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QUALITIES OF INTERNET CELEBRITY

Internet celebrity is a product of performance and perception. It can be generated when intentionally “performed” by an entity (whether person, animal, or non-living object), or may arise when unwittingly “perceived” by an audience to have the quality of internet celebritydom. While there are several factors that define a text or performance as having fame or infamy, most often internet celebrities are given attention and celebrated for their exclusivity, exoticism, exceptionalism, or everydayness (see Chapter 1 for theoretical inspirations behind these categories). However, what is it that makes these four qualities so special?

A noted French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu created a framework to understand forms of “capital” in order to explain how society comes to exercise judgments in taste, express aesthetic dispositions, and assign status and distinction towards different social behaviors.⁶⁶ The qualities of exclusivity, exoticism, exceptionalism, and everydayness, each corresponds to a specific form of capital that arouse interest and attention, whether positive (i.e., out of admiration or love) or negative (i.e., out of disgust or judgment).

Just as social, cultural, and technical forms overlap and are partly derived from economic capital, the qualities of internet celebrity are not clear-cut. A combination of each of these qualities may exist in any instance of internet celebrity, but this chapter will focus on specific case studies that best illustrate the core of these qualities when successfully enacted.

EXCLUSIVITY

Internet celebrity that is “exclusive” is the glamorization and celebration of practices and possessions so elite in access or rare in occurrence that it would be unusual for ordinary people to experience them without high “economic capital.” Economic capital refers to the assets that are monetary or have monetary value attached to them and can thus be directly converted into money from their institutionalized forms, such as property and goods.⁶⁷

The phenomenon of “The Rich Kids of Instagram” is a classic example of exclusive internet celebrity that is dependent on economic capital. In popular discourse, it usually acronymizes as “RKOI” and generally denotes teens and young adults who conspicuously display their opulent lifestyles through material possessions and extravagant experiences, such as owning a fleet of luxury cars, excessively engaging in fine dining, or frequently traveling on business class flights. In so doing, they attract massive amounts of attention from social media followers through “follows” and “likes” and are bestowed with publicity, acclamation, or in some cases infamy.

The phrase “RKOI” debuted and was popularized in July 2012 after an anonymous blogger started the Tumblr account richkidsofinstagram.tumblr.com – later migrating to therkoi.com – to repost Instagram photographs and their original

captions from young wealthy users dubbed “the 1%.” These RKOI images were easily searchable as users usually hashtagged their posts with consciously exclusive keywords such as “#wealth,” “#mansion,” and “#yacht”.⁶⁸ The anonymous blogger later launched a companion Instagram account @rkoi to cross-post images from its Tumblr, with an account biography that succinctly informs viewers that the images depict what the RKOI, who have more money than the average person, do in their private lives. At the time of writing, the account has over 417,000 followers⁶⁹ and has been headlined and featured in hundreds of news articles around the world.

So ubiquitous is the RKOI genre of exclusive internet celebrity that spin-off accounts featuring local internet celebrities have proliferated internationally in wealthy capitals such as Dubai,⁷⁰ Hong Kong,⁷¹ and Switzerland,⁷² and even in countries with traditionally lower gross domestic products (GDPs),

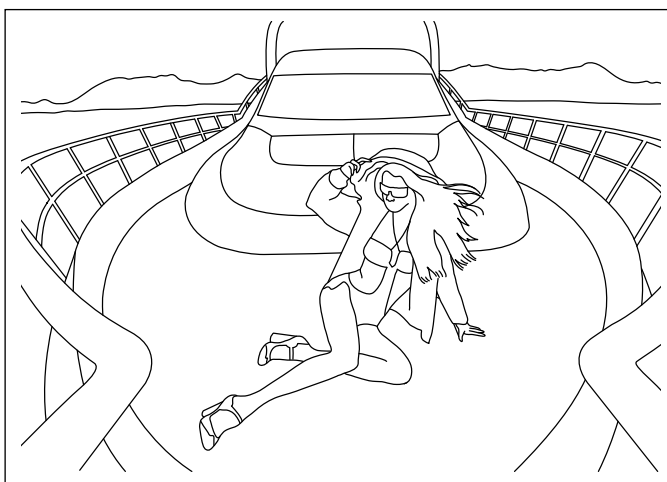


Figure 2.1. Artist’s impression of a typical “Rich Kids of Instagram” post, featuring a woman clad in a bikini lying on a yacht at sea. Art produced by LIBA Studio. Used with permission.

