



Digital ventriloquism and celebrity access: Cameo and the emergence of paid puppeteering on digital platforms

new media & society

1–20

© The Author(s) 2021

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/14614448211041175

journals.sagepub.com/home/nms

Jenna Drenten 
Loyola University Chicago, USA

Evie Psarras 
Independent Researcher, USA

Abstract

Cameo is part of a growing set of new media platforms trending toward direct routes for monetizing fame. Cameo allows fans to book personalized shout-out videos and provides celebrities—celetoids and reality stars in particular—access to new modes of income, which became increasingly important amid the pandemic. This research explores how the direct monetization of the fan-celebrity relationship is re-shaping the power dynamic of these parasocial relationships. Using digital ventriloquism as an analytical lens to study reality stars (e.g. *Real Housewives*) on Cameo, this study introduces the concept of paid puppeteering on digital platforms, defined as a form of digital ventriloquism in which a celebrity's public persona is manipulated and incentivized through financial means on a paid digital platform for the illusion of close parasocial connections with fans. Paid puppeteering reinforces celebrities as gig workers as Cameo mitigates fan access to celebrities—for a fee.

Keywords

Cameo, celetoids, digital ventriloquism, direct monetization, gig economy, paid puppeteering, parasocial relationships, reality television

Corresponding author:

Jenna Drenten, Quinlan School of Business, Loyola University Chicago, 16 East Pearson Street, Chicago 60611, IL, USA.

Email: jdrenten@luc.edu

Introduction

When social media platforms (e.g. Instagram, Twitter) entered the new media landscape in the early 2000s, celebrities gained more control over their own narratives (Khamis et al., 2016) and fans gained more seemingly unfiltered “backstage access” to celebrities’ lives (Marwick and boyd, 2011). Celebrity visibility, once curated by Hollywood power brokers and paparazzi, could now be scrolled, swiped, and shared at the command of celebrities themselves. Celebrities use social media to distribute a seemingly authentic image of the true celebrity self. This curated persona is grounded in a not-so-subtle shadow of monetization as online platforms have increasingly become a space for celebrities’ promotional ventures (Hackley et al., 2018), thus helping celebrities maintain relevancy and commercial power.

Celebrities turn to social media platforms for personal branding, a practice which has drawn critical attention to the interconnectedness between celebrities, fans, and new media (Mavroudis, 2018). Celebrity monetization in new media spaces tends to adopt somewhat veiled practices such as content marketing and native advertising (Campbell and Grimm, 2019). In these cases, advertisers pay celebrities to promote products on social media platforms.

Popular platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, YouTube, and others are largely free for fans to use—the cost of which is offset by commercial advertising. However, a growing set of new media platforms is trending toward more direct routes for celebrities to monetize fame by allowing fans to pay for direct, personalized access. For example, platforms such as Patreon and OnlyFans operate on subscription-based systems for fans to gain exclusive access to content produced by their favorite celebrities and creators. And social media platforms are integrating direct monetization options such as Twitch Subscriber Streams, YouTube Super Chats, and TikTok Shoutouts. These emerging practices represent a departure from the standard approach of making content available for free on advertising-based platforms and instead function as a direct way to monetize fan-celebrity interactions. Such evolutions in revenue generation represent important sociocultural shifts in celebrity access. To that end, the purpose of our research is to explore how the direct monetization of the fan-celebrity relationship re-shapes power dynamics in parasocial relationships, specifically to mitigate celetoid status. Celetoid status refers to people who have achieved their “15 minutes” of fame (Rojek, 2001).

For this study, we turn to the context of reality television stars on the platform Cameo, which enables fans to purchase custom video greetings from their favorite celebrities including musicians, artists, influencers, athletes, movie stars, and more. We specifically focus on reality television stars (e.g. *Real Housewives*) given their status as celetoids, defined by fleeting status or momentary fame (Rojek, 2001). Using ventriloquism as an analytical lens (e.g. Cooren, 2012, 2020), this study contributes to theorization of celebrity access and performance in the new media landscape by introducing the concept of paid puppeteering. We define paid puppeteering as a form of digital ventriloquism in which a celebrity’s public persona is manipulated and incentivized through financial means on a paid digital platform for the illusion of close parasocial connections with fans. Our analysis demonstrates how paid puppeteering on digital platforms operates as

a new strategy for celebrities to generate income from the cultivation of personal relations with fans.

This article is structured as follows. First, we ground our study in prior literature on social media, celebrity access, and power in parasocial relationships. We contextually link these concepts to celetoid status by tracing the evolution of reality television with specific attention on the *Real Housewives* franchise. We then describe the novel research context—*Real Housewives* on the Cameo platform—and introduce digital ventriloquism as our analytical lens. Next, we outline the methodology of the study which includes an analysis of 765 Cameo videos from 69 *Real Housewives*, coupled with metadata including pricing, profile information, average response time, and customer reviews on the Cameo platform. In the “Findings” section, we describe the concept of paid puppeteering and provide an organizing visual of paid puppeteering. Our analysis draws on examples from the data to illustrate each element of paid puppeteering. Finally, in the discussion, we address how fan-celebrity relationships are uniquely mediated through a direct-to-consumer monetization model rather than an ad-based model and the implications of this sociocultural shift in power within new media platforms.

Conceptual foundation

Social media, celebrity access, and the power shift in parasocial relationships

Social media have created new avenues for fans to interact with celebrities, changing what used to be an entirely one-sided relationship (Rojek, 2015). Fan and celebrity relations were once made tangible through planned communication in the form of meet and greets and backstage access at events. While social media presents fans with seemingly unfiltered access to celebrities, celebrities have harnessed this interest to their benefit, using social media and the relationships they appear to foster as a means to extend their brand power (Marwick and boyd, 2012; Hearn and Schoenhoff, 2015).

Platforms like Instagram and Twitter enable constant exchanges with fans (Marwick and boyd, 2012). Fans are given behind-the-scenes access to celebrities; however, the perception of free access is muddied by brand partnerships, sponsorships, and promotional efforts through social media (Drenten et al., 2020). Marwick and boyd (2012) compare the exchanges between celebrities and fans on Twitter to early celebrity tabloid coverage, which a few decades ago was almost entirely controlled by the Hollywood studio system (DeCordova, 1990). The authors argue that access to celebrities on Twitter is actually just as calculated as old tabloid coverage since the for-profit commercialism of social media sites tend to be obscured by the storytelling nature of the platform.

This points to the idea that celetoids and other celebrities use social media for-profit and maintaining relevance rather than fostering true connections with fans. For instance, viewing celebrity as practice on Twitter, Marwick and boyd (2012: 145) found that famous people directly mentioned fans in their tweets “to perform connection and availability,” “manage their popularity,” and to “give back to loyal followers.” While fan and celebrity interactions have increased with social media, this parasocial relationship still affords celebrities more power. The relational power differential here describes

“parasocial interaction,” “second order intimacy” (Rojek, 2001), “presumed intimacy” (Rojek, 2015), or the “illusion of intimacy” (Schickel, 1985; Turner, 2004). With each of these terms, there is the assumption that these relationships are inauthentic, fabricated, or even delusional on behalf of fans.

