<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Journal:</th>
<th><em>Marketing Intelligence and Planning</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manuscript ID</td>
<td>MIP-07-2017-0124.R1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manuscript Type:</td>
<td>Original Article</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keywords:</td>
<td>selfie, identity, convergence, celebrity, branded content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Implications of the Selfie for Marketing Management Practice in the Era of Celebrity**
Implications of the Selfie for Marketing Management Practice in the Era of Celebrity

Structured Abstract

Category: Conceptual paper

Purpose
This conceptual paper explores the implications of the selfie for marketing management in the era of celebrity. The purpose is to show that the facilitation of the creative performance of consumer identity is a key element of the marketing management task for the media convergence era.

Approach
The paper uses the selfie, the picture of oneself taken by oneself, as a metaphor to develop a conceptual exploration of the nature of marketing in the light of the dominance of celebrity and entertainment in contemporary media and entertainment.

Findings
The paper suggests that marketing management in the era of convergence should facilitate consumers’ identity projects through participatory initiatives. Marketers must furnish and facilitate not only the props for consumers mediated identity performances, but also the scripts, sets and scenes, plot devices, cinematographic and other visual techniques, costumes, looks, movements, characterizations and narratives.

Research limitations/implications
This is a conceptual paper that sketches out the beginning of a re-framed, communication-focused vision of marketing management in the era of media convergence.

**Practical implications**

Marketing managers can benefit from thinking about consumer marketing as the stage management of consumer visual, physical, virtual, sensory and psychic environments that enable consumers to actively participate in celebrity culture.

**Originality/value**

This paper suggests ways in which marketing practice can emerge from its pre-digital frame to embrace the new digital cultures of consumption.

**Keywords:** Selfie; Identity; Convergence; Marketing

**Introduction**

The selfie is often excoriated as an expression of low self-esteem, vanity, self-indulgence, immaturity, exhibitionism, and tastelessness (Murray, 2015). Yet, as with advertising (Cook, 2002) there is a contradiction: the selfie is so frequently and vehemently dismissed as culturally trivial, that it cannot be so. Indeed, the selfie has become a serious topic for social scientific study, including much work in the marketing area (Jerslev and Mortensen, 2016; Lee, 2016; Kedzior et al. 2016; Lim, 2016). The term selfie was first heard around 2002 (Wallop, 2014), but the concept is not unique to the digital era. For example, Manet included portraits of himself and friends and family in his picture ‘Music in the Tuileries Gardens’, whilst Robert Cornelius took perhaps the world’s first photographic selfie, in 1839 (Gilbert,
Buzz Aldrin’s moon landing in 1966 introduced the selfie to the space age, along with Paul McCartney’s early black and white selfie taken in a mirror with a box camera (I). In the era of media convergence (Jenkins, 2008) the selfie has assumed a new symbolism as consumer culture has shifted from a promotional paradigm (Wernick, 1991), to one that is, to a significant extent, participatory (Powell, 2013), totalising (Davis, 2013), and predominantly visual (Schroeder, 2004). Many of the visual tropes of convergence culture reflect the absorption into wider consumer culture of the idiom of entertainment (Gabler, 2000). There is a sense in which selfies are also promotional since they effectively promote a persona in a marketplace of competing identities. The idea that there is an element of visual performance that is important in marketing is by no means new (Brown, 1994) but what does seem to be new is the potential for the consumer who lives connected to social media to leap from the audience to the performer side of the screen and back, at will. Technology has enabled us all to be on TV (Gabler, 2000), or at least on the smartphone screen. The selfie represents the distillation of identity performance through digital consumption (Rettberg, 2014: Kerrigan and Hart, 2016). In this paper we suggest that the importance of the selfie to marketing management practice has been under-explored and we conduct a conceptual exploration that draws out some of the implications for marketing management. We begin by establishing a key theme of the paper- the selfie (and other forms of digital participation) as link node between the self, celebrity culture, and marketing.

The Emergence of the Selfie in Celebrity Culture

The contemporary selfie, taken on a smartphone and uploaded to social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and many others, has emerged from a shift to a visual economy. Schroeder (2013) suggests that consumers’ persuasive and performative uses of
social media reflect an internalisation of the visual idiom of advertising. In turn, advertising and social media are increasingly cast in the idiom of entertainment. Arguably, the selfie came of age with 2014 Oscars host Ellen DeGeneres’s selfie that ‘broke Twitter’ (Baertlein, 2014). This apparently spontaneous yet carefully orchestrated marketing event became the most shared selfie ever, beating even the Pope and President Barack Obama (Bean, 2014) for selfie aggregation. What is more, it even seemed that the stars themselves were conscious of the value of the potential exposure to their personal brand—some who missed out, such as Liza Minnelli, were pictured trying hard to elbow their way into the shot (Wallop, 2014). As an exemplar of non-advertising promotion in the media convergence (Jenkins, 2008; Meikle and Young, 2011) era, DeGeneres’s supercharged celebrity selfie exemplifies the commercially strategic performance of spontaneity that is thoroughly integrated into a marketing dynamic of entertainment, celebrity, performance, and social media. Most selfies are not so brazenly commercial, but they are a significant driver of social media traffic and therefore they are implicated in the commercial logic of social media, even where this is not the primary intent of the subject. Rojek (2012) suggests that images of celebrities generate pleasure accumulation, which generates capital accumulation. Selfies celebrate the subject using the very same platforms and visual technologies as established celebrities. Although only a small number of selfies go viral, the number uploaded to social media and viewed and shared just a few score times constitute in total a substantial accumulation of images. According to recent reports, just one social media platform, Facebook, has more than two billion unique users per day, and most users have profile pictures, in addition to daily uploads. The selfie is a visible, stylized and widespread record of consumers performing their (our) lives in the visual economy (Schroeder, 2004).

The selfie displayed via social media is a means of interpolating ourselves into the glamorous world of entertainment. Gabler (2000) citing, amongst many others, Veblen (1879-1899) on
the need to display our consumption practices, and Boorstin (1992) on the rise of the image through the technological developments of visual media, both describe a world in which we act out scripted versions of reality with plots, props, sets and costumes, and even narrative devices and plot twists that are marketed to us through, and as, entertainment. Celebrities are central to the effect, since they are the headline stars, practiced in stagecraft, to whom we look most attentively for our cues. What is more, branded goods are celebritised anthropomorphically (Eagar and Dann, 2016; Hosany et al. 2013; Brown and Ponsonby-McCabe, 2013; 2014). We can follow and like them through social media, and visit them in person in theme parks or retail emporia, as if they too were movie stars (as indeed they are—see, for example, the Lego Movie or Transformers). Via social media we can sometimes even interact with established celebrities (Wohlfeil and Whelan, 2012; Banister and Cocker, 2013), thereby further blurring the boundary between real life, and the ‘reel’ life (Barbas, 2001) of showbusiness. The selfie is an aspect of the mediated self (Gabler, 2000; Kerrigan and Hart, 2016) within the entertainment economy. Through social media, the stark divide between the prosaic life of the typical consumer and the life of the celebrity is virtually dissolved at particular moments.

This topic is important partly because a focus on the selfie not only as text but as paratext, reflects a broader change of emphasis in marketing and communication (Grainge and Johnson, 2015) from explicit spot and feature advertising toward media ‘content’, including implicit, non-advertising promotion such as product placement, branded entertainment, sponsorship, and public relations (PR), reflecting the new dynamic of consumer culture in the convergent (Jenkins, 2008) media era. Within this marketing landscape notions such as utility, brand salience, satisfaction, customer loyalty and so on are by no means irrelevant, but can be better understood through a metaphor in which marketing furnishes consumers
with spaces, sets and scenes, plot devices, dramatic incidents, cinematographic technologies, props, storylines, characters and narratives to facilitate the dramatic and visual performance of identity (Hackley, 2013), in the ultimate story—the story of our lives.

The commercially inflected character of the worlds of celebrity and entertainment has been noted by cultural theorists such as Gabler (2000), sociologists such as Gamson (1994) and historians such as Boorstin (1992). Marketing practice can be better understood by fully integrating a culturally informed perspective of the entertainment economy (Wolf, 2003) into its purview. This is especially resonant in an era in which the evolution of the consumer into a creative producer (Brown, 1995; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Tofler, 1980) has been realised in a fully participatory economy (Jenkins, 2008). Of course, the selfie, at first glance, is not about the money. It is, in some cases, about achieving a sense of stylised authenticity (Schroeder, 2013). However, the closer one looks, the more deeply integrated the selfie seems to be in an economic system, in a visual economy, and the more it seems to reveal about the extent to which consumption and identity are performed to an audience using our lives as the dramatic material.