such as Albania⁷³, Nigeria,⁷⁴ and Vietnam.⁷⁵ The exclusivity of internet celebrity among the likes of the RKOI have proven to be so alluring that traditional media industries have also begun to produce insights into the phenomenon through paperback novels⁷⁶ and reality TV documentaries based on American⁷⁷ and British⁷⁸ RKOI.

In her interview with a group of RKOI for *Vice*, journalist Chem Squier queries the young and wealthy over their internet celebrity status achieved almost solely by flaunting wealth on the internet. To this, an RKOI internet celebrity pseudonymized as “Luke” replied that it was merely a strategy to provoke and shock viewers, while @akinbelfon17 (Instagram account now defunct) asserted that her primary objective for posting pictures was to become famous.⁷⁹ Perhaps the appeal of exclusivity as a route to internet celebrity is best summarized by the account biography by spin-off RKOI account @richkidsof, which crassly states that viewers do not get to see “this shit” on a regular basis.⁸⁰

EXOTICISM

Internet celebrity that is “exotic” is perceived as distancing, far removed from one’s comfort zone, or so novel or foreign that it piques the interest of audiences who hold contrasting or different forms of “cultural capital.” Cultural capital refers to the embodied, objectified, or institutionalized assets that are accumulated through the cultivation of valued personal qualities, tasteful material objects, credentials, and qualifications.⁸¹

Given that the forms of cultural capital that are preferred and privileged in society vary across cultures, exotic internet celebrity is thus a result of generative frictions between the celebrity and the viewer. This means that exotic internet

celebrity arises whenever there is a gap in what is considered culturally normal or mainstream between the performer's and the audience's backgrounds and can occur within inter- and intracultural settings depending on the nuance of difference.

The distance of this cultural gap between the performer and the audience, and thus the extent of exoticism and celebrity bestowed upon the performer, is highly dependent on the “intersectionality” between the internet celebrity and the audience. Intersectionality is a concept coined by the critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe how the interconnected (and usually minority) identity categories of race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, and class and status are related to systems of power.⁸² As such, depending on the combination of a viewer's identity categories, they may perceive the performance of an internet celebrity as very exotic and attention-worthy or too mundane to warrant any attention.

To understand how exotic internet celebrity arises in inter- and intracultural contexts, we turn as a case study to Kinoshita Yuka, a Japanese competitive eater – a practice better known by its original South Korean name as *mukbang* (먹방) or by its Japanese terminology *oogui* (大食い).

Kinoshita has headlined global news for her viral binge-eating videos that are posted on her YouTube channel,⁸³ where she speaks in Japanese and English captions are provided. Some of her most notable feats include eating, in one videotaped sitting, 100 hamburgers from McDonald's, 9,102 kcal of Taiwanese beef ramen, or 7 kg of Hello Kitty decorated birthday cake. Kinoshita begins each video by laying out the copious amounts of food she is about to eat in a flat lay. If she makes the meal from scratch, Kinoshita holds up ingredients to the camera while recording the cooking process – boiling, simmering, frying, stirring – highlighting heavy foods such as meat and carbohydrates enveloped in oil bubbles and steam. The sheer amount of raw ingredients she uses is intended to

induce shock as viewers get a clear grasp of the amount of calories she will actually consume.

If she purchases ready-made food, Kinoshita preserves the original food packaging for her opening flat lay, laying one food item at a time on her table in a sped-up, fast-forwarded video sequence. With household famous brand logos such as McDonald's and Pizza Hut on display, viewers can identify with the everydayness of the foods Kinoshita binge eats. This awareness solicits a sense of relatability in viewers, inviting them to compare their ordinary capacity of consumption with that of Kinoshita's grotesque intake, as they stare and squirm over stretching the limits of the human body.