Marwick and boyd (2012) argue against parasocial interaction being inauthentic or one-sided. Other scholars add to this stance, arguing parasocial interaction among celebrities and fans is more valid today, particularly by way of celebrities’ self-disclosures (Chung and Cho, 2017). Parasocial relationships, Chung and Cho (2017) argue, are more than fabricated intimacy; they are complex, dynamic, and layered. So much so, one could argue that social media opened pathways to a new intimacy between fans and celebrities, that has shifted the power imbalance in previous parasocial relationships. Fans today may even have more control over their relation to celebrities than ever before. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the case of reality stars, “whose fame is neither ascribed nor earned, but rather results from marketing efforts, planned production and intense media attention” (Thompson et al., 2015: 479).

Reality television and the evolution of celetoid status

Prior to social media, reality television largely transformed ordinary people into celetoid-celebrities. Built into this definition was planned obsolescence (i.e. think lottery winners, every-day type heroes who disappear when media move on to the next story). The term has since been redefined by Rojek (2012: 165) to include a distinctive form of celetoid: the “long-life celetoid” who can “achieve durable or semi durable types of fame,” and are “not distinctive for anything except their impudent ordinariness.” Long-life celetoids are mainly a product of social media and reality TV spin-offs and docusoaps. Perhaps nowhere is the persistence of long-life celetoids more evident than in docusoaps like *Real Housewives* (Psarras, 2014). These cast members maintain media attention due to multi-year contract deals with networks, which legitimates these people as media personas (Thompson et al., 2015) and gives them time to build a brand across social media platforms.

The rise of long-life celetoids is representative of a bigger shift in contemporary media, referred to as the demotic turn to the ordinary (Collins, 2018; Gamson, 2011; Turner, 2006). The demotic turn is also characterized by an increasing focus on a celebrity’s mundane, backstage moments (Turner, 2006). Turner’s (2006) theorization of the demotic turn suggests media generate behaviors and cultural patterns that “reinforce their own commercial power and cultural centrality” (pp. 159–162). Media reinforce these things through the production of celetoids.

Reality television produces celetoids to fix the supply-side of an increased demand for celebrity content (Rojek, 2012; Turner, 2006). That demand was created by a changing economy, new media, convergence culture, and reality TV (Andrejevic, 2004; Jenkins, 2006), which necessitated celetoids’ performances across platforms. This is indicative of the labor celetoids do to create content that simultaneously promotes the network (Curnutt, 2011), their respective series and their individual brand (Psarras, 2020). This makes reality television integral for late-capitalist expansion (Bielby and Harrington, 2008; Hearn and Shoenhoff, 2015; Jian and Liu, 2009). Using celetoids for free labor or

offering the promise of “an attainable celebrity lifestyle,” concurrently expands profits for networks and lowers production costs (Hearn and Shoenhoff, 2015: 202), which makes celetoids exploitable and expendable (Hearn, 2016). New media technologies have however afforded celetoids more agency over planned obsolescence and their exploitability.

Social media affords celetoids the chance to increase their relevance in the attention economy. Celetoids transition their branded-persona fluidly across social platforms, increasing their “brand authenticity” (Khamis et al., 2016). Much of this authenticity is constructed by showcasing personal backstage moments (Thomas, 2014). The prevalence of backstage displays have, over time, impacted what traditionally private, A-list celebrities share with their audience. This seemingly habitual access to celebrities means that audiences have become accustomed to having access to the private components of celebrities’ lives (Chun, 2017); areas which used to be controlled by cultural intermediaries, networks, production companies, and publications (DeCordova, 1990; Dyer, 2004). In sum, the demotic turn to the ordinary and the subsequent proliferation of reality television, celetoids, and social media use have forever changed fan’s access to celebrities.

Research context: the *Real Housewives of Cameo*

Evidence of these new relational dynamics is seen on Cameo, a social marketplace where fans request personalized shout-out videos, or “Cameos,” from a range of celebrities—actors, athletes, musicians, influencers, political commentators, and reality stars. Launched in 2017, Cameo’s mission is to create the most personalized and authentic fan experiences in the world. CEO Steven Galanis started the platform with two friends, Martin Blencowe, a former NFL agent and movie producer, and Devon Townsend, one of the original stars of the defunct social media platform Vine. The co-founders saw a personalized congratulations video message taped by an NFL player celebrating the arrival of a friend’s new son (Majewski, 2019). This inspired the concept of the Cameo marketplace; giving everyday people access to personalized shout-out videos from celebrities—for a fee.

Cameo is—like Uber, Insta-cart, Mechanical Turk, and more—an outgrowth of the gig economy. Gig economy platforms appear to provide “extreme temporal flexibility” to individuals, presenting them with control over how they “spend each hour” or “minute of the day” (Lehdonvirta, 2018). Cameo hosts a range of marketplace offerings including (1) Cameos—short personalized video messages, (2) Cameo Direct—paid text-based direct messaging, and (3) Promotional Cameos—short personalized video messages for commercial-use. Celebrities choose which services they offer and set their own fees for booking. The price is shown on the celebrities’ booking pages and can be adjusted at any time. Cameo, like other gig economy platforms, has externalized “responsibility and control over economic transactions” between celebrities and fans, “while still exercising concentrated power” over content ownership and bookings (Vallas and Schor, 2020). The “side-hustle” Cameo offers, is conducive for particular talent, like celetoids and other low-level celebrities battling with the precarity of their fame. Cameo defines “talent” broadly as celebrities and influencers, which includes celebrity impersonators like Mike Goldman who impersonates Tiger King’s Joe Exotic

(US\$500); famous animals like Tinkerbelle the Dog (US\$120); and even the “The Fly on Mike Pence’s Head” (US\$35).

Cameo was further legitimized at the onset of the pandemic as people sought socially distant gifts for special occasions and celebrities sought accessible side hustles to offset the stall in television production. In 2020, bolstered by stay-at-home orders and reliance on digital technologies, Cameo reached over US\$100 million in bookings (Porterfield, 2021). To date, the site has sold more than a million personalized videos shot by over 30,000 creators—with new celebrities joining every week.

A key part of the booking process is giving the celebrity instructions to provide context for the booking. For example, if a bride-to-be wanted to ask her friends to be bridesmaids in her wedding, then she could book a Cameo to have a celebrity deliver the message. In the instructions, she would provide directions for what to say, such as friends’ names or contextual directives. This process is not without fault. In 2018, former NFL quarterback, Brett Favre, made headlines when a cameo of him, unknowingly espousing White supremacist rhetoric, circulated through social media. While Cameo facilitates transactional relationships between users and celebrities that could be problematic, it also provides celebrities with new income streams.

