Constructing Microcelebrity Identity Narratives in Celebrity News

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Abstract: The article delves into the transformation of celebrity culture, marked by the ascendancy of microcelebrities, with Lydia Millen, who boasts 1.2 million Instagram followers, serving as a case study. It explores the mechanisms through which digital personalities foster relatable identities and assesses the impact of journalism on the identity construction of microcelebrities, drawing on news coverage of Millen. By analyzing the interaction between Millen's self-representation and journalistic portrayal, the study seeks to uncover the power dynamics at play. Ultimately, the aim is to deepen our comprehension of modern celebrity culture and the consequences of media attention on microcelebrities.

Keywords: microcelebrity, myths, critical discourse analysis, celebrification

1. Introduction

In the digital era, the rise of influencers or 'microcelebrities' represents a paradigm shift in celebrity culture. Microcelebrities, such as Lydia Millen, are typically characterized by their ability to construct relatable identities, curate engaging content, and build rapport with their followers on social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok[1]. The advent of the information age has introduced novel avenues for ordinary individuals to gain media attention, which can subsequently be leveraged into promotional activities, specifically in the realm of celebrity endorsements [2]. Lydia Millen's brand, built around sharing content on fashion, fitness, lifestyle, and travel since 2012, exemplifies the potent influence of these digital personalities [3].

Nevertheless, their public personas also attract examination, criticism, and interpretation through journalism, thereby redefining their identities and impacting the power balance within media culture. This essay aims to investigate the manner in which journalism restructures the identities of microcelebrities, utilizing examples of news coverage on Lydia Millen. It will probe into the dynamics between Millen's self-representation and the journalistic portrayal of her life and activities. Furthermore, it will scrutinize the power structures inherent in this process, thereby enriching our comprehension of the intricate terrain of contemporary celebrity culture.

2. Literature Review

Celebrity is a complex, culturally constructed concept [4]. From the perspective of Stuart Hall's media representation theory (1997), celebrity status is not a naturally occurring phenomenon, but rather a manipulated construct. It is not an inherent aspect of human society, but a creation within it. Media has played a pivotal role in the production and perpetuation of celebrity[5]. Celebrity is also constructed in the press-driven narratives of fame, wherein a binary contrast between "private" and "public" is established and associates authenticity with a self that is disclosed only in private spheres, yet is subsequently portrayed by news outlets for public dissemination[5]. In the historical context, as Usher points out, the advent of celebrity culture in the 18th century occurred in tandem with the Enlightenment era and the surge of rationalism[5]. This cultural phenomenon, marked by the personalized depiction of individuals in newspapers, represented the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie and the waning influence of the monarchy.

The way we interpret celebrity today in the journalism discourse is comparatively, predominantly linked to the rise of mass communications and contemporary popular culture in the 20th century[6]. The rituals of celebrification in media industry are discussed in Boorstin's study[7] and he gives a critique insight from a conservative columnist's perspective: The celebrity, correspondingly, can be viewed as the human embodiment of the 'pseudo event' - a construct specifically tailored for media consumption and appraised based on the extent and efficacy of their media visibility. This includes the transformation of individual celebrities into commodities via mechanisms such as promotion, publicity, and advertising.

Furthermore, celebrities are implicated in processes that negotiate and form cultural identity. Celebrities are represented in the media as notable, heroic figures distinguished by their achievements or the manifest virtues of their character. This, in turn, contributes to the prevalence of entertainers within the celebrity domain[7].

However, these mythical cognitions of celebrity in popular culture are gradually deconstructed. Ordinariness and au-

thenticity are introduced into the research on the attributes of celebrity. As a way to offset the eroding sense of community, society is seen gravitating towards the image of the celebrity, investing significantly in interactions with diverse portrayals of these figures. Fundamentally, the construct of celebrity is being utilised to forge a new form of community through the media[6].Simultaneously, the emergence of the microcelebrity concept illustrates this shifting paradigm. This phenomenon has evolved alongside the advent of digital technology, particularly the robust display capabilities offered by webcamming technology[8].

Earlier scholarly explorations of celebrity culture allow us to understand microcelebrity not only as a term signifying an individual whose influence is not primarily driven by the orchestrated efforts of public relations and marketing teams - a scenario often viewed as an exception rather than the norm [9]- but also as a process in which ordinary individuals or public figures undergo a metamorphosis into celebrities[9].

