



## What is the Self in the Celebrity Selfie?

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Jerslev, Anne; Mortensen, Mette

*Published in:*  
Celebrity Studies

*DOI:*  
[10.1080/19392397.2015.1095644](https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2015.1095644)

*Publication date:*  
2016

*Document version*  
Peer reviewed version

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Jerslev, A., & Mortensen, M. (2016). What is the Self in the Celebrity Selfie? Celebrification, Phatic Communication and Performativity. *Celebrity Studies*, 7(2), 249-263.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2015.1095644>

**What is the self in the celebrity selfie? Celebrification, phatic communication and performativity**

**Anne Jerslev & Mette Mortensen**

**To cite this article:** Anne Jerslev & Mette Mortensen (2015): What is the self in the celebrity selfie?

Celebrification, phatic communication and performativity, *Celebrity Studies*, DOI:

10.1080/19392397.2015.1095644.

*When citing, please use the page numbers of the article published in *Celebrity Studies*.*

**To link to this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2015.1095644>

Published online: 08 Oct 2015.

Anne Jerslev and Mette Mortensen\* Department of Media, Communication and Cognition, University of Copenhagen, Karen Blixensvej 4, 2300 Copenhagen S, Denmark.

**Keywords:** celebrity selfies; celebrification; phatic communication; connected presence; performativity; Medina.

**Abstract:** The aim of this article is to outline celebrity selfies as a photographic genre and means of self-expression within celebrity culture. In the theoretical framework, we approach celebrity selfies on three distinct levels. First, the article elaborates on the concept of celebrification in order to set the cultural context for celebrity selfies. The second section discusses the phatic communicative function performed by celebrity selfies on social network sites to establish presence and keep fans updated and connected through the successive documentation of the everyday lives of celebrities. In the third section, we present the performativity of the image itself, which creates a sense of immediacy by putting on display its own coming into being. The following sections engage in a case study of selfies posted on the Instagram profile of the Danish pop singer and songwriter Medina, which merges intimacy, access and authenticity with promotion and branding. Finally, the conclusion elaborates on this article's contribution to the understanding of celebrity selfies and discusses the paradox that celebrity selfies narrow the gap between celebrities and their followers, at the same time as they continuously maintain differences across the gap.

## Introduction

Within a short time, selfies have turned into a favoured mode for celebrities to express themselves and communicate in an apparently direct and immediate fashion with fans and followers on Instagram and other social network sites. They belong to a larger, burgeoning tendency of ‘digital intimacy’ (Thompson 2008, cited in Marwick and boyd 2011b, p. 118) in celebrity culture emerging over the past few years, which puts on display the ‘authentic’ and ‘private’ persona in new genres such as celebrity selfies (cf. also Collins 2014) and the transformation of existing genres such as paparazzi photography (Jerslev and Mortensen 2014, Mortensen and Jerslev 2014). Celebrity selfies are – or, at least, provide the illusion of being – posed, produced and disseminated by celebrities, who invite us into their private lives. Whereas celebrities seem to have lost control in paparazzi photographs, celebrity selfies suggest that they reclaim control of how, when and where they are depicted.

The aim of this article is to outline celebrity selfies as a photographic genre and means of self-expression within celebrity culture. We take our point of departure in the celebrified ‘self’, which – as the name indicates – constitutes the inevitable focus for celebrity selfies. Studying the specific celebrity ‘self-production’ (Marshall 2010) involved in this genre indeed seems pertinent and timely: even though celebrity selfies are greatly proliferating, they have only been the subject of passing scholarly attention in research on selfies as such (see, for example, Frosh 2015, Hess 2015, Senft and Baym 2015, but see Collins 2014). From the perspective of this article, celebrity selfies constitute a distinct object of study. Unlike selfies taken by non-celebrities, they are characterised by performances of an, at once, authentic and commodified self. Celebrity selfies maintain ‘an instrumental or commodified form of social bonding’ with fans, as Miller (2008, p. 390) writes in another context, they also exhibit the artistic/media personality, advertise new artistic products and consumer goods, supply content to

celebrity and entertainment news, promote or cross-promote other brands, and so forth. As such, they exemplify current processes described in this article as celebrification; that is, the continuous production and reproduction of celebrity (Rojek 2001; see also, for example, Gamson 1994, Couldry 2004, Turner 2010, Driessens 2013a). The making and sharing of celebrity selfies help sustain celebrity capital (Driessens 2013b) by enduringly publicising the celebrity's own presentations of his or her seemingly private self, which typically exhibit the allure of a desirable, successful career, strong social relations (often to other celebrities), a fit and styled body, a lifestyle of consumption as well as intimate moments of quiet and contemplation. Celebrity selfies erode boundaries to fans and other media users by appropriating the immediate and direct mode of communication on social network sites. Many celebrities serially post a large number of selfies on social network sites as, it seems, a phatic gesture to nurture bonds with fans and the public, who are given the opportunity to follow their life as it unfolds. Celebrity selfies thus epitomise the argument presented by Marshall (2006, p. 640) that contemporary celebrity culture narrows the gap between celebrities and fans.

