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Introduction: performance, authenticity and social media visibility

A very brief overview of film stardom, celebrity and televisual fame

Academic debates relating to the consumption and production of film stardom have been a staple of film studies and beyond since Richard Dyer's seminal work on the subject inaugurated the field in the 1970s (Dyer 1979, Dyer 1986). Since that time a myriad of film, history, media, feminist and cultural theorists have examined the emergence of the film star (De Cordova 1990, Shail 2019), the role of film stardom in the development and decline of the studio era (McDonald, Barbas 2002), the status of the crossover star in a changing entertainment landscape (King 2003, Wright 2018), not to mention individual stars as role models and figures of aspiration, emulation and cautionary tales through a range of national contexts and socio-political periods (Babington 2001, Moseley 2002).

Although film star studies and more recently, celebrity studies have long been interested in debates around fame, talent, classifying and categorising performers (Geraghty 2000, Rojek 2001), seminal work within and beyond Hollywood routinely turns its attention to the question and indeed the challenge of constructing, circulating and maintaining audience interest and investment, linked as it is to the question of authenticity.

The outpouring of curiosity from early film audiences demanding to know the names of the celluloid figures seen on screen was to ensure that they were loyal to a seamless reel/real persona (Barbas 2002). Likewise, long-term film star studio contracts and subsequent fan mail correspondences thoughtfully orchestrated and carefully disseminated star images via promotion, publicity and extra-textual criticisms and commentaries in order that these performers would appear consistent and thus authentic to returning audiences (McDonald 2000, Barbas 2002). The level of stardom associated with the cinema screen surpassed that of other forms of recognition and/or renown on stage or sporting arenas due in part to the close-up which was seen to speak for and offer investment through interiority and authenticity (Walker 1970, Redmond 2006). The intangible notion of authenticity, of an individual being true to oneself remains central to contemporary debates around film stardom and the broader entertainment marketplace, from relatable televisually skilled small screen personalities (Langer 1981, Bennett 2010, Sobande 2019) through comedians (Taylor 2018, Wallace 2018), sporting figures (Alcott 2003, Quinn 2023) audio-visual performers (Frith 1998, Shumway 2007), politicians (Ceccobelli and Di Gregorio 2022) and celebrities (Menéndez Domingo 2023) in the broad church that spans the entertainment landscape. So too, the term appears central to the development of the more recent field of influencer culture, encompassing as it does a myriad of figures, faces, followers, fortunes and platforms.

Categorising and classifying online fame

In the original Call for Papers for this Special Issue of *Celebrity Studies*, I used the term social media influencer in order to encompass and account for a variety of entertainment, advocate, activist, commercial, amateur, professional and alternative faces and/or figures, looking to include those individuals who bring pre-existing fame to an online platform, those who establish a visible digital presence without earlier public recognition and those again who transfer their social media fame to more traditional entertainment forms and formats. However, what existing literature and the contributors to this volume demonstrate is the scale and scope of fame and recognition that exist within that term, and the distinct ways in which they each speak of and speak to a discussion around authenticity.

While the term micro-celebrity was first coined by Theresa M. Senft back in 2008 in her work on camgirls to describe a 'new style of online performance' (Senft 2008), it was later considered in relation to status building for Silicon Valley tech entrepreneurs (Marwick 2013). Since that time research has looked to 'internet celebrities' (Abidin 2018), content 'creators' (Craig and Cunningham 2019) and 'creative workers' (Duffy 2015) alongside what I have referred to here as social media 'influencers' (Banet-Weiser 2021; Van Driel and Dumitrica 2021, Joshi et al 2023). There are clear and carefully demarcated distinctions around these terms, and yet the figures in question routinely craft personal brands via online content across a range of digital estates removed from traditional media gatekeepers (Hearn and Schoenhoff 2015). Irrespective of whether these individuals are market or issue orientated (Nord 2023), role models or cautionary tales (Feezell 2005), looking to influence or ostensibly de-influence audiences (Bramley 2023), addressing a macro, micro or nano fan base (Ryding et al 2023), influencers in the more general sense routinely 'view themselves as a public persona to be consumed by others' (Marwick 2015, 333). In this way, these figures each need to decide whether they will share something akin to their 'real' life or a more performative public persona, itself presented as ordinary and/or authentic, with their followers or fanbase.

