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

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## **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, 2014). 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: Bourdieu, 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.. Life 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 celestoid 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 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 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 as 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 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 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.

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