Following from the aforementioned, we study celebrity selfies on three structural levels: an overall, cultural level (celebrification as a cultural process); a communicative level (selfies' phatic function); and the level of content (the performativity of the image). The levels are reflected in the organisation of both the theoretical framework and the analytical case study. First, the article elaborates on the concept of celebrification (Rojek 2001; see also for example, Gamson 1994, Couldry 2004, Turner 2004, 2010, Driessens 2013a) in order to set the cultural context for celebrity selfies. The second section discusses the phatic communicative function (Jakobson 1960, Licoppe and Smoreda 2005, Miller 2008, Hartley 2009) performed by celebrity selfies on social network sites to establish presence and keep fans updated and connected through the successive documentation of their everyday lives. In the third

section, we present the performativity (Austin (1975 [1962], 1990, 2010) of the image itself, which creates a sense of immediacy by putting on display its own coming into being. The subsequent sections also reflect the three structural levels in the case study of the Instagram profile of the Danish pop singer and songwriter Medina, which operationalises and provides nuances to the theoretical framework by adding ‘context-dependent knowledge’ to the ‘context-independent theory’ (Flyvbjerg 2006). To start, we analyse how her selfies feed into processes of celebrification by merging intimacy and authenticity with promotion and branding. We next study the phatic function of Medina’s selfies to keep connected with fans and then the performativity of the images. Finally, the conclusion elaborates on this article’s contribution to understanding celebrity selfies within a framework of celebrification.

### **Celebrification and celebrity selfies**

In this article, the celebrity selfie and its most frequent distribution via personal profiles on Instagram are understood within the overall theoretical framework of celebrification. Celebrification designates the particular media logic and cultural process through which celebrity selves are constructed and communicated at any one time. Broadly speaking, celebrification encompasses the mediated interplays and negotiations between celebrities/ their management and various media platforms, media institutions and fans/followers.

Our take on celebrification differs from how the concept is typically interpreted within celebrity studies as the process through which the ordinary, understood as individuals and fields outside the media and the realm of popular culture, is subsumed into celebrity logic and acquires a media form (for example, Gamson 1994, Couldry 2004, Turner 2004, Driessens 2013a). This perspective is certainly significant, not least in the current era of digital media in which processes of celebrification have spread to the

extent that the ‘performance of celebrity has become part of the daily practice of millions of consumers’ (Hackley and Hackley 2015, p. 469). However, in our understanding of celebrification, we follow Rojek (2001), whose discussion of celebrification has gained less notice, to argue that celebrification spawns across platforms and advances the integration of branding and celebrity culture. On a par with the researchers cited, he uses ‘celebrification process’ to point to the transformation from non-media to media person, but he also highlights celebrification as a ‘general tendency to frame social encounters in mediagenic filters’ (Rojek 2001, p. 186). Even though his book was published well before the emergence of social network sites, Rojek’s interpretation of celebrification processes anticipates the diversified and decentralised nature of contemporary celebrity culture, prompted by the rise of platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Instagram as well as the convergence between mainstream mass media and social network sites. In the current media environment, celebrification, not least, manifests itself in specific performances of celebrity, which profoundly challenge the public–private and the ordinary–extraordinary tensions fuelling celebrity culture from the beginning of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century (for example, Dyer 1989 [1979], Bennett 2011, Mortensen and Jerslev 2014). Across contemporary celebrity culture, these tensions have been substituted with a sense of direct and immediate access to the authentic and true celebrity addressing his or her followers in immediate and direct manners.

Along similar lines, Marwick and boyd define celebrity not as a noun but as an adjective; that is, a performative practice involving the continuous negotiation of what counts as a sellable celebrity self:

We conceptualize celebrity as an organic and ever-changing performative practice rather than a set of intrinsic personal characteristics or external labels. This practice involves ongoing maintenance of a fan basis, performed intimacy, authenticity and access, and

construction of a consumable persona. (Marwick and boyd 2011b, p. 140; original emphasis)

Constructions of authenticity, access and a consumable persona are the keywords of contemporary celebrification processes: celebrification is thus intimately tied with the commodification of the celebrity self. Today, celebrification processes are, perhaps, the most conspicuous example of what Andrew Wernick (1992) coined the ‘culture of universal promotion’. In a cultural condition defined by the pervasiveness of promotion discourses, Wernick argues, the individual is continuously encouraged to present and promote the branded self as a commodity to be worked on and a ‘persona produced for public consumption’ (1992, p. 193). The branded self involves ‘a whole way of life’ (Hearn 2008, p. 205) moulding both the public appearance and ‘the cultural processes of our daily lives’ (Turner 2004, p. 17; see also Ouellette and Hay 2008, Genz 2014). This surfaces in the ongoing circulation of selfies by celebrities, who in this documentation of their day-to-day lives merge authenticity and ‘self-commodification’ (Marwick 2013).

Seen within the framework of celebrification, the celebrity selfie constitutes an effective means for the continuous branding of the celebrity self, its visual portrait oscillating between intimacy and promotion, authenticity and performance, ordinary and extraordinary. By producing and distributing selfies, celebrities not only erase the borderlines between self and mediated self, self and branded self, and person and persona but also between themselves and fans by publishing on social network sites and showing scenes from the private sphere.

