

A New Definition of Celebrity:
In Response to the Rise of Social Media App Tik Tok

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Introduction

A famous quote by artist Andy Warhol reads “In the future, everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes.” which he then changed to, “In the future, everyone will be famous *in* fifteen minutes”. The changing of this quote abides perfectly with the rise of social media. Apps such as YouTube, Instagram and Tik Tok breed celebrities of a new definition. When you hear the word ‘celebrity’ it is often you think of the traditional Hollywood celebrity, but as social media advances this common thinking adapts to it. These platforms allow their users to have the opportunity to pursue fame by creating an on-screen persona that appeals to the masses. Online self-representation creates a world of opportunity for anyone and everyone to build a following. If it is this simple, then why aren't we all famous? Because it is not actually that simple. Although the chances of being discovered on social media seems more plausible, capturing and holding the attention and admiration of thousands even millions of people are where the challenges lie. Those who have achieved this status are referred to as micro-celebrities. The idea of a micro-celebrity has budded from the rise to fame of multiple internet creators that hold a following across these platforms. Through my research I intend to formulate an understanding of the specific characteristics micro-celebrities share that contribute to their newfound fame. Examples for the analysis can be seen through the study of two micro-celebrities, Tik Tok personalities Charli and Dixie D’Amelio. The sisters have gained a celebrity status through social media app, Tik Tok. The research questions that guide this study are as follows: How do the affordances of popular social media apps including Tik Tok, YouTube, Instagram contribute to the rise of micro-celebrity status? How are the personalities of Tik Tok users Charli and Dixie D’Amelio constructed online? How do they differ from their real life or before fame identity? What marketing tactics do they use to contribute to financial success?

Development of the Term Micro-Celebrity

In order to understand what a micro-celebrity is, it is important to have an understanding of its distinction to that of a traditional celebrity. Through media analysis and research, the general definition of a celebrity can be described as, “a person whose name has attention-getting, interest-riveting, and profit-generating value” (Stever). Although micro-celebrities take the principles of celebrity culture and apply them to online interactions, micro-celebrities are not traditional celebrities. In terms of the context of this paper, a traditional celebrity is referring to household names who have gained their influence from television, film or music rather than through digital means. It has become harder to differentiate between a traditional celebrity and a micro-celebrity, especially in the past year.

One difference that holds true between the two is in regard to their identity performance. Traditional celebrities have a clear line of when their public persona and true self should be present, due to their conventional role of identity performances. Their media personality is shown on screen, on stage or in interviews where there is a designated time and space for them to put on and identity performance. Micro-celebrities' do not have this designation because they market themselves as being their authentic self at all times while also upholding an online image or persona that is appealing. Influencers across social media platforms are forced to carefully construct and identity that allows a performance aspect to give their audience while maintaining the expectation to still be relatable (Chae). The construction of the term micro-celebrity or influencer comes from this presentation of idealized self on various platforms while preserving an appearance of relatability. Micro-celebrity is better described as something someone does rather than defining who someone is.

Amongst all popular creators on social media platforms there is a blueprint to this forged identity. As described in Hanneke van De Put's master thesis for Utrecht University, with

analysis of the construction of micro-celebrity status, these individuals must hold these four characteristics, integration, dispersed, episodic and interaction. A combination of these four factors defines the framework for a trans-mediated self. Integration in context refers to the amalgamation of the identities. Balancing both the online identity with one's own authentic self while in the eye of the media faces as a revelational skill for these creators. Dispersed refers to having this united identity be malleable enough to fit the narratives across multiple platforms. Performing well on multiple mediums can increase success levels to the potential of the user. The episodic element can be described as the linking of shared experiences between users. Similar to a parallel story line common in fiction writing, micro-celebrities intertwine their “plotlines” to make their online life deemed more interesting. This element is then exemplified by the interactive self. This final characteristic focuses on interactions with others in terms of forming relationships with other creators to contribute to the overarching identity of one’s performative identity. These associations reveal traits through candid perceptions of the various relationships (van de Put 10). The understanding of these four elements explores the intentions of the idealized media identity. The analysis of a micro-celebrity is much more complex due to this concept of performance identity that traditional celebrities don’t have to face due to the set designation of time and place when this persona is necessary.

