Estonian social media micro-celebrities and their audience

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Topics for today:

• Internet and social media use among young people in Estonia

• Performing the self in front of an imagined audience: Practices by young Estonian micro-celebrities

• Fans, followers and anti-fans of Estonian micro-celebrity scene
• 97% of children aged 9–17 access the internet every day, 41% spend about 2-3 hours online (Sukk & Soo, 2018)

• Younger age groups are most versatile internet users, however, their usage is mainly social media and entertainment related (Kalmus, Realo & Siibak 2012)

The difference between age groups in WI and SME scores was statistically significant, $F(5, 983) = 16.28$ and 125.04 ($p < .001$), respectively.
The findings of EU Kids Online study amongst 9-17 year olds (n=1020), carried out in summer 2018, indicate that most popular daily online activities of youth are entertainment and related:

- 80% watch videos
- 69% listen to music
- 41% plays online games

Communicating and interacting with ones friends or family (72%) and using social media (59%) are also popular (Sukk & Soo, 2018)
Climbing the ladder of online opportunities?

I: Basic use, practical information search (approximately 82% of Estonian population)

II: Interaction-and communication oriented (e.g. online games) (one-third of the population)

III: User generated creative online activities (one-fifth of the population)

IV: Civic and political activities online (one-fifth of the population)

## Social media use in different age groups in Estonia (Kõuts et al 2018)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Social media users (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>From all internet users</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The whole sample</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationality:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonians</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian-speaking</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>respondents</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Age:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-19</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>90</td>
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<tr>
<td>30-44</td>
<td>77</td>
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<td>45-54</td>
<td>60</td>
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<td>55-64</td>
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<tr>
<td>65-74</td>
<td>34</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education:</td>
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<tr>
<td>less than secondary</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>education</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Secondary education</td>
<td>65</td>
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<tr>
<td>Higher education</td>
<td>61</td>
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</table>
Graving for attention

- 44,000,000 messages processed
- 486,000 photos posted on Yelp
- 26 new reviews
- 120 new accounts opened on LinkedIn
- 140 submissions on Reddit
- More than 2,315,000 searches
- 3,125,000 likes
- 243,055 shares
- More than 18,000 matches made
- 972,000 daily swipes on Tinder
- More than 150,000,000 e-mails are sent
- More than 430,000 tweets sent

- More than 48,000 apps downloaded on iPhone
- More than 95,000 apps downloaded on Android
- Around 56,000 photos uploaded
- 9,800 articles pinned on Pinterest
- More than 280,000 snaps sent on Snapchat
- More than 100 new domains registered
- 14 new songs added on Spotify
- More than 2,700,000 video views
- More than 39,300 hours of music listened
- More than 2,700,000 video views
- More than 139,000 hours of video watched
- More than 300 hours of video are uploaded

- Netflix: 69,500 hours of video watched
- More than 195,000 minutes of audio chatting on WeChat
- More than 21,000,000 messages sent
Imagined audience

- People engaged in social media lack information about their audience and thus “it is often difficult to determine how to behave, let alone to make adjustments based on assessing reactions” (Litt 2012:331).

- Imagined audience = mental conceptualizations of the people with whom we are communicating on social media (Litt, 2012)
  - Ideal audience
  - Nightmare audience
Imagined audience on Facebook: Estonian teen sketches (Murumaa & Siibak 2012)

Ideal audience and personal publics

- Ideal audience = mirror image of the user

- Personal publics (Schmidt 2013) on social media challenge users to “maintain equilibrium between a contextual social norm of personal authenticity that encourages information-sharing and phatic communication (the oft-cited ‘what I had for breakfast’) with the need to keep information private, or at least concealed from certain audiences” (Marwick & boyd, 2011:124).
Identity construction and communities of practice

- Online arenas offer the young opportunities for
  - self-expression,
  - Socialization,
  - creativity
  and by doing so provide ‘new ways of forming identity, and hence new forms of personhood’ (Buckingham 2007, p. 89).
• User creativity is an inherently social phenomenon and thereby linked with practices of participation (Burgess 2007).