### **Connection over content: phatic communication**

The serial posting of selfies on Instagram and other social network sites constitutes a way for



celebrities to keep in touch with their fans and the general public on a daily basis. As a form of ‘mediated sociability’ (Licoppe and Smoreda 2005, p. 321), celebrity selfies seldom offer new, substantial information but nurture the relationship with fans, and so forth, who acknowledge this effort with likes and comments. The seriality of celebrity selfies chronicles the appealing everyday life of celebrities. Celebrity selfies affirm to an extent the thesis presented by Richard Dyer more than 30 years ago that the construction of the ‘ordinary’ celebrity centres on ‘a lifestyle of leisure’ and ‘consumption’ (1989 [1979], p. 35). They document the day-to-day endeavours of celebrities: sporting new outfits and gear, going to the gym, having dinner, shooting videos, hanging out with friends, recording music, performing on stage, travelling, or relaxing in their luxurious homes. In contrast to the images of stars off-set and off-duty to which Dyer was referring, contemporary celebrities such as Medina share many selfies of themselves carrying out professional tasks. However, their approach to work is infused with the ‘lifestyle of leisure’ and ‘consumption’ insofar as the depictions focus on the fun, social, exciting and glamorous aspects of their work life.

Celebrities establish presence and keep connected through the successive documentation of their ‘extraordinary everyday’ (Marshall 2006) lives in selfies. A similar effect is obtained by celebrities’ use of Twitter as emphasised, for instance, by Marwick and boyd (2011a, 2011b), Bennett (2011) and Muntean and Petersen (2009). However, in comparison with celebrities’ communication on Twitter as a predominantly textual medium, the visual reproduction of the self in selfies stages a spectacular ‘extraordinary ordinariness’ (Mortensen and Jerslev 2014) and creates an intensified sense of presence in the double meaning of this word as a spatial ‘being present’ and a temporal ‘in the present’. As Sandbye and other photography scholars have emphasised, the contemporary production and distribution of photographs ‘enhance the feeling of experiencing the moment rather than embalming it’

(2012, p. 2; original emphasis). In this manner, photography is closely related to ‘everyday life, to communication, to presence’ (2012, p. 2). Photography used to be understood as a medium concerned with documentation and remembrance, but now it has turned into ‘a medium of exchange’ (Batchen 2013) connoting presence as well as the present rather than the past.

As celebrity selfies insist on the present here and now, they perform a phatic communicative function; that is, the use of linguistic markers (verbal or, in this case, visual) to signal presence. The term was originally coined by anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1936) and then used by Roman Jakobson (1960) in his famous discussion of the communicative functions of verbal language. Phatic communication has recently been taken up by researchers to call attention to how interaction on digital platforms favours ‘connection over content’, as sociologist Vincent Miller observes (2008, p. 397). Miller also explains that ‘[p]hatic messages are not intended to carry information or substance for the receiver but instead concern the process of communication’ (2008, p. 394; original emphasis). In online media cultures, phatic communication serves the purpose of letting others know that ‘one is still “there”’ (2008, p. 393). Along these lines, Licoppe and Smoreda discuss phatic communication on digital media as a means of constructing what they term ‘connected presence’:

In the regime of ‘connected’ presence, participants multiply encounters and contacts using every kind of mediation and artifacts available to them: relationships thus become seamless webs of quasi-continuous exchanges. The boundaries between absence and presence get blurred and subtle experiences of togetherness may develop. The use of messaging technologies develops, for ‘connected presence’ weighs heavily on participants’ limited availability and attention; however committed they are to sustain that form of mediated sociability. Phatic communications becomes increasingly important, because simply

keeping in touch may be more important than what is said when one actually gets in touch.

(Licoppe and Smoreda 2005, p. 321)

The coupling of connectivity and phatic communication is instructive for understanding the communicative mode of celebrity selfies posted on social network sites. Celebrity selfies thus exemplify the ‘quasi-continuous exchanges’, the blurred boundaries ‘between absence and presence’, and may indeed offer ‘subtle experiences of togetherness’ in keeping with the definition of connected presence by Licoppe and Smoreda (2005, p. 321). According to Licoppe and Smoreda, phatic communication is used to maintain connected presence; for example, when celebrities post selfies of themselves (being celebrities) here and now, they construct a sense of ‘Hello, I am here, in this very moment.’

By engaging in phatic communication, celebrity selfies invite quick responses of awe and approval from fans and followers. However, in comparison with Twitter, selfies seem to call for more emotional engagement on account of the visual reproduction of the face, body and material world of the celebrity. Phatic communication in a visual form creates a heightened sense of presence and invites users to confirm their co-presence by sharing, commenting on, ‘liking’ the images, and imitating the celebrities in their own selfies. They inscribe themselves into the ongoing narrative produced by the successive publication of celebrity selfies. By the serial, visual recording of their day-to-day existence, the profiles of Medina and other celebrities function as a kind of moving archive, reflecting the general shift from a culture concerned with storage to ‘a new media culture built on permanent transfer’ (Ernst 2002, p. 23 cited in Røssaak 2010, p. 11; see also Jerslev and Mortensen 2014). Hence, one may point to the paradox in the circulation of celebrity selfies that even if they are deployed phatically to establish presence, they are also stored and accumulate as testimonies to life lived. Celebrity selfies are at once

fleeting in their insistence on the current ‘here’ and ‘now’ and permanent and perpetual when stored as ‘cumulative self-representations’ (Rettberg 2014, p. 35) in the archival function of Instagram.

