mobile phone in circular movements, sometimes using close-ups, other times with distance shots, or with immediate stops to keep up with the rhythm of the song. When I realized that this was a new platform, as a parent, privacy became my primary concern. We have always discussed her social media habits and use, how she connects with her friends, and the type of content that she shares. I queried my daughter and learned that she had a private profile and did not want to post any of her videos publicly. She said she was "just practicing" when she made her musical.ly videos. Being exposed to these practice sessions with friends, I channeled my interest as a parent into a formal feminist linguistics research project about young girls' practices through the site and how the musical.ly platform encourages microcelebrity aspirations for young users.

musical.ly is a popular app among tweens and teenagers that enables users to create public or private profiles and to share music videos where other "musers" lip-sync. In the context of musical.ly, "musers" produce and share videos, and inspire others to produce similar videos of the same song, using the same hand gestures or creating new performances. musical.ly pitches itself as a "Global Video Community" and the app's objective is stated on the home page as "make awesome videos with your favorite songs." Alex Zhu and Luyu Yang created the app in Shanghai in October 2014. musical.ly version 6.0, released in August 2017, aims to increase the number of users by including "a new section that shows similar videos you may like to watch, and new options for user profile pages, including the ability to post a video instead of a photo" (Robehmed, 2017).

This research project investigates how teenage girls use musical.ly in their online and offline lives. The project is driven by two main research questions: Firstly, what features and practices are available through the musical.ly platform, and how do they create a culture of microcelebrity practice for young girls? Secondly, how do teenage girls use musical.ly in their everyday lives to mediate social interactions with their peers? In order to analyze dynamism of the interactions on and around musical.ly, I first investigated the dynamics of musical.ly as an app. I collected data through focus group interviews with three teenage girls in relation to their use of the musical.ly app, documented field notes via personal observations of my daughter's use of the app and our conversations about the app, and conducted a walk-through of the app. The focus group interviews were conducted with the parental and personal consent of the participant girls. Pseudonyms are used for the informants and the non-microcelebrity musers they have mentioned. The data were collected by the first author and later synthesized, coded, analyzed, and written up in collaboration with the second and third author. As such, matters of personal observation are conveyed in the first person throughout this chapter.

Dynamics of Selfie Videos on musical.ly

musical.ly is especially popular among tweens and young teenagers. The app allows its users to create and post videos of 15–20 seconds and publish livestream videos. On its website, musical.ly self-defines as:

> a social media platform for creating and sharing short videos. Every day, millions of people around the world use musical.ly as an outlet for creative expression and communication with friends. musical.ly is a platform that connects individuals to a vibrant and highly-engaged community of content creators. (musical.ly, 2017a)

The emphasis is on creative expression and connecting with friends – "Live with passion, live musical.ly" is the platform's motto. The average age of musers is between 13 and 21 years old, and 70% of musers are female. Forty-nine percent of musical.ly usage is in the United States, and the app is used in 19 countries (Spangler, 2017).

musical.ly provides its users with the lists of popular songs from which they can choose shorter sections and use for their lip-syncs. Selfies are the primary component of the videos as the muser uses the mobile camera on one hand to record her face and the other hand to embellish her lip-syncing performance. musical.ly selfies can be perceived as a form of mobile witnessing that provides hints about one's identity in different contexts (Koliska & Roberts, 2015). For instance, the backdrop and setting of the videos are public identity–marking domains such as a school, a classroom, or the street, but can also be situated in traditionally private spaces such as the home or bedroom. As a new media technology with features that facilitate feelings of accessibility and connectedness, musical.ly's selfie videos can provide a backstage (Goffman, 1959) that gives users a sense of intimacy. Such disclosure into the private realm of musers' homes brings to the viewer a sense of "disclosive intimacy" (Abidin, 2015) despite the interaction being fairly ordinary.

However, selfies can also be carefully staged such that casual behind-the-scenes images are actually acts of "contrived authenticity and reflexivity" (Abidin, 2016, p. 13). These strategic selfies have been used by influencers on Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat to combat rumors, manage perceptions, and raise commercial activity (Abidin, 2016, p. 15). On musical.ly, the display of video selfies can resemble the more raw, less filtered aesthetic of 'behind-the-scenes' footage, which is often used for community building. Specifically, such selfies allow musers to construct smaller in-groups within their communities, as these selfies can be used as a medium of "language games" with their own grammar and vocabulary (Katz & Crocker, 2015, p. 1861) and through techniques of code-switching (Abidin, 2016; Katz & Crocker, 2015). musical.ly selfies are a conversational form that, though beginning as personal broadcasts such as tags and messages, can escalate into antagonistic interactions such as battles and challenges. Musers connect to others through battles/challenges by inviting their followers or the people they follow to lip-sync a particular song, and further interaction is triggered through likes and comments. Rettberg points to some changes with the emergence of apps like musical.ly: The scale of the global audiences can be accessed easily, the scale of access to various performances of the same music is increased, and the fixity of the media used makes recording and editing performances easier (2017, p. 6).