• When ‘writing oneself into being’ (boyd, 2008), either on a SNS or some other online platform, the youth are both exploring the social matrix of relating to others as well as trying out and displaying constructions and reconstructions of one’s identity.
## Stages of online impression management (Silbak 2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages of impression management in SNS</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Typology Dimension</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Framing</td>
<td>Monitoring the environment to identify the values and expectations of peers, and determining the optimal strategies to achieve them</td>
<td>ACTIVE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Performance</td>
<td>Strategic self-presentation in the environment in order to steer the opinions of other users in the service of personal or social goals</td>
<td>EXTRINSIC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Surveillance</td>
<td>Evaluating the impact of one’s self-presentation strategies on other users</td>
<td>OTHER-ORIENTED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Validation</td>
<td>Depending on the feedback received, proceeding with the chosen self-presentation tactics or returning to stage 1.</td>
<td>STRATEGIC</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Era of celebrification

• **Celebrification** - the process through which the ordinary (understood as that which is outside the media) acquires a media form i.e. particular process by which ordinary people or public figures are transformed into celebrities (Couldry, 2004)

• **Striptease culture** (McNair 2002)

• **Celebritization** “occurs not at the individual, but at the social fields level” (Driessens 2012: 643) as it should be seen as a more thorough process of change influencing culture and society on all levels and over a larger historical span.
Who are micro-celebrities?

• A self-presentation technique in which people view themselves as a public persona to be consumed by others, use strategic intimacy to appeal to followers, and regard their audience as fans (Marwick and boyd 2011b; Senft 2008; Senft 2013).

• Micro-celebrity, is something one does, rather than something one is (Marwick 2015).

• Much of the fame of micro-celebrities is due to the fact that micro-celebrities not only engage in textual and visual storytelling about their personal lives and lifestyles but also “engage with their following in ‘digital’ and ‘physical’ spaces” so as to sustain and amplify their shared sense of camaraderie” (Abidin, 2016a: 3).
Tacit and invisible labor

- Tacit labor: a collective practice of work that is understated and under-visibilized from being so thoroughly rehearsed that it appears as effortless and subconscious (Abidin 2016)
  - Camera-ready selfie face (Abidin, 2016)
  - MySpace angle (Marwick, 2014)
  - Creating an illusion of “cuteness” through one’s clothing and make-up (Abidin, 2017)
  - Using image-enhancing and photo-editing applications (Abidin, 2016)

- Integrating “advertorials” into their channels - a compilation of advertisements and editorials, which are opinion-laden and often paid for (Abidin, 2015)
Micro-celebrity scene in Estonia

- First micro-celebrities appeared around 2014
- First micro-celebrity fan-event organized in 2016
- First influencer agency created in 2016 – Creatly
- Estonian Social Media Awards, since 2016
- In 2018 four young micro-celebrities were selected in the TOP 5 Most Influential on Young People in Estonia

First YouTubers’ Live fan-event in Kultuurikatel, 2016
• In 2016 Swedbank mobile bank video campaign „In search for the best Youtuber in Estonia?“
  - All in all 54 videos submitted – more than 430000 views
  - Amongst 10-19 year olds downloads of Swedbank mobile app increased 25%

• In 2017 Enterprise Estonia invested 45 000 EUR when inviting influencers to Estonia as part of nation branding

• Since 2018 influencer marketing has been a separate category in the marketing and PR awards
Most popular Youtubers in Estonia

• The most popular YouTuber in Estonia at the moment is **Life of Boris** with 2.45 million subscribers (161 million views). His content is produced in English and aimed at global audiences.

• The most popular Estonian-speaking YouTuber is HDTanel with 49 000 subscribers (HDTanel, 2019).
Political campaign ad of the most popular blogger in Estonia, Mallukas

Mallukas live-vlogging while giving birth to her second daughter

A TV show: Summer of Mallukas (2018 and 2019)

Published a book about her life (2019)
**Most popular YouTubers amongst Estonia 9-13 year olds (Miil, 2019)**

- Survey carried out in Estonian secondary schools in spring 2019 (N=513).
- Only 8 teens from the sample said they are not following not a single YouTuber.
- Gender-specific preferences: no female YouTubers amongst the favorites' of boys.
- Preference are also age-specific: pre-teens’ taste is different compared to 9-10 year olds’
- Estonian YouTubers are more popular than international.

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<tbody>
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<td>PewDiePie</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1. Hensugusta</td>
<td>57</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ninja</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2. Victoria Villig</td>
<td>33</td>
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<tr>
<td>TheTomsikene</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3. Martti Hallik</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hensugusta</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4. Maria Rannaväli</td>
<td>32</td>
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<tr>
<td>EstMagicz</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5. Liina Ariadne</td>
<td>21</td>
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<tr>
<td>SarioTV</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6. Sidni</td>
<td>21</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tfue</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7. TheTomsikene</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>IstoProcent</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8. Deanabanana</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mänguväli</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9. Nele Kirsipuu</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marri Hallik</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10. Kuldne Kolmik</td>
<td>9</td>
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The aim

• To map the (strategic) self-presentation practices of Estonian micro-celebrity practitioners
  - Interviews with Estonian micro-celebrities (N=21)

• To understand how young followers interpret the content, understand the production process and self-presentation strategies of micro-celebrities
  - Focus group interviews with young followers of micro-celebrities (N=51)