However, even though celebrity selfies construct a sense of access, they also reinforce a more traditional vertical relation between celebrity and fans. Celebrity selfies offer proximity and presence as a one-way interaction with fans. Celebrities on Instagram tend to communicate one to many, and invite fans to follow the documentation of their mainly to be important in their acknowledgement and admiration of the celebrity persona.

### **The performative construction of the self**

By showing celebrities in the act of taking the image, selfies invariably allude to their own production. Art history, of course, contains numerous precedents of artists portraying themselves while painting their own image or an image of others (Rettberg 2014, Saltz 2014). Just as self-portraits have always combined ‘the most intimate artistic gesture with the most public display of image management’ (Rascaroli 2009, p. 176), self-representation as an intimate act and strategic management of the self are fundamental to celebrity selfies. They show celebrities taking the snapshot – looking into mirrors, making the smartphone visible or holding the phone out at arm’s length. Disclosing their own act of creation, celebrity selfies show celebrities at the time and place the photo is taken, in the act of taking the photo. One cannot separate the image from the act or the act from the image. One cannot separate celebrity-construction, self-construction and the mirroring of self.

When Oxford Dictionaries announced ‘selfie’ to be the word of 2013, it offered a definition that highlights precisely how this genre is at the same time a photograph and an act: ‘A photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media

website.’<sup>1</sup> Following this definition, which underscores the conflation of object and act, the photograph and the taking of the photograph, we propose that selfies may be understood as performative statements, a form of visual speech act uttering a presence in the here and now by the photographic enacting of ‘being seen doing’ (Gade and Jerslev 2005, p. 7; original emphasis) – here and now.

As a communicative gesture emphasising the act of here and now, celebrity selfies’ doing accords with J. L. Austin’s influential definition of performativity in his seminal work *How to Do Things with Words*, in which he claims that ‘the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action’ (1975 [1962], p. 6). Austin’s examples of performative statements include the marriage ritual (the vow ‘I do’; sc. take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife), to baptise (‘I baptise this child’) and to promise (‘I promise to’). Although Austin was referring to spoken sentences, selfies may still be characterised as performative – they are, so to speak, a way to do things with images – because they are, at once, an act and the result of that act. As visual performative statements, selfies communicate what, to Barthes (1984 [1980], p. 87), was essential about the photographic image – that ‘[e] very photograph is a certificate of presence’. By their simultaneity of being and doing, they appear to present the celebrity instead of representing her or him (see also Marshall 2010).

Through the notion of the performative, Austin emphasised the relational and intersubjective nature of utterances, ‘the act-like character of language’ (von Hantelman 2010, p. 18), which Butler (1990) used as her point of departure for her famous work on culture and gender as constructions. According to art historian von Hantelman (2010), performativity transfers attention from the work to its production of reality; that is, the relationship between the work and the user, which is a useful point for understanding the particular performativity at play in celebrity selfies. From this perspective, performativity is here

used in the strictly Austrian manner in order to point out how the celebrity selfie accomplishes an act in the social world and constitutes a communicative gesture – at once pointing at and drawing the user in closer.

The selfie captures a posing body, lingering in a performative space and time in between, taken by the camera and yet in the very process of being taken, immobilised but not quite stilled, situated in a moment of presence and yet also having been there at one and the same time. Barthes (1984 [1980]) and, after him, most comprehensively, art historian Craig Owens have theorised the photographic pose. Owens defines the photographic pose as “‘freezing”, as if anticipating the still I am about to become, mimicking its opacity, its still-ness’ (1992, p. 210). Like Barthes, Owens underlines the still-ness of the photograph and the arrest of the body even before it is captured by the camera. The selfie, on the other hand, could be described as the still in the act of becoming. Through selfies, celebrities seem to reach out to the viewer and invite them closer spatially as well as temporally.

All in all, the theoretical sections have established a framework for understanding the working of celebrity selfies on the levels of culture, communication and content: understood within the framework of celebrification, the celebrity selfie contributes to the continuous branding of the celebrity self. When posted on social network sites, celebrity selfies constitute an example of the ways in which digital media create ‘connected presence’ through phatic communication, and may be understood as a symptom of the general cultural move from content to connection, from photography as a medium of memory to a medium of exchange. Finally, the image itself has been conceptualised as performative.

### **‘Me’ as in Medina: branding the authentic celebrity self**

As a case study of a celebrity actively promoting a celebrified self through selfies, we have chosen the

Danish pop, dance and R&B singer and songwriter Medina (born in 1982). Acknowledged for her ‘honest but also strategic’<sup>2</sup> communication on social network sites, she is frequently brought up in the Danish press as a prime example of celebrities’ professional, strategic approach to social network sites to connect with fans, strengthen their brand, feed stories to celebrity news and gossip, and promote other brands (Kolby 2014; see also, for example, Rix and Olsen 2013, Skouboe 2014, Skyum-Nielsen 2014). Currently the best-selling recording artist in Denmark, Medina has also established herself as a name in other European countries and the US. The professionalisation and operationalisation of the celebrity self at play in Medina’s selfies seems to be in line with how, according to some music critics, Medina’s artistic universe revolves around the self. The daily newspaper Politiken, in its review of her second album *Velkommen til Medina* (Welcome to Medina) from 2009, counted 505 self-references (i.e. ‘I’, ‘my’, ‘mine’) during the course of the album’s 40 minutes (Lund 2009). In Denmark, Medina has received the greatest number of ‘likes’ for her photographs on social network sites, and she claims to manage her Instagram profile single-handedly (Skyum-Nielsen 2014).

