#familygoals: Family Influencers, Calibrated Amateurism, and Justifying Young Digital Labor

Crystal Abidin

Abstract
Following in the celebrity trajectory of mommy bloggers, global micro-microcelebrities, and reality TV families, family Influencers on social media are one genre of microcelebrity for whom the “anchor” content in which they demonstrate their creative talents, such as producing musical covers or comedy sketches, is a highly profitable endeavor. Yet, this commerce is sustained by an undercurrent of “filler” content wherein everyday routines of domestic life are shared with followers as a form of “calibrated amateurism.” Calibrated amateurism is a practice and aesthetic in which actors in an attention economy labor specifically over crafting contrived authenticity that portrays the raw aesthetic of an amateur, whether or not they really are amateurs by status or practice, by relying on the performance ecology of appropriate platforms, affordances, tools, cultural vernacular, and social capital. In this article, I consider the anatomy of calibrated amateurism, and how this practice relates to follower engagement and responses. While some follower responses have highlighted concerns over the children’s well-being, a vast majority overtly signal their love, support, and even envy toward such parenting. I draw on ethnographically informed content analysis of two group of family Influencers on social media to illustrate the enactment and value of calibrated amateurism in an increasingly saturated ecology and, investigate how such parents justify the digital labor in which their children partake to produce viable narratives of domestic life.

Keywords
microcelebrity, Influencers, social media

Following in the celebrity trajectory of mommy bloggers, global micro-microcelebrities, and reality TV families, family Influencers on social media are a new genre of microcelebrity. Family Influencers are known for the “anchor” content they produce, in which they demonstrate their creative talents such as producing musical covers or comedy sketches, which are highly profitable endeavors. Yet, this commerce is sustained by an undercurrent of “filler” content wherein everyday routines of domestic life are shared with followers as a form of “calibrated amateurism.” Calibrated amateurism is a practice and aesthetic in which actors in an attention economy labor specifically over crafting contrived authenticity that portrays the raw aesthetic of an amateur, whether or not they really are amateurs by status or practice, by relying on the performance ecology of appropriate platforms, affordances, tools, cultural vernacular, and social capital. In this article, I consider the anatomy of calibrated amateurism, and how this practice relates to follower engagement and responses. While some follower responses have highlighted concerns over the children’s well-being, a vast majority overtly signal their love, support, and even envy toward such parenting. I draw on ethnographically informed content analysis of two group of family Influencers on social media to illustrate the enactment and value of calibrated amateurism in an increasingly saturated ecology and, investigate how such parents justify the digital labor in which their children partake to produce viable narratives of domestic life.

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States. During her fieldwork in the 1990s, women were broadcasting their lives via webcams as a hobby, with many occasionally monetizing their craft in various ways. Microcelebrities were ordinary celebrities (Turner, 2010) famous to only a niche audience and who were reciprocal in their interactions with viewers. Alice Marwick (2013) later continued the study of microcelebrity among tech entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley, noting that many of them used social media to promote their start-ups and to network. In other words, social media was still supplementary to their primary careers as San Francisco entrepreneurs. Turning to look at Internet users who pursued microcelebrity full-time as a career, Crystal Abidin (2015a, 2016) investigated “lifestyle” Influencers in Singapore who accumulated large followings on their digital estates through narrating their personal lives as a central attraction for followers, thus growing from being ordinary Internet users to highly profitable microcelebrities. This article focuses on Influencers in the “family” genre and takes interest in yet another incarnation of microcelebrity.

In this article, I study a particular type of child microcelebrity nestled within the structure of family Influencers. However, these children are unlike those featured in parenting blogs. The content of parenting blogs thus far seems focused on three main areas. The first group comprises parenting tips, such as sustaining “emotional reciprocity” and building “communities of trust” (Morrison, 2011), fostering postpartum support (Nash, 2015), exchanging information and support on (in)fertility (Harrison, 2014), and sharing resources on children’s health care and safety (Aiello, 2010; Howell, 2010). The second group focuses on networking savvy, such as learning about social influence (Stevenson, 2012; Thompson, 2007), branding themselves as a formidable marketing and consumer power against corporations (Azzarone, 2009; Tatum, 2007), and learning to build their own infrastructure of economies, acknowledgment, and celebrity (Business Wire, 2010). The third group plays with notions of sustaining authenticity, such as maintaining parent blogging as “nonmonetized blogging,” preserving the “unglamorous minutiae” of their daily lives, presenting “more authentic view of motherhood,” using parenting blogs as a “site for memoir” rather than as a “source of extra income” (Friedman, 2013), and privileging “parent-centered products” (Mom Bloggers Club, 2009). In the genre of parenting blogs, children are a periphery as the focus is on the everyday lived experiences of being a parent.

Child microcelebrities of family Influencers are also unlike the “micro-microcelebrities” observed by Abidin (2015b), who defines the latter as “children of Influencers who have themselves become proximate microcelebrities, having derived exposure and fame from their prominent Influencer mothers.” In this instance, it seems that the micro-microcelebrities are literally grown (in the womb) and groomed (in the home) to inherit their Influencer mothers’ social capital. Their young lifestyles as depicted on digital estates become vessels that are deliberately curated to maximize advertorial potential, including the promotion of advertorials unrelated to children or parenting. As a highly commercial form of “sharenting” (Blum-Ross, 2015), micro-microcelebrity practices are purposefully commodity- and exposure-driven as their Influencer mothers “curate [their] identities into being” (cf. Leaver, 2015).

In contrast to these two groups of prolific children on the Internet, children of family Influencers are central to demonstrating the private domesticity of everyday life. Unlike children of parent bloggers, these children are not discussed as “wards” to be raised properly or “problems” to be fixed. Their parents do not focus on the trials and tribulations of parenting them in their narratives. Unlike micro-microcelebrities, these children are not overtly postured simply to inhabit advertorials, nor are their lifestyles constantly recorded and publicized to bait the interest of followers who may “fan” after them. Instead, the children of family Influencers are noted for their “anchor” talents, such as making music covers and producing comedy sketches together with their parents, and for their appearances in “filler” domestic scenes, such as snippets of everyday life when they are not filming “anchor” content.

Methodology

Many scholarly analyses of microcelebrity have thus far focused on Twitter, no doubt stimulated by the logistical ease of scraping public data grounded in “hashtagged publics” as a form of “communicative metrics” that yields large-scale datasets (Bruns, Moon, Paul, & Münch, 2016). These methods draw on social network analysis, where crawler-enabled scraping of Tweets are analyzed through big data visualization (Arvidsson, Cialiandro, Airoldi, & Barina, 2016; Marshall, Moore, & Barbour, 2015). Other recent methodological contributions to the study of microcelebrity have recommended “interpretative phenomenological analysis” (Marshall et al., 2015) where analyses are grounded in “individual’s perception of their experiences” (Hinds in Marshall et al., 2015) guided by applied psychology; prosopography (Marshall et al., 2015) where descriptive-based studies of patterns of relations and reputation are usually founded on the observation of quantitative datasets; or Internet-based observation as a form of digital ethnography usually focused on a single microcelebrity’s specific platform and their self-branding strategies (Garcia-Rapp, 2016).