First Youtubers’ live-event in Tallinn, 2016
Imagining one’s audiences

- Micro-celebrities are eager to learn more about their audience
- Producing content for their ideal audience
  - Shared tastes, humour, values
  - „For people about my age or so“
  - „Normal people“ 😊

“Little kids have nothing to watch and they click around in YouTube and stumble upon my videos and then they will keep on watching“ *(YouTuber, 18 year old male)*

“Recently, a 40-something guy from our IT department came to me with his daughter and was like: „little fan wants an autograph.“ And then for a moment I was like...Jesus, he is not a person with whom I communicate usually, right? Like he can know a lot more about me then I know about him. For a moment there, I was like: „oh-ou“. *(YouTuber, 23 year old female)*

“Yeah, they [very young audiences] are f****** cool! I don’t have anything against them. Just that it would be awesome if there were more people who were my age.” *(YouTuber, 16 year old male)*
Alternative imagined audience: brands and companies (Õunpuu, 2019)

• Creative self-expression and self-actualisation through ones posts can be followed by fame, fortune (money and goods) and career aspirations.

• The volume of sponsored posts is growing

• Unclear rules and practices for sponsored posts: „I was sent” or „I had the opportunity to review”
  • A cue for the audience to decode
  • Audience members are sharing the „interpretative lens“ (boyd 2008)

• Influencer agencies
Strategic self-presentation (Murumaa-Mengel & Siibak, forthcoming 2020)

I try to offer more than I actually have, see. I do not accept that I am having a boring day or boring weekend, I am not going to have a boring weekend, but I’ll go then, thinking about the vlogs, I will take people along and will go and do a thing.

Everyone imagines, everyone who meets me, they imagine that I am actually that kind of a person, you’ll see. Although, in reality I actually am not such a person. At parts there is a piece of me like …/…/ This characters life, this is actually much more interesting than my life.

Like for now, I am not wearing any make-up, at all, but … all through the years when I have been making videos… I have for example made such where I am totally natural in videos and so, and then I am with make-up, and then I am sometimes looking back and those videos without make-up I would not like to watch like that, and then I made those [videos] private and decided that now I am making videos with make-up.
Authenticity as peace of mind and belief in personal brand

• „Living up“ their lives to have interesting content
• Engaging with and meeting the expectations of the active audience: „communicating reciprocal intimacies“ (Abidin, 2017)
• Strategical honesty

Of course it is scripted and all that, but I put a little more energy in than I would in a normal communication situation /---/ you gotta put a twist in it so people will kinda like it. It’s me but with a little twist. (YouTuber, 23 year old male)

„I have shared when I have not eaten healthy. I am honest about it and I tell to viewers that one needs to learn from one’s mistakes and I give tips how to avoid situations like these and so on. In this sense I am „flawed person“, I do not know how is that in Estonian. I am not perfect. (Female fitness blogger)
Navigating the accessible-private

• Omitted parts of the authentic self
  • Romantic partners/family members/friends
  • Smoking, drinking
  • „Drama“
  • Home address, phone numbers

• Privacy strategies in the offline lives
  - Changing one’s phone number
  - Using different paths to go home
Following as a daily habit

- Following one’s favorites “cross-platform digital estates” (Abidin, 2017) becomes a habit, part of the routine
  - before going to sleep
  - just after waking up
  - at breakfast
  - as a reward for completing tasks
  - filler-time-killer

- Almost all the interviewees of our study could characterize their favorite micro-celebrities in depth - they could name their family members and pets, know what their room looks like, talk about their hobbies and interests, and how these micro-celebrities “really are”.

  „On weekends, I can be on YouTube for eight hours straight, because I start watching the videos and before I know it, it’s two o’clock in the morning“ (Girl, 13 years old)

  „If I have subscribed to a YouTuber then I always switch on the notification so I instantly know when someone has uploaded a new video so I can start watching it. I know people who even skip school when new videos come out.“ (Girl, 13 years old)

  „I believe that my favorite YouTuber is the same person in reality as in YouTube. I follow him on all the possible social media platforms and if he was fake he must never let his guard down, because he’s the same everywhere.“ (Boy, 15 years old)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Good YouTuber</th>
<th>Lousy YouTuber</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal appeal</strong></td>
<td>Humorous, original, friendly, energetic, open-minded, being oneself, positive, cool, courageous, active, honest, speaks in a clear manner with the speed one can follow</td>
<td>Lazy; different in videos and in real life; vain, arrogant, has a too good an opinion about oneself; whining, too calm, belittles others, calls names; numb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Values</strong></td>
<td>Friends and family</td>
<td>Prioritizes fame and money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Videos (technical qualities/characteristics)</strong></td>
<td>Posts frequently and regularly; good quality camera; interesting thumbnail; short and apt title; good editing of content</td>
<td>Frequent posts but videos are not that engaging; bad editing of content; using click-bite; bad quality, does not post when has promised to do so</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Unfavorable content and practices