It indicates that microcelebrity are more organic in their rise to prominence, compared to the traditional celebrity in a sociocultural context. Social media platforms enable individuals to build their personal brands. From this perspective, users in the age of Web 2.0 are empowered by gaining increased control over their media experiences[10].

The contrasts and tensions between ordinary and extraordinary are introduced in Gamson's research[11]. In his seminal study, Gamson examines the dichotomy and tension that exists between notions of the ordinary and the extraordinary within the celebrity construct[11]. He postulates that the celebrity culture functions primarily as a commodity system, thereby suggesting that its functioning does not necessarily hinge on the extraordinary attributes of the celebrities themselves. This idea is paralleled in Turner's work, where he posits that certain sectors within the media industry have taken to manufacturing celebrities from ordinary individuals who possess no particularly notable abilities or achievements[6]. This is a departure from the conventionally understood notion of celebrities as individuals of extraordinary accomplishments, as delineated in Rojek's taxonomy of fame[12]. Within the contemporary context, the ordinary people are transformed into online celebrities and also products in the commodity system by the celebrity industry that has established its own management systems, star-manufacturing procedures and strategic techniques such as exploring algorithmic sorting, platform policies, and personalised notifications[13].

The myth of 'democratization' of fame in the culture of technological participation is intricately connected with notions of authenticity, meritocracy, and entrepreneurialism, and is deeply romanticized. As argued by Marwick, in a context where social media is linked with democracy, egalitarianism, and participation, the San Francisco technology scene views itself as exceptional[1]. This narrative upholds their perceived uniqueness within this socio-cultural setting, fortifying a system deeply embedded in privilege and centred around the core beliefs of neoliberal capitalism.

This cultural function of the celebrity forms an essential part of the discourse in celebrity journalism. As Usher discusses, the digital age has seen an expansion in this discourse, with the evolution of media landscapes into interconnected, diverse, and simultaneous platforms propelling this growth[5]. This not only enhances the visibility of celebrity news but also supports the complex communicative ecosystems that have emerged. These systems, in turn, reinforce the dual roles of journalism and celebrity as both the architects and the products of capitalist democracies. In this way, the interplay between the cultural role of celebrities and their depiction in journalism forms a crucial part of the discourse within the neoliberal capitalist landscape. Microcelebrities depend on the perpetuation of hyperconsumerism and the enactment of parasocial relationships. They utilize the intensified interactions between representational and presentational media for persona construction[5].

The aforementioned parasocial interaction can be characterized as a simulated experience in which consumers engage with personas - these can be mediated depictions of presenters, celebrities, or characters - as though these personas are actually present and participating in a two-way relationship, as Labrecque illustrates[14]. In the social media age, the cultivation of parasocial interaction is not limited to conventional mass media. Instead, it can also be nurtured through messages within an online environment crafted to bridge the distance between the viewer and a mediated persona, such as a brand or celebrity[14].

The construction of this interaction necessitates the utilization of representational text, imagery, and meaning, which forms the para-social component[5]. Drawing from psychosocial theories surrounding emotional labour and the sociological concept of "emotion work" [15], these parasocial relations can be viewed as unidirectional bonds, where individuals experience a sense of intimacy and connection with a media figure, despite the absence of reciprocation.

In tandem, authenticity emerges as an intriguingly vital concept in the entire phenomenon, as Dyer elucidates. Dyer states that the concept of authenticity proves to be peculiarly vital within the entire phenomenon under discussion[16]. A lexicon encompassing terms such as immediacy, sincerity, believability, and the like is commonplace— mirroring the descriptors employed for interpersonal interactions in everyday life— so its distinctiveness might not be immediately evident[16].

Marwick also states that to evolve into a micro-celebrity, one must construct a persona, generate engaging content, and tactically entice online fans by demonstrating authenticity[1]. In this scenario, authenticity is a multifaceted attribute that ranges from direct engagement with followers to the open sharing of profoundly personal information, albeit it's a fragile quality. Although micro-celebrity utilizes the principles of mainstream celebrity culture within the realm of online interactions, these internet celebrities are not conventional celebrities. They do not have a group of agents and managers to shield them from public scrutiny, nor do they possess enormous wealth.