This article returns to in-depth ethnography as a basis of investigation. It is an extension of a project based in traditional anthropological fieldwork with microcelebrities and Influencers (Abidin, 2013, 2014a) and how some of these actors eventually groomed micro-microcelebrities (Abidin, 2015b). As such, although this extended data set largely comprises screen grabs, archived comments, and volumes of field notes tracking historical events that unfolded in the Influencer industry, the data in this article are derived from an ethnographically informed content analysis of two groups
of family Influencers on social media. The archived social media content here presented and scrutinized serves as a precursor for future traditional anthropological fieldwork among this new genre of Influencers. Comprising a combination of physical and digital participant observation, personal and group interviews, live archiving through screen grabs, and a web archaeology of previously deleted or abandoned content and sites, this article borrows from Postill and Pink’s (2012) framing of social media as a “messy web” of research sites. I practice a combination of ethnographic inquiries along (imaginary) binaries of the online and the offline, the virtual and the real, the permanent and the in motion, loose and intensive communication with participants, and practices of production and consumption (Postill & Pink, 2012). These highlight the role of an anthropologist in negotiating access to a community via a variety of roles among different subgroups, at times even as an outsider, thus not necessitating exclusive access through the enactment of microcelebrity per se (cf. Mavroudis & Milne, 2016), given that exclusive dyadic communicative mediums on social media can be otherwise substituted.

The two groups of family Influencers studied are not epitomized for particular celebrations or controversies, nor were they observed through particular hashtags. Instead, an overall understanding of all their digital estates was cultivated through cross-platform observations and engagements with these Influencers over time, noting their discursive presentations of self alongside their growth in popularity, status, follower base, and exposure across traditional and social media. In the early stages, the cross-platform digital estates of these Influencers were scrutinized and corroborated between Influencer content and follower responses, interactions with fellow Influencers and relationships of reciprocity, self-publicity and reports from the press, and live data currently on display and deleted or abandoned content. After grasping a firm understanding of the Influencer’s microcelebrity history, origin story, communicative practices, self-branding strategies, and general norms, participant observation withers from a thorough archiving to a casual check-in of their feeds once a week (given that most Influencers have weekly scheduling), noting any changes in their output or reactions from followers. During periods of peak activity—such as festive seasons where Influencers publish content with the intention of permanence to build up their repository and brand image, there are instances where content is susceptible to being edited or deleted, especially if it is subversive or has become viral. Three of such milestone instances are (1) during Influencer wars where heated words are exchanged, (2) branding faux pas where Influencers have to retract their content due to client pressures, and (3) deliberately controversial content intended to be transiently visible in order to incite interest and debate within the community. During these times, despite faith in the permanence of web content, researchers have to actively archive content via screen grabs as evidence and “temporal signals” (Marshall et al., 2015, p. 293) to reconstruct a trajectory of events and maintain a version of history.

**Family Influencers**

Family Influencers are not simply a new incarnation of, or modern equivalent to, reality TV families, as both genres of entertainment and performances are systemically distinct. Reality TV families may be native to the mainstream entertainment industry or “ordinary celebrities” (Turner, 2010, p. 2). In the first instance, already-famous families from entertainment industry circuits such as Hollywood produce reality programs to monetize their audience’s desire for spectacles, such as the Simmons family in *Run’s House* which stars former Run-D.M.C. rapper-turned-reverend Joseph Simmons and his domestic life with his wife and children (MTV, 2016) or the Osbourne family in *The Osbournes* which features English rock band singer Ozzy Osbourne, his celebrity-manager wife, singer-songwriter daughter, and TV personality son (IMDB, 2016). In the second instance, everyday individuals voluntarily “turn themselves into media content” (Turner, 2010, p. 2) through media formats such as reality TV, radio talk shows, and user-generated online media to become “ordinary celebrity.” This article is focused on ordinary people who become microcelebrity Influencers. As one of the pioneering scholars of celebrity studies, Graeme Turner (2014) notes that representations in the media are increasingly tending toward the “lived experience of ‘the ordinary’” (p. 92). In this genre, the seemingly authentic and dedicated representations of everyday life are but a calculated production of entertainment in the guise of democratic access or what he terms “the demotic turn” (2014, p. 92). Hill (2005, p. 178) terms such television formats “popular factual television,” in which “real people” perform in (at least) partially staged settings. Yet, for being “ordinary,” reality TV families are seldom mundane.

Reality TV families are often spectacles for being extraordinary, exotic, or eccentric. “Extraordinary” reality TV families are those known for their remarkable feats, outstanding achievement in specific spheres, or overcoming adversity in life, such as the Roloff family on the *Little People, Big World* series documenting the everyday life of a couple with dwarfism and their four young adult children.
including one with dwarfism (The Roloff Family, 2016; TLC, 2016a) or the Gosselin family on the Kate Plus 8 (formerly Jon & Kate Plus 8) series documenting how a single mother parent’s a set of twins and a set of sextuplets conceived via in vitro fertilization when husband and wife discovered they could not have kids naturally (TLC, 2016b). “Exotic” reality TV families are those noted for differing from the norm and feeling foreign or distant from mainstream society, such as the Duggar family of 19 Kids and Counting fame whose large family of 19 children is a result of devout Baptist parents avoiding birth control (Duggar Family, 2016; TLC, 2016c) or the Williams family who star in My Five Wives in which a polygamist patriarch lives with his five wives and 25 children (Brady & Wives, 2016; TLC, 2016d). “Eccentric” reality TV families are characterized as being unconventional, outlandish, or aberrant and whose behavior is usually abhorred by their audience, such as the Thompson & Shannon family whoheadline Here Comes Honey Boo, starring an obese child beauty pageant contestant (nicknamed “Honey Boo Boo”), her unhealthy lifestyle, and the family’s rural life in the country (CBS46.com, 2012). Despite starting out as “ordinary celebrity” (Turner, 2010, p. 2), each of these reality TV families eventually became plagued with scandal—such as divorce among the Roloffs and the Gosselins, and accusations of sexual assault among the Duggars and the Thompson & Shannon family. Their longevity in the publicity circuits of mass media and the gossip press relied more on drama in their personal lives off-screen than their actual television productions.