On a methodological note, Medina is not of interest as a representative of a particular Danish or Scandinavian celebrity culture. Her deployment of Instagram, her favoured channel for publishing selfies, very much adheres to the same aesthetics, themes and forms of communication as British and American celebrities active on this social network site, such as Kim Kardashian, Suki Waterhouse, Cara Delevingne, Sofia Vergera, Lena Dunham and Justin Bieber. The analysis primarily studies the web edition of Medina’s Instagram profile.<sup>3</sup> Although Instagram mostly functions as an ‘on the go’ platform via the mobile phone app, Instagram on the web presents a better overview of the images posted by a celebrity. We decided against a quantitative approach, even though the great number of visuals might call for an analysis of shares between different types and genres of images. For our

overall purpose of examining the use of celebrity selfies as a strategy of celebrification, it made more sense to deploy qualitative visual/textual analysis in order to investigate the specific ways in which Medina's selfies project an authentic and commodified celebrity self. This case study offers 'the force of example' (Flyvbjerg 2006, p. 228; original emphasis) and is structured according to the same three levels as the theoretical sections (culture/celebrification, communication/the phatic, content/performativity).

### **Celebrification: the branded and authentic self on Instagram**

Medina's Instagram profile had 340,901 followers (as of 26 June 2015), a high number by Danish standards. As the artist puts it herself in an interview from April 2014: 'I reach approximately one sixth of Denmark when I push send. I have 500,000 following me on Facebook, a quarter of a million on Instagram and 111,000 on Twitter' (Skouboe 2014). Her profile included 3370 posts made public since 5 May 2012 (as of 26 June 2015) and allows fans to follow the artist but also to gain knowledge of and become part of her network. When Medina tags actors, colleagues, members of her band, make-up artists, etcetera in the captions to selfies, she enables fans to have a look at her private circles and professional network, which they may also follow to get closer to Medina. As already mentioned, reciprocity hardly ever exists in the social network relationship between celebrity and fan, and the basic distribution of power in celebrity culture appears to remain intact. Even so, it is still striking that celebrities use the same communicative platform as their fans: the 'burgeoning marketplace' of Instagram (Abidin 2014, p. 124). Launched in 2010 as a free app for photo sharing, Instagram had 300 million users as of 2015, who can 'like' and 'share' images posted by other users and spread them via Twitter, Facebook and other social network sites. Artists, celebrities, bloggers and so on deploy Instagram in a manner which not only merges "lifestyle" and "work", but also 'obscure[s] the



commerciality of their posts', as Abidin observes about bloggers' use of this social network site (2014, pp. 125–126). In relation to celebrity culture, it is important to note that Instagram has more female than male users and that the majority of users are under the age of 35, which renders it an attractive platform for celebrities such as Medina to communicate with their targeted audience of young females (for example, Hansen 2014, Smith 2014). Moreover, as a photo-sharing platform and 'playground for aesthetes' (Brams 2015), Instagram offers a number of possibilities for visual mise-en-scene and for celebrities to draw on and further develop well-established photographic genres. These include the self-portrait, the everyday snapshot, fashion photography and other commercial and promotional genres, which all put to the fore the 'personalization', 'lifestyle' and 'exclusivity' characteristic of Instagram as a communication channel (Luttrell 2015, p. 132).

Medina's profile resembles a private noticeboard with its display of various types of visuals. The images can be divided into three overall categories: the first category, by far the largest, contains 'private' photos. This category includes selfies, photos taken by the artist of her immediate surroundings (e.g. a vase of flowers, a jar of caviar or her walk-in closet) and photographs of Medina taken by other people (e.g. during rehearsal or backstage, training or costume-fitting, and with her family). The second and smallest is comprised of 'official' photographs from concerts, posters for upcoming concerts and other kinds of PR material, images from charity events, and photographs of adverts (e.g. for the Danish cosmetic brand Gosh). In contrast to the backstage glimpses facilitated by the 'private' images, the 'official' images present front-stage behaviour in the sense of Goffman (1990 [1959]). Finally, the third category consists of written statements; that is, close-ups of text messages from public spaces such as 'I feel bad for the people who never go crazy' (officialmedinamusic, 4 June 2014, Instagram), printed poster texts such as 'Never make eye contact while eating a banana'

(officialmedinamusic, 5 May 2014, Instagram) or ‘You are somebody’s reason to smile’ (officialmedinamusic, 25 December 2014, Instagram), and memes such as an image of a woman wearing a Batman mask with the text ‘Ordinary life does not interest me’ (officialmedinamusic, 10 December 2014, Instagram).