Authenticity can be one of the constructed attributes of Internet celebrities, and another variety of microcelebrity is that these individuals achieve fame within a limited community of fans who participates in their celebrity development[11]. The concept of niche assumes psychological prominence within such specific groups, binding them through potent emotions and shared values. Collective identity formation within these fan groups can be understood as a process fulfilling their need for belonging, distinctiveness, and comprehension[17].

In redirecting attention towards microcelebrity within the context of journalistic discourse, it is significant to acknowledge the role journalism plays in mythologizing the societal perception of identities of microcelebrities and the collective identities within the fandom communities. As indicated in Usher's study[5], journalism has been instrumental in the normalization and rationalization of the celebrity phenomenon. Concurrently, it has fostered processes that have turned public persona into a powerful cultural identifier and supporter of the socio-economic and political structures we exist within, and constitutes a key and originating feature of these institutions, shaping our shared understanding of self-identity within their confines[5].

3. Methodology

Three pieces of influencer news reporting, each focusing on the same activity of a social media influencer, Lydia Millen, have been selected as the media text examples for analysis. These three news articles were respectively gathered from the news websites of Manchester Evening News, Mail Online, and The Sun, covering a controversy involving Millen, who checked into London's luxury hotel, The Savoy, when the heating system at her home broke down. Millen, who has 1.2 million Instagram followers and posts lifestyle content, shared her decision in a TikTok video, leading to significant backlash on social media.

The research methodology for this study will be grounded in Fairclough's model for Critical Discourse Analysis[18]. Janks elaborates that utility of this approach lies in its ability to direct the analyst's attention towards the signifiers comprising the text, including specific linguistic choices, their arrangement, sequence, and layout[19]. Nonetheless, this method also necessitates acknowledging the historical determination of these choices to appreciate that these selections are bound to their respective conditions of possibility.

This methodological framework will facilitate a rigorous examination of how microcelebrity identities are represented within the domains of celebrity news and journalistic discourse. Furthermore, it will provide insights into the processes through which identity myths are constructed, particularly in relation to the dynamics of power.

Three stages are involved in this model: textual analysis (description), processing analysis (interpretation), and social analysis (explanation) [19].

4. Textual analysis: Description and Semiotic choices

At this level, the choices including words and visual elements will be analysed and compared among the selected examples.

Media Text 1: "Anger as TikTok influencer Lydia Millen claims she's visiting The Savoy to 'keep warm' ", sampled from Manchester Evening News, available at: https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/uk-news/anger-tiktok-influencer-lydia-millen-25583427

Media Text 2: " 'Tone-deaf' influencer slammed for checking into £1,000-a-night Savoy hotel after her heating broke (and poses in a £2,000 outfit)", sampled from Mail Online, available at: https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-11460805/Tone-deaf-influencer-slammed-checking-Savoy-complaining-broken-heating.html

Media Text 3: "MILLEN AROUND Inside YouTube star Lydia Millen's incredible home after she sparked cost of living row with hotel stay", sampled from The Sun, available at: https://www.thesun.co.uk/tvandshowbiz/21137157/inside-lydia-millen-incredible-home-house/

Table 1: Description Level

Language choices	Media Text 1	Media Text 2	Media Text 3
Language choices to describe Lydia Millen	Influencer; The creator, who has 1.2 million Instagram followers; Quoted phrase from Lydia Millen: "life and style from the English countryside".	A tone-deaf influencer; Identification of age and location: 34, from Milton Keynes; Emphasis on the number of her followers: 739,000 TikTok followers and over 1.2m Instagram followers through one-minute clip.	YouTube Star; A very successful YouTube and social media star; The fashion, fitness, lifestyle and travel influencer; Location and family relation mentioned : her dream country home in Buckinghamshire with her husband Alistair Keith Gordon
Language choices to describe the activity	Highlights her outfit, a grey dressing gown shown in her TikTok video; Directly cites the negative comments from social media users with the terms such as "peasants" and phrases like "half the country can't afford to turn theirs on".	Specific monetary amounts are mentioned, such as the £1,000-per-night cost of The Savoy and the £2,000 outfit Millen selects for the day; Direct quotes from social media users, using phrases such as 'satire,' and 'the rest of us peasants'. Lists Millen's replies to those comments;	Focuses on Millen's career, noting that she began in 2012 and used her platforms to share fashion-focused content, including favorite outfits, fashion hacks, and seasonal trends; Little focus on the activity of hotel stay.