Judging by their origins and the genealogy and manifestation of their fame, family Influencers are distinct from reality TV families. They are chiefly premised on being ordinary, everyday, and mundane. Family Influencers do not usually draw on the same mainstream entertainment industry apparatus as do traditional celebrity (Rein, Kotler, & Stoller, 1997, pp. 42-58; Turner et al., 2000). Although many of them may be signed to Influencer management companies, their production is usually always self-directed and their output primarily disseminated on social media.1 Arvidsson et al. (2016, p. 923) have previously argued that the qualities of microcelebrities can be assessed as “technical qualities,” such as software prowess and “entrepreneurial success,” or as “staging of selfhood,” such as performances of authenticity.

The performance ecology of family Influencers predominantly draws on an architecture of “anchor” material and “filler” material. Anchor material is the primary content for which these Influencers are known. Such performances appear to be produced with more care and effort, utilizing higher end equipment such as moving image recorders, audio mixers, lighting, and props, and are uploaded on a regular schedule a few times a fortnight. Some genres of this output include instrumental and singing covers, comedic skits, and cooking and craft tutorials. Filler material is the secondary content for which these Influencers are known and complement the mainstay of their output by giving followers a highly contextualized snapshot of their everyday lives. Such performances are intentionally framed to convey the aesthetic of an amateur, such that the production comes across as being raw, unfiltered, spontaneous, and more intimate. Most notably, filler material focuses on family Influencers’ domestic lives, their daily operations as a household, and their cultural norms and practices. While the filler material of family Influencers similarly pitches the ordinary as spectacle à la reality TV families, they not only steer clear from scandal but are almost always mundane and inane.

**Domestic Fillers**

There are several types of domestic fillers used by family Influencers. (1) **Developmental milestones** document the progress young children in the family have made, such as using the potty for the first time or losing their first tooth. These are occasions not otherwise featured in anchor material. (2) **Family occasions** show the family celebrating cultural and religious holidays such as the Fourth of July or Easter and personal commemorations such as birthdays and wedding anniversaries. While anchor material may correspond to the revelries of public holidays, such as singing Christmas songs and making sketches about Independence Day, filler family occasions show how the family actually commemorates events in their personal time. (3) **Errands** provide snapshots into how family life is managed, such as talking to a mounted camera during meal times or in the car during school runs on-the-go, and appear more haphazard and spontaneous. (4) **Confessions** record the family having a private conversation or sharing personal reflections, such as when parents reveal parenting mistakes or when children reflect on their growing fame. (5) **Reactions** usually catalogue the children’s response to current happenings, such as viral videos and global tragedy, to spontaneous questions from parents resulting in nuggets of “kid wisdom,” or to hidden camera setups in which parents prank their children or capture their unexpected acts of kindness in public. (6) **Logistics** broadcast how family Influencers manage the backend of their fame and engagement with followers, such as acknowledging fan mail on camera, holding Question & Answer (Q&A) sessions, hosting Ask Me Anything (AMA) sessions, and archiving behind-the-scenes (BTS) footage at formal client or sponsored events where the family is guest appearing. To illustrate family Influencers’ enactment of anchor and filler material, the next two subsections present case studies of two such microcelebrity units.

**Reality Changers**

The Reality Changers are a Hispanic family of four based in California and whose anchor material is instrumental and singing covers. Father-and-daughter duo Jorge and Alexa Narvaez (then 6 years old) first amassed virality and subsequently microcelebrity from their singing covers on
them viral attention (realitychangers, 2014b). Including an updated cover of the song that first brought
grew older, she eventually joined her father and sister in the
Netflix... and birds” (realitychangers, 2011c). As Eliana
boys or girls, Eliana responded, “I don’t like boys! I like
realitychangers, 2011b), or when asked by her father if she likes
and she asked it to “wake up” from “taking a nap” (reali-
tychangersfamily, 2016e); and “reactions” such as when Eliana
“errands” such as picking Alexa up from school (reali-
tychangersfamily, 2016b). Shortly after their viral cover of
“Home,” Jorge introduced his younger daughter, 2-year-old
Eliana, in a filler video featuring both of them talking to a
handheld camera and singing various nursery rhymes and
playfully fighting in bed (realitychangers, 2011f). While
Eliana was still too young to sing, Jorge continued filming
anchor videos of him and Alexa covering songs and filler
videos of Eliana in their domestic life.

Some of the family’s domestic fillers included “development-
mental milestones” such as when Alexa lost her first tooth
(realitychangers, 2011a); “logistics” such as when the family announced a giveaway contest and unboxed and read out fan mail for Eliana’s third birthday (realitychangers, 2011d); “errands” such as picking Alexa up from school (realitychangers, 2011e); and “reactions” such as when Eliana encountered death for the first time when her goldfish died and she asked it to “wake up” from “taking a nap” (realitychangers, 2011b), or when asked by her father if she likes boys or girls, Eliana responded, “I don’t like boys! I like Netflix... and birds” (realitychangers, 2011c). As Eliana grew older, she eventually joined her father and sister in the anchor music covers they filmed (realitychangers, 2013), including an updated cover of the song that first brought them viral attention (realitychangers, 2014b).

**Eh Bee Family**

The Eh Bee Family are a Canadian family of four based in
Los Angeles and whose anchor material is comedy skits. The Eh Bee parents, daughter, and son are most noted for
their viral New Year’s Eve Vine in which the family’s revel-
eries were abruptly interrupted by the over-enthusiastic
dughter who smashed a bowl on the floor (Eh Bee, 2014).
As of July 2016, this video has amassed over 108 million loops, over 508,000 “likes,” over 221,000 Revines, and over 17,000 comments. The Eh Bee Family are predomi-
nantly on Vine where they have, as of July 2016, over
2,137 million loops and over 3.1 million followers (Eh
Bee, 2016a). Their complementary digital estates on social
media as of July 2016 include Facebook with over 10 mil-
lion “likes” (Eh Bee Family, 2016b), YouTube with over
189 million views and 1.7 million subscribers (Eh Bee
Family, 2016c), Instagram with over 1.6 million followers
(Eh Bee Family, 2016d), Twitter with over 74,000 follow-
ers (Eh Bee Family, 2016e), Periscope with over 10,000
followers (Eh Bee Family, 2016f), Twitch (Eh Bee Family,
2016g), and Snapchat. The family also own a webstore
hawking merchandize (Eh Bee, 2016b). The Eh Bee Family
have a variety of anchor comedy skits, several of which are recurring, such as the annual update of their viral New
Years’ Eve Vine (Eh Bee, 2015), the “KidzBop” series in
which the children remix hip hop songs with clean, child-
friendly lyrics (Eh Bee Family, 2014b), or the “Dead
Husband Walking” series in which the husband parodies
stereotypically sexist or offensive remarks to his wife and
the scene immediately cuts to him lying in a mock casket
with melodramatic music (Eh Bee Family, 2013).