Kinoshita draws viewers in with her chirpy commentary, which are addressed to viewers in the first person, while she holds the gaze of the camera/viewers and polishes the foods off in one sitting with no display of discomfort. This is made

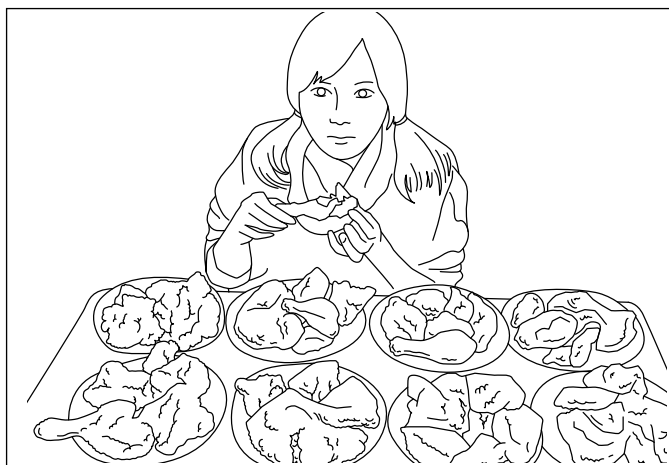


Figure 2.2. Artist's impression of Kinoshita Yuka's typical *mukbang* spread, sitting behind a table full of plates of food. Art produced by LIBA Studio. Used with permission.

even more spectacular as Kinoshita is skinny, young, and gives the impression of frailty through her usual wardrobe of layered tops and cardigans to protect her from the cold – in short, she is the antithesis of the typical *mukbang* eater whom one imagines to be male, brawny, and hardy.

Viewers who first chance upon Kinoshita are always surprised at her feats for several reasons. A selection of comments paraphrased from one of her most popular videos in which she eats 48 pieces of KFC chicken from four buckets evidences this.⁸⁴ Often, Kinoshita is gawked at by viewers in awe of the copious amounts she consumes. Sentiments include:

I feel sick just watching this.

What the heck. I can't believe what I saw.

Oh my god. Are you a monster?

Furthermore, the fact that she is a female *mukbang* eater casts her in an exotic light amidst the male-dominated broadcast scene. Sentiments include,

You ate 48 pieces of chicken? And you're a girl?

Haha, your eating makes me, a grown man, look weak.

Among the small subculture of female *mukbang* eaters, Kinoshita is also captivating for her uncharacteristically svelte appearance despite what is perceived to be uncouth binge eating. Sentiments include,

Oh! You're so small sized! How did you eat all of that?

I don't understand how you are not fat!

You're quite cute!

Finally, Kinoshita's popularity and celebrity are often reduced to the popular YouTube trope of "Asians doing weird shit," as viewers rationalize away her achievements and exoticism as being "just Asian." Sentiments include,

This is crazy. It only happens in Asia.

Asians are super human.

Wow Asian girls look so beautiful and delicate that it is pleasing even to watch them down 4 buckets of chicken!

In each group of comments, the intersectionality of Kinoshita's identity markers is compounded as she is singled out as a *mukbang* eater, a female *mukbang* eater, a slim female *mukbang* eater, and finally a slim Asian female *mukbang* eater, exacerbating her exoticism and the audience's corresponding interest in her. These comments casting Kinoshita in an exotic light are unsurprising and are common in the comments sections for East Asian internet celebrities who have gained traction in Anglocentric places. To comprehend this patterned behavior, we must understand the concepts of "ethnocentrism" and "orientalism."