We argue here reality stars are appealing to book on Cameo because they are effectively prepackaged to produce Cameo shout-outs. The women of *Real Housewives* for instance, work across platforms, according to executive producer Andy Cohen, “as GIF and catchphrase machines.” These women are long-life celetoids who have been trained to produce soundbites on reality television that can instantly become a graphics interchange format (GIF) or meme on social media (Psarras, 2020). Those moments become part of the women’s branded-persona. The catchphrases that make such moments enable celetoids to produce humorous Cameo videos that are easy to reproduce across shout-out requests and customizable to individual fans.

Cameo affords fans more personalized control and access to celebrities than any other platform. To that end, this research is guided by the following questions: how do celebrities use Cameo to mitigate the limits of celetoid status and how does the direct monetization of the fan-celebrity relationship shape power dynamics in parasocial relationships? To answer these questions, we critically examine Cameo and the performative nature of *Real Housewives*’ Cameo content, using ventriloquism as our analytical lens.

Digital ventriloquism as an analytical lens

Ventriloquism is the practice of throwing one’s voice, or making a voice appear to originate from an alternative source (Connor, 2000). A skilled ventriloquist makes the audience believe the sound is coming from the moving mouth of an inanimate ventriloquial figure, or dummy. Through back-and-forth conversation, the dummy is often portrayed as cheeky or defiant with unique characteristics and mannerisms apart from the ventriloquist. The audience knows the anthropomorphic dummy cannot speak voluntarily yet the origin of its voice defies bodily boundaries. A ventriloquial perspective of communication suggests dialogue is always the result of actions and reactions where the boundary between a voice’s origin and dissemination is blurred. Cooren (2010, 2012, 2020) theorizes ventriloquism is a productive metaphor in understanding how people speak and act

on behalf of others (e.g. a press secretary for the White House). Employing this metaphor, Cooren (2020) writes,

The ventriloquist makes her dummy say things, which also means that her dummy ends up speaking through what she is saying on its behalf. Any ventriloquial act thus problematizes the question of absolute origin as there is no way to identify, once for all, who or what is speaking. (p. 11)

Cooren's perspective of communication as ventriloquism highlights how tethering the dummy and ventriloquist is necessary for understanding agentic dynamics. Constitutive ventriloquism refers to different agents within the chain of agency reciprocally animating each other into being, whether upstream (acting on behalf of) or downstream (mobilizing to interact). Day (2018) advances Cooren's model of ventriloquism by highlighting the power dynamics involved in speaking on behalf of others or mobilizing interactions. In her study of new media activism, Day (2018) finds the activist group The Yes Men hijacked the public conversation around environmentalism by forcibly throwing their own voices into fake corporate online advertisements for the oil and gas brand Chevron. Power typically lies with corporations; however, the Yes Men used Chevron as an unwilling dummy to bolster their own voices, if only temporarily, thus claiming power in the process. Such "culture jamming" was made possible given the accessibility of digital technologies which "provide opportunities for creative play with professional formats, allowing for easily produced parody, pranking, and critique" (Day, 2018: 620). Indeed, new technologies have given rise to an emergent practice of digital ventriloquism, by which voices are programmed and disembodied in various ways (e.g. smart objects, Iravantchi et al., 2020; deepfakes, Taylor, 2021; lip-syncing, Riszko, 2017). Social media provides a unique space for digital ventriloquism, as the voices portrayed are often disassociated from their origin. For instance, Leppänen's (2015) study of dog blogs finds human writers perform a stylization of dogs' imagined voices and dogs serve as a metaphorical dummies for digital ventriloquism. This practice of thrown voices in social media is also evident in the case of online bots where a "voice can be appropriated, manipulated or faked in a manner that redirects political order" (Frost, 2020: 6) as a form of political digital ventriloquism. Thus, digital ventriloquism constitutes a "re-defining the power relationships tied to it" (Zheng, n.d.).

Scholars have turned to ventriloquism as a useful analytical metaphor for examining media and communication; however, to our knowledge, none have used digital ventriloquism to deeply analyze the commercial and monetized aspects of mediated communication. Our study contributes to theorization of new media as a ventriloquial space by interrogating the dynamics of power, monetization, and celebrity access. We offer a new concept of paid puppeteering to better capture the financially incentivized ventriloquial interaction between fans and celebrities on digital platforms. This is further explored in our analysis.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach of visual and textual analysis of Cameo content. Scholars suggest qualitative visual methods capture the meanings of produced,

shared, and consumed through imagery (e.g. Cameo videos), which can be further contextualized through text-based data (van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2001). In line with previous interpretive studies of new media (e.g. Bainotti et al., 2020), our methodological approach provides a rigorous, theory-driven analysis of ventriloquial practices mediated through the Cameo platform.

The context-immersion period began by regularly checking Cameo profiles and discussing different features of the platform, as it evolved, over 3 months. A screenshot of a profile for *Housewife* Bethenny Frankel is provided in Figure 1. Following the immersion period, formal data collection was initiated using *Real Housewives* as the sampling frame. We created a database of all *Real Housewives*, including their names and franchise season(s), and we cross-referenced these names in Cameo using the search functionality. We downloaded details from each profile, including the celebrity's Cameo bio, pricing structure per celebrity, services offered, response time, public reviews, and permanent profile link.

A systematic approach to data collection was taken by manually downloading public Cameo videos from each Housewife's Cameo profile, totaling a corpus of 765 videos across the 69 *Real Housewives* with Cameo accounts. At the initial time of downloading the data, only nine videos were publicly available on each Cameo profile. Thus, data collection included up to nine videos for each Real Housewife. Cameo later updated its user interface allowing fans to access all previously recorded videos by joining a celebrity's 'fan club'; thus, additional videos were downloaded for select Housewives, resulting in an average of 11 videos per Housewife. For data analysis, the authors independently open-coded separate halves of the data, checking back with each other to compare coding and emergent themes (see Pennington, 2016). Initial findings were discussed prior to proceeding with independently coding the alternative half of the data. Again, the authors met to discuss the emergent coding scheme. The data were analyzed through the lens of ventriloquism, with special attention on the power dynamics, communicative practices, and financial incentivization motivating each video.

Findings

Celebrity access is perceived as free yet mass-mediated on traditional social media platforms. That is, all fans following a celebrity have equal access to the same content. In contrast, Cameo places transactions at the center of the platform. Our analysis points to what we term "paid puppeteering on digital platforms," in which celebrities on Cameo are theorized as the ventriloquial figure, or dummy, with fans as the ventriloquists. This power dynamic is mediated by financial incentivization, as celebrities are willing to barter control of their own voices in order to maintain celebrity status. In line with prior theorization of ventriloquism, paid puppeteering is reciprocal, but motivated by transactional practices—rather than forcibly (Day, 2018) or ideologically (Cooren, 2012). Unlike traditional inanimate dummies, celebrities maintain power by determining their own monetary value based on previous performances and behind-the-scenes access.