Some of the family’s domestic fillers include “logistics” such as when they share grainy images from BTS before of-
icial events (Eh Bee Family, 2016a) or respond to Q&As (Eh
Bee Family, 2016i), “errands” such as when they provide
peek sneaks into how they manage long distance affect when
different members of the family travel for work (Eh Bee
Family, 2016h), “confessions” such as when they screen grab
and repost poorly edited captures of hate comments (Eh Bee
Family, 2015a), and “family occasions” such as going on
holiday and recounting the excitement when the mother was
bitten by a horse (Eh Bee Family, 2016m) or the mundane of
playing Pokémon Go (Eh Bee Family, 2016o).

Returning to Turner’s (2010) notion of the “ordinary
celebrity,” such family Influencers do indeed “bypass”
typical corporate layers and structures previously pertinent
to manufacturing fame and celebrity (Turner, 2014, p. 75).
Bennett (2011, p. 179) similarly asserts that while every-
day users’ pursuit of fame is becoming more mainstream,
their aspiration is also increasingly being supported by “tools with which to become famous,” as evident in the
strategies of family Influencers and their domestic fillers.
This brings us to the notion of “microcelebrity” that was
first coined by Theresa Senft. In her ethnography of
Camgirls, Senft (2008, p. 16) argues that microcelebrities
are “non-actors as performers” who self-present “without
overt manipulation” and are, therefore, deemed more
“real” than mass media celebrities who are constantly por-
trayed with “perfect hair, perfect friends and perfect lives.”
However, as microcelebrity Influencers began proliferat-
ing on commercial blogs and social media since the mid-
2000s, with top rankers drawing in lucrative earnings, this
display of the “real” became a more conscious perfor-
ance in itself. Tied to the attention economy of needing to vie for more followers, more likes, and therefore more
revenue for their advertorials—especially so on the hyper-
visual medium of Instagram, dominated by young women
Influencers—self-curation of the seemingly casual and
apparently authentic spurned its own performance ecology
altogether. I term this performance ecology “calibrated
amateurism.”
From the Backstage to Calibrated Amateurism

The notion of an “amateur” has been studied in a variety of forms, including through homemade and Do It Yourself (DIY) artifacts (Luckman, 2013; Wark, 2013); in economies and markets (Luckman, 2013); as practices and ethics of volunteer, un/paid, and neoliberal labor (Fuller, Hamilton, & Seale, 2013; Kennedy, 2013; Ross, 2014); and as an aesthetic in different economies (Hamilton, 2013; Milne, 2013; Ross, 2014). While acknowledging the crucial work on the systemic productions of amateur labor (Ross, 2014) and its resulting consequences and backlash (Kennedy, 2013), this article takes on an anthropological curiosity toward the conscientious performance of amateurism as an everyday aesthetic among the genre of family Influencers on YouTube.

The intentional enactment and staging of an amateur aesthetic is highly rewarding for Influencers. They are creative content producers on social media who historically debuted as passion-driven, independent, unpaid amateurs. However, the increasing saturation, competition, and subsequently professionalization of the Influencer industry has resulted in cohorts of actors who now find themselves straggling along a continuum of voluntary and monetary labor, amateur and professional resources, independent and institutionalized systems, and everyday and celebrity reputation. Their “liminal roles” and the “liminal spaces” they occupy are reminiscent of new “work roles” in the media industries that “deliberately avoid classification or refusal official forms of consecration or authorisation” (Hamilton, 2013, p. 180).

The calibrated amateurism performed by Influencers may appear similar to the “symbolic amateurs” discussed by Hamilton (2013), as actors who “symbolic adopt[1] the post of the amateur even while inhabiting the sphere of the professional” (2013, p. 182). She argues that such “amateur tactics by professionals has broader implications” (2013, p. 186), especially when “the appearance of being amateur” supports “low-expectations” and “low overheads” (2013, p. 187). However, unlike the tech start-ups Hamilton discusses, Influencers are not chiefly motivated to minimize their production costs and suppress expectations from customers but rather perform carefully orchestrated bouts of amateurism alongside more polished presentations of the self in order to maintain an impression of relatability. As Influencers become more refined in their craft, their original appeal as “real people” (Hill, 2005, p. 178) who are “ordinary celebrity” (Turner, 2010) “without overt manipulation” (Senft, 2008, p. 6) has to be strategically and periodically reenacted in other to stimulate “the populist thrust of [their] DIY, participatory feel” (Ross, 2014, p. 37) as a “return to credibility” (Luckman, 2013, p. 249).

“Calibrated amateurism” is a modern adaptation of Erving Goffman’s (1956) theories of strategic interaction and Dean MacCannell’s (1973) study of tourist settings as “staged authenticity.” In The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, Goffman (1956, pp. 10-11) distinguishes between a “sincere” performer and a “cynical” performer. A sincere performer is one who is “convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality” and is able to persuade his audience that his presentation is genuine. However, a cynical performer is one who “may be moved to guide the conviction of this audience only as a means to other ends, having no ultimate concern in the conception that they have of him or of the situation.” Cynical performances may be utilized for “self-interest,” for “private gain,” or for what the performer perceives to be for “the good of the community.” In this respect, it is not always discernible whether family Influencers are “sincere” or “cynical” as the domestic fillers they perform are ultimately oriented to draw in their followers whose attention is tied to the Influencers’ revenue.

Goffman (1956) defines the “personal front” (pp. 13-14) or “front region” (1956, pp. 66-68) or “front stage” (1956, p. 78) as the portion of a person’s performance that is displayed publicly for an audience. It comprises an “appearance,” which marks the performer’s social status during the exchange, and a “manner,” which marks “the interaction role the performer will expect to play in the on-coming situation” (1956, p. 15). Audiences naturally expect congruence between the performer’s “appearance” and “manner,” and the interaction that results between audience and performer usually requires both to signpost their status through “symbols” (1956, p. 15). Of this, the anchor material family Influencers conscientiously produce is chiefly the “front region.”

In contrast, Goffman (1956) defines the “back region” or “backstage” (pp. 69-70) as where the unseen “action” (p. 21) and “suppressed facts make an appearance” (pp. 69-70). The “backstage” features performers “out of character,” and for this reason, it is usually obscured from the audience as a form of “impression management” (Goffman, 1956, p. 70). In the “backstage,” performers are very likely to “correct” or “conceal” their “errors,” “mistakes,” and failures before presenting their act to an audience, thus giving the impression of their “infallibility” (Goffman, 1956, p. 27). They are also likely to conceal any “dirty work” mobilized to sustain their performance or conceal the fact that the actual “action” required to produce the “expression” is severely overrated by the audience concealed from the “backstage” by the performance (Goffman, 1956, p. 28). In this regard, it is no longer apparent if the domestic fillers enacted by family Influencers belong firmly in the “backstage” since these performances are equally managed, purposefully ridden with “error,” and makes visible the literal “dirty work” of their craft, such as BTS of filming equipment and the backlash with which they cope as prominent microcelebrities. It is at this juncture that Goffman’s (1956) theory of “scheduling” (p. 84) and MacCannell’s (1973) theory of “staged authenticity” converge.
Scheduling Staged Authenticity

To paint the illusion of relatability, Goffman (1956) argues that performers may engage in “scheduling” (p. 84) to segregate different audiences from each other. This is so that only one aspect of a persona is presented as required (Goffman, 1956, pp. 30-31, 84-85). Performers may also obscure the “routine character” of their act and stress its spontaneity so as to foster the impression that this act is unique and specially tailored to whoever is watching (Goffman, 1956, pp. 31-32).