The democratisation of celebrity (Driessens, 2013) is not only the result of an industrial process (Hesmondhalgh, 2005) that manufactures celebrity through reality TV, talent shows and the like, but also reflects the rise of the self-promoting social media celebrity. Self-created celebrities (or ‘celetoids,’ Rojek (2012)) exploit the disintermediation (Hackley and Hackley, 2015) of the entertainment industry and have little need of PR and talent agencies, journalists and editors, movie studios, publicists and agents, at least initially. These media institutions remain powerful, but they are no longer as powerful as they once were as gatekeepers to celebrity if the protagonist can earn fame through a reality TV show. Selfie
subjects utilise “fame technologies” that combine and conflate two storylines: “…fame as rise to greatness and fame as artificial production” (Gamson, 1994, p.16). From the perspective of the consumer engaged in a visual performance of mediated identity, the distinction between earned fame and undeserved celebrity (Boorstin, 1992) is not relevant. The life-as-performance metaphor is older than Shakespeare, but what are the implications of its shift to virtual expression? What are the new rules of digital self-presentation (Goffman, 1956) and how do we display that which defines us? Is it all about displays of excess economic or cultural capital (Veblen, 1899: Bordieu, 1993)? Or can there be more nuanced accounts of the selfie impulse, perhaps as an expression of the need to belong, or the need to mythologise our existence? Alternatively, could the urge to playfully entertain, to engage with the ludic (Turner, 1982) explain our selfie obsession?

Selfies and Identity Performance

The selfie is by no means the only textual genre that we can use in the media performance of our lives. It operates alongside blogs, vlogs, videos and Vines, Tweets, memes and goodness knows what else (Jensen Schau and Gilly, 2003; Phillips, et al. 2014). Arguably, though, the selfie has become a distinctive and perhaps defining feature of Gabler’s (2000, citing Gergen, 1991) ‘mediated identity’. Young women are often considered the key selfie producers (Murray, 2015) spending up to five hours per week puckering up for alluring selfies (Matyszczyk, 2015), according to one study, although young men can apparently become even more intensely addicted to taking the ‘perfect selfie’ (Molloy, 2014). The carefully designed beauty shot aimed at generating likes and shares from friends and admirers has become a significant force in fashion and cosmetics marketing as women (mainly, but not exclusively) offer new looks, make up tips and styles that can attract huge audiences on social
media, and, subsequently, lucrative sponsorship and endorsements. It is, though, by no means
the only selfie style.

Such is the urge to stand out from the crowd, some are even dying to take the ultimate selfie—
CNN reported an initiative by Russian police to try to stem the deaths and injuries amongst
young Russians from reckless selfies taken atop skyscrapers, trains (Macaky, 2015) or
bridges (Stepansky, 2015), or posing with guns or wild animals (Uttam, 2015). It is not
unknown to see selfies on social media taken in the wreckage of car crashes, at funerals,
street brawls, or in the recovery ward after major surgery. In another example of crass
tastelessness, a minor British politician was amongst many tourists who caused outrage by
taking smiling selfies at the site of a terrorist massacre in Tunisia that had occurred just days
previously (Webb, 2015). The impulse to insert oneself into the news media sometimes
seems to eclipse a sense of propriety. But selfies can be sacred as well as profane: for
example, devotees take them at holy sites so that loved ones who cannot be there in person
will be able to introject the spiritual benefit (Billing, 2015). Selfies, as noted above, can also
be vehicles for political activism and resistance (Murray, 2015). For example, in Turkey,
women responded to a government dictate that criticized public levity amongst females by
undertaking a viral campaign of smiling selfies (Hebblethwaite, 2014).

From the above few examples it seems clear that the selfie has extraordinary reach as a
powerful mode of identity expression. One important aspect of celebrity culture and
entertainment that gives the selfie part of its narrative drive is the role of the image in
articulating and performing myths of selfhood. The selfie may adapt the visual style of
realism, but it is, of course, a form of representation, and as such it tells a story about us, to
us.
Selfies and the performance of myths

Holt (2004) argues that brands perform myths, while Schroeder (2005) has drawn attention to the way that the practices and vocabulary of brand marketing have become as fitting for describing the professional lives of artists as for those of inanimate brands. We are, as they say, all marketers now. For Barthes (1957) the technologies of modernity materialise myths, obscuring their origins. Traditional stories of human heroes and supernatural beings are transposed into modern technological and narrative forms. Kleos, the Greek notion of fame or renown, was sought by men to grasp at immortality. The impulse to witness immortality remains. We seek our myths where we can find them and, like Narcissus, we can sometimes find them in our own reflection.

Many selfie exponents are highly calculating in targeting their social media market to build an audience and maximise advertising revenue, but many more are posted unselfconsciously. Many of us do not conceive of ourselves as heroes in our own dramatic life story, but, nonetheless, our selfies often conform to mythic narratives because myths are the basis of the stories through which we understand the world. The selfie is a narrative device that locates the subject within the story of his or her life. The spiritual force of the mythic hero might be largely forgotten due to the relative decline of religion and ritual in the secular West, but its influence remains, as can be seen from the burgeoning uses of mythic hero narratives in entertainment. Many recent movies and TV dramas aimed at an adult audience are replete with characters with supernatural powers, comic book heroes, vampires, werewolves, angels and demons. TV shows like Game of Thrones, The Flash, Grimm and Marvel’s Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D occupy the current top US TV shows (US TV Guide 2017), while the top 50 movie releases in 2016 included Captain America: Civil War, Deadpool, Batman VS Superman: Dawn of Justice, Suicide Squad, Fantastic Beasts and Where to find them, Doctor
Strange, X-Men: Apocalypse (IMDB, 2016), while 2017 witnessed more releases of such movies including: Transformers: The Last Knight, Wonder Woman, Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Men tell No tales, Guardians of the Galaxy Vol.2, (IMDB, 2017). Celebrity in the convergence era, though, often appears to be a debased form of heroic representation that bowdlerises the traditional hero narrative described by Campbell (1949): “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.” (p.28). In contrast, the contemporary ‘celetoid’ (Rojek, 2012) celebrity hero produced through reality TV or social media virality, might go from nobody to virtual icon in a few days, and sometimes back again in short order. The narrative of the hero myth has been reduced to an edited vignette, and the distance between nonentity and quasi-heroic celebrity has been collapsed. What this means is that the celebrity myth might be debased, but it is more accessible than ever. When our images are viewed on a smartphone screen they appear to occupy the very same realm as those of the most celebrated individuals on earth, and beyond. The connection is implied, but it powerful nonetheless.

The grip that the mythic narrative retains on the popular consumer imagination hints at the depth of our need to draw on myths to express our experience. As the cultural production of celebrity has surged in the era of media convergence, we are reminded that, still, there is a sense that celebrity connects us all through our spiritual yearning for a life more creative, more dangerous, more vivid, and more recognised, than the one we think we have. A rejection of Enlightenment (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002) perhaps, but the turn to myth also reflects a timeless impulse. The mythic narrative of the hero remains faintly inscribed in contemporary celebrity stories. The mythic hero seeks a higher way, and embarks on a quest
for truth, often after firstly rejecting or not recognising the call. The tribulations and entanglements the hero faces against dark and mysterious forces yield insights that deepen the meaning of the hero’s liminal journey. Campbell (1949) used the term monomyth, borrowed from James Joyce, to refer to the spiritual unity shared by human beings through heroic myths. The seemingly trivial problems and anxieties of daily life resonate with the dramatised troubles of soap opera stars or actors, since they are suggestive of a greater purpose and they connect subjective experience to universal mythic narratives. Selfies utilise fame technology that enables us to take our rightful place amongst the pantheon, or at least, so it appears.

The selfie and celebrity introjection

Alexander (2010), in his discussion of iconic celebrity, describes a process of introjection in which celebrants use the iconic celebrity’s surface aesthetic to channel deeper, second order meanings. The visual aesthetic of celebrity is accompanied by second order connotations that play around the tension between the sacred and profane. For example, Greta Garbo’s face was, for Barthes (1957) ‘divine’ and elicited ecstatic absorption. Yet, Garbo’s personality and behaviour challenged conventional morality. MGM made her a star with her break through movie- Flesh and the Devil, in which her sexual chemistry with co-star John Gilbert fairly fizzed through the celluloid. To be enchanted by Garbo’s signature cinematic close-ups was to take something of her perfect imperfection as one’s own. Garbo’s divinity was ideal, and idealised. In one genre of selfie, women present their idealised physical selves, with the advanced technology of digital photography. Lifie can be just as glamorous, aesthetically, as a movie, at least through a high quality camera and with the help of editing software, and perhaps some artful lighting and posing craft. Our selfies shift us across to the other side of the glass to take our place in a media montage of human life, making our lives seem more
vivid and significant. To imply that there is a spiritual resonance as we behold our latest selfie may seem preposterous on the face of it. And yet, it seems entirely reasonable to speak of celebrity worship, iconic stars and the divine Garbo (not to mention the quasi-iconic 1980s transsexual celebrity from Baltimore, USA, Harris Glen Milstead, also known as Divine). To view oneself in such company may be narcissistic, but as Alexander (2010) notes, according to Christian religious tradition, humans are created in the image of God. The selfie sanctifies the subject: as Gabler (2000) notes, some people are willing to do almost anything to “get to the other side of the glass for their moment of beatification” (189). Duly beatified, the selfie subject takes his or her place amongst the righteous.