Paid puppeteering on digital platforms emerges through the lens of digital ventriloquism. In our conceptual model of paid puppeteering on digital platforms (see Figure 2), the hand of the puppeteer represents fan's requests on Cameo. Here, fans manipulate the

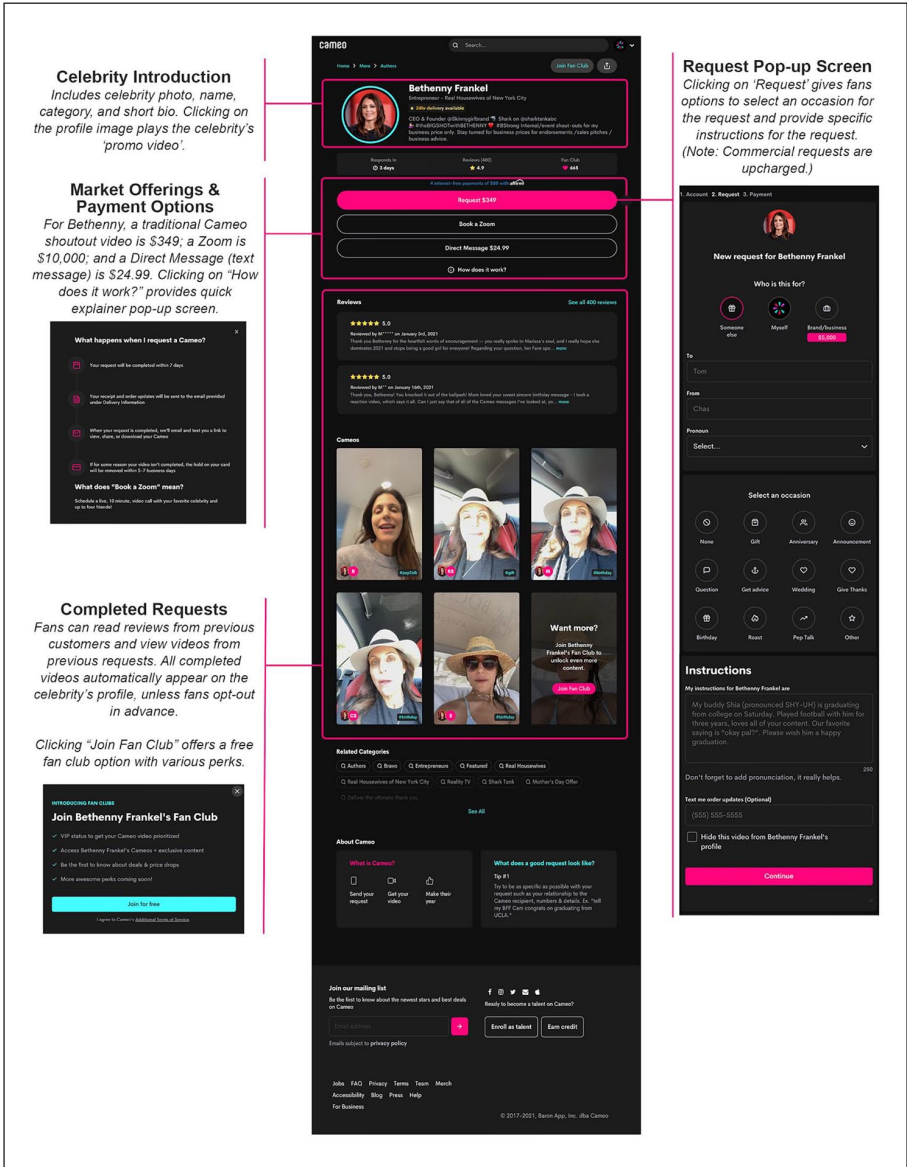


Figure 1. Anatomy of a Cameo profile.

messages from celebrities, making celebrities their ventriloquial dummy. Cameo is the stage where transactions and entertainment occur. Finally, the strings represent transactions between fans and celebrities, specifically, the financial incentivization of the celetoid and requests and payments made by fans. Financial incentives underlie paid puppeteering on digital platforms as fans throw their voices and celebrities act as

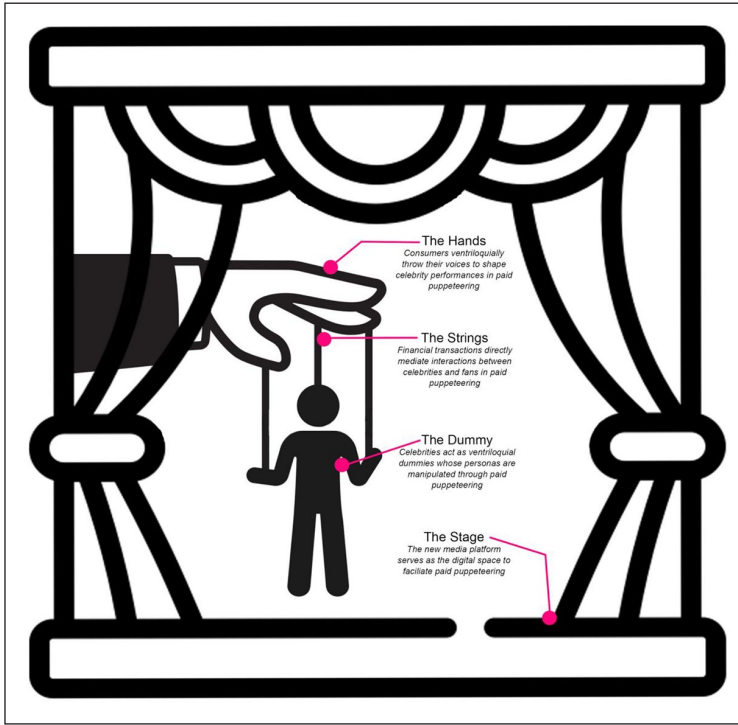


Figure 2. Conceptual model of paid puppeteering on digital platforms.

puppets—for a direct fee. Our analysis highlights examples from the data to illustrate the elements of paid puppeteering on digital platforms: (1) The stage (how Cameo facilitates paid puppeteering), (2) the hands (how fans ventriloquially throw celebrity voices), (3) the dummy (how celebrities act as ventriloquial “dummies”), and (4) the strings (how financial incentivization mediates paid puppeteering).

The stage: how does Cameo work to facilitate paid puppeteering on digital platforms?

In the practice of paid puppeteering, the Cameo platform operates as the stage upon which celebrities distribute personalized performances as requested by fans. To book a Cameo, fans submit a request form, which prompts the user to categorize the request based on occasion (e.g. birthday, wedding, roast, pep talk) and gives the fan 250 characters to provide detailed instructions for the booking. A temporary hold is placed on the fan’s credit card until the cameo is delivered. If the request is not completed within 7 days, the hold on the credit card is removed and the fan is not charged for the booking. Thus, it is up to the celebrity to complete, ignore, or deny requests as they come through the platform. The purchased cameo can be shared and sent across social media platforms or through other channels (e.g. text message, email).