In tandem with performers/family Influencers putting together “backstage” with them, fostering the impression that they have entered a space usually inaccessible to others outside their social group or team. Here, there may be some “informalit[ies]” and “limitations” in “decorum,” which Goffman (1956) defines as “the way in which the performer comports himself while in visual or aural range of the audience but not necessarily engaged in talk with them” (p. 67). However, this “backstage” is seldom as spontaneous as it postures to be but is instead a deliberate effort to manufacture a “back region.”

In his exceptional excerpt describing the pursuit of authenticity in tourist settings, MacCannell (1973) writes,

Just having a back region generates the belief that there is something more than meets the eye; even where no secrets are actually kept, back regions are still the places where it is popularly believed the secrets are . . . An unexplored aspect of back regions is how their mere existence, and the possibility of their violation, functions to sustain the commonsense polarity of social life into what is taken to be intimate and “real” and what is thought to be “show.” (p. 591)

In response, and turning to the contemporary phenomena of commercial lifestyle blogs, Abidin (2014b) similarly argues that some microcelebrities “capture attention by turning usually private events into a public performance” in order to “captivate an audience” (p. 2). Goffman (1956, pp. 78-82) offers that one motivation behind impression management in the “backstage” is that performers may feel the need to demonstrate their “familiarity” with the team by actively expressing and displaying their comfort and intimacy with each other.

In tandem with performers/family Influencers putting more of the “back region” on display, audiences/followers are also pushing for more consumption of BTS, at times even “demanding increasing levels of disclosure on [the] supposed[ly] ‘private’, ‘unseen’, ‘secret’, or ‘personal’” lives (Abidin, 2013) of Influencers. Perhaps, this desire is best encapsulated by MacCannell’s (1973) observation of tourists who crave authenticity:

... tourists try to enter back regions of the places they visit because these regions are associated with intimacy of relations and authenticity of experiences . . . tourist settings are arranged to produce the impression that a back region has been entered even when this is not the case . . . between the front and the back there is a series of special spaces designed to accommodate tourists and to support their beliefs in the authenticity of their experiences. (p. 589)

Very tellingly, the domestic fillers that family Influencers produce are reminiscent of such tourist pursuits of “the real.” Focusing on the premise of the Influencer as the performer, I introduce this contemporary manifestation of the staged “backstage” in digital spaces as calibrated amateurism.

Calibrated Amateurism

“Calibrated amateurism” is a practice and aesthetic in which actors in an attention economy labor specifically over crafting contrived authenticity that portrays the raw aesthetic of an amateur, whether or not they really are amateurs by status or practice, by relying on the performance ecology of appropriate platforms, affordances, tools, cultural vernacular, and social capital. When orchestrated conscientiously, calibrated amateurism may give the impression of spontaneity and unfilteredness despite the contrary reality. In her work on Influencers’ commercial uses of selfies, Abidin (2016, p. 10) describes such staging as “tacit labour” or “a collective practice of work that is understated and under-visibilized from being so thoroughly rehearsed that it appears as effortless and subconscious” (cf. “tacit knowledge” in Polanyi, 1958). Despite its veil of improvisation, calibrated amateurism is elegantly undertaken to foster an air of relatability (Abidin, 2015a) among Influencers or the capability of Influencers to convince their followers to feel a rapport and identify with them.

The “calibration” aspect of calibrated amateurism speaks back to three developments within the microcelebrity economy. First, in relation to the increasing digital savvy with tools and literacies, calibrated amateurism marks out a standard scale of technology use, such as when Influencers selectively toggle among smartphones, handycams, videocams, and professional studio equipment when recording content to convey various states of the amateur aesthetic. Second, in relation to family Influencers’ complementary use of anchor content and filler content, calibrated amateurism adjusts expectations and comparisons between both content streams, such as when “anchor” music covers are edited to omit mistakes to convey good quality, while “filler” impromptu jam sessions are edited to include goofy BTS to convey casualness. Third, in relation to the dominance of luxury-oriented immaculate female Instagram Influencers, calibrated amateurism correlates various performances of apparent spontaneity and revelations into the backstage with a larger standard of an emergent BTS genre of (scripted) performance.

The “amateur” aspect of calibrated amateurism anchors relatability in five ways. First, while the anchor content may take more time to produce and is intentionally scheduled to bait anticipation and longing among followers, the frequency of filler content is almost daily to convey a sense of spontaneity
and continuity. Second, the **genre** of filler content is usually purposefully inane and mundane to depict an image of domesticity and to stage a sense of privacy (Abidin, 2014b) such that followers feel they are allowed sneak peeks into a traditionally inaccessible aspect of life. Third, capitalizing on the **affordances** of various social media, Influencers cement or subvert uses of various platforms to convey an unfiltered aesthetic, such as when serial versions of the same (moving) image are uploaded (i.e., unfiltered then filtered images on Instagram, outtakes then actual-takes on Snapchat, etc.) to intentionally indicate multiple attempts and imply authentic disclosure. Fourth, in response to the **cultural norms** of various platforms and their respective users, Influencers may also reinforce or challenge followers’ expectations and establish themselves as veritably authentic by committing the odd faux pas (i.e., sudden angry outbursts on usually pristine Instagram captions in the spur of the moment) or engaging in meta-self-parody (i.e., producing “Types of YouTubers” videos while themselves being YouTubers). Finally, where the luxury-oriented hyperfeminine Instagram Influencers that have dominated the economy thus far occasionally use the BTS aesthetic to foster a sense of realness with their followers, family Influencers who draw on calibrated amateurism have turned the BTS genre into a bona fide genre and **mainstay** in their own ecology.