• **Quality lies in its entertainment value:** If it is not funny and entertaining, it will not be worthy of my attention

- "If you don’t like it, don’t watch"
  - Roasting is not fun, roasting is a form of online bullying
  - Just scroll on if you don’t like something - in cases of commercial content, alarming or ethically problematic content, the audience usually does not react, rather they just move on and hope that someone else will take action

„It’s important they make me laugh. Watching videos helps making me feel good when I’ve had a bad day, for example when I’ve gotten a bad grade in school“ *(Boy, 14 years old)*
What do the audiences expect from the content? (Perm 2017; Muuli 2017)

• „Do your own thing“ – be authentic, be yourself!
• „Be original, be extraordinary!“
  - Plain and common is boring
  - Allow the audience to experience something exclusive
• Comply with the expected technical qualities
  - the posts must have a strong central idea
  - somewhat professional-looking execution,
  - presented in an aesthetically pleasing way
  - generally well thought through
• Engaging content is presented frequently
• Posting commercial content is OK – it is part of the business
• Be aware of what your audience likes and respond accordingly
Ideal audience: fans (Murumaa-Mengel & Siibak, forthcoming 2020)

• Following to experience a sense of belonging and social support - emotional labor

• Following micro-celebrities one can identify with, with whom the audiences share interest with

• The lifestyle presented by the micro-celebrity is taken “as it is presented”, not questioning the strategic presentation of edited life.

“When you see that they [young microcelebrities] do not have to study for school and ... Not do anything and you have to...then it sometimes like not actually annoys me but I am a bit cross about it. I don’t want to do it at all and they don’t have to do the same thing every day...it’s like you know how some people are naturally skinny; they can eat whatever they want and you can’t really do that /---/ maybe yeah, they don’t have to study and all....”(Female, 16 years old)

My all time favorite post is a YouTube video by Conan Gray in which he talks about femininity, masculinity and him coming to terms with being a “girly boy”. I understood him because I myself am not a masculine guy. I felt connected to him, I felt like he talked to me.” (Boy, 15 years old)
Followers  (Murumaa-Mengel & Siibak, forthcoming 2020)

• Accepted the public discourse: shame and fear of judgement of peers about wasting too much time on such trivial and „pointless“ content
  • „I am not a fan“
  • Lurking

• Dedicating undivided attention to a single, idolized micro-celebrity is rare
Anti-fans & hate-watching (Murumaa-Mengel & Siibak, forthcoming 2020)

- Anti-fans can find gratification in texts that they strongly oppose, as they can decode the texts as “beneath them”, frivolous, dumb or completely “other” in some way.

- Anti-fans (haters, trolls) turn into nightmare audiences for the micro-celebrities as they might have different …
  … values (e. g. materialistic vs spiritual),
  … senses of humor (black gallows humor vs lighthearted slapstick),
  … standpoints on potentially polarizing issues (e. g. gender or race issues), or
  … perceived norms of netiquette (e. g. private vs public info)

At the beginning, I took everything to heart, like...how can they say these things, why are they saying this? But then I grew a thicker skin and I think that the best antidote to such people is just ignoring them because their greatest aim is to hurt someone through mean words. (Blogger, 22 year old female)
• Anti-fans may spend a remarkable amount of time and energy picking apart the content micro-celebrities are updating, with the aim of finding “glitches”: contradictions, exaggerations, signs of non-authenticity and unethical behavior.

• Anti-fans may launch or join a massive online public shaming campaign

• The entertainment may come from laughing at someone, rather than laughing with them

If I dislike a video I usually just scroll past it, but there have been cases where I go to another YouTuber that uploads “drama alerts”. I just have to leave a comment with a link to the sketchy video and he will do his own video and alert everyone else about it.

(Boy, 13 years old)
Conclusion

• Micro-celebrities have become opinion leaders and role models for the present day young. Becoming an influencer is seen as a promising career option.

• Micro-celebrities constantly make use of different strategies and invest their invisible labor in holding the interest of their audiences. It is important to appear authentic!

• The pleasures of viewing micro-celebrity content is built on an affective relationship between the micro-celebrity and each fan, follower or anti-fan.
Acknowledgement:

I am very thankful to my inspiring and hard-working colleague Maria Murumaa-Mengel and our fantastic team of students in exploring this fascinating research field over the recent years.

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THANK YOU!
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