Walking Through musical.ly

I conducted a walk-through of musical.ly, using Light, Burgess, and Duguay's (2016, p. 17) approach with the suggestion that "the walk-through method is versatile and provides foundational analysis of an app, which can be combined with content analysis or interviews to gain further insights into users' application and appropriation of app technology to suit their own purposes."

Setting Up

I started a brand new musical.ly account as a user and explored the app as a beginner would, but scrutinized each of the options that the platform made available to me. Profiles are created using a handle, such as "@name", and the

user's birthdate. The user's profile page shows their username, the number of other users following them, and the number of fans or other users who follow them. In the profile page, two sets of activities are visible: A user's "Likes" and whether they have posted any musical.lys. The profiles that a user follows appear on the list as "musers you are following." Depending on the choices of the muser, the profile page can be linked to their Instagram page or YouTube channel, and a short bio can be added to this page. Signing up to musical.ly is possible via email address, Facebook account, or phone number. After providing their birthdate, users need to prove that they are not robots by clicking a checkbox and also by selecting some images according to a visual prompt. Once their human status is proven, users are led to choose a muser name and asked to provide a profile photo or create a selfie using the app. They are then directed to find contacts via Facebook or email. The first notification users get states: "Your first musical.ly: Create a video to share your funniest self and impress your friends!" The "Top Musers on musical.ly yesterday" function provides users with the most liked musical.lys in global and local contexts, which in my case was Turkey. The app's website operates in English and Chinese, and the app operates in 20 languages – however, Turkish is not an option.

Networking

In the profile section under "Settings," it is possible to invite friends, follow the musical.ly corporate accounts on Instagram or Facebook, connect to Apple Music or the Android version, or get a muser T-shirt via Amazon. Through the settings, it is possible to keep a "Best Fan Forever" list and to manage a "Block" list. Preferred regions and languages can also be set. The app provides privacy options, including only allowing friends to contact a user via instant messaging, hiding location info, or keeping the account private. The "my coins" button enables musers to purchase musical.ly currency in the local currency, which allows them to exchange virtual gifts. In the case of Turkey, the lowest musical.ly currency "m100" is equivalent to 3.49 TRY, and the highest musical.ly currency 'm10000' is equivalent to 349.99 TRY. Musers can also decide which push notification to receive in the settings. They can determine when to receive contact from the app based on new likes, new followers, comments, mentions in comments, mentions in a musical.ly, or questions asked by fellow users. Musers can also use animated thumbnails from the options provided in the "Settings" section.

Content Production

The platform has its own recording tools, editing options for slowing down and speeding up the videos, and a function to add visual effects to the images. There are two ways of shooting videos with musical.ly: A muser can hold a smartphone with one hand while gesturing with the other hand, or if the performance involves multiple musers, the phone camera can be fixed at a point so that multiple video selfies match up when processed into a single file. There might be edits after a

change of clothes, or other modifications to appearance, such as the use of makeup. Creating a musical.ly is done hitting the "+" sign in the center of the screen through which three sections appear as "pick music," "shoots first," and "from library." "Pick music" gives two options: "Online library" allows users to either use a search bar search for a particular song or check the categories such as Featured, Comedy, Pop, muser Comedy, #World Challenge, Shuffle, Foodies, EDM, Summer Vibes, A-List Pop, Best Laughs, Birthday, and DreamWorks Classics. The other option of shooting videos allows users to pick music through their own library through "My songs." Musers can decide on the pace, filters and beauty effects, and emoji use, tag other musers, add inspirational information, or instigate a battle or challenge on a trending hashtag.

Privacy

Standard user conditions and privacy policies are made available through the settings section of the app, including the age limit for users – 13. Terms of use (musical.ly, 2016a), privacy policy (musical.ly, 2016b), copyright policy (musical.ly, 2015), and open source notices (musical.ly, 2017b) are also available. As the platform is widely used by the tweens and teenagers, musical.ly provides information about the app and a separate section titled "For Parents" (musical.ly, 2017c). It includes information about the app and its uses, and encourages parents to start a dialog with their teens about internet safety, online privacy, and the options that are available to them. The link also includes additional resources available to North American musers.