The creation and circulation of authenticity

Allan Taylor's book-length study, *Authenticity as Performativity on Social Media* (2022) begins with the author outlining how his professional interest in online performativity was derailed, or at least reshaped in the classroom by his student's commitment to 'you know – real' media and marketing campaigns. Debating the parameters of influencer authenticity was the springboard for his research in expanding the critical framework of the term in question (Taylor 2022). And Taylor is not alone in looking to debunk, deconstruct or at least trying to make sense of the relationship between authenticity, audiences and influencer culture.

Emily Hund informs us that '[a]uthenticity is the quality that makes one person more influential than another' (Hund 2023, 13); it is understood as a commercially viable construct (Hund 2023) and a contemporary marker of social status (Johnston 2020). If one considers therefore that the presentation of authenticity is an important part of an influencer's brand (Howell 2021) it can help to explain why these figures routinely play to amateur modes of production with the aim of contriving authenticity, irrespective of their professional capabilities or technical proficiencies (Abidin 2017). In this way, audiences are not looking for or at anything 'real' or 'genuine' but rather, something performative passing as relatable and, with the suspension of disbelief, believable, or what Taylor refers to as 'a comforting mirage that gives enough of a gritty effect of it' (Taylor 2022, see also Ardley, Craig, Hunt and May 2022). This is an important distinction from the outset. Influencers, much like their earlier recognisable counterparts from stage, screen and the sporting arena, are not offering their true, authentic self to a willing public, but rather, a strategic self-presentation, a carefully curated artifice so as to look in many regards as an actual, real or in some cases purely virtual figure, with the orchestrated minutia of lifestyle, leisure and labour laid bare.

With this in mind then, this Special Issue seeks to contribute to the developing field of influencer cultures, with nine original articles interweaving discussions around authenticity and performativity, tackling a range of minority and more mainstream contexts, countries, platforms and practices. Although the debates, case studies and analyses are rich and varied in breadth and scope, what they have in common is a commitment to expanding the field, beginning with a consideration of influencers as figures of emulation and aspiration.

Overview of the Special Issue

Alfred Archer and Catherine Robb consider the ways in which social media influencers could and/or should be held up as role models for an interested and invested audience in contrast to more traditional forms of celebrity. Drawing on extant role model frameworks and case studies such as the Swiss based Chloe Kian, they consider the moral responsibility of those who are in a position of

visibility and by extension, influence, especially when there exists a blurring of personal/private and public selves for commercial gain. Although one might suggest that an influencer who shares their life with a willing audience takes on a greater responsibility to be a virtuous role model than other recognisable individuals who offer a clearer demarcation between their personal and professional lives, the authors conclude that there is little difference between traditional celebrities and their more recent social media counterparts in terms of their responsibilities. After all, social media influencers are not presenting their 'genuine' self and experiences but rather a carefully curated 'public persona that involves a performance of authenticity' (Archer and Robb, this volume). While Archer and Robb draw attention to the careful orchestration of ostensibly authentic social media influencers, likewise, Lucy Braidotti looks to examine a number of 'meticulously curated' micro-influencers of Instagram fame. The author draws on empirical research with a number of Italian based female beauty, fashion and travel figures who 'calibrate' and where appropriate recalibrate their physicality and femininity in order to garner attention, but more importantly engagement as a marker of status, prestige and social standing online. In this way, micro-influencers have replaced traditional markers of social status such as education and wealth with attention and 'public expressions of sentiment' as status symbols. The concept of 'affect' is of crucial commercial importance here as the aforementioned figures rely on building convincing, authentic and long-standing connections with their audiences on the platform in question (Braidotti, this volume).

Helle Kannik Haastrup and P David Marshall pick up on extant literature relating to 'staged authenticity' and 'managed connectedness' (Hou cited in Kannik and Marshall, this volume), paying particular attention to the ways in which American activist macro-influencers (e.g. public intellectuals visible on legacy media), star macro-influencers (e.g. philanthropic film stars working with NGOs) and micro-influencers (e.g. commercial social media activists) each signpost the subject of climate change on Instagram. Although each influencer takes their role and responsibilities as a climate activist seriously by seeking to inform, engage and enact meaningful change; how they present their climate message and/or credentials differ in significant respects. We are shown the ways in which activist macro-influencers routinely give precedence to their work; star macro-influences delicately balance climate messaging with their commercial commitments while the micro-influencers offer a more consistent, albeit curated and aesthetic set of personal messages that showcase environmentally-conscious living; with authenticity dependent on a combination of factors spanning legacy fame, status, lifestyle and documentation.