Various language choices in the three media texts has built different "lexical fields" [20] and discourses of celebrity news, modulating the connoted sets of identities, values or activities that are not transparently conveyed in the texts. Identities of Lydia Millen are signified through those representational strategies: In the media text 1, Lydia Millen is portrayed as a successful influencer with a large following on social media. Her phrase "life and style from the English countryside" suggests a privileged lifestyle based on the underlying beliefs or common concepts that connect countryside with posh life and Britain's upper classes[21]. The direct quotation of social media users' negative or sarcastic comments implies criticism and resentment towards Millen's action and reflects the public sentiment, indicating a social divide and wealth disparity. A meaning is created within this lexical field: Lydia Millen is represented as an influencer out of touch with the struggles of many of her followers.

The image of Lydia Millen in the second media text is similar to the first one, insensitive to the realities of many of her followers and living an improvident life. The words are selected in a more negative light, emphasizing the contrast between her lifestyle and people who have economic struggles, such as "tone-deaf" influencer and listed specific monetary amounts and Millen's backlash against the social media comments.

Media text 3, however, is distinct in its positive portrayal of Millen. It ignores any controversy and instead showcases her success as a YouTube and social media star, highlighting the luxury of her lifestyle and home. The text makes use of language that celebrates Millen's accomplishments, with phrases like "very successful" and "just as luxe as her lifestyle", serving to frame Millen as a dedicated and successful influencer in her field.

5. Comparison through a linguistic approach

Based on Machine and Mayr 's research in Representing Action: Transitivity and Verb Processes [20] and Halliday 's work Introduction to Functional Grammar[22], I will take a transitivity analysis to examine how meaning is constructed through the use of verbs and related structures.As a component of a systemic functional linguistics, an analysis of transitivity in clause structure allows us to see who is predominantly assigned a subject (agent/participant) or object (affected/patient) role[20]. Our perception of people isn't solely shaped by how they're represented, but also by how their actions, or lack thereof, are portrayed. This understanding enables us to identify who assumes a significant role in a particular clause and who bears the consequences of that action. In addition, this can subtly promote certain discourses and ideologies, again without being explicitly stated.

5.1 Media Text 1 — Manchester Evening News:

The text heavily features material processes (verbs that express actions), such as 'claimed', 'checking into', 'took', 'share', 'heading down', 'make full use of'. Lydia Millen is primarily presented as the actor in these processes, indicating her active role in the narrative. The reactions of social media users are also expressed through verbal processes like 'said' and 'added'. The negative reaction is conveyed through words like 'anger' and 'backlash', which create a sense of conflict.

5.2 Media Text 2 — Mail Online:

In this text, similar material processes are used as in the first text ('checking into', 'shared', 'making', 'getting ready', 'pair', 'finishes off', 'spritzes', 'picking out'). However, this text includes more descriptive language and goes into more

detail about Millen's actions and choices, including the prices of her clothing and hotel stay. The reactions of social media users are reported using verbal processes, again showing negative sentiment ('slammed', 'labelled').

5.3 Media Text 3 — The Sun:

Unlike the previous two, this text contains fewer material processes, focusing more on relational processes that describe states of being and attributes ('is', 'began'). These establish Millen's status as a successful influencer and emphasize her professional achievements. There's no mention of the controversy, and thus no negative sentiment is conveyed through process verbs.

In texts 1 and 2, Millen is portrayed as the primary actor carrying out actions that receive criticism from social media users, creating a sense of conflict. Words choice and verb processes reflect this negative sentiment and the controversy at the heart of the narrative. In contrast, text 3 uses processes to present Millen in a positive light, focusing on her status and achievements. The absence of conflict in verb processes and words choice sets this text apart from the other two. This comparison reveals how transitivity analysis can be used to identify differences in how the same individual is portrayed across different media texts.

6. Visual elements

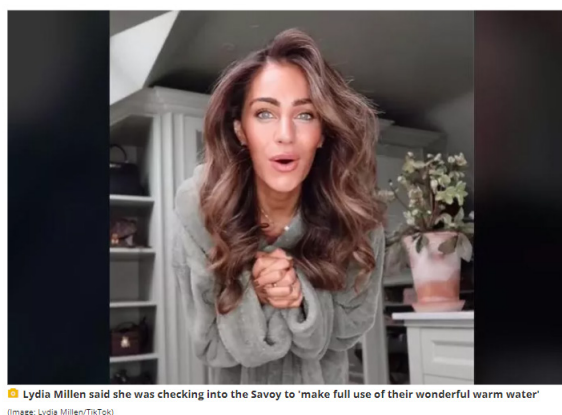It can be seen that there are some visual signs presented in these three media texts.