Ethnocentrism is the judgment of other cultures by the customs and standards of one's own culture, resulting in the belief that other cultures are inferior in standards or values. It is usually also referred to as "Americentrism" or "Eurocentrism" when Americans or Europeans exercise bias towards their own cultures and worldviews and assume the inferiority of others by default. Ethnocentrism is usually mobilized in tandem with orientalism, a concept coined by the postcolonial public intellectual Edward W. Said to describe the prejudices of Western cultures as permeated through romanticized, false, or exaggerated cultural representations of Asia.⁸⁵ The YouTube comments that explain away Kinoshita's abilities by

way of her being simply “Asian” are evidence of this orientalism at play, just as how the virality of Japanese entertainer Pikotaro’s parody video “PPAP” (Pen-Pineapple-Apple-Pen) was almost entirely celebrated for its Asian exoticism in popular press reports,⁸⁶ and how the global uptake of Chinese photo-editing app *Meitu Xiuxiu* was attributed largely to reveling in the “bizarre” and “alien” spaces of East Asian internet cultures.⁸⁷

Evidently, in the intercultural space of a global platform like YouTube, Kinoshita holds exotic internet celebrity. She is relatively well known and successful despite being from a minority demographic. Although she boasts over 3.7 million subscribers and over 1.2 billion views since having begun her channel in 2014,⁸⁸ on YouTube, Kinoshita is still a minority content creator in terms of gender, genre, and cultural specificity: A 2015 study conducted by YouTube analytics company OpenSlate indicated that the platform is still dominated by men in 90% of all the 51 categories of available content, and that “female-dominated YouTube categories” are feminine in nature comprising “Makeup & Cosmetics,” “Skin & Nail Care,” and “Weight Loss”,⁸⁹ which are very different from Kinoshita’s *mukbang* genre. Social media marketing company Socialbakers reports that the top online entertainment show channels on YouTube are based in the USA and belong to the genres of gaming and product reviews,⁹⁰ unlike Kinoshita’s genre of food and challenge videos that are particularly popular in East Asia. Social media analytics company Social Blade also reveals that among entertainment genre channels on YouTube the most viewed videos are in the English language,⁹¹ while Kinoshita’s videos are spoken in Japanese and subtitled in English.

However, even within the intracultural space of Japan and Japanese internet celebrity, Kinoshita is still characterized by a degree of exoticism. The clear majority of popular female

Youtubers in Japan belong to the hyperfeminized genre of fashion and beauty. They include top-ranked stars such as “さあや saaya”,⁹² “sasaki-asahi”,⁹³ and “SekineRisa”.⁹⁴ Kinoshita’s inter- and intracultural exoticism has led hers to being ranked the fourth most subscribed YouTube channel in Japan.⁹⁵ But this performance is a rarity considering the fact that the most watched Japanese YouTube channels are regularly in the genres of music, such as label “Universal Music Japan”⁹⁶ or girl group “AKB48”⁹⁷; children’s activities such as “Kan & Aki’s CHANNEL”⁹⁸ or “がっちゃんねる★The-Gacchannel”⁹⁹ featuring young children playing with toys or going on excursions; and male-hosted entertainment such as “兄弟者”¹⁰⁰ featuring video gameplay or “HikakinTV”¹⁰¹ featuring comedic skits and challenges.¹⁰² Kinoshita experiences a double layer of exoticism within inter- and intracultural spaces, and this compounds viewers’ interest in her and increases her subsequent internet celebrity.

EXCEPTIONALISM

Internet celebrity that is “exceptional” highlights the unusual abilities, astounding qualities, or expert skills of a person that can be elite or mundane in nature but are spectacular and admired for their “technical capital” all the same. Although Pierre Bourdieu does not define technical capital per se, he discusses it as a derivative and a combination of economic, cultural, and social capital. Contemporary theorists like the social computing scholar Sarita Yardi¹⁰³ and disability and education scholar Simon Hayhoe¹⁰⁴ have studied forms of technical capital, which they define as the knowledge and mobilization of digital technologies to access information, achieve social mobility, and ensure social inclusivity. Although traditionally, exceptionalism in performance pertains to the

realm of highly specialized skills, the attention economy of the internet is more democratic and embracing of various skill sets, both elite and mundane.