Kannik and Marshall draw on Marwick (2013) and more recently Thomas Poell, David Nieborg and Brooke Duffy (2021) when noting that 'there is no contradiction between being truthful and being commercial', and with this in mind, our next article considers the ways in which maternal influencers seek to negotiate an authentic relatable private self that affords commercial opportunities. At a time when niche influencers are growing in popularity, a wealth of pregnancy, health, beauty, baby, home, travel and food partnerships can avail themselves to mothers, for mothers, who carefully curate their domestic life for an interested and invested audience. Maria Elena D'Amelio draws on multimodal analysis of three Italian-based influencers on Instagram whose presentation of contemporary motherhood looks to simultaneously challenge and conform to the ideology on intensive mothering that saturates the pro-natal media environment. The research foregrounds the precariousness of routinely invisible labour, before outlining the challenges that come from balancing the presentation of actual motherwork, the depiction of a convincingly authentic self and the unattainable, idealised standards of the good mother. Drawing on extant literature spanning feminist media, motherhood studies and influencer cultures, D'Amelio offers a framework for understanding how these women, via their own curated content, operate in and through digital maternal ambivalence. Like D'Amelio before him, Allan Taylor picks up on performance and the policing of gender norms online, outlining the ways in which the constructed identities of queer beauty influencers such as Jeffree Star look to balance rebellious authenticity and spectacle with neoliberal capitalism. Taylor introduces us to a figure who routinely and repeatedly foregrounds himself as unfiltered, uncensored and unapologetic, with the

suggestion that his ‘honesty and outspoken opinions are part of his “authentic” appeal’ (Taylor, this volume). The author makes the point that the American musician turned YouTuber turned cosmetics entreprenuer offers increased visibility of men in makeup to a sizeable audience. We are informed that his indulgant and spectacular makeup tutorials challenge a predictable straight male gaze and ‘resists cis- and heteronormativity’ in favour of offering an inclusive space and liberation for women and queer men in the audience. That said, although Star has proved successful in constructing and circulating a commercially successful and credible persona for invested audiences, the male beauty influencer could put the queer body as a site of resistance at risk. After all, figures such as Star who have moved from ‘queer outsider to the epitome of social media capitalism’ are said to be ‘caught between [...] potential politicisation and personal profit’ (Taylor, this volume).

While theorists routinely draw attention to questions of representation and identity in their work on influencer cultures, within and beyond this Special Issue, questions of sex, gender, age and race appear at the forefront of such contributions to the field. In most if not all examples, the case studies presented share a common feature in that they are routinely ‘normate’ figures and able bodies on display through various guises and platforms (Thomson 1996). Prior to 2010 people with disabilities were rarely shown in the broader media and entertainment landscape, and when they were, they exploited problematic representations, and although contemporary influencers have ‘increasingly moved away from stigmatising stereotypes’ (Trevisan and Farinosi, this volume) there remains a note of caution in terms of their ability to engage a mainstream audience. From this perspective, Filippo Trevisan and Manuela Farinosi’s article on digital celebrity and disabled influencers examines the ways in which '15 diverse fashion influencers with visible impairments address disability in their personal brands’ considering the ways in which English posting individuals position themselves in relation to commercial opportunities and/or an activism agenda. The research draws attention to two distinct strands of disability visibility; namely that which foregrounds community and that which sign-posts the ordinary everyday. What they have in common, we are told, is ‘the most crucial ingredient of digital celebrity: authenticity’ (Trevisan and Farinosi, this volume). The theorists conclude that it is the space and scope of social media platforms such as Instagram, removed from more traditional gatekeeping of alternative media fare, that affords influencers the opportunity to ‘experiment with innovative intersections of identity, commerce and advocacy’ (Trevisan and Farinosi, this volume) which in turn can be seen to open up, at least ostensibly, opportunities for otherwise routinely overlooked and marginalised groups. Courtney Dreyer and Dakota Sandras pick up the debate around authenticity, ordinariness and commerce in relation to American Christian micro-influencers working as ‘biz and beauty mentors’ for the multi-level marketing hair care and wellness company, Modern Nature (Monat). The researchers develop Sophia Amorouso’s notion of the ‘girlboss’ as an entrepreneurial woman who works to secure her social, financial and domestic agency, foregrounding individual responsibility as it negotiates discourses of neoliberalism and contemporary feminism. Here, Dreyer and Sandras coin the term ‘godly girlboss’ to foreground an individual who imbues the neoliberal girlboss with the values of white Christian femininity. We are shown the ways in which Monat’s most successful distributors and members of the elite Monat Motor Club construct and circulate their personal brands via ‘prosperity gospel rhetorics’ (Dreyer and Sandras, this volume) in advance of pushing products and recruiting others through the direct sales system. In short, figures such as Christina Smallwood, Connie Sanchez and Christa Paarni encourage customer loyalty by extolling the virtues of who they are not just what they endorse so that women ‘buy into both the business and the ideologies their personas represent’ (Dreyer and Sandras, this volume). Like traditional film stars, celebrities and television personalities before them, there is a line being carefully negotiated as the godly girlboss displays aspirational wealth and luxury while maintaining an authentic ordinariness that remains relatable to other women who are currently struggling and looking for a life chance or life choice. The godly girlboss tempers her own rags to riches story of hard work and struggle by praising God and Monat for providing opportunity, support and guidance, leading not to wealth in and of itself, but to a ‘Christian, neoliberal feminist worldview’ that enables one to balance work and family, charity and community (Dreyer and Sandras, this volume).