As Alexander (2010) implies, all celebrities were not created equal, and some seem decidedly more deserving of iconic status than others. Then again, as noted above, there has always been a tension between deserved, ascribed (Boorstin, 1992) and celetoid celebrity (Rojek, 2012) produced purely by media institutions such as talent or reality shows rather than through talent or endeavour. Judgements around the merit of one celebrity over another can often seem less a judgement on the authenticity of the celebrity, than of the fan. There is cultural capital in discerning between the bogus and the authentic, even amongst celebrities. What we cannot gainsay is the powerful influence of movies and entertainment in giving us our template of what celebrity can look like. It is telling that the selfie is a form of iconic representation that is simultaneously an introjection. It is us, but playing a celebrity. The selfie represents us, though more intensely, somehow, and more publicly. Life, before selfies, was a series of lifies with an audience of, well, whoever was actually there. We did stuff, alone, or with one or a few other people. Now, a huge audience is always there, in principle at least, and the performance is mediated. We are able to externalise and materialise our lived experience through the visual performance of self on social media. The selfie is a key
signifier in the family album of our lives, more striking and immediate than our social media likes, shares, comments, blogs, views and memes.

**Celebrity Sells**

Gabler (2000) and Boostin (1992) hypothesised a thoroughly mediatised consumer culture at a time when the developed world was on the cusp of the convergence era (Jenkins, 2008). Today, the sharpness of their cultural analysis seems somewhat blunted because we are so immersed in the logic of hyperreality, simulacra, and the spectacle. Yet, these authors locate the mediatisation of culture in a historical trajectory dating from early print and the penny dreadfuls to Hollywood and TV, and in so doing they reveal the extraordinary depth and breadth of its effects. Today, even ordinary lives are lived through, and on, screens and the impulse to record events and experiences, rather than simply to live through them, has become instinctive to a great many people. Selfies are vehicles for displaying our expertise in embodied consumption practices, our skills in home décor, our choices of car, clothing, make-up, and even our tooth-whitened smile and the evident joy and fulfillment of our family and social relationships. Early movie stars took on this role as experts in consumption (Barbas, 2001), and now we can all star in our own lifestyle advertisements through our selfies. Just as movies became powerful vehicles for teaching audiences new values and ways of looking, behaving and feeling, selfies now operate in a similar way, propagating ideas for living from the bottom up in a thoroughgoing participatory culture (Jenkins, 2008).

The currency of celebrity may be devalued given the huge increase in the production of celebrities to serve marketing ends (Hackley and Hackley, 2015) but this ostensible democratisation of celebrity (Driessens, 2013) is key to the cultural dynamic of the selfie. The celebrities who are paid to *Tweet* about, wear, drive, speak of, sing about, write about or appear on behalf of, brands, are accepting the brand into their orbit, and making their implicit
endorsement known to their own fanbase. Consumers now have another way that we can imitate the stars—through our selfies we can advertise the same products, but, for most of us, without benefiting from the fee. Many of the world’s top entertainment stars now see no artistic shame at all in fattening their already clinically obese bank accounts by accepting cheques to hawk branded items. Indeed, promotion has become indistinguishable from entertainment, and the old saw in celebrity endorsement marketing about ‘aligning’ the brand with the star has long gone the way of the dodo (Kerrigan et al. 2011; Spry et al. 2011). For example, some of Manchester United’s highest paid footballers were cast in an improbable high concept ad for high end wine (Keegan, 2017), whilst short movies featuring major stars and Hollywood-standard production values have become a standard trope in new car launches, as in the recent Jaguar ad featuring now grown-up ‘About a Boy’ child star Nicholas Hoult (Graser, 2014). Stars from sport such as Rooney, Usain Bolt, Lionel Messi and LeBron James have deals not only with sportswear and sports drinks brands, but also with airlines, electronics, personal care (Messi is the ‘face’ of Gillette razors) fast food, watches, cars, confectionary and fashion brands, to name a few. Fashion models such Kate Moss, Carla Delvingne and Naomi Campbell have accepted deals with holiday and headphones companies alongside the more predictable clothes, jewelry and fragrance brands. Celebrities who are truly known only for being known (Boorstin, 1992) such as Kim Kardashian, Paris Hilton and Lauren Conrad have promoted fast food and electronics, whilst TV stars such as Nina Dobrev, Matt LeBlanc and Stephen Fry sell food, insurance, car tyres and music performers such as Taylor Swift, Madonna and Jay Z endorse beer, mobile phones, pizza, fast food and fashion. Many major stars (though by no means all) now shill anything from credits cards to cosmetics, fragrance to fashion, cars to watches.
Latent celebrity can be as useful for marketers as actual celebrity. Reality TV shows have become aggressive sellers of product placement opportunities to brands (Jenkins, 2008; Cashmore, 2006; Hackley et al. 2012), even though the celebrities within the shows are elected by the public during the course of the show and held no celebrity cachet whatsoever before the first episode ran. As noted earlier, many bloggers, vloggers and YouTubers now attract bigger audiences than prime time TV shows and attract sponsorship, placement and endorsement deals to match their prodigious audience reach. The selfie, featuring branded product, is a visual trope that adds to the self-created artist’s commercial repertoire. Selfies’ commercial potential becomes more overt where, for example, they become news stories featured on media outlets, or where selfies go viral, and the images are not only viewed but shared, commented upon, adapted, incorporated into other montages or stories, and otherwise consumed, reflecting the active participation of consumers and accumulating more value for media organisations.

Marketing Practice and Selfie-Inflected Consumption

This paper suggests, then, that the selfie phenomenon in the convergence era points to the need for a profound shift in the marketing management mentality to reflect the ways in which social media and celebrity culture have added public and performative elements to consumer culture. Marketing’s task in the new consumer culture landscape is to furnish opportunities for consumer self expression that subjectively feel creative and individualised. This is not merely a matter of adopting social media or other categories of digital marketing practice per se: it demands a dissolution of the old marketing sub-discipline demarcations in favour of a creative, strategic and cross-disciplinary approach that plays into the Zeitgeist of consumer culture (Holt, 2010). But, firstly, a word of caution. Consumers are not loyal, orderly or
respective. Witness, for example, the catastrophe that befell the National Lottery Twitter
campaign for British Athletics (Taylor, 2017) when trolls photoshopped offensive slogans
into the images. This was a case of damaging and unsolicited consumer participation in a
social media campaign, and it illustrates the importance of control mechanisms, filters and
clearly conceived creative strategy in engagement initiatives.

In contrast, the Coca Cola ‘Content 2020’ initiative (Baker, 2011) (launched with two videos
on YouTube) is a strategic attempt to elicit consumer engagement in brand storytelling and
brand conversations but in ways that are carefully designed and moderated by the brand.
Coca Cola sought to grow the brand globally by moving away from the hegemony of the 30
second TV spot (which must have taken a leap of faith, because few brands can match Coca
Cola for iconic TV advertisements) towards the creation of multiple iterative content
initiatives linked to wider social themes such as sustainability and development. In the
consumer marketing industry more generally, the global rebalancing of adspend from mass
media to digital content (Benes, 2016) partly reflects a change in the creative logic of social
media marketing and communications, from sales orientation, to engagement. The broad
category of digital does include many sales oriented techniques, such as programmatic social
media advertising and SEO (Search Engine Optimisation) that shadow browsing patterns and
insert real time offers into browsers’ newsfeeds. But, globally, there are also significant rises
in video (Joseph, 2015) and other forms of brand sponsored content that are presented as
entertainment or information and reflect a strategic need not to sell as such but, rather, to
maintain brand presence and visibility by integrating the brand seamlessly within consumers’
media consumption of entertainment, news, information and social media.
Content marketing lends itself well to performative marketing in digital spaces because it can elicit visual and textual responses from consumers who are willing to engage by contributing their own content to competitions, discussions and memes. But, in itself, content marketing is not necessarily the answer for marketing practitioners. Branded content is a broad and nebulous category that is many different things to many people, and it forms only part of the panoply of marketing interventions. Offline extensions of digital content can be equally important in consumer activation and engagement through, for example, retail experience design or pop-up events. However, the flexibility of brand sponsored content on digital platforms is such that it can combine abstract ideas, spectacle and stories with marketing interfaces such as product or service reviews, order reconciliation and delivery. This flexibility means that the old categorical distinctions of the marketing mix and the promotional mix no longer fit the new, fluid and digitally-driven marketing landscape.

In using content as an example we are not suggesting that the facilitation of consumer identity performances can be reduced to certain categories of marketing techniques, on or offline. Creative ideas that can be spread across different executional media (Jenkins et al., 2013) are at a premium in the effort to connect contemporary marketing with selfie consumer culture. The relative lessening of importance of traditional, sales-oriented advertising and benefit-based branding reflect the need to address the new, performative consumer cultures. The use of any particular set of techniques or principles is not in itself a solution to the heterogeneous and messy problems of marketing practice, even if social media is now an unavoidable part of almost any marketing plan. Rather, there is a need to bring traditional marketing skills of creative excellence and imagination to bear in ways that are articulated by new craft skills and informed by a deep understanding of the consumer cultural milieu. Marketing has not changed, but it has also changed profoundly.
Under convergence (Jenkins, 2008) brands are a seamless part of media consumption on mobile devices and PCs through advergames, TV shows, movies, newspaper websites, video sharing platforms and vlogs, news, comment and photo/video platforms, brand websites and blogs, music, digital radio, countless branded apps and more, there is an opportunity to furnish consumers with the tools that facilitate digital and offline expressions of identities and values. Indeed, it is those brands that are incorporated into cultural usage that will be recalled into consumers’ evoked set when purchase choices are made. It is axiomatic that consumers choose most purchases from two to five alternatives, that they, and we, can recall easily. Market share is driven by brand presence and salience, not by loyalty (Sharpe, 2010) and digital communication is a major channel for building brand presence. The rise of digital has not entirely reduced marketing to a hard science of big data mining, powerful though data profiling techniques can be. Great ideas astutely executed can still leverage consumer engagement that is disproportionate to their investment, as can be seen in 2016 campaigns for Booking.Com, House of Fraser, Instagram Film, Netflix and many others (Barsby, 2016).