Cameo's Terms of Services have extensively evolved since the introduction of the platform. For example, at the time of data collection, many *Housewives* provided Cameos promoting fans' businesses. Lea Black promoted the "Queen of Microblading" and said "everyone needs to get their microblading from you" and Nene Leakes created a public service announcement (PSA)-like Cameo encouraging the University of California San Diego community "to fill out your census forms, by mail, by phone or online." These Cameos, while booked as personal, are the equivalent of paid advertisements. In this way, the Cameo platform—or stage—provides a digital space for fans to broker promotional deals directly with celebrities. Since data collection, Cameo expanded and adjusted its format by now requiring fans to explicitly state if a Cameo is booked for commercial purposes which increases the pricing and requires disclosure from fans. For instance, Bethenny Frankel has a set price for personalized Cameos at US\$349 and for promotional Cameos at US\$5000. In television and radio endorsements, companies pay celebrities directly to promote external products. This is a mass-mediated approach and the costs are veiled from fans (e.g. consumers). In ventriloquized Cameo content, fans pay celebrities directly to purchase a product (e.g. a Cameo). This is a mass-customization approach and the costs are transparent to fans (e.g. consumers).

The Cameo platform, as a stage for paid puppeteering, is distinct from prior social media platforms which are largely supported by commercial advertising placement. The fundamental purpose of Cameo is to connect fans and celebrities by commodifying personalized shout-out videos. In our data, *Housewives* like Meghan King Edmonds recognize that fans often ask celebrities for shoutouts on social media platforms—but these platforms are not purposefully monetized. In her bio video, Meghan says,

Hey guys, I'm super stoked to be on Cameo and interact with everybody. I get a lot of requests on my social media for me to send shout-outs. So here's a great place to ask me and I'm so excited to work with everybody. Let's do it.

Celebrities could, of course, provide shout-out videos of their own volition through other social media platforms such as Instagram but Cameo bakes this into the purpose of the platform and rewards celebrities for their labor by monetizing the shout-out. In sum, Cameo is the stage for a range of performances by celebrities which fans pay for to be entertained through paid puppeteering.

The hands: how do fans ventriloquially throw celebrity voices in paid puppeteering?

Our analysis suggests fans act as the ventriloquists—mediating their thrown voices through the Cameo platform. Fans throw their voices in the following three ways: verbatims (e.g. what to say), contextualization (e.g. why to say it), and stylization (e.g. how to say it). Cameo suggests a "good request" includes verbatims, such as "tell my BFF Cam congrats on graduating from UCLA" (see Figure 3). In line with ventriloquism, celebrities are expressly told what to say, thereby fans put words in their mouths.

Fans provide directives to celebrities for producing Cameos. These instructions reflect the celebrity-fan relationship and give the impression that the fan who requested the

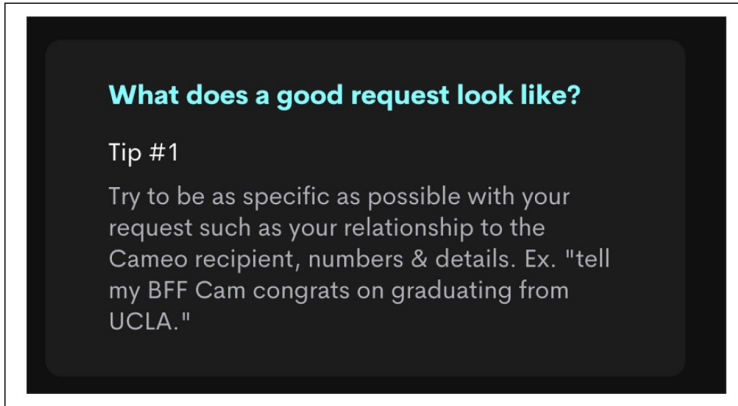


Figure 3. “Good Request” tip from Cameo.

Cameo spoke to the celebrity directly. Celebrities mirror this directive language in how they present the Cameo content. In our analysis, celebrities consistently use phrases on behalf of someone else (e.g. “your wife told me to say”). Specific details about the recipients are included to personalize the Cameo, which the celebrities, in turn, regurgitate to fans (e.g. “you love scuba diving”). Fans throw their voices and put words into the celebrities’ mouths—akin to a celebrity having a mic in their ear or reading from a teleprompter.

Celebrities encourage fans to throw their voices through the practice of paid puppeteering. For example, in Lisa Vanderpump’s tongue in cheek promo video, she states, “I will do whatever you want. You can put your words in my mouth, and you know me, nobody puts anything in my mouth.” Putting words in someone else’s mouth is central to paid puppeteering. Fans also engage in paid puppeteering on digital platforms by making aesthetic style suggestions. For instance, as shown in Figure 4, Jules Wainstein goes so far as to truly embody the men whom she is impersonating:

Hi Katie, it’s Jules from the Real Housewives of New York. I have a message from two of your friends, Zane and Bri. They’re at happy hour. And I’ve never had a message like this. They are—they’re talking to you, through Cameo, through me. So . . . I’m going to pretend I’m them. . . . {transformation to Zane} Hi, Katie. It’s Zane, we’re at happy hour and we love you. And I’m so happy that you agreed with my Ashley Tisdale take. {transformation to Bri} It’s Bri. You’re an amazing human and friend, and I am so lucky to have you in my life. Love your favorite [unintelligible]. {transformation back to Jules} This was the best video I’ve ever made in my entire Cameo life. I love your friends. They’re so funny. Happy Holidays and I’m sending you lots of love.

The stylization of celebrity performances is directed by the fans who are paying for the paid puppeteer experience. Some fans push the limits of this power dynamic as they request “inside jokes” and secret phrases. In the case of Jules Wainstein, fans not only threw their voices into Jules but also their entire appearances. Other evidence in our data

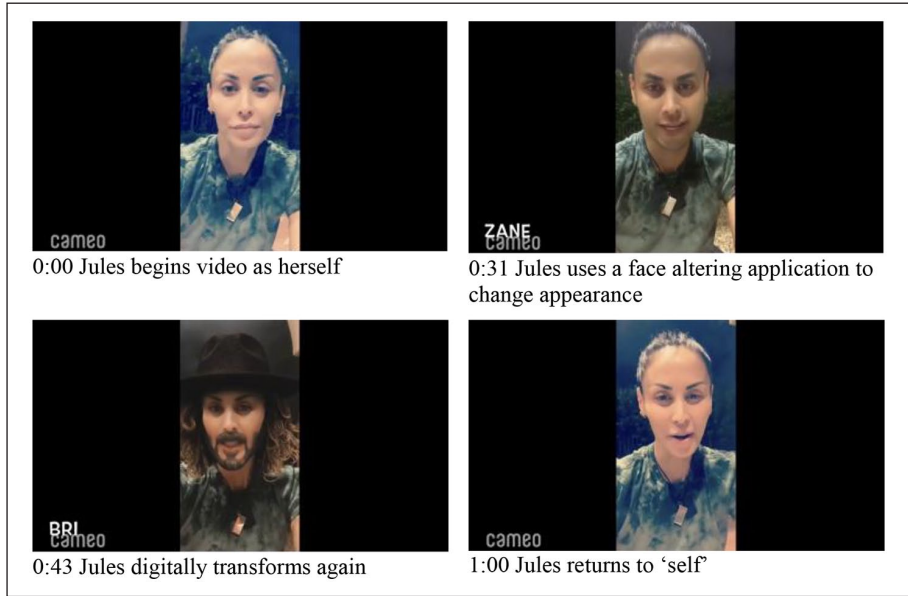


Figure 4. Jules Wainstein's video changing appearance to embody fans.