### Follower Engagement

As a mark of their relatability and in line with sponsors’ and clients’ demands for more customer engagement, Influencers frequently go beyond digital estates to interact with followers in the flesh. Among family Influencers, the most common of these are fan meet-and-greets and invitations to events. The Reality Changers, for instance, published a short 1:08 video—as opposed to their regular vlogs that average 10 min—inviting followers to watch them perform music covers at the “People en Español Festival” (realitychangers, 2014a). Published on YouTube a day before the 2-day meet-and-greet, the family speaks into a handicam with shaky camera work conveying spontaneity, in front of a backdrop and empty hall that looks to be the platform on which they will perform. This gives followers the impression that the family took time out of their busy dress rehearsals to keep their audience updated, and the 360° view of the venue that the father revealed served as a teaser of actual things to come. In another tease for the event VidCon, the family is seen lying on the bed in their home before leaving for the event—the father tells followers “we’re gonna start literally driving right now”—to invite followers to meet with them (realitychangers, 2014c). In a follow-up video posted the following week, the family publishes clips from BTS at VidCon, featuring fellow YouTubers and Influencers they have met, the backstage logistics before their performance, and their interactions with followers who came down to meet with them. This included a video selfie of the family in front of what looks to be at least a hundred screaming fans in the frame (realitychangers, 2014d). This circuit of posting invitation videos to create anticipation and recap videos to present reflections has become an effective feedback loop in which followers feel acknowledged on digital estates and in physical spaces. The follow-up videos continue to bait the attention of followers who tune in hoping to catch a glimpse of themselves of camera, which in turn encourages them to be more enthusiastic and engaging during physical meet-and-greet in order to increase their chances of being on camera. This echoes findings from Arvidsson et al. (2016, p. 922) that actors in participatory culture contribute to the valuation of their economy by simultaneously generating value (i.e., generating content) and differentiating value (i.e., valuating content), and therefore constitute an “audience commodity” (Arvidsson & Bonini in Arvidsson et al., 2016). Thus, these feedback loops serve not only as archives or content for their digital estates but become events in themselves when viewers relive the meet-and-greet and their experiences are mediated through the perspective of the family Influencers.

The Eh Bee Family similarly acknowledge their followers, but in one particular instance, harnessed their strong follower base to locate the camera they lost while at Disneyland. After publishing the announcement of their lost camera on Twitter—“Spends the whole day vlogging at Disneyland . . . loses camera. If anyone finds a lost G7X, come say hi and hang out with us.” (Eh Bee Family, 2016k)—and pleading for its return as it contained footage that was presumably for their digital estates—“Ugh . . . you can keep the camera if you find it. I just need the footage So much fun stuff was filmed today at Disneyland!” (Eh Bee Family, 2016m)—the family managed to retrieve their camera. In a selfie with the group of girls who returned the camera, the Eh Bee Family (2016l) posted the caption, “This is what honesty looks like! Thank you for returning our camera!”

These continuous real-time updates, albeit merely filler material, allowed viewers to follow along their drama and invest in the emotional cycle of their ordeal—problem, escalation, anticipation, resolution, and relief included. The “lost camera” Tweets were widely retweeted by followers who also replied with well-wishes and multiple tweets seeking updates. The transient sense of community centered on the drama was brought to a close when the Eh Bee Family uploaded a follow-up video on YouTube 2 days later. In the aesthetic of a talking head video filmed via a mounted camera on their drive to pick up their lost camera, mother and father recounted their day and the emotional turmoil they felt regarding their loss. To emphasize the severity of their loss, the mother told the camera “memories from the seven hours were on there” and was quickly interjected by the father who corroborated this sense of loss with “and we also filmed some funny skits before, that was on our memory card . . . I didn’t get a chance to move it on to the computer” (Eh Bee Family, 2016j). Attempting to highlight that this loss was less to do with their digital estates and commercial investments and more to do with audience engagement and intimacy, the parents had this seemingly spontaneous exchange:
In the rest of the video, the family recounts how a follower had found the camera in a bathroom and sent them a message via Instagram to get in touch. Both parents repeatedly expressed their surprise at this follower who was “honest,” “wholesome,” “good people,” and “the good Samaritan” and promised to “reward” her. Arriving at the house, they are greeted by three young girls, one seemingly high-school aged and two elementary-school aged. The mother dismounts the videocam from the car and films the father interacting with the girls. In one swift action, the father took out the memory card from the camera and handed the device back to the oldest girl to keep as a reward. The father reiterates, “the memories that we had, that was the most important thing, it wasn’t about the camera.” The scene then cuts to the mother walking toward them with a “cash reward” of US$200. Congruent with their Influencer persona as a family that makes comedy sketches as a wholesome activity (rather than a commercial one), both parents close the video by restating that honesty begets rewards and that “good things come to good people.”

In their engagement with followers, family Influencers—like some Influencers of other genres—are cross-platform, meaning that each of their social media platforms and the various channels on each platform may be curated for specific content and reasons. This is a savvy capitalization of the specific community norms (García-Rapp, 2016) and vernaculars (Gibbs, Meese, Arnold, Nansen, & Carter, 2014) of each subcultural community of followers across different platforms. In the case of the Eh Bee Family, for instance, comedic skits are published on their mainstay Vine; compilations of their Vine series are uploaded on YouTube, which also contains their domestic filler vlogs, especially Q&As; Twitch is reserved for livestreaming their gameplay and “after dark” conversations with viewers; Instagram showcases high-quality photographs of the family at various Influencer engagements; whereas the images on Twitter appear more spontaneous, grainy, and unfiltered cataloging random thoughts and shout-outs on-the-go. In the specific instance of their “lost camera” series of social media posts, Vines were 6-second comedic sketches filmed around Disneyland with little reference to the incident; Twitter was the backchannel used to engage with their followers through live updates of the ordeal and to harness their “free labour” that is “willfully given and enjoyed” (Terranova in Kennedy, 2013); and YouTube was used to eventually collate their reflections on the entire event. Followers who are tuned in to only one platform will miss out crucial context for the overall picture and not be aware of the family Influencer’s corroborative interactions with their audience. This echoes Abidin’s (2016, p. 6) work on Influencers’ commercial selfies, where she asserts that “an ecology of selfie work across different platforms” demonstrate that Influencers curate distinct representations of selfies on each social medium to convey contrasting messages and solicit varied follower responses. As such, loyal followers or “hardcore” fans appear to be those who conscientiously follow Influencers on all their digital estates in order to receive both anchor content and various genres of filler content.

Follower Reactions

Reactions from followers to the videos posted by family Influencers are overwhelmingly positive, and the handful of negative comments seem directed to their filler content rather than their anchor content. A vast majority of the comments reveal followers perceiving the domestic lives of family Influencers as ideal and enviable. In response to one of the Reality Changers’ music covers featuring both Alexa and Eliana (realitychangers, 2013), one follower reveals their emotional reaction with “For the first time I saw this I literally cried . . . :) <3” while another follower displays their desire to emulate after them: “I love your family bonding . . . wish I could have a family like that . . . will May God bless you more guys . . .” Similarly, the KidzBop series of Vines produced by the Eh Bee Family (2014a) demonstrate approval—“Best family ever. Lol. Amazing parenting”—and envy from followers: “I love you guys I’m a huge fan I wish I was in your family it is probualy fun [sic].”