With regard to Medina’s selfies, they altogether put on display a celebrity self fully in charge of her life. The artist is projecting the self of a successful artist leading a full life – physically fit, wearing high-fashion clothes, travelling, working out, engaging with an admiring crowd or doing photo shoots, and owning two cute puppies. Neither photographs nor captions confess to insecure or bad days. The individual selfies and the collection of selfies on the profile appear to authenticate Medina as a celebrity self in control: being herself, managing herself and branding herself at one and the same time. This obvious commodification of her self in the selfies goes hand in hand with the projection of intimacy and authenticity.

As a tangible effect of this, the three categories mentioned – official photographs (including adverts), private photographs (including selfies) and text messages – are not completely distinguishable. A number of selfies cross over into adverts. In some selfies, Medina wears products from brands with which she has sponsorship agreements; in others, she endorses brands as an appreciation for free samples of their products (Skyum-Nielsen 2014); and, finally, some brands promoted by Medina in her selfies seem to be a way to display her taste and lifestyle. In many images, she shows how she is casually wearing exclusive brands such as Chanel and Louboutin (e.g. officialmedinamusic, 12 December 2014, Instagram) or Gucci (e.g. officialmedinamusic, 19 December 2014, Instagram) and mimes a fashion blog by mentioning the brands she combines in her current outfits. For instance, one caption to a photo of her feet in high heels says: ‘Date night ♥ @charlotte\_eskildsen @kimgrenaa.’

(officialmedinamusic, 13 November 2014, Instagram). The names mentioned, Charlotte Eskildsen and Kim Grenaa, are tagged and clicking on them leads to the Instagram profiles of, respectively, the Danish designer Charlotte Eskildsen and Kim Grenaa, who is creative director of the fashion magazine Dansk.

The coupling of promotion and branding with intimacy and authenticity clearly manifests itself, for instance, in a close-up of Medina holding her head in her hands and wearing pink lipstick and full eye make-up, uploaded on 4 February 2015. She is gazing solemnly into the lens and appears to have taken the image with the camera phone's self-timing release. The text says: 'No filter. . . . Just a lot of Make up hahaaaaa.....!!!!!! #medinabygosh Goodnight beautiful ppl♥ stay warm hearted'

(officialmedinamusic, 4 February 2015, Instagram). Gosh, a Danish brand of cosmetics for which Medina is 'the face', has launched the special line of make-up, 'Medina by Gosh'.<sup>4</sup> In the text, she makes a claim for the authenticity of the image by saying that she has not used any filters; that is, she has not embellished her looks (this is a frequent remark made in connection with her selfies). This statement also alludes to the fact that filters are not needed when wearing her brand of make-up by Gosh. The image is both one of authenticity with her pose and the lack of filters and one of advertisement as she encourages fans to buy the products. Medina promotes the cosmetics by promoting herself – and vice versa.

Medina has been criticised for cynicism after she disclosed her social media strategy in the Danish financial newspaper Børsen (The Stock Exchange). In this interview, she recounts how virtually nothing is left to chance when she uploads an image, and she confirms her awareness of her power to influence young consumers, her primary audience and target group. She explains that part of her

business is to market brands with which she has sponsorship agreements on Instagram: ‘I am completely aware when there is a Schweppes in an image – accidentally, in the corner’ (Skouboe 2014). As she explains, ‘I am a company promoting other companies’. When asked by Børsen how many of her selfies are staged to camouflage branding, she responds, ‘I guess more than eighty percent’ (Skouboe 2014). Apart from maintaining sponsorship agreements, Medina is also well aware of how her selfies enter into the feeding chain of the media. Tabloid papers and other media outlets frequently recirculate her selfies. As she states herself, ‘I know what is going to happen when I upload something. It enters into all the magazines, they eat it raw’ (Skouboe 2014) Perhaps, the most illuminating quote from Børsen, which sums up her approach to social media in general and selfies in particular, is her response when asked whether the singer regards herself as a business or a person: ‘I certainly regard this as a business, but it is also something I love; so it becomes a part of who I am’ (Skouboe 2014).

The selfies on Medina’s Instagram profile contribute to her continued celebrification by functioning as styling of self (Corner and Pels 2003), self-commodification and maintenance of sponsorship agreements. On the other hand, according to the artist herself, they also work as a presentation of her authentic self (cf. also Tolson 2001), the successful artist/business woman as a privately-performing self who discloses herself to her fans – ‘I love it; so it becomes a part of who I am’, as she says in the earlier quote.

### **Being present, keeping connecting**

Instagram writes in its presentation of the platform that it ‘allow[s] you to experience moments in your friends’ lives through pictures as they happen’ (2015; original emphasis). Indeed, Medina’s profile gives the impression that ‘friends’ or, at least, fans are offered almost instant access to her

extraordinary life through pictures. Selfies stored provide evidence of time passed, events attended, restaurants visited, shows performed and so forth. The images rapidly accumulate on Medina's Instagram profile in the horizontal structure distinctive of social network sites, which present the sum of images as a quantitative and successive one after the other.