Ruepert Jiel Dionisio Cao extends the debate around micro-figures, marginal voices, entrepreneurial opportunities, class and authenticity from multi-level marketing to masturbatory materials in his article on micro-celebrity and gay porn stardom on (then) Twitter. While the influencers thus far have been keen to display an ostensibly authentic self for public interest and commercial investment, Cao leads us to question the impetus for producing, distributing and trading *free* online pornography. Drawing on virtual ethnographic and interview data from six queer male pornographers, the focus here is on the ways in which an anonymous group of Filipino Twitter users who produce, distribute and consume free amateur pornography use sexual scripts via the 'alter community' to search for social and sexual acceptance, secure camaraderie and challenge homophobia. Cao notes that the emergence, development and indeed flourishing of amateur gay pornography online counters an oppressive sexual morality in the country in question. While the Philippines prohibits the publications and distribution of any and all pornographic content, the 'alter community' is significant in enabling individuals to perform and negotiate their own sexual identities. Cao picks up on debates around authenticity as a constructed performance for sexualised micro-celebrities, highlighting the complex ways in which amateur porn stars seek to combine their own desires, those of their fans and the affordances of the platform in question, concluding that authenticity is less about a 'real' self and more about a faithfulness to predictable homonormative sexual scripts with limited scope for differentiation and/or diversification (Cao, this volume).

In the final article of this Special Issue of *Celebrity Studies*, Robin Schmieder outlines the importance of ordinariness and perceived authenticity to social media success before turning his attention to a sub-set of social media celebrities who ostensibly challenge such understandings. Schmieder considers the ways in which Vtubers such as *CodeMiko* and *Ami Yamato* ask us to consider and reconsider what is understood by the construction, curation and circulation of authenticity online. After all, such deliberately and overtly fabricated constructions lay bare earlier assumptions about both the production and consumption of fame cultures within and beyond social media platforms. By drawing attention to the differing ways in which Vtubers engage their audience, we are asked to consider what distinguishes a virtual figure from their non-virtual counterparts. In the same way that there are multiple and myriad ways in which influencers perform authenticity, there are various ways in which virtual figures present themselves to followers and fans. While the South Korean Twitch streamer and YouTuber Youna Kang routinely presents herself to audiences as the virtual *CodeMiko,* with passing references to 'The Technician' as a nod to her human form, the Japanese virtual YouTuber, *Ami Yamato* speaks to her fanbase as if she were a 'real' vlogger, refusing to acknowledge her virtual form, tackling avatarial accusations head on. Irrespective of the modes and models for digital interactions, the article reminds us of the ways in which authenticity remains significant to debates around influencer cultures, suggesting that virtual masks do not necessarily lead to charges of the inauthentic, rather, that Vtubers lay bare the negotiation and performativity of the 'real' for willing audiences.

What becomes clear as you read through each article, either as stand-alone research or a curated collection is the ways in which social media influencers across a myriad of countries, content areas and platforms are simultaneously game-changing and predictable; ordinary yet extraordinary (Dyer 1979); inclusive yet alienating; innovative yet reminiscent of existing fame cultures. Afterall, the ways in which social media influencers construct, curate and negotiate their online presence is, to echo the beginning of this introduction, reminiscent of earlier forms of fame that were shaped by 'authenticity' as a guarantee that a 'star really means what he or she says ... really is what she or he appears to be' (Dyer 2004, 10; See also Dyer 1991). With sincere thanks to all of the contributors for their time and incredible efforts in putting this Special Issue together, it is to their debates around performativity and authenticity that the volume now turns ...

Notes on Contributor

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