More specifically, some followers publicly endorse the parenting of family Influencers and their young children who grow up on the Internet:

Eliana seems to be very strong emotionally beyond her years. She kind of smiled when her little fishy died. And she did not smile because she was happy, but because she was strong. And that is unusual for such a young child to have figured out that so young, how to keep the tears back. I’m impressed. Good parenting Jorge. Hugs to you and your girls! (realitychangers, 2011b)

Awesome! Beyond the performance, the fact that a dad will sing with his daughters thus transmitting the love of music to them is already GOLD! (realitychangers, 2013)

Other followers are up front about their growing fandom over the youngest members of family Influencers, with comments such as “Head’s up man, I’m stealing your child <3 haha c:” (realitychangers, 2011b) and “How can I get my baby girl to be like her? super cute . . .” (realitychangers, 2011b).
At times, followers may express some ambivalence about family Influencers' parenting methods. In response to the Eh Bee Family’s KidzBop series of Vines, one scrutinizing follower notes that the daughter may have poor hygiene:

Your daughter is missing many teeth. I only lost one tooth as a kid, one wisdom tooth as a teen. I don’t ever take care of my teeth like i should, but they stay healthy enough, I guess. (Eh Bee Family, 2014a)

In another instance responding to the Reality Changers’ viral “Eliana and the Dead Fish” video, a follower offers advice regarding pet care: “Awe sorry for your loss but remember to put air raters filter a proper fish tank and and water conditioner to” (realitychangers, 2011b).

Negative comments seem to be few and far between but are rarely in response to family Influencers’ public parenting on the Internet. Some may criticize the mundaneness of their content, such as this follower responding to the Reality Changers’ filming of Eliana’s first encounter with death via her pet fish:

There is something wrong in filming such scenes-what if it were you some years ago after the death of someone close. NO OFFENCE—am from different continent I would never film such moment. WHAT IS THE DAMN POINT [sic]? (realitychangers, 2011b)

Some followers who have become somewhat possessive fans over particular children in the family Influencer unit may also perceive sibling rivalry, such as this follower who evaluates Eliana’s singing as positive and Alexa’s behavior as negative: “The younger one was better than the older one!!!! And then the older one is being mean to the young one!!!! Sooooooooo unfair” (realitychangers, 2013).

Directing the domestic filler genre more specifically, a handful of followers felt the Eh Bee Family overplayed the drama of their lost camera. They also began attacking followers who were posting compliments as being overdramatic:

That’s kinda stupid to give them $200. They found a camera and told them. Big deal. They can always buy a new one. So stop saying “Oh you’re a family to look up to.” And “That’s so kind!” It’s super annoying. (Eh Bee Family, 2016j)

Finally, in the genre of negative comments are haters who address the commerce of family Influencers. These comments were hardly observed on the digital estates of family Influencers, although it is unverifiable if they have been removed or censored. In response to the mother of the Eh Bee Family emphasizing that they wanted to retrieve their lost camera genuinely for their “memories,” one hater writes:

SO, you’re NOT vloggers huh, then I guess you didn’t monetize your channel right, you just do this for fun RIGHT????? (Eh Bee Family, 2016j)

While this tension between monetizing and enjoyment in family Influencer commerce is not the focus of this article, this reaction highlights the fact that enjoyment is often overplayed and reiterated to obscure the commercial aspect of the practice. This demonstrates that the domestic fillers performed by family Influencers are indeed a crucial strategy to foster relatability between Influencers and followers because Influencers have the allowance to visibilize their “off-screen” persona and interact with followers in ways not accommodated for in their anchor content. Followers also seem to be aware of the relatability allure in domestic filler material, as evidenced by a passionate and long response in the same “lost camera” post:

... Every family has issues and when we watch a channel like yours and NOTHING bad ever happens, it can get annoying. Well this video changed my viewpoint. It’s not easy to see that you are genuine when everything just goes perfectly all the time. Just like the rest of us, you have pitfalls in life. Losing your camera was for a reason . . . It showed us that you are real, and have real issues just like the rest of us. [. . .] now I (we) see a side of you that you might want to make more public in the future, because it matters. People don’t always want to just see the good stuff. Real life isn’t all good all the time, however, you guys brought the best out of an unfortunate situation, and I’m glad to see it all worked out. Cheers and blessings! (Eh Bee Family, 2016j)

This desire of followers to observe the raw, unfiltered emotions of family Influencers is best encapsulated as what Grindstaff (2002, pp. 19-20) refers to as “the money shot.” In her work on reality TV talk shows, Grindstaff notes that the audience is most captivated by a display of human emotionality and volatility so as to signpost one’s performance as “real,” “ordinary,” and “authentic.” In reality TV talk shows, these are often expressions of sorrow or shock, such as when a partner reveals that they have been cheating on their other half in front of a live audience. In the genre of family Influencers, however, these “money shots” appear mostly to be positive, such as when followers specify particular video segments in which the family displays utmost rapport—“1:15-1:23 awww so cute. Love how the dad says: Are you gonna be okay? And she says back, I better, i better someday xd” (realitychangers, 2011b)—or when a child bares their most innocent or cute face—“00:5 to 00:13! look at her eyes! sooooo adorable . . . ” (realitychangers, 2011b).

As a testament of their effective feedback loop of digital and physical interactions, a segment of comments also show followers anticipating direct and reciprocal relations with Influencers. In response to the Eh Bee Family retrieving their lost camera with the help of their followers, one person writes, “See this video proves that they read ALL there coments. You guys are truly amazing [sic]” (Eh Bee Family, 2016j). Similarly, directing the Reality Changers’ domestic filler of acknowledging fan mail, one follower who spots their work featured writes, “Im glad that she
liked the handmade card I made her: The Party Hearty one” (realitychangers, 2011d). In fact, this feedback loop seems to have generated a hierarchy of followers, where those who are more loyal, more invested, or have more resources feel more valued over others who are not acknowledged. In response to the many cards and presents Eliana received from fans, one follower note, “I watch you guys, but i don’t have money to send anything” (realitychangers, 2011d).

Exclamations of desire toward family Influencers such as “omg ur fam is perf!! im crying!! pls adopt me!!” are not unusual, and criticism of the work in which these very young children engage as part of their family Influencer commerce is rare. Perhaps this is in part due to the fact that the parents in family Influencer units seem to preempt backlash and continuously justify the digital labor of their children as a precaution.

**Justifying Young Digital Labor**

In her work on micro-microcelebrity, Abidin (2015b) writes that even though these children are prominent on digital platforms, their work has yet to be “formally recognized as labour,” is not regulated by any governing body, and falls outside the jurisdiction of child labor laws that have thus far only governed mainstream industry child stars. While this may be similar with the children in family Influencer units, parents have justified the digital labor of their young through four main mechanisms.