The Polaroid-like photographs are posted in reverse chronological order and provide approximate information about when they were taken as well as the number of likes and comments. When one clicks on a selfie, Medina's written caption to the right of the image usually states in the present tense the occasion and location; for example, 'First stop Beijing, after the Changsha' (officialmedinamusic, 17 May 2014, Instagram) and '#inthemiddleofNOWHEREandiloveit' (officialmedinamusic, 22 April 2014, Instagram), the latter anchoring a selfie of Medina almost buried in a large fur hood. Other captions make reference to events about to take place, which fans are encouraged to follow such as the announcement posted on 20 November 2014: 'Visiting P3 [radio channel] in a mini second ...! #p3 #radio #medina #goodmorning' (officialmedinamusic, Instagram). In other selfie captions, she merely says 'good morning', announces herself to be 'ready for a perfect day' (officialmedinamusic, 29 April 2014, Instagram) or wishes fans a 'good night' (officialmedinamusic, 5 December 2014, Instagram). The texts hardly ever contain detailed information, but stay on the specifics of what has happened or is about to happen. In this way, the captions emphasise the phatic function of the posted selfies. They offer proximity in time and space by letting followers in on the quickly changing when, where, why and with whom of Medina's celebrity lifestyle. In addition, she maintains a sense of immediacy by communicating several times a day to fans that she is still here, right now, 'enjoying life' (as she often proclaims). Even her overtly commercial selfies, such as the Gosh advert mentioned earlier, are accompanied by phatic greetings – 'Goodnight beautiful ppl ♥ stay warm hearted' – which emphasise

how the nurturing of emotional bonds with fans also works as strategic communication.

Phatic communication offers access to a parallel universe, which is distinctly different from the everyday life of fans. When celebrity selfies provide scenes from the everyday, the snapshots of ordinary life are always embedded in the extraordinary. Celebrities such as Medina put the glamour and luxury of the everyday at the fore in their Instagram profiles. The selfies invite fans to come closer and join the ‘connected presence’ but, at the same time, accentuate the distance.

### **Performing the self, being the self**

As discussed in the theoretical section, celebrity selfies resemble performative utterances insofar as the celebrity comes into being in the exact here and now when the photograph is taken. This notion of coming into being is underscored by the way in which taking the selfie prompts a small break, a moment in between, from whatever routines or activities the celebrity is currently engaging in. Medina, for instance, frequently snaps images while going to the gym, checking her look in the mirror or being together with friends – thus, the selfies show her in these situations but also stepping out from them. Other selfies anticipate future events, as already mentioned, and are taken as Medina is about to enter a radio studio, board a plane, get out of bed and so forth.

How the selfie represents a performative moment in between may be exemplified by a typical selfie of Medina posted on 10 May 2014 with the phatic text message once again focusing on the occasion, time, place and people present: ‘Early early.... Video shoot somewhere in Sweden · #thiscouldbesomething @antonewald #universalsweden makeup time.. ... @regtornwall @sborresen’ (officialmedinamusic, Instagram). In this image, Medina is at the centre of the frame. She is facing the camera and looking into the lens with her lit face cropped above the eyebrows. Her arm is stretched

forward and cut above the elbow in the characteristic gesture of shooting the selfie by holding her mobile phone in front of her. We simultaneously see the taking of the selfie and the selfie taken. Even though Medina could have used filters to enhance the selfie, it still seems to be taken spontaneously in the middle of ongoing activities. A woman is half-visible in the background to the left, looking down at her mobile phone. To the right side, we see the nose and mouth in profile of another person, who seems to pass accidentally behind her. The text states that Medina is at a video shoot (in the far left background, the outline of a lit lamp is discernible) and that she has just had her make-up done. In other words, like many of her other selfies, this one is snapped at an in-between moment (i.e. after make-up and before a video shoot); and the seemingly accidental presence of the two other persons underscores the selfie's appearance of being shot impulsively at the moment she is taking a break. The solemn look on Medina's face, the close-up and the direct gaze into the camera might connote sincerity, intimacy and authenticity according to art and photo historical conventions. However, at the same time, Medina frames the selfie in the caption as a documentation of her recently finished make-up (i.e. the professional styling and management of the celebrity self). This image literally captures Medina at the moment when her celebrity self has come into being through make-up and she is about to perform in front of the cameras. At the same time, the selfie functions as a preview of her look and appearance in the music video: an exclusive, private and intimate moment shared with fans.

Medina connects and communicates with fans through displays of moments-in-between, which are intimate and inviting, because we watch the image as it comes into being. Her Instagram profile offers a parallel world for her fans to commit to and identity with. However, when Medina creates presence and pays attention to fans, it is by paying attention to herself. The relation is asymmetrical per se. In the reproduction of her celebrified self, fans are looking at Medina looking at herself. She is making herself

available but also appears to be enclosed in a circle of self(ie)-absorption.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this article has been to outline celebrity selfies as a genre which offers new opportunities for celebrities to communicate with fans and followers. Studying the construction and communication of the self in celebrity selfies, this article has argued that authenticity and commodification go effortlessly hand in hand. To pursue this argument, the theoretical sections have established a framework for understanding celebrity selfies on three different levels: celebrification as a cultural practice, phatic communication establishing connective presence, and performativity as a visual practice producing immediacy. Apart from stipulating a framework for theorising celebrity selfies specifically, we have aimed to provide nuances to the discussion of celebrification by both emphasising this concept as a structuring logic of social encounters in social media and arguing that branding is integral to the term. Moreover, along with other scholars, we have applied the ‘classical’ notions of phatic communication (originally from anthropology/ linguistics) and performativity (originally from philosophy of language) to selfies’ communicative modes on social network sites. By relating these terms to selfies as visual communication, we have offered further perspectives to their particular construction of presence and the conflation of being and doing at stake in performativity acted out through the medium of photography.