Becoming a Muser on musical.ly

I carried out two focus group interviews with my daughter and her two best friends who are currently classmates at an international school in Ankara, Turkey. Interviews were conducted with parental consent and personal consent after I had explained the objectives of the research. In addition, through conversations, I ensured that the girls were willing and happy to participate in this small-scale research project. They expressed personal interest in participating in the focus group interviews. In order to retain privacy, I adopt pseudonyms for all three girls and the other girls they mentioned in relation to musical.ly use discussed in this chapter.

The first focus group interview was with my daughter Yaz (13) and her best friend Esra (14) in the kitchen of Esra's house, and the second was with my daughter and her other best friend Mine (13) through a video conference session on the app Houseparty. All three girls were using musical.ly for at least six months albeit with varying use habits. Yaz kept the 36 musical.lys she produced in her private profile, Esra made public five of the 60 musical.lys she created, and Mine created 30 videos of which only 1 was shared publicly. Esra's muser profile featured a selfie while Yaz and Mine did not post any profile photos. When queried, both Yaz and Mine stated that they want to keep their accounts private especially since some of their schoolmates who were fellow musers knew of their musical.ly handles, and they could not maintain psuedonymity on the app. Yet,

the girls could also identify the more prolific musers in their school and were conscientiously tracking the content of these small-scale, localized mircocelebrities within their network.

Song Choice

The girls usually select their lip-sync tracks from the Top Songs list that can be reached through the Turkey and Global options of musical.ly. In each option, it is surprising to observe that the Turkey list is almost always identical to the Global list. Rather than having some local Turkish popular music tracks, the Turkey option connects the musers in Turkey to trending tracks in English. From the Top Songs list, the girls make their selection based on which songs are currently popular among their peers and popular musers. They would often watch the top videos from around the world to get inspiration on what is currently trending. In fact, so important is this criteria that Esra would regularly delete her old musical.ly videos whenever songs fell out of trend and were no longer popular on the app.

   Although songs in several languages are available, the girls largely prefer to use English-language tracks. This was because the global microcelebrity musers whom they follow mostly produce content in English, and as 7th graders in an international school, all of them were effectively bilingual anyway. Moreover, the repertoire of popular culture they consumed was also largely Americanized, with their favorite singers being artists such as Selena Gomez and Taylor Swift.

   However, Esra points out one specific instance in which she produced videos using a Turkish backing track. The song "Gıybet," which translates into English as "gossip," was a summer hit in 2016 by Serdar Ortaç, a pop-singer in Turkey. Recalling this time, Esra and Yaz laughed and admitted that neither were fans of Serdar Ortaç or his music. Instead, they chose the song because the lyrics sounded funny and could potentially generate more fun as a group activity. When pressed, the girls revealed that their main motivation for using musical.ly was to have fun when they get together after school as a group bonding activity, rather than for microcelebrity pursuits.

Gestures

In general, there is a standard repertoire of hand and facial gestures to draw from among musers. Microcelebrity musers are known for pioneering new gestures, and the girls report systematically observing these new trends and then adopting or adapting them for their own videos. Mine reports that she personally "practices" the hand gestures she sees popular musers doing, and in once instance practiced over 15 times for a 10-second clip because she "could not remember" her hand signs. At times, they may also decide to create original hand gestures in relation to the song lyrics, but are largely attuned to what is popular in the global muser community as filtered by the app. Many of the technical features that the girls use in their videos are self-taught as they explore the different functions on the app. Their taste discrimination is enacted when they observe microcelebrity

musers and take inspiration from the newest ways this innovative group plays with their mobile phone cameras or incorporates special visual effects from within the app.

Although the girls claim that they produce musical.ly videos for group enjoyment rather than for publicity, perfection is still important to them. The girls unanimously point to Nira, who is a peer from the same school and perceived as a microcelebrity on musical.ly. The girls talked about their observations of Nira's leadership and popularity with her musical.ly performances among friends, lip-syncing and practicing at school with friends. Nira, as a leader among her musical.ly peers, decides on the song and preplans their hand gestures, standing positions, and backdrop prior to recording. Nira's attention for detail even extends to their clothing choice as she contemplates how their peer groups who can view their private videos (through circulation within or outside of the app) would receive their performance. Esra pins Nira's expertise down to "experience" and "time," citing that "she thinks about how to create videos" and is an asset to the group. However, deciding whether or not to post a video or make it public is a group decision, as the girls would view other videos, compare their own against the median, and only post publicly should they feel their video "meets the standard."