The D’Amelio’s

To demonstrate how micro-celebrities implement the affordances of a platform, an analysis of Tik Toks biggest creator Charli D’Amelio and her sister Dixie can be conducted.

Charli and Dixie achieved their celebrity status through Tik Tok and have gained a significant following on Instagram and YouTube as well. Charli, 16, is leading the app with over one hundred million followers achieved in a little over a year while Dixie, 19, who gained her

following through appearances on Charli's accounts, has accumulated almost fifty million of her own followers. The pairs audience demographics are 72% female, primarily ages 13-21, United States residents who speak English. They average 3.3 million likes, 96.7 thousand comments and 87.3 thousand shares per post. (Gayton). Regardless of the numbers, the pair have reached new feats in terms of social media engagement across various platforms. By conducting an analysis of their trans-mediated identities through their content across these platforms we can form a better idea on the concept of micro-celebrity and how it compares to that of a traditional celebrity.



Charli D'Amelio, right, and sister Dixie D'Amelio, left (Spangler, Todd. "TikTok Stars Charli and Dixie D'Amelio Are Launching a Podcast About Themselves." *Variety*, *Variety*, 1 Oct. 2020)

Idealized Self vs. Authentic Self

Micro-celebrities are expected to be authentic and available to their fans. Being authentic can prove challenging for micro-celebrities because it can conflict with the idealized selves that they attempt to present. Authenticity can be shown in multiple ways, the first being through the content that micro-celebrities share with their fans. One-way influencers do this by sharing content in relatable settings such as the creators' personal space, their bedroom or living room. Another way they utilize authenticity and reliability is by not wearing makeup or dressing down. A more casual appearance appeals to viewers because they aren't over glorified and therefore appear more 'real' (Ang). Sharing personal information with their following creates a safe environment where the followers feel a connection with the micro-celebrity. This interaction creates comfortability and a sense of friendship that appeals to a majority of social media users, especially those of young ages or minority groups. Having someone you admire experience the same things as you is eye opening for most. In an exclusive interview with Keltie Knight of Entertainment Tonight, Charli talks about the disconnect between these identities. She is quoted saying one of her main goals is proving to her followers that, "I am a normal teenager who goes to high school [and] we are exactly the same" (1:50). Micro-celebrities, like Charli face a challenge that traditional celebrities do not. Their performance identity must be relatable enough to their followers while also maintaining a factor of idolization and perfectionism. In the same video interview, she mentions in the majority of her videos she looks very put together which is not true off screen. She claims, "everyone puts me at this place to where 'she's perfect all the time' but that's not always the case." (Charli D'Amelio Gets Real About Anxiety, Fame and What She Wants Her Fans to Know (Exclusive) 7:26) Users of Tik Tok relate Charli's rise of fame to her 'girl next door' demeanor, she is perceived as familiar and approachable in a sense of fascination.