One example of internet celebrity as the celebration of exceptionalism is that of the 21-year-old South Korean musician Sungha Jung. He first became popular on YouTube at the young age of 10 as a guitar prodigy. With a guitar larger than his body and his tiny fingers stretching to reach across the fretboard, Jung's fingerstyle acoustic guitar covers of popular songs requires proficient technical skills beyond that of mainstream guitar-playing techniques. Further, he arranges the covers himself by ear, and his videos have earned him 1.4 billion views and 4.8 million subscribers on YouTube.¹⁰⁵ One of the spikes in

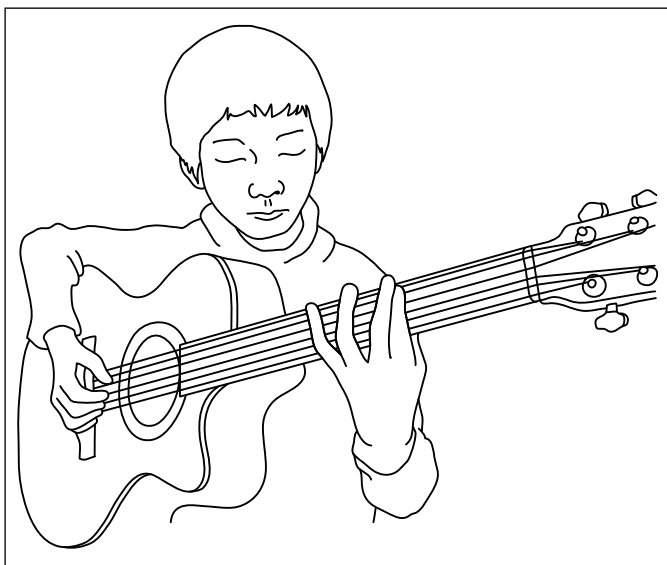


Figure 2.3. Artist's impression of Sungha Jung playing his guitar on YouTube. Art produced by LIBA Studio. Used with permission.

his online fame is attributed to his cover of the theme from the movie *Pirates of The Caribbean*, which has accumulated over 56 million views at the time of writing.¹⁰⁶ The video caught the attention of renowned guitarists Hata Shuji and Ulli Bögershausen who have offered to become his personal mentors.¹⁰⁷

Jung has since been able to parlay his YouTube fame into several studio albums,¹⁰⁸ annual concert tours around the world,¹⁰⁹ endorsements by several music brands,¹¹⁰ and appearances in a documentary on fingerstyle acoustic guitar playing¹¹¹. Given his decade-long presence on YouTube, growing from being a young boy to a young adult, Jung's fans have expressed their pleasure at having been able to witness his skills mature online.^{112, 113} In recent years, to keep up with the evolution of social media and to engage with his younger generation of fans, Jung has expanded his internet presence to Instagram where he publishes photographs with fans and renowned musicians, and short video teasers to his full-length YouTube videos.¹¹⁴

Although an exceptional internet celebrity like Sungha Jung is celebrated for his elite skills, such exceptionalism can also extend to mundane and everyday skills. In early 2017, a string of videos starring a young Chinese woman using office props as makeshift culinary tools started gaining viral traction on Facebook. Known only by her handle “Ms Yeah,” the woman engaged in quirky experiments in the office such as baking a cake in her office drawer with a light bulb and tin-foil or using a fire extinguisher to make ice-cream.¹¹⁵ Several trend reports quickly uncovered that 23-year-old Zhou Xiao Hui was the star of these “office chef” videos.

Originally from Chengdu in Sichuan province, she is known as “办公室小野” (*ban gong shi xiao ye*) in China, the moniker under which she has been publishing videos since January 2017, where she has over 3.5 million followers on *Weibo*¹¹⁶ and over 1.3 million followers on the Chinese streaming site *MeiPai*.¹¹⁷ A month later, Ms Yeah cross-posted

her videos onto YouTube where she quickly amassed viewers and fans from around the world.¹¹⁸ Ms Yeah uploaded new makeshift culinary videos on all platforms at least once a week, and her viral fame on Facebook continued to captivate audiences. At the time of writing, she boasts over 3.2 million followers on Facebook,¹¹⁹ over 3 billion views across all her cooking videos,¹²⁰ and a sustained average of 500,000 to 1 million views per video.¹²¹

The reasons for Ms Yeah's national and international reach can be attributed to several factors. For one, she and her team intentionally position her videos for cross-cultural reach in the international market, revealing in an interview with *Reuters* that dialogue is minimized such that "everyone watches the video in silence, [and] foodies from all over the world can understand what we are doing".¹²² She also uses "universally understood emojis" and subtitles if there is any dialogue at all,¹²³