Microcelebrity (and Resistance) on musical.ly

musical.ly has over 250 million users, and the app hosts genres of videos, such as comedy, beauty, fashion, sports, vlogs, food, and animals, in addition to music. The North America president of the company, Alex Hoffman, states that they encourage their top musers to be stars in other industries (Robehmed, 2017). These "stars" can be conceptualized as microcelebrities who "attempt to gain popularity by employing digital media technologies, such as videos, blogs and social media" (Senft, 2008, p. 16). The concept of "influencers," studied in depth by Abidin (2015), takes this definition one step further by focusing on setting up biographical, sociocultural, and institutional systems to monetize their microcelebrity efforts. While many musers may attain microcelebrity status, only a subset is able to parlay their microcelebrity into becoming influencers.

As evidenced from the walk-through method, several affordances of musical.ly intrinsically encourage users to package their profiles in pursuit of microcelebrity. The repertoire of videos posted by a muser and the number of "Likes" they have accumulated are prominently displayed on the profile page, inviting comparison and scrutiny when user activity can be pinned down to a standardized metric. Musers are prompted to invite friends who are not on the app to sign up. A list of top musers is updated by the day as a mark of how transient and competitive popularity and ranking on the app is. Musers are invited to self-brand and identify with the app by purchasing a muser T-shirt made available on Amazon, and prolific users may monetize their audiences through virtual gifts that are bought in local currency. Of these successful musical.ly influencers, the girls follow Baby Ariel (22.3 million fans), Lisa and Lena (24.4 million fans), Kristen

Hacher (18.1 million fans), and Flamingoes (2.49 million fans). In particular, Baby Ariel is cited as their favorite. Baby Ariel has became popular on musical.ly with her lip-syncs posted on a regular basis since 2015. Her YouTube channel that she started for posting musical.ly tutorials now hosts her singles as an emerging singer.

The performances and actions of microcelebrity and influencer musers are generally viewed as a script by fame-aspirants who want to attain greater popularity. However, while acknowledging that these musical.ly micro-celebrities are *inspirational*, the girls report that they are not *aspirational* as they personally wish to avoid "too much fame." The girls speculate that within their peer groups, it is important to avoid being the subject of rumors and gossip by ensuring they do not appear to be too hungry for fame. Yaz and Esra state that they "don't want to be made fun of" especially since some girls in their school were mocked and gossiped about over their musical.ly performances. As such, to avoid the stigma and shame from a negative assessment of their reputation (Nycyk, 2015, p. 18), the girls would only absolutely post and make a video public if they feel it meets the standard of their imagined audience of their peer group.

Conclusion

In the months during which I observed the girls and musical.ly, I never got to the point of producing a successful lip-sync video myself. It occurred to me that while I was fixated on privacy concerns, I also overlooked the fact that these very young teenage girls were exhibiting elegant and savvy digital literacies and skills that required much corporeal and emotional negotiation. While the girls had initially framed their deliberate nonposting and nonpublic facing profiles as "privacy" concerns, my deeper inquiry revealed that they were less concerned about personal privacy than about face, status, and value within their social networks, desiring to avoid gossip, rumor, and mockery for subpar performances. While the girls reiterated that they were just being on musical.ly "for fun," they also demonstrated a great investment in effort and time to perfect their moves. And while it may appear that they were focused on producing content for the app, my observations provided an insight that musical.ly was often an important lubricant or social "excuse" for the girls to get together in the flesh and spend physical, co-present time together. Although they were very much influenced by microcelebrities and influencers on musical.ly, none of the girls saw these actors as role models in that they did not desire to pursue publicity and fame, thus decoupling "inspiration" and "aspiration" in the concept of microcelebrity.

It is hoped that this small-scale pilot study will provide a mixed methodological framework for approaching a platform when investigating its microcelebrity phenomena. Combining the walk-through method centered on the platform, focus group discussions centered on the users of the platform, and personal observations centered on corroborating the theory and actual praxis of these users, this chapter has provided a more holistic view of the embrace and

resistance of microcelebrity. The rapid changing ecologies of app platforms has become valid for musical.ly just before the publication of this book, as musical.ly and TikTok merged to debut a new worldwide short form video platform. So further research and the use of more longitudinal methodologies would be helpful to discover microcelebrity phenoma on merged ecologies.

Acknowledgments

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