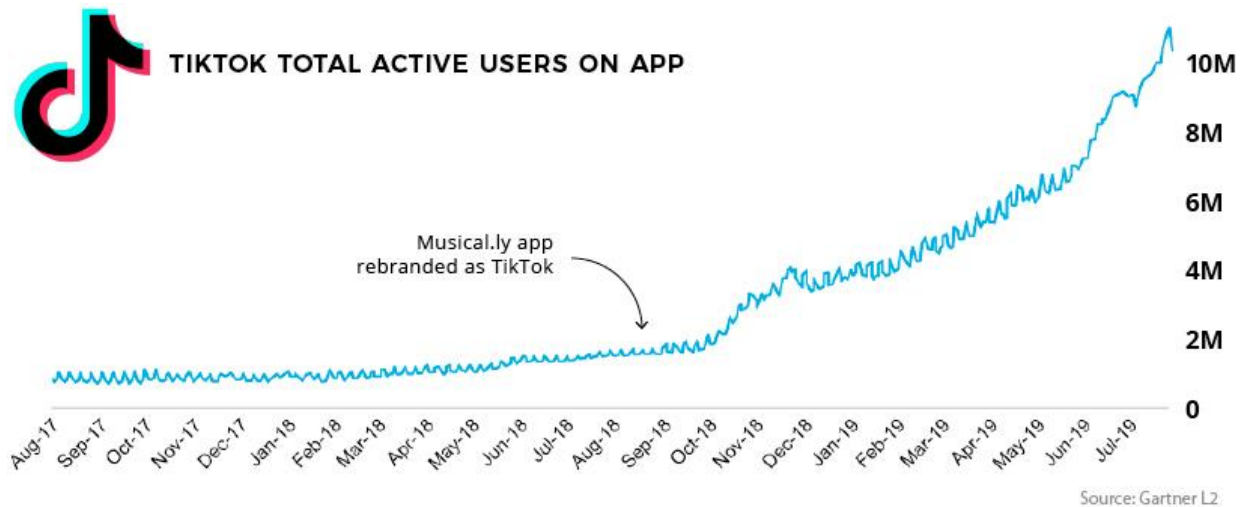
There are more surface level characteristics that are common to micro-celebrities that resonate with the younger demographic of Tik Tok users. There is a sense of privilege that can be addressed in this scenario. Being rich, white, thin and pretty contributes to the success of influencers. This privilege arises from the idealization of their target market which is primarily adolescent users who view these characteristics as desirable. Before they built a following, the majority of micro-celebrities, specifically those on Tik Tok, hold these four factors as a foundation towards their success (Venus, Chae). Without these qualities to fall back on the users who don't have this privilege use their personality or skill set to gain their media fame. Personality types that are often in relation to their status on the app revolve around humor, positivity and confidence. Highlighting and self-promoting a talent or passion in your content is another way to receive a following (Shen 211). Charli and Dixie hold the characteristics of privilege as they are rich, thin, white and subjectively pretty. The genre of video content they make on Tik Tok allows for little personality to get across thus proving their physical appearance and status had a significant effect on their rise to fame. Understanding the psychographics of the audience helps make clear what drives the following for specific micro-influencers. The psychographics of Gen Z users connect to the appeal of the D'Amelio sisters. Contributing to their impressive following is a calculated understanding of the Tik Tok trends, music or sounds, dance, fashion or humor and its relation to the various types of social media channels they spread their influence on.

The Origin of Tik Tok

Tik Tok is a leading app in the social media environment that is breeding these micro celebrities at a steady pace. The algorithm of the app allows for users to gain exposure easier than the competing social channels with the use of the 'For You' page and its hashtag. In addition to aid from the algorithm, Tik Tok has become arguably the most downloaded and used app in terms of screen time. As of July 2020, the app has accumulated over 2 billion downloads worldwide (Haenlein). The number of users on the app directly contributes to the ease of social media fame and attention.

The exploitation of Tik Tok was not forthcoming, in fact the app had entirely different intentions before it adapted to what it is now. In 2016 Chinese developers, Alex Zhu and Luyu Yang, had intent to create an educational app for kids. Throughout their studies, it became evident that this idea was unprofitable. Zhu and Yang then turned their research towards a short form video app that centered around lip syncing and dance, thus the app *Musical.ly* was crafted. The app gained popularity across East Asian countries at a similar time to competing app, *Douyin*. Douyin is a video sharing social media service that was created in 2016 China as well. The two apps fell short of worldwide success until they were bought out by Internet Company, ByteDance in 2017. Developers at ByteDance combined the ideas to create Tik Tok. All active profiles on Musical.ly transferred over to Tik Tok and the app is no longer existing while Douyin acts as the Chinese counterpart. Today Tik Tok has advanced to offer videos ranging 15 seconds to one minute producing content across a variety of genres including, dance, comedy, and education (Gayton). An interface that adheres to the decline in attention span gained its popularity gradually over the following years. Along with the apps fame, came the introduction to a new era of media celebrities such as the mentioned sisters, Charli and Dixie D'Amelio. The

internet fame of that the influencers gained is with responsiveness to the development of a new social channel along with the properties that make up the app itself.