Figure 1: Webpage screenshot from Manchester Evening News.

Figure 2: Webpage screenshot from Manchester Evening News.

Influencer Lydia Millen, 34, from Milton Keynes, uploaded a TikTok yesterday showing herself getting ready to check into The Savoy hotel in London after the heating in her Buckinghamshire home broke. Lydia pictured at The Crown premiere earlier this month

Figure 3: Webpage screenshot from Mail Online.

The five-star Savoy hotel charges up to £1k-a-night for a room. Lydia appears to be an ambassador for the hotel so it's unclear if she paid for her recent stay

Figure 4: Webpage screenshot from Mail Online.

The influencer checked into the hotel after the heating in her Buckinghamshire home - pictured as part of a Sky advert - broke down earlier this month

Figure 5: Webpage screenshot from Mail Online.

The influencer shared this glimpse of her stunning Buckinghamshire garden earlier this year

Figure 6: Webpage screenshot from Mail Online.

Lydia Millen lives in a stunning home and she often shows fans inside
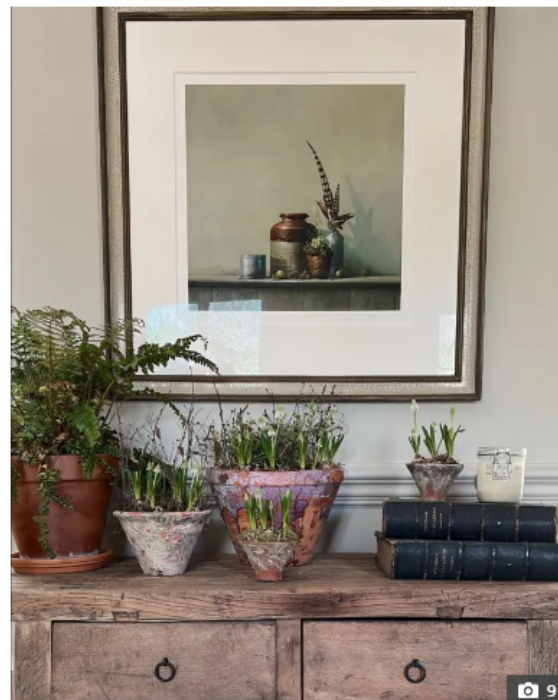Credit: Tiktok /@lydiamillen

Figure 7: Webpage screenshot from The Sun.

There's a rustic theme running throughout the space

Figure 8: Webpage screenshot from The Sun.

Lydia kits out the home with beautiful furnishings and has a penchant for vintage items

Figure 9: Webpage screenshot from The Sun.

Figure 1, 2 ,6 ,7,8 and 9 are Millen's self-generated contents from social media platforms and Figure 3, 4 and 5 are from the third-party media resources to offer a portrayal of her as views through the lens of diverse media sources.

Figure 1 and Figure 7, both extracted from the same TikTok video with Millen in her grey dressing gown as the main

subject, represent diverse visual presentations: full-length and half-length portraits featuring varied facial expressions. Respectively, these express a willingness to engage through sharing, and project a warm, welcoming smile.

Millen's self-representation in her own online public posts is selected in the media texts to reconstruct the notion of her identity. Although all media texts employ self-produced content from Millen, they still construct diverse discourses. This textual analysis demonstrates that the framing within media texts can recontextualize an identical event, contingent upon the differing objectives, values, and priorities inherent in the communication process[23].

7. Processing analysis: How the meanings are produced and received

In this stage, the connections between the text and the interactions that happen during its production, dissemination, and consumption will be explored[19]. Both linguistic and visual elements in these media texts collaboratively function to narrate stories derived from the same event. The systemic construction of these narratives yields interpretations and propagates values[23].

The textual analysis reveals the construction of distinct discourses across the three media texts. Media texts 1 and 2 exhibit a critical tone, linking the discourse on wealth disparity and consumerism to the discourse on influencer lifestyles. The two articles are generated with the communication objective of presuming readers' psychological anticipations for social comparison and group solidarity. Influencers are negatively stereotyped in these media texts, a depiction that contradicts Millen's self-perception. The press articles communicate a gap between Millen's reality and the realities of many of her followers and interpret her actions as reflective of a severe socio-economic divide.