demonstrates how fans further attempt to stylize celebrities' voices to meet their own ventriloquially expectations. For example, Braunwyn is asked to "say this in a singsong voice" and in her video, debates with herself what that means. Braunwyn is told what to say and how to say it, all while integrating personalized information about the recipient and requestor of the Cameo. As Braunwyn's performance unfolds, she begins to question how she is meant to deliver the ventriloquial request. Thus, the experience of paid puppeteering is directed by fans who throw their voices, but left to celebrities to deliver the desired performance on the digital platform.

When fans do not get the performance they paid for, their responses vary. For instance, in the reviews left on Gizelle Bryant's Cameo profile, several fans note their names being mispronounced. One fan wrote, "Thank you Gizelle! Greer absolutely loved her Cameo. You accidentally called her Gina, so I wish you re-recorded, but it made for a memorable video :). She is Gina forever now." A separate fan wrote, "Thank you so much Gizelle! Is there any way you might be able to re-record by pronouncing my name [correctly]? Thank you so so much!" In both cases, the recipients were unhappy in the situation, but they handled their dissatisfaction differently. This highlights how Cameo gives some level of power and control to fans to puppeteer these celebrities (e.g. request do-overs, leave negative reviews); however, celebrities also maintain some control in their willingness to comply. In line with the conceptual lens of digital ventriloquism, the mispronunciation of names by celebrities and subsequent responses from fans demonstrates the potential betrayal involved in paid puppeteering. Celebrity dummies are imperfect and can unintentionally misrepresent their fans—those for whom the celebrities are supposed to speak.

The dummy: how are celebrities ventriloquial “dummies” in paid puppeteering on digital platforms?

The concept of paid puppeteering on Cameo makes a celebrity a fan’s dummy. Analysis shows *Housewives*’ customized shout-outs invoke the vibe of their show persona and often include the catchphrases these women have cultivated for their brand. The findings here show how they become fans’ dummies through performative techniques and demonstrate how this transaction mirrors traditional comedic ventriloquism and entertainment.

First, to demonstrate availability on Cameo, each *Housewife* films an introductory video announcing their partnership with Cameo and offer up their services for shout-outs, exclaiming that they “can’t wait to meet” fans. Their presence on Cameo is presented to fans as a commodity that can be purchased for entertainment. While these women participate on Cameo for money and self-branding maintenance, it is clear they understand how essential fans are to determining their value on Cameo. If celebrities want to make money here, fans have to be willing to pay their requested fee.

Housewives perform shout-outs on Cameo under the assumption that they are hired to be their character from the show. Part of their character is related to the catch phrases they are known for. Our data even show some *Housewives* engage in a type of celebrity code-switching. For example, Eilenn Davidson and Lisa Rinna are both *Housewives* and soap opera stars. In their Cameos, they switch their catchphrases to match requests from fans who are either soap opera fans or *Housewives* fans. This plays into the women’s “celebrity text”—factoids people immediately recall about famous people. Celebrities and celebrities must maintain their image and often do so by “reiterat[ing] and revalidat[ing] their celebrity texts” (Weinstein and Weinstein, 2003: 299). A celebrity text refers to a few factoids the public will know about a celebrity (i.e. Tom Cruise was married to Nicole Kidman and is a Scientologist). Cameo affords these women the opportunity to reiterate and revalidate those celebrity texts (or catchphrases).

Luann de Lesseps exemplifies this idea. She began filming *Housewives* when she was married to a Count. Part of LuAnn’s “rich bitch” persona (Lee and Moscovitz, 2013) was her emphasis on etiquette and social grace. She published a book on etiquette shortly after her first appearance on the show, titled *Class with the Countess*. Famous LuAnn catch phrases from the book and the show include, “money can’t buy you class.” LuAnn even translated this catchphrase into a pop song and curated an entire cabaret show out of the song, spending 2 years touring the United States. Other songs include, “Feelin’ Jovani” which is based on a feud with another *Housewife* over the designer, Jovani. Since fashioning herself into a cabaret star, she sings happy birthday to co-stars on the show. Such behavior and this persona translate seamlessly to Cameo where she can sing Happy Birthday upon request and give shout-outs that exemplify the mass-customization required to deliver on the platform:

Hey Sarah, this is from Julia, your bestie, who tells me that you’re turning 31! Happy Birthday. I hear you went to my cabaret show in Los Angeles. I hope you’re safe and well and that you’re feeling Jovani because it feels so good. I know you recently became addicted to TikTok. I love it. Remember, money can’t buy you class but it can buy you a lot to celebrate your birthday . . . sending you lots of love and kisses, from me, the Countess.

LuAnn's persona is intertwined with these catchphrases and her Cameos demonstrate how celetoids become a dummy for fans acting as ventriloquists. In sum, *Housewives* act as dummies for fan entertainment on Cameo. These celebrities however have agency in that they can choose to fulfill, decline, or ignore requests.

The strings: how does financial incentivization mediate paid puppeteering on digital platforms?

The transaction between fans and celebrities on Cameo is mediated by financial incentivization (i.e. the strings). In our conceptual model of paid puppeteering on digital platforms, the strings facilitate the valuation of a celebrity's Cameo fee and payments made to the celebrity by fans. The strings augment the power dynamics at play in paid puppeteering by highlighting this balancing act between fans who may or may not want to pay the price of a request, and the celebrity's willingness to trade their voice for fan requests. As indicated on Cameo's website in the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section, "the cost of a Cameo video is set individually by each of the talent in the Cameo Marketplace." Cameo talent is "given up to seven days to fulfill requests," after which "your request could expire." In addition, "all talent has the option to accept or decline any request that comes through." The transactional nature of the exchange encourages fans to provide direct feedback to the celebrity and prompts celebrities to respond as paid service providers. These strings—or financial incentives—mediate paid puppeteering on digital platforms by placing a dollar amount on the fan-celebrity parasocial relationship.

Our analysis interrogates these women's performances and questions whether fans are getting what they pay for. For instance, Jill Zarin's personal request fee is US\$125.00. Her Cameos were customized to the individual, but mainly promoted Jill's products and did not include catchphrases from the series. In comparison to other *Housewives*, her valuation is too high. Jill is famous for being on *Housewives*; not calling up her *Housewives* persona is risky because fans are likely requesting her for Cameo messages because they watch the show. Luann de Lesseps charges the same fee as Jill, yet, her Cameos are concise, stay on topic, keep to the request, showcase her *Housewives* persona, and she does not promote other products.