(Routley, Nick. *The Rise and Fall of Social Media Platforms*. 9 Oct. 2019)

Algorithmic Analysis of Social Media Platforms

The Tik Tok algorithm allows for user content to be shared seamlessly amongst its users. The way the app is designed with a separate ‘Following’ and ‘For You’ page gives anyone the opportunity for their content to be shared. The ‘for you’ page is catered to the user's interests based on the content they interact with. As a platform with a variety of subgroups; dancing, comedy, make up, fashion, etc. the content you see is customized based on your pervious interactions and usage. This gives shared content a higher opportunity to be seen on the pages of people who will enjoy it, increasing the chance for virality and exposure (Jarvey).

YouTube works in a comparable way; you can see videos of the channels you are subscribed to or browse the recommended page based on your video history. Videos similar to the ones you watched will be recommended for you to view. Although, YouTube has created a platform that is very top-heavy. This means only channels with high subscriber amounts and

high views will be recommended. Smaller creators have trouble promoting their content solely on YouTube and often build a following on other social media apps before gaining their viewership there (Shen 220).

Instagram is more difficult to explain in terms of algorithmic understanding. The app is also guilty of being top heavy and displaying posts by higher followed pages ahead of smaller users. The explore page and 'based off photos you liked' features often show images from accounts with a large active following (Djafarova).

The emphasis is on the shared relationship between the technology and the user. How each platform works shapes the behavior of its users, guiding them towards micro-celebrity practices. As social media progresses, they seem to be encouraging ordinary people to achieve celebrity status (Lagrée 12). On Tik Tok, a video by someone with any number of followers can be shown on the 'For You' page. As there may be a technological explanation for the happenings of media celebrification, each app allows for self-representation which suggests more importance on the users rather than the platform.

All platforms have their differences in shareability but one affordance that all three share is that the content can be edited before it is posted. YouTube allows its users to upload videos that are self-edited, ultimately decided what to show and what not to. Tik Tok allows some editing while recording a video; the inclusion of effects is now featured allowing alterations to the overall look of the video and or the appearance of individual in frame. The beauty filter ultimately smooths your skin with an attempt to hide blemishes and redness. There are also filters that whiten your teeth and allow you to reconstruct your face. On Instagram, any image may be altered through filters while making changes to the lighting and saturation. If serious editing is desired, images can be 'facetuned' or photoshopped (Chae). By altering the content,

users are physically altering their media perception to fit the favored beauty standard constructed by the generation. The filters and editing techniques subjectively make you appear thinner and prettier. Choosing what content is shared and how it is shared allows creators to adapt their content to fit the falsified identity they created for themselves. In order to maintain their image, it is strategic for them to do so although, it takes away more of their authentic self from their media identity.

In response to the formulated content, the comment section of all these apps allows for content creators to get an immediate reaction from the public. If the comments happen to be negative users have the option of turning the comment section off or deleting the post as a whole. This is directly associated to maintaining the user's online identity and how they wish to be perceived. By conforming to the expectations that each of the apps promote, influencers are veering further away from their true selves (Cunningham). This is a constant issue across platforms when the content isn't received as it was meant to. In an attempt for micro-celebrities to share more of their true personality it must be consistent with their media image. When a traditional celebrity faces negative feedback on their work, the blame can often be shifted to other working aspects of the production whereas a social media post is primarily one users work. When a film is deemed bad there are no comments directly attached to it allowing the audience to perceive the film their own way without unintentional bias. Feedback from an audience can eliminate the true intentions of the original piece of content of any medium.

For true success as a media celebrity, users must make an effort to be active on each of the social media platforms. It is rare for the users who gained celebrity status on one app to stay active on solely the app that derived from (Gaenssle). Developing an understanding and staying current with the innerworkings of each of these platforms is essential to the success of these influencers. The complexity behind adapting to each algorithm proves as a vast difference

between the effort of a micro-celebrity and a traditional celebrity. This idea explains how the D'Amelios have since converted their millions of fans from Tik Tok into Instagram and YouTube supporters as well.