Choosing to examine celebrity selfies through a study of the Danish singer Medina raises the question of whether the conclusions drawn apply only to our example or whether they are of broader significance. As already argued, Medina’s selfies exemplify traits of this genre that are also to be found in selfies produced by celebrities from other countries. Merging branding and authenticity in a



paradoxical combination with power structural asymmetry seems to represent general characteristics of celebrity selfies. Along the same lines, it also appears to be a general point that celebrification is strategic work and a way of life at one and the same time. As a contemporary example of a culture of universal promotion (Wernick 1992), Medina's Instagram profile blurs the boundaries between the public and the private of celebrity appearance, the ordinary and the extraordinary, authenticity and commodification. Managing celebrity and living celebrity are one and the same thing, just as self and branding of the self are one and the same thing.

The case of Medina shows how her selfies and the wider context of her Instagram profile function as part of her celebrification. They construct an image of a star in control – of her body, her career and herself as a brand. In contrast to the discourse of intrusion (Muntean and Petersen 2009) at play in paparazzi photography, celebrity selfies subscribe to a discourse of disclosure and agency (authors 2014a, 2014b). It has even been suggested that celebrities deploy selfies as a form of anti-paparazzi. For instance, Rihanna reportedly 'self-paparazzied' with a selfie as a protest against ever-present paparazzi (O'Connor 2013), and Lindsay Lohan has similarly accounted for her use of selfies to avoid intrusive photographers: 'So if you do take a selfie, and you Instagram that or tweet that, then there's no picture for them to take so they don't follow you' (Hoover 2014).

Even though selfies appear to be gestures of presence, intimacy and access, and may be seen as examples of how contemporary celebrification processes narrow the gap between celebrities and fans (Marshall 2010), celebrity selfies nevertheless offer fans images of themselves as pieces to add to the puzzle of the celebrity's paradoxical extraordinary ordinariness (Dyer 1989 [1979]; see also, for example, Bennett 2008, Mortensen and Jerslev 2014). Whereas paparazzi photography's stolen moments present the extraordinary person as merely ordinary (Mortensen and Jerslev 2014), the

multiplication of celebrity selfies on a platform such as Instagram may be said to deny the ordinary as the banality and repetitiveness of the everyday and show the extraordinariness of even the ordinary. This lack of reciprocity is further underlined by Instagram's usual asymmetrical communicative structure, in which celebrities address fans by short written captions but rarely answer fans' comments or follow their profiles in return. So, in closing, celebrity selfies accentuate the way in which current processes of celebrification narrow the gap between celebrities and their followers, but also continuously maintain differences across the gap by asymmetrically upholding the distinction between the ordinary and the extraordinary.

#### *Disclosure statement*

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

#### **Notes**

1. Available from <http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/press-releases/oxford-dictionaries-word-of-the-year-2013/> [Accessed 30 Sept 2015].
2. All Danish quotes have been translated into English by the authors.
3. Available from <http://instagram.com/officialmedinamusic> [Accessed 30 Sept 2015].
4. Available from [www.gosh.dk/da/exclusives/medina-by-Gosh.html](http://www.gosh.dk/da/exclusives/medina-by-Gosh.html) [Accessed 25 Feb 2015].

#### **Notes on contributors**

Anne Jerslev, PhD, is Professor at the Department of Media, Cognition and Communication, University of Copenhagen. Research areas include celebrity studies, in particular fan discussions on

comment sites, documentary theory and reality TV studies. She has published several books, edited volumes and articles on celebrity culture, reality television, documentary and realism. Her latest publications include ‘Talking about Angelina – Celebrity Gossip on the Internet’ in *New Media Talk* (edited by Anne Jerslev; *Film & Media Studies Yearbook*, vol. 12, Intellect Press, 2014), *Impure Cinema. Intermedial and Intercultural Approaches to Film* (co-edited with Lúcia Nagib; I.B. Tauris, 2014) and ‘David Lynch between Analogue and Digital: Lost Highway, The Straight Story and the Interview Project’ in *Impure Cinema. Intermedial and Intercultural Approaches to Film* (edited by Lúcia Nagib and Anne Jerslev; I.B. Tauris, 2014).

Mette Mortensen, PhD, is Associate Professor at the Department of Media, Cognition and Communication, University of Copenhagen. Research areas include media and conflict, journalism, celebrity studies, photography, and digital aesthetics and communication. She has written the monograph *Kampen om ansigtet: fotografi og identifikation (Facial Politics. Photography and Identification)*; Information Press, 2012), and co-edited several books and special issues of journals. She has published articles in journals such as *The International Journal of Cultural Studies*, *Global Media and Communication*, *Journalism Practice*, *Information, Communication & Society*, *Photographies* and *Digital Journalism*. Her most recent books are *Journalism and Eyewitness Images. Digital Media, Participation, and Conflict* (Routledge, 2015), and *The Dynamics of Mediatized Conflicts* (co-edited with Mikkel Fugl Eskjær and Stig Hjarvard, Peter Lang, 2015).

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