**Concluding comments: Marketing and the performance of consumer identity**

The selfie, then, has become a motif of the era of media convergence. This paper argues that the selfie phenomenon should not be dismissed as mere narcissism or inadequacy, but is part of a broader representational and performative shift facilitated by social media and mobile communication technology, and underpinned by celebrity culture. The selfie is a palpable manifestation of the mediated performance of life in a visually oriented and entertainment-driven economy. Consumer marketing in the era of convergence is not only a matter of consumer ‘engagement’, to use that sterile term. Instead, it provides artfully designed opportunities for the mediated performance of consumers’ identity. Marketing is not all about
facilitating selfies, and the selfie is just one of many social media genres that enable the participation of consumers and drive the marketing heft of social media platforms. But the rise of the selfie is symptomatic of important truths about contemporary marketing and consumer culture. The marketing metaphor originated in traditional markets as sellers communicated their products, value and prices to consumers. Market traders today, when one can still encounter such prehistoric beasts, are still ineluctably theatrical, as they perform, project and dramatise the communication of their offers. The rise of mediated communication has continued to enable the dramatic representation of marketing offers.

There is a need for drama in marketing whether the seller is selling socks, cooking pots, clothes line pegs, or movies, cosmetic surgery, cars, lifestyles, political leaders, or salvation. In a digital era of constant internet communication, deeply informed by the idiom of entertainment, it is not only the marketers who perform, but the consumers. Indeed, the principal role of marketers is now to facilitate and stage manage the consumers’ performance of identity. Marketing managers must adapt and broaden their skill set to facilitate the provision of compelling props, sets, narrative devices and other plot thickeners to develop the consumers’ story of their life. The changes in consumer behaviour are mirrored by a radical shift in marketing communication budgets from advertising to publicity, especially in the form of non-advertising promotions such as branded content, product placement, sponsorship and countless digital manifestations such as websites, brand blogs, programmatic advertising that follows the user’s web surfing pattern, advergames, and branded interactive chat forums (Jenkins et al, 2013). As it happens, advertising and media agencies are enlisting designers, digital natives, scriptwriters, movie makers, jokesters, animators and more, because the old one-two of art and copy for a print and broadcast campaign just doesn’t wash any more when clients are demanding branded content that draws consumers into the story with compelling,
iterative stories for every conceivable media platform. The smart marketers know that however advanced their skills and intuition, they can’t compete with consumer creativity. They have to design scenarios that allow consumers to extemporize as they play out their own drama, using marketing as a resource (Hackley, 2013).

**Marketing’s role enabling consumer performance**

Marketing practice is, as usual, well ahead of marketing principles in adapting to the new realities of consumer culture. Amongst Facebook’s 2 billion active daily users (Pell, 2017) many other social media sites with image capability such as Instagram, Twitter and China’s Qzone number their daily users in the hundreds of millions (Statista, 2017). In addition to the huge number of daily selfie-posting opportunities open to contemporary consumers, there are many virtual lifestyle games and countless other internet-based communication fora that foreground consumers’ self-presentation and identity positioning. Retail and entertainment design has long displayed a theatrical bent. From the early retail emporia to Disneyland, Las Vegas and onward to the recent London launch of Versace branded apartments, designers have long understood the marketing implications of the spatial environment (see Sherry, 1998, for one of many examples). The dominance of the idiom of entertainment over contemporary life through visual media has now pushed marketing to a new frontier that transcends physical space. The distinction between private and public has become oddly inverted, as physical social contact and community have reduced in advanced economies, while virtual social contact has replaced it. As we note above, following Gabler (2000), we are all on TV, watching life.

Inevitably there are negative aspects to this. At the extreme, there is the Japanese cultural phenomenon of Hikikomori in which a million young adults, mostly males, have retreated to
their rooms, never to emerge, having rejected human social contact in favour of a virtual existence (Lucchese, 2015) online, playing games, surfing websites, reading blogs, chatting with comrades, and feeding when a carer pushes a meal through the bedroom door. This is the kind of bleak and tragic consequence that some critics see as the inevitable result of a culture dominated by the image and entertainment.

On the other hand, it is also clear that the internet provides a seemingly inexhaustible resource for the enterprising to assert new forms of identity in new and exciting, and perhaps liberatory (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995) ways. The consumer now achieves what millions dreamed of when movies first reached mass audiences: living through a screen, they (and we) can star in the movie of our life. It has long been obvious to marketers, if not to marketing academics, that what we think about brands matters much less than what others think of them. Brands communicate. They help us to play our roles as people who are creative, spirited, rebellious, sexual, tasteful, clever, individual, and different- in fact, just like movie stars. Many of the prescriptions implied in the performance metaphor for marketing might seem similar to those called for by writers on postmodernism in marketing (Brown, 1994; 2006)- with one apparent difference: it isn’t enough for marketers to write convincingly about marketing. Like the put-upon copywriters and art directors struggling to stay relevant in the advertising industry, markets must master all the skills of stage direction, including set design and set dressing, screenplay writing, casting, you name it. The drama of life is unfolding, and we are on the front row, watching ourselves in the starring role.

References


http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0267257X.2016.1260630


Matyszczyk, C., (2015). Young women spend five hours a week taking selfies, says survey


Pell, D., (2017). Facebook is the new nation state, both sides are winning the war on media, and other stories you might have missed. Available at: https://qz.com/1017409/dave-pells-next-draft-june-28-2017/ (accessed 1 July 2017).


Implications of the Selfie for Marketing Management Practice in the Era of Celebrity

Structured Abstract

Category: Conceptual paper

Purpose
This conceptual paper explores the implications of the selfie for marketing management in the era of celebrity. The purpose is to show that the facilitation of the creative performance of consumer identity is a key element of the marketing management task for the media convergence era.

Approach
The paper uses the selfie, the picture of oneself taken by oneself, as a metaphor to develop a conceptual exploration of the nature of marketing in the light of the dominance of celebrity and entertainment in contemporary media and entertainment.

Findings
The paper suggests that marketing management in the era of convergence should facilitate consumers’ identity projects through participatory initiatives. Marketers must furnish and facilitate not only the props for consumers mediated identity performances, but also the scripts, sets and scenes, plot devices, cinematographic and other visual techniques, costumes, looks, movements, characterizations and narratives.

Research limitations/implications
This is a conceptual paper that sketches out the beginning of a re-framed, communication-focused vision of marketing management in the era of media convergence.

**Practical implications**

Marketing managers can benefit from thinking about consumer marketing as the stage management of consumer visual, physical, virtual, sensory and psychic environments that enable consumers to actively participate in celebrity culture.

**Originality/value**

This paper suggests ways in which marketing practice can emerge from its pre-digital frame to embrace the new digital cultures of consumption.

**Keywords:** Selfie; Identity; Convergence; Marketing

**Introduction**

The selfie is often excoriated as an expression of low self-esteem, vanity, self-indulgence, immaturity, exhibitionism, and tastelessness (Murray, 2015). Yet, as with advertising (Cook, 2002) there is a contradiction: the selfie is so frequently and vehemently dismissed as culturally trivial, that it cannot be so. Indeed, the selfie has become a serious topic for social scientific study, including much work in the marketing area (Jerslev and Mortensen, 2016; Lee, 2016; Kedzior et al. 2016; Lim, 2016). The term selfie was first heard around 2002 (Wallop, 2014), but the concept is not unique to the digital era. For example, Manet included portraits of himself and friends and family in his picture ‘Music in the Tuileries Gardens’, whilst Robert Cornelius took perhaps the world’s first photographic selfie, in 1839 (Gilbert,
Buzz Aldrin’s moon landing in 1966 introduced the selfie to the space age, along with Paul McCartney’s early black and white selfie taken in a mirror with a box camera (I). In the era of media convergence (Jenkins, 2008) the selfie has assumed a new symbolism as consumer culture has shifted from a promotional paradigm (Wernick, 1991), to one that is, to a significant extent, participatory (Powell, 2013), totalising (Davis, 2013), and predominantly visual (Schroeder, 2004). Many of the visual tropes of convergence culture reflect the absorption into wider consumer culture of the idiom of entertainment (Gabler, 2000). There is a sense in which selfies are also promotional since they effectively promote a persona in a marketplace of competing identities. The idea that there is an element of visual performance that is important in marketing is by no means new (Brown, 1994) but what does seem to be new is the potential for the consumer who lives connected to social media to leap from the audience to the performer side of the screen and back, at will. Technology has enabled us all to be on TV (Gabler, 2000), or at least on the smartphone screen. The selfie represents the distillation of identity performance through digital consumption (Rettberg, 2014: Kerrigan and Hart, 2016). In this paper we suggest that the importance of the selfie to marketing management practice has been under-explored and we conduct a conceptual exploration that draws out some of the implications for marketing management. We begin by establishing a key theme of the paper- the selfie (and other forms of digital participation) as link node between the self, celebrity culture, and marketing.