First, parents emphasize that their children are having fun, experiencing joy, displaying enthusiasm, and are willingly participating in their digital estates. In one video, Reality Changers daughters Alexa and Eliana are seen goofing around making funny faces in the background and at times even playfully holding up objects to obstruct the camera lens or going out of frame while their father is addressing followers on camera (realitychangers, 2014a). Instead of asking them to tone down, he allows their voices and actions to drown him out, himself reciprocating with funny faces to express that his daughters are spontaneously having fun. In another instance, in reference to the Eh Bee Family mother mentioning in a Q&A that it has been 3 years since they started making Vines, the father asks the children, “You guys having fun still?” Both the Eh Bee children swiftly holler in unison “oh yeah!” (Eh Bee Family, 2015b), to which the parents respond that their filming is a fun activity that everyone enjoys. In the same Q&A, the parents respond to why the family has not yet revealed their real names despite many requests from followers. The mother says, “We never did this to become famous, or to have our names out there, or for any other reason than to just make people laugh and smile, and make your day a bit better” (Eh Bee Family, 2015b). In this narrative, she not only highlights the fun her children experience and their willingness to participate but also subtly shifts the emphasis from labor and fame to the intrinsic motivation of wanting to create joy.

Second, parents usually regularly allow children to take-over some aspects of domestic filler content, in which the focus becomes child-driven narrative frivolity. The Eh Bee Family (2015b) often leave in outtakes in which either child is interrupting a speaking parent or is making a mistake when addressing their audience. In another example, the Reality Changers father captures both his daughters goofing around while he was addressing viewers through a handicam (realitychangers, 2014c). A playful Eliana then accidentally rolls off the bed and kicks the handheld camera away, and viewers observe a series of blurry images from the flight of the camera, accompanied by a distant exclamation from the father, “Ah! You dropped the camera!” followed by a burst of laughter from both daughters. The main content of that piece of domestic filler then shifted from Jorge addressing his followers to both daughters jumping on the bed and harassing their father on camera. At times, this may be an awkward experience especially when long silences are caught on tape. In their very first vlog on YouTube (Eh Bee Family, 2014c), the Eh Bee Family father points the camera to his daughter and asks, “What do you wanna talk about? [ . . . ] Is there anything you wanna say? What do you wanna say?” She responds only with a blank stare and a few gestures, keeping mostly silent while her father continually prompts her to respond. When she finally decided on wanting to show viewers a particular family routine they usually do, the father follows her lead and films her in action. This appears to be a purposeful strategy to convey the raw aesthetic of calibrated amateurism. More crucially, this gives the impression that the children have some editorial discretion and agency to shape the content being produced, even if their blabber is not always coherent.

Third, parents demonstrate children’s consent to participate or semblances of disallowing children to participate as part of their disciplining. In a very early Eh Bee Family (2014b) Q&A in which the children appeared to be less comfortable in front of the camera, the father is observed holding the handicam still while his children negotiate getting into the camera frame, shuffling on the couch, moving off camera, and finally settling in properly to begin. He waits till they appear comfortable before asking on camera, “Are you ready to go?” When both children nod, he continues with the Q&A. There are also instances when the children are explicitly told on camera that they may stop filming and go off, such as in one particular incident 7 min into a 22-min Q&A where the Eh Bee Family father (2016i) turns to his children to say, “So you guys go have fun, and I’m gonna do some of the more serious questions.” They exit the camera frame, and he continues the Q&A with his wife. In several videos, only one of the two Eh Bee Family or Reality Changers children are visible on camera. Followers leave comments asking where the missing child is, only to have the family Influencers respond that they were being disciplined and could not film that day or that they simply did not feel like appearing on camera in that time. A more subtle instance of children’s consent is when parents capture
them on camera, notice that they want some downtime, and transit to another focus altogether. In their recap of the VicCon event (realitychangers, 2014d), father Jorge reveals a short snippet in which Eliana was found sleeping behind a table during a formal address, completely uninterested in the more “adult” proceedings of the day. This contrasted his earlier footage in which she was prancing around on a sugar high and constantly grabbing the handcam from him to speak to the camera. Toward the end of the video, the scene cuts to the family lazing in their bedroom at home. Jorge turns the camera to Alexa, who is playing minecraft on the desktop across the room, and asks what her favorite part of the event was. Without even moving her gaze from the computer, a disinterested Alexa mutters “I got to meet lots of people I’ve never met.” Her voice trails off, before she suddenly exclaims, “I’m gonna die! Oh my god! Look I’ve got so much iron . . .” in response to her gameplay. On that note, Jorge changes the conversation to Alexa’s love of minecraft, jesting, “She’s way too into uh, minecraft . . . She’s obsessed with minecraft, I’m not even kidding . . .” The rest of the video continues on the theme of minecraft, including Eliana’s views on the game.

Finally, parents hyper-visualize the everyday routine of life to reiterate that their microcelebrity children are still “normal kids.” In response to a Q&A where a viewer asks if the Eh Bee Family (2015b) kids ever fight, the mother responds in mock surprise: “Of course they fight! They’re normal children, they’re not robots!” Other routines such as homework and chores are frequent talking head domestic filler topics, although such posturing may be framed more humorously and naturally. In one instance of playful banter between the Eh Bee Family (2016i) parents, the mother tells the father, “You know what Ms Monkey [microcelebrity pet name for their daughter] said? She said ‘Can you help me with my homework cos you’re smarter than papa?’” to which the father responds with laughter.

#familygoals

Family Influencers are primarily famous for the “anchor” content in which they display their creative talents in music, drama, and the arts. It is this aspect of their microcelebrity that has landed them performances at prestigious festivals and events. Yet, their appeal is dominantly sustained by an undercurrent display of charisma via the “filler” content in which they publicize snippets of their domestic lives as an operational family. Such intentional performances of the backstage are becoming increasingly popular as a strategy to convey relatability with followers and are now utilized by Influencers of many genres. Through the ethnographic study and content analysis of family Influencers and their digital estates, I have conceptualized this staging of this seemingly raw, unfiltered, spontaneous aesthetic as “calibrated amateurism.” So convincing are these displays that family Influencers seldom come under fire for subjecting their young children to hours of digital labor for content production. In fact, the “filler” of calibrated amateurism sincerely convinces followers that these performers are “family” before “Influencers” and privilege the care, well-being, and enjoyment of their children above their commerce. Perhaps, for this reason, family Influencers have not been embroiled in media panics and scandals unlike their counterpart reality TV families. In contrast, followers envy and pine after their craft, unity, and family spirit to the extent of wanting to emulate after them as #familygoals.

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Note

1. In various popular media articles, building family-based businesses has been named “familypreneur” or family entrepreneurship. This perspective is focused on how families can be self-sustaining (Samuel, 2015) and serve as alternative philosophies of education and parenting (The Familypreneurs Podcast, n.d.). While family Influencers can be one form of family-based commerce, this article is focused more on the anthropology of their practice rather than their business model.

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