As illustrated by the representational strategies, a discernible distinction between the two articles lies in the degree of personalization and depersonalization[20]. The second media text underscores Millen's personal motivations behind her activities by divulging numerous specifics regarding her personal circumstances, including her indulgent consumption habits. The discourses constructed here can provide a form of catharsis for those frustrated with economic disparity or perceived insensitivity of online celebrities and a way of venting their frustrations. This also confirms biases against influencers, particularly the notion that they are out of touch with the realities of ordinary people and reduces intimacy between Millen and ordinary people.

It is significant to note that, as Hall argued[24], the production and consumption of meanings might not be symmetrical. That means the meaning structures "do not constitute a 'immediate identity'", "the degrees of symmetry— that is, the degrees of 'understanding' and 'misunderstanding' in the communicative exchange— depend on the degrees of symmetry/ asymmetry (relations of equivalence) established between the positions of the 'personifications', encoder-producer and decoder-receiver".

The identities of Lydia Millen are constructed distinctly in the third media text. Her identity is constructed as an aspirational figure who has attained financial success through her social media career. It fuels the aspiration to attain a certain standard of luxury and lifestyle that Lydia embodies and reinforces the myth that the influencer admired by ordinary individuals is indeed successful and worthy of their attention.

8. Social analysis: Conditions of production and interpretation

The values and interpretations generated and absorbed in the three media texts pertain to the prevailing microcelebrity culture. The essence of this culture is mirrored in Millen's situation where she chronicles her life and personal choices publicly. As described in the press article by Mail Online[25]: "Lydia did respond to some of the backlash and insisted she was trying to keep her content positive for fans," microcelebrities are obliged to actively sustain their "publicly marketable personality"[1].In a manner similar to more conventional celebrity identities, the self-representation of a microcelebrity is carefully crafted and performed to attract attention and generate publicity.

Lydia Millen is also represented in the media texts within the sociocultural context of achieved microcelebrity[1]. An authentic and positive identity is sought to be incorporated in self-identification of Millen, through an approach of disclosing personal details and fostering the perception of intimacy to simulate friendship or closeness to her followers or audiences. This is based on the convention in microcelebrity culture: Audiences typically anticipate micro-celebrities to exude greater "authenticity" than conventional celebrities, presumably due to their detachment from the mechanizations of traditional star-creation processes. Guidelines targeting brands and marketers for successful online interactions often underscore the importance of authenticity[1]. The concept of "authenticity" in microcelebrity culture is closely tied to the idea of personal branding and microcelebrities are seen as more approachable and real compared to traditional celebrities, whose public image is often carefully managed by a team of publicists.

The role as which journalism functions here is reshaping and circulating the myths of microcelebrities. Critique, glam-

ourization and privilege of microcelebrity are embodied in the celebrity news discourse, reconstructing the class-related myths of microcelebrities by diminishing the deep connection with the audience built by persona strategies of microcelebrities[26]. Journalism tends to scrutinize the actions of microcelebrities, highlighting potential controversies, ethical dilemmas, and the pitfalls of their lifestyles by providing a more nuanced perspective on microcelebrities. Journalists can also build up or deconstruct the image of a microcelebrity through story narratives.

9. Conclusion

Through highlighting the case of Lydia Millen, it is elucidated that journalism plays a substantial role in reshaping the identities of microcelebrities within the contemporary sociocultural context. Journalism provides a critical viewpoint, allowing audiences to comprehend the nuanced realities of these digital personas. Through the practices of transparency, scrutiny, and contextualization, journalism effectively dismantles the myths and misconceptions associated with microcelebrity culture.

The power hierarchy within media culture is illustrated. While microcelebrities possess the power to project curated versions of their identities, journalism, on the other hand, wields the authority to critique, analyse, and contextualize these identities within broader societal narratives. This ongoing negotiation of power significantly contributes to the continuously evolving landscape of celebrity culture in the digital age. Using Lydia Millen as a case study underscores the complex relationship between journalism and microcelebrity culture, ultimately offering invaluable insights into the mechanics of modern celebrity culture and its interplay with media discourse.

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Appendix

Press Release Links:

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