The Emergence of the Selfie in Celebrity Culture

The contemporary selfie, taken on a smartphone and uploaded to social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and many others, has emerged from a shift to a change in the developed world to a visual economy. Schroeder (2013) suggests that consumers’
persuasive and performative uses of social media reflect an internalisation of the visual idiom of advertising. but, in turn, advertising and social media are cast in the idiom of entertainment. In turn, advertising and social media are increasingly cast in the idiom of entertainment. Arguably, the selfie came of age with 2014 Oscars host Ellen DeGeneres’s selfie that ‘broke Twitter’ (Baertlein, 2014). This apparently spontaneous yet carefully orchestrated marketing event became the most shared selfie ever, beating even the Pope and President Barack Obama (Bean, 2014) for selfie aggregation. What is more, it even seemed that the stars themselves were conscious of the value of the potential exposure to their personal brand- some who missed out, such as Liza Minnelli, were pictured trying hard to elbow their way into the shot (Wallop, 2014). As an exemplar of non-advertising promotion in the media convergence (Jenkins, 2008; Meikle and Young, 2011) era, DeGeneres’s supercharged celebrity selfie exemplifies the commercially strategic performance of spontaneity that is thoroughly integrated into a marketing dynamic of entertainment, celebrity, performance, and social media. Most selfies are not so brazenly commercial, but they are a significant driver of social media traffic and therefore they are implicated in the commercial logic of social media, even where this is not the primary intent of the subject. Rojek (2012) suggests that images of celebrities generate pleasure accumulation, which generates capital accumulation. Selfies celebrate the subject using the very same platforms and visual technologies as established celebrities. Although only a small number of selfies go viral, the number uploaded to social media and viewed and shared just a few score times constitute in total a substantial accumulation of images. According to recent reports, just one social media platform, Facebook, has more than two billion unique users per day, and most users have profile pictures, in addition to daily uploads. The selfie is a visible, stylized and widespread record of consumers performing their (our) lives in the visual economy (Schroeder, 2004).
The selfie displayed via social media is a means of interpolating ourselves into the glamorous world of entertainment. Gabler (2000) citing, amongst many others, Veblen (1979-1899) on the need to display our consumption practices, and Boorstin (1992) on the rise of the image through the technological developments of visual media, both describes a world in which we act out scripted versions of reality with plots, props, sets and costumes, and even narrative devices and plot twists that are marketed to us through, and as, entertainment. Celebrities are central to the effect, since they are the headline stars, practiced in stagecraft, to whom we look most attentively for our cues. What is more, branded goods are celebritised anthropomorphically (Eagar and Dann, 2016; Hosany et al. 2013; Brown and Ponsonby-McCabe, 2013; 2014). We can follow and like them through social media, and visit them in person in theme parks or retail emporia, as if they too were movie stars (as indeed they are—see, for example, the Lego Movie or Transformers). The opportunities for performing in the movie of one’s life have multiplied since Gabler (2000) wrote... We are all stars in our own life and we can upload promotional material, such as a selfie, to social media at any time via smartphones to advertise our latest episode. What is more, via social media we can sometimes even interact with established celebrities (Wohlfeil and Whelan, 2012; Banister and Cocker, 2013), thereby further blurring the boundary between real life, and the ‘reel’ life (Barbas, 2001) of showbusiness. The selfie is an aspect of the mediated self (Gabler, 2000; Kerrigan and Hart, 2016) within the entertainment economy. Through social media, the stark divide between the prosaic life of the typical consumer and the life of the celebrity is virtually dissolved at particular moments.
This topic is important partly because a focus on the selfie not only as text but as paratext, reflects a broader change of emphasis in marketing and communication (Grainge and Johnson, 2015) from explicit spot and feature advertising toward media ‘content’, including implicit, non-advertising promotion such as product placement, branded entertainment, sponsorship, and public relations (PR), reflecting the new dynamic of consumer culture in the convergent (Jenkins, 2008) media era. As a primary text, the selfie is a representation, a picture of oneself, taken by oneself. As a paratext, the selfie can be seen as an iterative cultural practice that can be read and interpreted like a note in the margin of consumer culture. What the selfie connotes can be more revealing than its denotative meaning. This assertion is supported conceptually by locating the selfie as an aspect of the mediated self (Gabler, 2000; Kerrigan and Hart, 2016) within the entertainment economy. The analysis explores the selfie as a visual performance of identity that is important to an understanding of consumer culture. This implies a conceptual shift in the way that marketing management is conceived. Within this marketing landscape—Managerial marketing notions such as utility, brand salience, satisfaction, customer loyalty and so on are by no means irrelevant—to contemporary consumers, but can be better understood through a metaphor in which marketing furnishes consumers with spaces, sets and scenes, plot devices, dramatic incidents, cinematographic technologies, props, storylines, characters and narratives to facilitate the dramatic and visual performance of identity (Hackley, 2013), in the ultimate story—the story of our lives. The selfie is both a promotional billboard and a plot device in itself. It promotes an episode in our life, with the subject as the star attraction. Other forms of digital participation such as holiday snaps, Tweets, blog pieces and Facebook posts also perform the same function, but none with the intensity of focus of the selfie.
The commercially inflected character of the worlds of celebrity and entertainment has been noted by cultural theorists such as Gabler (2000), sociologists such as Gamson (1994) and historians such as Boorstin (1992). Marketing practice can be better understood by fully integrating a culturally informed perspective of the entertainment economy (Wolf, 2003) into its purview. This is especially resonant in an era in which the evolution of the consumer into a creative producer (Brown, 1995; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Tofler, 1980) has been realised in a fully participatory economy (Jenkins, 2008). More tentatively, this paper also suggests that cultural and historical accounts of consumption practices in the visual economy are enlivened by an explicit focus on marketing as a central dynamic. Of course, the selfie, at first glance, is not about the money. It is, in some cases, about achieving a sense of stylised authenticity (Schroeder, 2013). However, the closer one looks, the more deeply integrated the selfie seems to be in an economic system, in a visual economy, and the more it seems to reveal about the extent to which consumption and identity are performed to an audience using our lives as the dramatic material.

Selfies and mediated entertainment

As Gabler (2000) suggests, news coverage, religion, politics and education, not to mention government policies and, of course, consumer marketing, have borrowed deeply from the techniques of visual entertainment in order to gain consumers’ attention more persuasively. From the other side of the screen, consumers can, with a smartphone, self-produce Facebook or Instagram posts or YouTube videos in which scenes of everyday life are dramatised with cinematographic flair, narrative coherence and poised stagecraft that seem second nature compared to the embarrassed shuffling and awkward staring of early home movies. The democratisation of celebrity (Driessens, 2013) is not only the result of an industrial process (Hesmondhalgh, 2005) that manufactures celebrity through reality TV, talent shows and the
like, but also reflects the rise of the self-promoting social media celebrity. Self-created
celebrities (or ‘celetoids,’ Rojek (2012)) exploit the disintermediation (Hackley and Hackley,
2015) of the entertainment industry and have little need of PR and talent agencies, journalists
and editors, movie studios, publicists and agents, at least initially. These media institutions
remain powerful, but they are no longer as powerful as they once were as gatekeepers to
celebrity if the protagonist can earn fame through a reality TV show. A selfie is always a bid
for fame or celebrity, and selfies do not invariably involve copying a celebrity or acting out a
scenario from a movie or TV show. For selfie exponents, selfies perform authentic identities
by insinuating the subject into the visual economy on platforms with potential audiences of
hundreds of millions. It is not necessary for a selfie to go viral and the subject to become
celebrated. The mere fact that this possibility exists ensures that the selfie is validated as a
performance. Selfies are not performances in an empty theatre—the theatre is always full,
even if the audience happens not to be looking. Selfie subjects utilise “fame technologies”
that combine and conflate two storylines: “…fame as rise to greatness and fame as artificial
production” (Gamson, 1994, p.16). From the perspective of the consumer engaged in a visual
performance of mediated identity, the distinction between earned fame and undeserved
celebrity (Boorstin, 1992) is not relevant. In conceiving of selfies as a manifestation of the
idiom of celebrity within the entertainment economy, this paper explores Gabler’s (2000)
‘mediated self’ in an era of 24/7 instant online access. If entertainment, in print, to celluloid,
video and beyond to digital formats, has provided ideas for living since the dawn of Western
consumer culture, social media websites provide a stage, or a film set, for the performance of
our mediated selves. The life-as-performance metaphor is older than Shakespeare, but what
are the implications of its shift to virtual expression? What are the new rules of digital self-
presentation (Goffman, 1956) and how do we display that which defines us? Is it all about
demonstrating economic superiority through displays of excess economic or cultural capital
(Veblen, 1899: Bordieu, 1993)? Or can there be more nuanced accounts of the selfie impulse, perhaps as an expression of the need to belong, or the need to mythologise our existence? Alternatively, could the urge to playfully entertain, to engage with the ludic (Turner, 1982) explain our selfie obsession?

Below, the paper offers some examples of selfie practices, before outlining how selfies dramatise lives and perform myths of selfhood within an entertainment driven consumer culture. The paper concludes by calling for a conceptual shift in marketing to more completely and fully integrate marketing practices into a visual economy in which celebrity and entertainment are dominant.