How They Built Their Following

This analysis consults the four aforementioned characteristics, integration, dispersed, episodic and interactive, their focus on the content as it pertains to the idealized self through their relationship with each platform. Both D'Amelio sisters inherent the four elements of a constructed online identity and use the furtherance of the algorithms to maximize their success.

Integration again refers to the unity of the idealized self with the authentic self. To find the desired mixed of identities, often creators look to appeal to relatability. Charli and Dixie both shared content in familiar spaces such as their bedrooms or living room which appeals to users who want to see them at home as opposed to a studio or work environment. The two often dress down with limited emphasis on make-up or hair emphasis as another form relation to the common teenager. Another aspect that allows for integration is through expression of interest in the content. An illustration of this can be seen through the leisure's the two expressed before their media fame. Charli was involved with dance and was a part of a dance studio where she frequently preformed in competitions. Her content on Tik Tok and Instagram expresses this interest. Similarly, Dixie occasionally competed in motor cross events which she shares throughout her content. By inviting users to view their separate passions, a formulation of their personalities can be made. They combine an idealized version of their authentic self through decorated versions of their recreation and relatability. The pair co-host a podcast, *Two Chix*, that claims to let fans discover who Charli and Dixie really are. Performing this identity in

environments that are deemed “behind the scenes” or opportunities to really uncover who they are blur the lines between these versions of themselves.

This podcast can also be taken as an example for the second element, **dispersed**, meaning they can perform cross-platforms, which Charli and Dixie do almost effortlessly. Disregarding the number of followers and subscribers they have gained on Tik Tok, Instagram and YouTube the two have successfully managed to share content across a number of apps. Understanding that social media is dynamic and subjective, it is important to perform on multiple sites with different content on each. The challenge arises when differentiating your content limits you from maintaining your online image. The D’Amelio’s have figured out a way to successfully formulate all their content to fit the narrative of their persona. Dixie has a YouTube talk show in which she interviews her friends and other industry stars. This combines dispersed with episodic elements. Throughout the show she hosts guests to talk about their shared experiences in the eyes of the media. This show connects micro-celebrities with each other allowing for parallel plot lines to administer their narrative.

Episodic relates to sharing experiences with like individuals. Another notable example of this can be seen in the formation of the ‘Hype House’. Early on in the rise of Tik Tok, a creator house in Los Angeles housed a number of budding creators who collaborated with one another and built each other’s fan bases and share experiences as such. The Hype House grouped together twenty-one popular users such as Alex Warren, Addison Rae, Chase ‘Lil Huddy’ Hudson along with Charli and Dixie. The house was a space for users who lived outside of Los Angeles to stay and be around similar influencers with the idea to make content together. The D’Amelios who have since split from the Hype House, built relationships with other digital creators that they still hold today.

The element of **interaction** refers engagement with an audience. Forming these connections and collaborating with other influencers builds your online identity through engaging new audiences and creating more compelling content in a wider variety. Charli and Dixie's following and reach doubled after their announcement to be a part of the Hype House and only continued to grow as they made content with the other members. (van de Put 10) Their involvement in the Hype House allowed them to expand the interactions with their target audience by building relevancy and relatability.

Through this analysis of The D'Amelio sisters, Charli and Dixie, we see the four characteristics of micro-celebrities implemented into their activities across social media platforms. These implementations cater to the economic opportunities they have since had.

Micro-Celebrity Branding

Achieving micro-celebrity status comes with the achievement of being discovered by broad audiences. Through the use of the affordances of the app with the correct use of the four characteristics, an audience is built. Once their following is set, they immediately become a target for a wide range of companies and organizations who seek their influence to achieve marketing objectives. The self-adapted identities these users create to market themselves is similar to the way brands build visibility and value for their goods and services. Success in micro-celebrity status comes after a career can be made by the use of your name. Dunkin Donuts company tactically caught on to the rise in fame of Charli D'Amelio and became the first brand to create a partnership with the teen. Charli has since endorsed two signature drinks with the brand along with designated merchandise to accompany the release of both drinks. Dunkin' saw a 45% increase in cold brew sales following the release of the first drink in September of 2020. D'Amelio can also be credited with triggering a 57% increase in Dunkin' app downloads.