Other women who follow LuAnn's cues for mass customization on Cameo include Kameron Westcott (US\$60.00) and Karen Huger (US\$95.00). These women are not as widely followed as LuAnn in the *Housewives* universe, so pricing themselves more affordably for fans, is understandable, perhaps even strategic. Both women stay on topic in Cameos, perform as *Housewives*, and keep the focus on fans. Ultimately, these women perform as service providers. It appears that most *Housewives* produce concise requests that are ad free, inclusive of their *Housewives* persona and the fan's request. In unique instances, *Housewives* will perform however they prefer. For instance, Katie Rost's Cameo videos (US\$99.00) exceed 6 minutes, lack focus and any connection to *Housewives*. In several videos, Katie performed tarot readings for fans that appeared to be spontaneous and not per fan request.

Response time is also indicative of the type of service *Housewives* are willing to provide for fans on Cameo. Bethenny Frankel, one of the most well-known *Housewives*,

charges US\$349.00 per Cameo. Each message is customized to fans, fulfills requests, and embodies the qualities fans recognize about her on *Housewives*. Bethenny offers fans the option for 24-hour delivery and responds to requests within 2 days. Delivering quality messages within this short time frame references good service. The concept of paid puppeteering demonstrates how fans have the autonomy to decide if a celebrity is worth the price, how celebrities have the autonomy to accept or reject a request, and the importance of competent valuations on Cameo.

Discussion

Extending work on celebrity access, social media, and power in parasocial relationships, this research makes three contributions to new media studies. First, we offer a conceptual model of paid puppeteering on digital platforms, which illustrates how a celebrity's public persona can be remediated through financial incentivization on a new digital platform that capitalizes on fans' parasocial ties to celebrities. Paid puppeteering is representative of digital ventriloquism and direct monetization that provides fans with increased, personalized access to celebrities and affords celebrities an opportunity to nurture and profit from parasocial bonds. Digital ventriloquism provides a unique analytical lens to question who or what is acting in communication practices through new media. As we demonstrate, an exchange of money further complicates this dynamic. In a capitalist marketplace where social media platforms, such as Cameo, provide a direct connection between fans and celebrities, the issue becomes one of control and power: control of what and power for whom?

Second, we identify how paid puppeteering on digital platforms is used to mitigate the limits ofceletoid status, specifically in the context of *Real Housewives* on Cameo. Our study shows Cameo is an efficient place for meme-able personas, like *Housewives*, to make money quickly. In fact, *Housewives* are in the general business of crafting meme-able personas. To ensure camera time and another contract, these women must strategically deliver soundbites or catchphrases on the series that can later become a meme or GIF that can be shared across social media sites (Psarras, 2020). This bakes their personas into the composition of *Housewives* fandom and the larger sphere of popular culture. Using Cameo to propagate that persona nets them additional income, fan interaction, and likely an extension on their fame. The analytical power of digital ventriloquism as a metaphor draws attention to the layered dynamics of paid puppeteering on digital platforms. Celetoids impersonate not only their fans but also the characters they play on television. In this way, we never know where the words are coming from, which is further complicated by aspects of monetization. In paid puppeteering, people talk, but money talks too.

Housewives like Luann de Lesseps, analysis indicates, fulfill what fans want—both in terms of saying what is scripted in the request but also in terms of delivering the catchphrases fans love and likely expect in their Cameo. A good ventriloquial act “problematizes the question of absolute origin as there is no way to identify, once for all, who or what is speaking” (Cooren, 2020). LuAnn's Cameos problematize origin by hitting the marks of the request and letting the recipient know she is doing this because their friend scripted a conversation. LuAnn also expertly puts on the persona she is known for, so

effectively, that her voice may appear to be the absolute origin for a moment; making her Cameos appear entirely personable and customized, in spite of them being similar across requests. This form of mass customization enables *Housewives* to mitigate the limits of their celetoid status because they can prolong their time in the spotlight by fulfilling seemingly personalized videos to fans, nurturing their parasocial bonds and proliferating their branded-persona across other media contexts.

Third, we critically explore how direct monetization of the fan-celebrity parasocial relationship shifts power dynamics. This power shift has propagated a highly transactional relationship between celebrities and fans that is the precursor to and the result of new social media applications that give fans more power over celebrities. This is readily apparent in the rise of social media sites like OnlyFans, a subscription-based social media application where fans can access pay-walled and mainly pornographic content from participating celebrities. The biggest celebrity name to appear on OnlyFans is actress, Bella Thorne. Fans were upset when Thorne charged US\$200 for what they thought would be pay-per-view nude photos of the actress.¹ That fans can directly pay celebrities for increasingly private content is a new idea that shifts the power dynamic of the fan or celebrity relationship to one that is increasingly transactional. Value is derived by fan reviews, prior performances, behind the scenes access, and the potential for mass customization (e.g. personalized messages). Thus, our research provides a conceptual bridge between prior ventriloquial analyses (e.g. Cooren, 2012; Day, 2018) by delineating the power dynamics between the fans and celetoids on digital platforms.

In our research, celebrity valuations on Cameo and fans' willingness to pay the requested fees outline the nuances of directly monetizing the fan-celebrity parasocial relationship. Cameo-supported relationships seem "authentic" but are inherently guided by financial transactions, which blurs the power dynamics between celebrities (e.g. who must act as puppets) and fans (e.g. who must pay for personalized messages). Celebrities have the power to establish their value, or price, within the Cameo marketplace (e.g. set their own price) but fans have the power to deconstruct that value through potentially negative reviews. Cameo is just one example of a growing trend toward digital patronage (Bonifacio and Wohn, 2020) which allows celebrities to directly monetize their labor. Future research might explore perceptions of quality. Paid puppeteering, as a form of digital ventriloquism, captures the transactional parasocial relationship between celebrities and fans enabled through monetized and highly personalized social media. Paid puppeteering on digital platforms signals a trend toward celebrities as the ultimate gig workers by which platforms (e.g. Cameo) bridge the power distance between celebrities and fans—for a fee.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iDs