The Emergence of the Selfie and as Identity Performance

The selfie is by no means the only textual genre that we can use in the media performance of our lives. It operates alongside blogs, vlogs, videos and Vines, Tweets, memes and goodness knows what else (Jensen Schau and Gilly, 2003; Phillips, et al. 2014). Arguably, though, the selfie has become a distinctive and perhaps defining feature of Gabler’s (2000, citing Gergen, 1991) ‘mediated identity’. Young women are often considered the key selfie producers (Murray, 2015) spending up to five hours per week puckering up for alluring selfies (Matyszczyk, 2015), according to one study, although young men can apparently become even more intensely addicted to taking the ‘perfect selfie’. One unfortunate fellow attempted suicide after spending hundreds of hours trying and failing to achieve the selfie of his dreams (Molloy, 2014). The carefully designed beauty shot aimed at generating likes and shares from friends and admirers has become a significant force in fashion and cosmetics marketing as women (mainly, but not exclusively) offer new looks, make up tips and styles that can attract huge audiences on social media, and, subsequently, lucrative sponsorship and endorsements. It is, though, by no means the only selfie style.
Such is the urge to stand out from the crowd, some are even dying to take the ultimate selfie-
CNN reported an initiative by Russian police to try to stem the deaths and injuries amongst
young Russians from reckless selfies taken atop skyscrapers, trains (Macaky, 2015) or
bridges (Stepansky, 2015), or posing with guns or wild animals (Uttam, 2015). It is not
unknown to see selfies on social media taken in the wreckage of car crashes, at funerals,
street brawls, or in the recovery ward after major surgery. No doubt, following Timothy
Leary’s infamous YouTube video of his own demise, a selfie exponent somewhere will earn
immortality by clicking the selfie stick just as his or her final breath leaves their mortal body.
(Chris you might want to check this: http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/teen-
beauty-queen-live-streams-10717268) Aaannnd...cut. In another example of crass
tastelessness, a minor British politician was amongst many tourists who caused outrage by
taking smiling selfies at the site of a terrorist massacre in Tunisia that had occurred just days
previously (Webb, 2015). The impulse to insert oneself into the news media sometimes
seems to eclipse a sense of propriety. But selfies can be sacred as well as profane: for
example, devotees take them at holy sites so that loved ones who cannot be there in person
will be able to introject the spiritual benefit (Billing, 2015). Selfies, as noted above, can also
be vehicles for political activism and resistance (Murray, 2015). For example, in Turkey,
women responded to a government dictate that criticized public levity amongst females by
undertaking a viral campaign of smiling selfies (Hebblethwaite, 2014).

From the above few examples it seems clear that the selfie has extraordinary reach as a
powerful mode of identity expression. As the examples above attest, the selfie has become an
important vehicle for many forms of identity positioning. One important aspect of celebrity
culture and entertainment that gives the selfie part of its narrative drive is the role of the
image in articulating and performing myths of selfhood. The selfie may adapt the visual style
of realism, but it is, of course, a form of representation, and as such it tells a story about us, to
us.

Selfies and the performance of myths

Holt (2004) argues that brands perform myths, while Schroeder (2005) has drawn attention to
the way that the practices and vocabulary of brand marketing have become as fitting for
describing the professional lives of artists as for those of inanimate brands. We are, as they
say, all marketers now. For Barthes (1957) the technologies of modernity materialise myths,
obscuring their origins. Traditional stories of human heroes and supernatural beings are
transposed into modern technological and narrative forms. Kleos, the Greek notion of fame or
renown, was sought by men to grasp at immortality. The impulse to witness immortality
remains. We seek our myths where we can find them and, like Narcissus, we can sometimes
find them in our own reflection.

Selfies may often be posted without conscious strategic intent, but they will be read and
responded to as a visual iteration of the subject’s life story. In other words, the selfie is a
paratextual promotion of the movie of our life. Many selfie exponents are highly calculating
in targeting their social media market to build an audience and maximise advertising revenue,
but many more are posted unselfconsciously. Many of us do not We may be too humble and
self-effacing to conceive of ourselves as heroes in our own kitchen-sink reality-based
dramatic life story, but, nonetheless, our selfies often conform to mythic narratives because
myths are the basis of the stories through which we understand the world. It is difficult to
give narrative structure to life, at least, without some recourse to myths. The proliferation and
diffusion of celebrity in consumer culture reflects what Lasch and Lury (2007) characterise as
a shift in cultural production from representation, to mediation. Viewed alongside the
The aforementioned shift from text to paratext in marketing communication, and from presentation to iteration and brand storytelling, the selfie can be seen as a narrative device that positions the subject’s identity within the broader context of the story of his or her life. A life story is the more compelling if it mobilises a mythic narrative. The selfie is a narrative device that locates the subject within the story of his or her life. The spiritual force of the mythic hero might be largely forgotten due to the relative decline of religion and ritual in the secular West, but its influence remains, as can be seen from the burgeoning uses of mythic hero narratives in entertainment. Many recent movies and TV dramas aimed at an adult audience are replete with characters with supernatural powers, comic book heroes, vampires, werewolves, angels and demons. TV shows like *Game of Thrones, The Flash, Grimm* and *Marvel’s Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D* occupy the current top US TV shows (US TV Guide 2017), while the top 50 movie releases in 2016 included Captain America: Civil War, Deadpool, Batman VS Superman: Dawn of Justice, Suicide Squad, Fantastic Beasts and Where to find them, Doctor Strange, X-Men: Apocalypse (IMDB, 2016), while 2017 witnessed more releases of such movies including: Transformers: The Last Knight, Wonder Woman, Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Men tell No tales, Guardians of the Galaxy Vol.2, (IMDB, 2017).

Celebrity in the convergence era, though, often appears to be a debased form of heroic representation that bowdlerises the traditional hero narrative described by Campbell (1949):

“A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.” (p.28). In contrast, the contemporary ‘celeloid’ (Rojek, 2012) celebrity hero produced through reality TV or social media virality, might go from nobody to virtual icon in a few days, and sometimes back again in short order. The narrative of the hero myth has been reduced to an edited vignette, and the distance between nonentity and quasi-heroic celebrity has been
What this means is that the celebrity myth might be debased, but it is more accessible than ever. When our images are viewed on a smartphone screen they appear to occupy the very same realm as those of the most celebrated individuals on earth, and beyond. The connection is implied, but it powerful nonetheless.

Nonetheless, the cultural hold the mythic hero narrative still has on the popular imagination hints at a collective memory in which some of those amongst us are elevated through our personal trials to the role of hero or heroine, sage, unifier, peacemaker and magnanimous presence to light up the blighted lives of those left behind. The grip that the mythic narrative retains on the popular consumer imagination hints at the depth of our need to draw on myths to express our experience. As the cultural production of celebrity has surged in the era of media convergence, we are reminded that, still, there is a sense that celebrity connects binds us all through our spiritual yearning for a life more creative, more dangerous, more vivid, and more recognised, than the one we think we have. A rejection of Enlightenment (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002) perhaps, but the turn to myth also reflects a timeless impulse. Few of us have never dreamed, even in passing, of a life of deep fulfilment that would bring us the respect and recognition of our peers, and perhaps even the adulation of strangers. The mythic narrative of the hero remains faintly inscribed in contemporary celebrity stories. The mythic hero seeks a higher way, and embarks on a quest for truth, often after firstly rejecting or not recognising the call. The tribulations and entanglements the hero faces against dark and mysterious forces yield insights that deepen the meaning of the hero’s liminal journey.

Campbell (1949) used the term monomyth, borrowed from James Joyce, to refer to the spiritual unity shared by human beings through heroic myths. The seemingly trivial problems and anxieties of daily life resonate with the dramatised troubles of soap opera stars or actors, since they are suggestive of a greater purpose and they connect subjective experience to
universal mythic narratives. Selfies utilise fame technology that enables us to take our rightful place amongst the pantheon, or at least, so it appears.

The selfie and celebrity introjection

Alexander (2010), in his discussion of iconic celebrity, describes a process of introjection in which celebrants use the iconic celebrity’s surface aesthetic to channel deeper, second order meanings. The visual aesthetic of celebrity is accompanied by second order connotations that play around the tension between the sacred and profane. For example, Greta Garbo’s face was, for Barthes (1957) ‘divine’ and elicited ecstatic absorption. Yet, Garbo’s personality and behaviour challenged conventional morality. MGM made her a star with her break through movie- Flesh and the Devil, in which her sexual chemistry with co-star John Gilbert fairly fizzed through the celluloid. To be enchanted by Garbo’s signature cinematic close-ups was to take something of her perfect imperfection as one’s own. Garbo’s divinity was ideal, and idealised. In one genre of selfie, women present their idealised physical selves, with the advanced technology of digital photography, that now makes film star looks highly accessible. Lifie can be just as glamorous, aesthetically, as a movie, at least through a high quality camera and with the help of editing software, and perhaps some artful lighting and posing craft. Our selfies shift us across to the other side of the glass to take our place in a media montage of human life, making our lives seem more vivid and significant. Our selfies make our lifie seem altogether more vivid and significant. We elect ourselves as celebrities, then we introject the celebrity we appear to have become to enrich our unmediated selves. To imply that there is a spiritual resonance as we behold our latest selfie may seem preposterous on the face of it. And yet, it seems entirely reasonable to speak of celebrity worship, iconic stars and the divine Garbo (not to mention the quasi-iconic 1980s transsexual celebrity from Baltimore, USA, Harris Glen Milstead, also known as Divine). To view oneself in such
company may be narcissistic, but as Alexander (2010) notes, according to Christian religious
tradition, humans are created in the image of God. The selfie sanctifies the subject: as Gabler
(2000) notes, some people are willing to do almost anything to “get to the other side of the
glass for their moment of beatification” (189). Duly beatified, the selfie subject takes his or
her place amongst the righteous.