Figure 2.4. Artist's impression of Ms Yeah cooking dishes with office equipment, such as using a blow dryer and coffee pot. Art produced by LIBA Studio. Used with permission.

to give her non-Mandarin-speaking viewers context. More crucially, Ms Yeah's unusual makeshift culinary skills that churn out edible meals demarcate her as exceptionally resourceful and adventurous. Moreover, against the backdrop of "run-of-the-pepper-mill celebrity chef[s] or food blogger[s]",¹²⁴ and the usually demure and graceful female entertainers in China's *zhibo wanghong* or livestreaming internet celebrity scene,^{125,126} Ms Yeah's mime-like comedy and skillful makeshift culinary skills emerge as especially memorable.

What had begun as her first experimental video to grill beef with an iron is now a full-time project managed by a team of six staff members who produce content for Ms Yeah's platforms.¹²⁷ Although in an interview in the early days of her fame in April 2017, Ms Yeah claimed not to be interested in the "commercial requests" that were flooding in, China's internet celebrity industry, valued at around USD8.5 million in 2016,¹²⁸ proved too lucrative to ignore. Ms Yeah has since swiftly transited into producing sponsored videos and branded content, including collaborating with Chinese import-export giant Alibaba's Jack Ma.¹²⁹ However, she remains reflexive and acknowledges that the boundaries of exceptionalism and incredible skill on the internet are constantly shifting, and that her content will "eventually get boring." As such, she is delicately diversifying her content by venturing into food-related cosmetic videos – such as using tomato juice as lipstick, or marshmallows as a makeup sponge¹³⁰ – to solidify her transition from one-hit wonder to sustained internet celebrity.

EVERYDAYNESS

Internet celebrity that is "everyday" curates the usually mundane and ordinary aspects of daily life with such candor and

insight (as well as with much regularity and consistency) that a sustained social relationship based on a sense of community and trust is fostered as “social capital.” Social capital refers to the assets arising from stable networks of relationships between people, organizations, or institutions, through acknowledged membership within these groups.¹³¹ The sustained and regular interactions of everyday internet celebrities with their audience prime their digital estates as networked spaces for like-minded viewers to congregate and keep up-to-date. Over time, this sense of familiarity and trust allows everyday internet celebrities to promote other persons, products, or services through personal recommendations and endorsements.

The most common instances of everyday internet celebrity include users who post daily “outfits of the day” or “OOTDs,” lifestyle or parenting blogs in which users reveal sneak peeks into their daily routines, or the traveling artifact trope, like the classic “traveling garden gnome.” At the confluence of all these genres is “Naptime With Joey” – a pastiche of costume dress-up emulating iconic characters or cosplay, mommy blogging, and travel photography. In early 2016, Los Angeles-based mother and photographer Laura Izumikawa first began dressing up and photographing her four-month-old sleeping infant in various costumes.

On Instagram, Joey Marie Choi cosplays daily during naptime in a vast assortment of costumes, appearing dressed as, for example, a piece of sushi, a barista, Jon Snow from *Game of Thrones*, or the cartoon character Pikachu.¹³² The excitement caused by waiting for these daily updates stems, in part, also from Izumikawa’s ability to keep up with trends that resonate with her audience, for instance dressing Joey as parody Japanese artist Pikotaro when the catchy tune “PPAP” went viral on YouTube, or as the character Barbara from Netflix’s *Stranger Things* when the hashtag “#justice4barb” trended on Twitter.