Jenna Drenten  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9718-3437>

Evie Psarras  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8129-081X>

References

- Andrejevic M (2004) *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Bainotti L, Caliandro A and Gandini A (2020) From archive cultures to ephemeral content, and back: studying Instagram Stories with digital methods. *New Media & Society*. Epub ahead of print 20 September. DOI: 10.1177/1461444820960071.
- Bielby DD and Harrington CL (2008) *Global TV: Exporting Television and Culture in the World Market*. New York: New York University Press.
- Bonifacio R and Wohn DY (2020) Digital patronage platforms. In: *Conference companion publication of the 2020 on computer supported cooperative work and social computing (CSCW '20 companion)*, New York, 17 October, pp. 221–226. New York: Association for Computing Machinery.
- Campbell C and Grimm PE (2019) The challenges native advertising poses: exploring Potential Federal Trade Commission responses and identifying research needs. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* 38(1): 110–123.
- Chun WHK (2017) *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Chung S and Cho H (2017) Fostering parasocial relationships with celebrities on social media: implications for celebrity endorsement. *Psychology & Marketing* 34(4): 481–495.
- Collins K (2018) Comedian hosts and the demotic turn. In: Llinares D, Fox N and Berry R (eds) *Podcasting: New Aural Cultures and Digital Media*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 227–250.
- Connor S (2000) *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cooren F (2010) *Action and Agency in Dialogue: Passion, Incarnation and Ventriloquism*. Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Publishing.
- Cooren F (2012) Communication theory at the center: ventriloquism and the communicative constitution of reality. *Journal of Communication* 62(1): 1–20.
- Cooren F (2020) Reconciling dialogue and propagation: a ventriloquial inquiry. *Language and Dialogue* 10(1): 9–28.
- Curnutt H (2011) Durable participants: a generational approach to reality TV's "ordinary" labor pool. *Media, Culture & Society* 33(7): 1061–1076.
- Day A (2018) Throwing our voices: ventriloquism as new media activism. *Media, Culture & Society* 40(4): 617–628.
- DeCordova R (1990/2007) The emergence of the star system in America. In: Gledhill C (ed.) *Stardom: Industry of Desire*. London: Routledge, pp. 132–140.
- Drenten J, Gurrieri L and Tyler M (2020) Sexualized labour in digital culture: Instagram influencers, porn chic and the monetization of attention. *Gender, Work & Organization* 27(1): 41–66.
- Dyer R (2004) *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*. London: Routledge.
- Frost C (2020) The power of voice: bots, democracy and the problem of political ventriloquism. *Journal of Political Power* 13(1): 6–21.
- Gamson J (2011) The unwatched life is not worth living: the elevation of the ordinary in celebrity culture. *PMLA* 126(4): 1061–1069.
- Hackley C, Hackley RA and Bassiouni DH (2018) Implications of the selfie for marketing management practice in the era of celebrity. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning* 36(1): 49–62.
- Hearn A (2016) Witches and bitches: reality television, housewifization and the new hidden abode of production. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 20(1): 10–24.
- Hearn A and Schoenhoff S (2015) From celebrity to influencer. In: Marshall PD and Redmond S (eds) *A Companion to Celebrity*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, pp. 194–211.

- Irvantchi Y, Goel M and Harrison C (2020) Digital ventriloquism: giving voice to everyday objects. In: *Proceedings of the 2020 CHI '20: CHI conference on human factors in computing systems*, New York, 21 April, pp. 1–10. New York: Association for Computing Machinery.
- Jenkins H (2006) *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press.
- Jian M and Liu CD (2009) “Democratic entertainment” commodity and unpaid labor of reality TV: a preliminary analysis of China’s Supergirl. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 10(4): 524–543.
- Khamis S, Ang L and Welling R (2016) Self-branding, “micro-celebrity” and the rise of social media influencers. *Celebrity Studies* 82(2): 191–208.
- Lee MJ and Moscovitz L (2013) The “Rich Bitch”: Class and gender on the Real Housewives of New York City. *Feminist Media Studies*. 13(1): 64–82.
- Lehdonvirta V (2018) Flexibility in the gig economy: managing time on three online piecework platforms. *New Technology, Work and Employment* 33(1): 13–29.
- Leppänen S (2015) Dog blogs as ventriloquism: authentication of the human voice. *Discourse, Context & Media* 8(3): 63–73.
- Majewski T (2019) Inside Cameo: the rocketship making influencers money. *Product Hunt*. Available at: <https://www.producthunt.com/stories/inside-cameo-the-rocketship-making-influencers-money>
- Marwick A and boyd d (2012) To see and be seen: celebrity practice on Twitter. *Convergence* 17(2): 139–158.
- Mavroudis J (2018) Fame labor. In: Abidin C and Lindsay Brown M (eds) *Microcelebrity around the Globe*. Bingley: Emerald Publishing, pp. 83–93.
- Pennington DR (2016) Coding of non-text data. In: Sloan L and Quan-Hasse A (eds) *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE, pp. 232–250.
- Porterfield C (2021) Cameo customers spent \$100 million on celebrity shout outs in 2020, CEO says. *Forbes*. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carlieporterfield/2021/01/05/cameo-customers-spent-100-million-on-celebrity-shout-outs-in-2020-ceo-says/>
- Psarras E (2014) We all want to be big stars: the desire for fame and the draw to the real housewives. *Clothing Cultures* 2(1): 51–72.
- Psarras E (2020) “It’s a mix of authenticity and complete fabrication” Emotional camping: the cross-platform labor of the Real Housewives. *New Media & Society*. Epub ahead of print 4 December. DOI: 10.1177/1461444820975025.
- Riszko L (2017) Breaching bodily boundaries: posthuman (dis)embodiment and ecstatic speech in lip-sync performances by boychild. *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media* 13(2): 153–169.
- Rojek C (2001) *Celebrity*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Rojek C (2012) *Fame Attack: The Inflation of Celebrity and Its Consequences*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Rojek C (2015) *Presumed Intimacy: Parasocial Interaction in Media, Society and Celebrity Culture*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Schickel R (1985) *Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity*. New York: Doubleday & Company.
- Taylor BC (2021) Defending the state from digital Deceit: the reflexive securitization of deepfake. *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 38(1): 1–17.
- Thomas S (2014) Celebrity in the “Twitterverse”: history, authenticity and the multiplicity of stardom situating the “newness” of Twitter. *Celebrity Studies* 5(3): 242–255.
- Thompson A, Stringfellow L, Maclean M, et al. (2015) Puppets of necessity? Celebrityisation in structured reality television. *Journal of Marketing Management* 31(5–6): 478–501.
- Turner G (2004) *Understanding Celebrity*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.

- Turner G (2006) The mass production of celebrity “celetoids,” reality TV and the “demotic turn.” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 9(2): 153–165.
- Vallas S and Schor JB (2020) What do platforms do? Understanding the gig economy. *Annual Review of Sociology* 46: 273–294.
- van Leeuwen T and Jewitt C (2001) *The Handbook of Visual Analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Weinstein D and Weinstein M (2003) Celebrity worship as weak religion. *Word and World* 23(3): 294–302.
- Zheng Y (n.d.) *ventriloquism*. The Chicago School of Media Theory. Available at: <https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/ventriloquism/>

Author biographies

Jenna Drenten (PhD, University of Georgia) is an Associate Professor of Marketing in the Quinlan School of Business at Loyola University Chicago. Her research explores digital consumer culture, gender, and identity: how digital technologies shape who we are, who we’ve been, and who we might become.

Evie Psarras is a feminist media scholar with a PhD in Communication from the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her work explores the intersections of traditional & digital media, celebrity culture, self-branding and digital labor.