As Alexander (2010) implies, all celebrities were not created equal, and some seem decidedly
more deserving of iconic status than others. Then again, as noted above, there has always
been a tension between deserved, ascribed (Boorstin, 1992) and celetoïd celebrity (Rojek,
2012) produced purely by media institutions such as talent or reality shows rather than
through talent or endeavour. Judgements around the merit of one celebrity over another can
often seem less a judgement on the authenticity of the celebrity, than of the fan. There is
cultural capital in discerning between the bogus and the authentic, even amongst celebrities.
What we cannot gainsay is the powerful influence of movies and entertainment in giving us
our template of what celebrity can look like. It is telling that the selfie is a form of iconic
representation that is simultaneously an introjection. It is us, but playing a celebrity. The
selfie represents us, though more intensely, somehow, and more publicly. Life, before selfies,
was a series of lifies with an audience of, well, whoever was actually there. We did stuff,
alone, or with one or a few other people. The performance of social life had a very limited
audience. Now, a huge audience is always there, in principle at least, and the performance is
mediated. We are able to externalise and materialise our lived experience through the visual
performance of self on social media. The selfie is a key signifier in the family album of our
lives, more striking and immediate that our social media likes, shares, comments, blogs,
views and memes.
Celebrity Sells

As noted above, celebrity is important to the emergence of the selfie and key to the stylistic manifestations of selfies. Gabler (2000) and Boorstin (1992) hypothesised a thoroughly mediatised consumer culture at a time when the developed West was on the cusp of the convergence era (Jenkins, 2008). Today, the sharpness of their cultural analysis seems somewhat blunted because we are so thoroughly immersed in the logic of hyperreality, simulacra, and spectacle that we take it all for granted. Yet, in locating the mediatisation of culture in a historical trajectory dating from early print and the penny dreadfuls, to Hollywood movies and TV, they reveal the extraordinary depth and breadth of its effect. Gabler (2000) and Boorstin (1992) hypothesised a thoroughly mediatised consumer culture at a time when the developed world was on the cusp of the convergence era (Jenkins, 2008). Today, the sharpness of their cultural analysis seems somewhat blunted because we are so immersed in the logic of hyperreality, simulacra, and the spectacle. Yet, these authors locate the mediatisation of culture in a historical trajectory dating from early print and the penny dreadfuls to Hollywood and TV, and in so doing they reveal the extraordinary depth and breadth of its effects. Today, even ordinary lives are lived through, and on, screens and the impulse to record visual events and experiences, rather than simply to live through them, has become instinctive to a great many people. Selfies are vehicles for displaying our expertise in embodied consumption practices, our skills in home décor, our choices of car, clothing, make-up, and even our tooth-whitened smile and the evident joy and fulfillment of our family and social relationships. Early movie stars took on this role as experts in consumption (Barbas, 2001), and now we can all star in our own lifestyle advertisements through our selfies. Just as movies became powerful vehicles for teaching audiences new values and ways
of looking, behaving and feeling, selfies now operate in a similar way, propagating ideas for living from the bottom up in a thoroughgoing participatory culture (Jenkins, 2008).

Renown has its own commercial logic that drives the news profiles, pictures, interviews, personal appearances, the biography, sponsorships and brand relationships of various kinds, and live shows. The celebration of the individual has become a taken for granted idiom of entertainment and news media. The currency of celebrity may be devalued given the huge increase in the production of celebrities to serve marketing ends (Hackley and Hackley, 2015) but this ostensible democratisation of celebrity (Driessens, 2013) is key to the cultural dynamic of the selfie. The celebrities who are paid to Tweet about, wear, drive, speak of, sing about, write about or appear on behalf of, brands, are accepting the brand into their orbit, and making their implicit endorsement known it visible to their own fanbase. Consumers now have another way that we can imitate the stars through our selfies we can advertise the same products, but, for most of us, without benefiting from the fee. Many of the world’s top entertainment stars now see no artistic shame at all in fattening their already clinically obese bank accounts by accepting cheques to hawk branded items. Indeed, promotion has become indistinguishable from entertainment, and the old saw in celebrity endorsement marketing about ‘aligning’ the brand with the star has long gone the way of the dodo (Kerrigan et al. 2011; Spry et al. 2011). For example, some of Manchester United’s highest paid footballers were cast in an improbable high concept ad for high end wine (Keegan, 2017), whilst short movies featuring major stars and Hollywood-standard production values have become a standard trope in new car launches, as in the recent Jaguar ad featuring now grown-up ‘About a Boy’ child star Nicholas Hoult (Graser, 2014). Stars from sport such as Rooney, Usain Bolt, Lionel Messi and LeBron James have deals not only with sportswear and sports drinks brands, but also with airlines, electronics, personal care (Messi is the ‘face’ of Gillette razors) fast food, watches, cars, confectionary and fashion brands, to name a few. Fashion models
such Kate Moss, Carla Delvingne and Naomi Campbell have accepted deals with holiday and headphones companies alongside the more predictable clothes, jewelry and fragrance brands. Celebrities who are truly known only for being known (Boorstin, 1992) such as Kim Kardashian, Paris Hilton and Lauren Conrad have promoted fast food and electronics, whilst TV stars such as Nina Dobrev, Matt LeBlanc and Stephen Fry sell food, insurance, car tyres and music performers such as Taylor Swift, Madonna and Jay Z endorse beer, mobile phones, pizza, fast food and fashion. Many major stars (though by no means all) now shill anything from credits cards to cosmetics, fragrance to fashion, cars to watches.

Latent celebrity can be as useful for marketers as actual celebrity. Reality TV shows have become aggressive sellers of product placement opportunities to brands (Jenkins, 2008; Cashmore, 2006; Hackley et al. 2012), even though the celebrities within the shows are elected by the public during the course of the show and held no celebrity cachet whatsoever before the first episode ran. As noted earlier, many bloggers, vloggers and YouTubers now attract bigger audiences than prime time TV shows and attract sponsorship, placement and endorsement deals to match their prodigious audience reach. The selfie, featuring branded product, is a visual trope that adds to the self-created artist’s commercial repertoire. Selfies’ commercial potential becomes more overt where, for example, they become news stories featured on media outlets, or where selfies go viral, and the images are not only viewed but shared, commented upon, adapted, incorporated into other montages or stories, and otherwise consumed, reflecting the active participation of consumers and accumulating more value for media organisations.

Celebrity, or pseudo-celebrity, was not always as accessible as it appears today. Kelner’s (not in bibliography and couldn’t find it) (2003) affectionate account of the low-rent entertainers...
who wait in the green room of fame awaiting the ‘big break’ that never quite arrives, somehow reveals the sadder side of celebrity and demonstrates the lengths to which some will go to fulfil their need for a sense of existential liminality (Turner, 1974) as they await their metamorphosis from nobody to somebody. Kelner’s dreamers subsist in a realm in which profound personal transformation is a constant, though latent, possibility, or so it seems to them. They spend their time in the gritty outer fringes of showbusiness, playing sparsely attended gigs in pubs, end-of-pier dives, holiday camps and the last resort of the down-at-heel entertainer, the cruise liner after-dinner cabaret. These inhabitants of the entertainment netherworld are as plentiful as ever today, but the digital resources at their disposal have transformed their ability to position their identity within a discourse of celebrity, utilising the strategic techniques of marketing (Schroeder, 2005). Indeed, a putative celebrity identity positioning no longer requires the tangibles of an entertainment career at all. The contemporary artist has little need of an art, other than the art of self marketing. There is no need for the neophyte fan magnet to actually have experienced a ten-year apprenticeship playing dingy bars, to have an agent, or even to have an act. Rudimentary social media and self-presentation skills, and a voracious lust for fame, can be enough to bring, real, revenue-earning celebrity within reach through just one viral story, some popular videos, or a reality TV appearance. Life has indeed become a performance (Gabler, 2000), even performance has become a performance. Why try to be a talented entertainer, when you can just play one?

**Marketing Practice and Selfie-Inflected Consumption**

This paper suggests, then, that the selfie phenomenon in the convergence era points to the need for a profound shift in the marketing management mentality to reflect the ways in which social media and celebrity culture have added public and performative elements to consumer culture. Marketing’s task in the new consumer culture landscape is to furnish opportunities
for consumer self expression that subjectively feel creative and individualised. This is not merely a matter of adopting social media or other categories of digital marketing practice per se: it demands a dissolution of the old marketing sub-discipline demarcations in favour of a creative, strategic and cross-disciplinary approach that plays into the Zeitgeist of consumer culture (Holt, 2010). But, firstly, a word of caution. Consumers are not loyal, orderly or respectful. Witness, for example, the catastrophe that befell the National Lottery Twitter campaign for British Athletics (Taylor, 2017) when trolls photoshopped offensive slogans into the images. This was a case of damaging and unsolicited consumer participation in a social media campaign, and it illustrates the importance of control mechanisms, filters and clearly conceived creative strategy in engagement initiatives.