Charli's branded Tik Tok post announcing the release gained her 2.5 million views in six days. The collaboration seemed fit as Dunkin' Donuts lists their values as "honesty, transparency and humility" which follow suit to what Charli stands for. After collaboration with Dunkin Donuts, she began a partnership with Pura Vida Jewelry as well (Thomas, Craft). This marketing strategy is a direct example of the use of micro-celebrity success in the corporate world. The Tik Tok star is profiting off the use of her name for the benefit of the company. Charli has also produced her own form of self-marketing with the release of her own merch line as well as a book, *Essentially Charli*, which gives insight on who Charli is behind the posts.

Dixie has been able to leverage her social media base to support both a music and acting career, a common move for media-celebrities. She is signed to one of the largest talent agencies United Talent Agency, UTA, as of January 2020, that aided in her appearance on BratTV's YouTube Series, *Attaway General*, where she acted alongside other social media stars. UTA is a private agency representing talent in a variety of divisions in film, technology, books, digital media, music, video games, and news. Some of their notable clientele include Johnny Depp, Diplo, Anderson Cooper and Bill Nye. In August of 2020, she also signed to L.A Reid's label HitCo Entertainment. Since signing, she has begun releasing music both on her own as well as with prominent musicians such as former One Direction member, Liam Payne and rapper, Wiz Kalifa. Her most popular song, 'Be Happy' has accumulated over 75 million streams on Spotify alone (Jin). Moving from social media to music and acting is a different form of marketing in where influencers decide to do marketing themselves as a talent as opposed to working with brands. Dixie is example of someone who combines both techniques to maximize her marketing potential.

Together Charli and Dixie have partnered with renowned cosmetic brand, Morphe, on a 'gen-z' inspired make up line. The pair have also teamed with clothing brand, Hollister, to be the

face of their new denim line. Along with these partnerships, the pair profit from their own signature ring lights for fans to use while creating social media content. These colorful LED lights range from \$14.99 to \$99.99 based on size on their designated website (Millman). Individuals with the opportunity that the D'Amelio's have, often transform their formulated media persona into a commodity to be picked up by corporate companies. Marketing strategies by large companies are transitioning their avarice towards including micro-celebrities rather than traditional celebrities based on target audience and who they want to appeal to. The influence these media personalities have over a larger market makes them more desirable for companies with younger demographics (Jin). In order for micro-celebrities to reach the full potential of capitalizing on their name and face alone, they must extend their assets to fit the wants and needs of these brands. Maintaining a brand-friendly media identity at all times is another factor that influencers such as Charli and Dixie must incorporate into their online personas which for some may challenge their ability to maintain authenticity.



(“Charli and Dixie D'Amelio's Gift Guide Will Brighten Up Your Holidays.” *E! Online*, 18 Dec. 2020.)

Conclusion

By exploring the content of Charli and Dixie D'Amelio through the lens of self-commodification towards a media personality, we uncover the depths of their appeal and the vast differences from a traditional celebrity definition. Social media apps are breeding celebrities of a new definition. The gaining this celebrity status across social media has become a more desired achievement for users of the apps. Through the adaptation of affordances offered by social media apps, the ability to reach this goal is becoming more accessible. As we saw in the analysis above, creating an online persona that includes integration, dispersion, episodic and interaction as a part of your social narrative will aid in your ability to succeed in building a platform for yourself. With these four elements and the creation of content that abides to the understanding of the algorithms, the research proves social media success. Discovering the 'how' and 'why' these influencers gained their following then uncovered their expanded success economically which was reached through their personal exploration outside of social media. Formulating this success is not always as calculated as these examples express, further insight into the unconscious implementations of these practices will better prove the monopolization of micro-celebrities in everyday life.

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