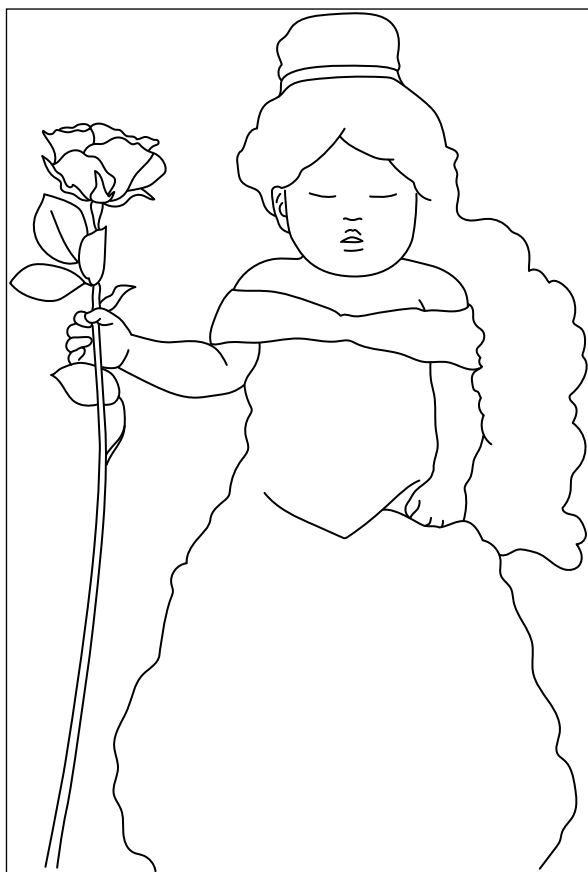


Figure 2.5. Artist's impression of "Napttime With Joey" in a typical costume. Art produced by LIBA Studio. Used with permission.

As well as building a sense of anticipation around the daily photo update, Napttime With Joey also appeals to followers by using discursive narratives, visual images, and video diaries to project a coherent narrative about the joys and struggles of parenting, and organisational skills around domestic

management and family life. Mother Izumikawa explains that she began photographing her daughter to “memorialize her growth and little milestones,” and the “little props” she added were intended to create “hilarious pictures” for Joey’s grandparents who do not live with them.¹³³ Over time, Izumikawa explains that the archive of images served as “[m]emories of bonding with Joey and watching her grow bigger and differently every week... the transformation of her growth”.¹³⁴ Alongside this heartwarming backstory is Izumikawa’s altruistic aim for the project to “remind parents to have fun with their kids and not get too caught up in the seriousness of parenting”.¹³⁵

Naptime With Joey’s fame on Instagram eventually led to a book deal comprising a selection of Joey’s photographs with publisher Gallery Books in 2017, after several requests from Instagram followers.¹³⁶ Despite Naptime With Joey’s continually expanding fame around the globe, the project maintains its flavor of everydayness and humility through an extension of press collateral and personal updates from Izumikawa on her various social media. For instance, she still expresses surprise at Joey’s fame despite her successful earnings from book sales and product placements¹³⁷: “My photos of my napping daughter dressed up as pop culture icons became viral one day and now I blog about our lives because it turns out, people want to know more about us which is totally crazy to me!”.¹³⁸

At the time of writing, the Naptime With Joey Instagram account boasts over 620,000 followers and features a mix of public relations material – such as book promotions, book tours, sponsored posts, product placements¹³⁹ – and domestic revelation material – such as Joey’s growth milestones, Joey’s mealtimes, the family’s celebrations around special occasions, and vlogs of everyday domestic life. Izumikawa now describes herself as a “stay-at-home-working-mom”,¹⁴⁰ highlighting her role as a parent over that of the creator of an everyday internet celebrity.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we reviewed some key qualities of internet celebrity to understand how different personalities accrue fame on the internet for being exclusive, exotic, exceptional, or everyday. Where exclusive internet celebrity incites voyeurism over the excess of elite materiality, exotic internet celebrity captures attention for being foreign and outside of one's comfort zone. Where exceptional internet celebrity captures audiences for their highly technical skills, everyday internet celebrity generates feelings of affect and connectedness from regularity and consistency. We learnt how these types of internet celebrity engage with forms of economic, cultural, technical, and social capital to attract an audience, as illustrated through the case studies of the Rich Kids of Instagram popularized in Anglo- and Eurocentric contexts, Kinoshita Yuka from Japan, Sungha Jung from South Korea, Ms Yeah from China, and Naptime With Joey who are Asian-Americans. In the next chapter, we will learn about the relationship between internet celebrity and the traditional media industry, including the interdependent relationship between both industries.