In contrast, the Coca Cola ‘Content 2020’ initiative (Baker, 2011) (launched with two videos on YouTube) is a strategic attempt to elicit consumer engagement in brand storytelling and brand conversations but in ways that are carefully designed and moderated by the brand. Coca Cola sought to grow the brand globally by moving away from the hegemony of the 30 second TV spot (which must have taken a leap of faith, because few brands can match Coca Cola for iconic TV advertisements) towards the creation of multiple iterative content initiatives linked to wider social themes such as sustainability and development. In the consumer marketing industry more generally, the global rebalancing of adspend from mass media to digital content (Benes, 2016) partly reflects a change in the creative logic of social media marketing and communications, from sales orientation, to engagement. The broad category of digital does include many sales oriented techniques, such as programmatic social media advertising and SEO (Search Engine Optimisation) that shadow browsing patterns and insert real time offers into browsers’ newsfeeds. But, globally, there are also significant rises in video (Joseph, 2015) and other forms of brand sponsored content that are presented as
entertainment or information and reflect a strategic need not to sell as such but, rather, to maintain brand presence and visibility by integrating the brand seamlessly within consumers’ media consumption of entertainment, news, information and social media.

Content marketing lends itself well to performative marketing in digital spaces because it can elicit visual and textual responses from consumers who are willing to engage by contributing their own content to competitions, discussions and memes. But, in itself, content marketing is not necessarily the answer for marketing practitioners. Branded content is a broad and nebulous category that is many different things to many people, and it forms only part of the panoply of marketing interventions. Offline extensions of digital content can be equally important in consumer activation and engagement through, for example, retail experience design or pop-up events. However, the flexibility of brand sponsored content on digital platforms is such that it can combine abstract ideas, spectacle and stories with marketing interfaces such as product or service reviews, order reconciliation and delivery. This flexibility means that the old categorical distinctions of the marketing mix and the promotional mix no longer fit the new, fluid and digitally-driven marketing landscape.

In using content as an example we are not suggesting that the facilitation of consumer identity performances can be reduced to certain categories of marketing techniques, on or offline. Creative ideas that can be spread across different executional media (Jenkins et al., 2013) are at a premium in the effort to connect contemporary marketing with selfie consumer culture. The relative lessening of importance of traditional, sales-oriented advertising and benefit-based branding reflect the need to address the new, performative consumer cultures. The use of any particular set of techniques or principles is not in itself a solution to the heterogeneous and messy problems of marketing practice, even if social media is now an
unavoidable part of almost any marketing plan. Rather, there is a need to bring traditional marketing skills of creative excellence and imagination to bear in ways that are articulated by new craft skills and informed by a deep understanding of the consumer cultural milieu. Marketing has not changed, but it has also changed profoundly.

Under convergence (Jenkins, 2008) brands are a seamless part of media consumption on mobile devices and PCs through advergames, TV shows, movies, newspaper websites, video sharing platforms and vlogs, news, comment and photo/video platforms, brand websites and blogs, music, digital radio, countless branded apps and more, there is an opportunity to furnish consumers with the tools that facilitate digital and offline expressions of identities and values. Indeed, it is those brands that are incorporated into cultural usage that will be recalled into consumers’ evoked set when purchase choices are made. It is axiomatic that consumers choose most purchases from two to five alternatives, that they, and we, can recall easily. Market share is driven by brand presence and salience, not by loyalty (Sharpe, 2010) and digital communication is a major channel for building brand presence. The rise of digital has not entirely reduced marketing to a hard science of big data mining, powerful though data profiling techniques can be. Great ideas astutely executed can still leverage consumer engagement that is disproportionate to their investment, as can be seen in 2016 campaigns for Booking.Com, House of Fraser, Instagram Film, Netflix and many others (Barsby, 2016).

Concluding comments: Marketing and the performance of consumer identity

The selfie, then, has become a motif of the era of media convergence. This paper argues that the selfie phenomenon should not be dismissed as mere narcissism or inadequacy, but is part of a broader representational and performative shift facilitated by social media and mobile communication technology, and underpinned by celebrity culture. The selfie is a palpable
manifestation of the mediated performance of life in a visually oriented and entertainment-driven economy. Consumer marketing in the era of convergence is not only a matter of consumer ‘engagement’, to use that sterile term. Instead, it provides artfully designed opportunities for the mediated performance of consumers’ identity. Marketing is not all about facilitating selfies, and the selfie is just one of many social media genres that enable the participation of consumers and drive the marketing heft of social media platforms. But the rise of the selfie is symptomatic of important truths about contemporary marketing and consumer culture. The marketing metaphor originated in traditional markets as sellers communicated their products, value and prices to consumers. Market traders today, when one can still encounter such prehistoric beasts, are still ineluctably theatrical, as they perform, project and dramatise the communication of their offers. The rise of mediated communication has continued to enable the dramatic representation of marketing offers.

There is a need for drama in marketing whether the seller is selling socks, cooking pots, clothes line pegs, or movies, cosmetic surgery, cars, lifestyles, political leaders, or salvation. In a digital era of constant internet communication, deeply informed by the idiom of entertainment, it is not only the marketers who perform, but the consumers. Indeed, the principal role of marketers is now to facilitate and stage manage the consumers’ performance of identity. Marketing managers concepts such as consumer experiences, satisfaction, loyalty, and delight are not redundant, but marketers must adapt and broaden their skill set to facilitate the provision of compelling props, sets, narrative devices and other plot thickeners to develop the consumers’ story of their life. The changes in consumer behaviour are mirrored by a radical shift in marketing communication budgets from advertising to publicity, especially in the form of non-advertising promotions such as branded content, product placement, sponsorship and countless digital manifestations such as websites, brand blogs,
programmatic advertising that follows the user’s web surfing pattern, advergames, and branded interactive chat forums (Jenkins et al, 2013). As it happens, advertising and media agencies are enlisting designers, digital natives, scriptwriters, movie makers, jokesters, animators and more, because the old one-two of art and copy for a print and broadcast campaign just doesn’t wash any more when clients are demanding branded content that draws consumers into the story with compelling, iterative stories for every conceivable media platform. The smart marketers know that however advanced their skills and intuition, they can’t compete with consumer creativity. They have to design scenarios that allow consumers to extemporize as they play out their own drama, using marketing as a resource (Hackley, 2013).

Marketing’s role enabling consumer performance

Marketing practice is, as usual, well ahead of marketing principles in adapting to the new realities of consumer culture. Amongst long Facebook’s 2 billion active daily users (Pell, 2017) many other social media sites with image capability such as Instagram, Twitter and China’s Qzone number their daily users in the hundreds of millions (Statista, 2017). In addition to the huge number of daily selfie-posting opportunities open to contemporary consumers, there are many virtual lifestyle games and countless other internet-based communication fora that foreground consumers’ self-presentation and identity positioning. Retail and entertainment design has long displayed a theatrical bent. From the early retail emporia to Disneyland, Las Vegas and onward to the recent London launch of Versace branded apartments, designers have long understood the marketing implications of the spatial environment (see Sherry, 1998, for one of many examples). The dominance of the idiom of entertainment over contemporary life through visual media has now pushed marketing to a new frontier that transcends physical space. The distinction between private and public has
become oddly inverted, as physical social contact and community have reduced in advanced economies, while virtual social contact has replaced it. As we note above, following Gabler (2000), we are all on TV, watching life.

Inevitably there are negative aspects to this. At the extreme, there is the Japanese cultural phenomenon of Hikikomori in which a million young adults, mostly males, have retreated to their rooms, never to emerge, having rejected human social contact in favour of a virtual existence (Lucchese, 2015) online, playing games, surfing websites, reading blogs, chatting with comrades, and feeding when a carer pushes a meal through the bedroom door. This is the kind of bleak and tragic consequence that some critics see as the inevitable result of a culture dominated by the image and entertainment.

On the other hand, it is also clear that the internet provides a seemingly inexhaustible resource for the enterprising to assert new forms of identity in new and exciting, and perhaps liberatory (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995) ways. The consumer now achieves what millions dreamed of when movies first reached mass audiences: living through a screen, they (and we) can star in the movie of our life. It has long been obvious to marketers, if not to marketing academics, that what we think about brands matters much less than what others think of them. Brands communicate. They help us to play our roles as people who are creative, spirited, rebellious, sexual, tasteful, clever, individual, and different—fact, just like movie stars. Many of the prescriptions implied in the performance metaphor for marketing might seem similar to those called for by writers on postmodernism in marketing (Brown, 1994; 2006)—with one apparent difference: it isn’t enough for marketers to write convincingly about marketing. Like the put-upon copywriters and art directors struggling to stay relevant in the advertising industry, markets must master all the skills of stage direction, including set design.
and set dressing, screenplay writing, casting, you name it. The drama of life is unfolding, and we are on the front row, watching ourselves in the starring role.

References


Pell, D., (2017). Facebook is the new nation state, both sides are winning the war on media, and other stories you might have missed. Available at: https://qz.com/1017409/dave-pell-s-next-draft-june-28-2017/ (accessed 1 July 2017).


Statista, (2017). Most famous social network sites worldwide as of April 2017, ranked by number of active users (in millions). Available at:


