

## Instafame: Luxury Selfies in the Attention Economy

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*Empire on top, my Instagram—my watch  
Five days on my yacht  
Cash money act up  
I just Instagram my shit and let them broke haters just watch  
—Fat Joe, “Instagram That Hoe”*

Instagram, the mobile photo-sharing application, was purchased for \$1 billion by Facebook in 2012; it had, at the time, thirteen employees. While a \$1 billion valuation is difficult to grasp—that’s more than the *New York Times* is worth—the purchase is now widely viewed by tech and business analysts as a coup (Indvik 2013). Facebook’s popularity with young, lucrative American consumers has waned as it has grown into an aggregated behemoth of online content, its News Feeds clogged with video game scores, e-commerce purchases, and advertising (Hess 2013). Instagram, despite having far fewer users, is thriving. The site’s top users are a who’s who of pop stars and television celebrities. It is used by 11 percent of American teenagers, was parodied by the popular site CollegeHumor, and is regularly name-checked in hip-hop songs (Madden et al. 2013). With Instagram’s user base of 150 million people comes the possibility of achieving Instafame, the condition of having a relatively great number of followers on the app. While the most followed users are primarily celebrities—the pop star Rihanna, for instance, has 11 million followers—to many Instagram users, gathering thousands, or even hundreds, of followers can be a motivating force. One participant in a Pew Research Center Internet study on online bullying said:

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“[On Instagram,] people tend to not come off so mean. Because all they really want is for people [to] like their photos” (quoted in *ibid.*). To further this goal, users pose in well-rehearsed digital self-portraits, or “selfies”; obsessively document outfits, cars, vacations, and landscapes; and fill their posts with hashtags like #instafamous and #followforfollow.<sup>1</sup>

This essay examines Instafame as a variety of microcelebrity as it exists on a particular platform, Instagram. Microcelebrity is a mind-set and a collection of self-presentation practices endemic in social media, in which users strategically formulate a profile, reach out to followers, and reveal personal information to increase attention and thus improve their online status (Senft 2013). These practices are pursued in view of the so-called attention economy, a marketing perspective assigning value according to something’s capacity to attract “eyeballs” in a media-saturated, information-rich world (Fairchild 2007). Attention-getting techniques employed by consumer brands have trickled down to individual users, who have increasingly, and occasionally improbably, used them to increase their online popularity (Marwick 2013a). In some online spaces, social media allow for people who fall outside the norms of mass culture to become popular, such as the quirky YouTube comedian Miranda Sings or the feminist fashion blogger Tavi Gevinson. Compared to sites like Facebook that constrain self-presentation within a rigid profile structure, Instagram provides users with a fairly open-ended social media tool, suggesting that individuals could choose to represent themselves using a range of techniques.

It makes sense to think of Instafame as a form of microcelebrity, but in a slightly different way than previously understood. To date, scholars have not aligned microcelebrity with the kinds of glamorous visuals and conspicuous consumption that have been associated with stardom since at least the Hollywood studio era. This position is partly due to the focus on identity online as “written into being,” as Jenny Sundén wrote in 2003. Eleven years later, the Internet is increasingly a visual medium, and more and more individuals are using images rather than written self-descriptions to express themselves. Due to the photographic nature of the medium, Instagram users’ approach to microcelebrity differs from that of users of platforms such as early webcams, blogs, and Twitter, which scholars, including myself, have previously written about (Senft 2008; Marwick and boyd 2011b).<sup>2</sup>

1. The latter tag signals “I’ll follow you if you follow me.”

2. The term *microcelebrity* was coined in Theresa Senft’s 2008 study of camgirls. Early webcams broadcast live, posting a series of still frames that were refreshed every thirty seconds or so. Today live webcams are more typically associated with pornography, while video bloggers (“vloggers”) use webcams to record short videos posted to sites like YouTube.

On Instagram, textual description and replies to followers are de-emphasized in favor of images, particularly selfies. Given these changes, I offer a new take on microcelebrity, originally conceived as a practice primarily to foster direct relationships with audience members, now developed to include a specific type of visual self-presentation strategy. While Instagram makes it possible for “regular people” to attract the mass audiences historically limited to broadcast media, the Instafamous tend to be conventionally good-looking, work in “cool” industries such as modeling or tattoo artistry, and emulate the tropes and symbols of traditional celebrity culture, such as glamorous self-portraits, designer goods, or luxury cars. I argue that Instagram represents a convergence of cultural forces: a mania for digital documentation, the proliferation of celebrity and microcelebrity culture, and conspicuous consumption. Instafame demonstrates that while microcelebrity is widely practiced, those successful at gaining attention often reproduce conventional status hierarchies of luxury, celebrity, and popularity that depend on the ability to emulate the visual iconography of mainstream celebrity culture. This emulation calls into question the idea that social media are an egalitarian, or even just a more accessible, way for individuals to access the currency of the attention economy.

### Social Media and Microcelebrity

Media and celebrity are inextricably intertwined. Celebrities historically proliferated with broadcast media, which enabled the celebrity image to spread far beyond its origins (Baudry 1986). The contemporary shift from broadcast to participatory media and the popularity of social media technologies have contributed to two major changes in celebrity. “Traditional” celebrities like pop stars and actors have embraced social media to create direct, unmediated relationships with fans, or at least the illusion of such. Seeming to bypass agents and managers and other traditional brokers of celebrity attention, young stars like Lady Gaga and Kim Kardashian provide snapshots of their lives and interactions with followers that give the impression of candid, unfettered access. “Parasocial interaction” is the illusion of real, face-to-face friendships with performers that is created through watching television shows or listening to music (Horton and Wohl 1956). In parasocial relationships, a fan responds to a media figure as if he or she were a personal acquaintance (Giles 2002). Social media transform the parasocial into the potentially social and increase the emotional ties between celebrity and fan (Marwick and boyd 2011a; Muntean and Petersen 2009).

Social media also enable microcelebrity. The microcelebrity practitioner may

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have a very small audience but is nonetheless able to inhabit the celebrity subject position through the use of technologies also popular with superstar musicians, athletes, and actors. In the broadcast era, celebrity was something a person was; in the Internet era, microcelebrity is something people do. Subcultural or niche celebrities are now able to amass enough fans to support themselves through their online creative activities while remaining unknown to most and ignored by mainstream media. Microcelebrity is linked to the increasingly pervasive notion of “self-branding,” a self-presentation strategy that requires viewing oneself as a consumer product and selling this image to others (Hearn 2008; Lair, Sullivan, and Cheney 2005). Celebrity thus becomes a continuum of practices that can be performed by anyone with a mobile screen, tablet, or laptop.

Recently, some scholars have argued that reality television and the Internet have contributed to what Graeme Turner (2004: 82) calls the “demotic turn” in celebrity. As Joshua Gamson (2011: 1062) explains, “Celebrity culture is increasingly populated by unexceptional people who have become famous and by stars who have been made ordinary.” Gamson argues that while it *appears* that celebrity culture has opened up, the stardom attainable through reality television, or achieved online, is still fractional in value compared to that of television and film. A case in point is how YouTube was once lauded as a potentially “democratizing” force. *Newsweek*, for instance, wrote that the site allowed unknowns to be “propelled by the enthusiasm of their fans into pop-culture prominence, sometimes without even traditional intermediaries like talent agents or film festivals” (Stone 2006: 38). While *Newsweek* and its ilk were correct in the sense that some stars have been discovered on sites like YouTube, those attaining major celebrity have quickly become ensconced in the traditional celebrity/media machine; Justin Bieber comes to mind. In some ways, social media have contributed to this demotic turn by vastly increasing the number of average people who achieve recognition for memes, viral videos, blogs, and so forth. But while social media tools may have opened up spaces of visibility for people outside broadcast media or politics, these opportunities are typically limited, fleeting, and unaccompanied by the financial resources available to the traditionally famous.

With the increase in broadband and mobile access, the “always-on” nature of social media encourages celebrities and those aspiring to be famous to share constant details of their day-to-day lives (Mullen 2010). Simultaneously, the highly visible metrics of social media success—the number of followers or “likes” attached to a piece of content—encourage people to actively foster an audience. As a result, celebrities and microcelebrities alike use social media to create persistent streams of content, competing for the largest audience numbers.

On Instagram, people do not have equal access to this “star system” of attention as currency. Users often “like” what they find “aspirational”: marketing jargon for something people desire to own but usually cannot. What the young users of Instagram find aspirational often resembles “the lifestyles of the rich and famous.” Thus Instafame is not egalitarian but rather reinforces an existing hierarchy of fame, in which the iconography of glamour, luxury, wealth, good looks, and connections is reinscribed in a visual digital medium. The presence of an attentive audience may be the most potent status symbol of all.

## Selfie Culture

While Instagram users take pictures of all sorts of things, many of the most followed accounts are packed with selfies. While self-portraiture in art is not new, its prevalence as a genre of photograph is. José van Dijck (2008: 58) suggests that the primary purpose of analog personal photography was to create memory aids, to remember the way things were. Most snapshots featured people other than the photographer; Amparo Lasén and Edgar Gómez-Cruz (2009) mention a large compilation of one hundred thousand family photos taken during the 1960s, of which fewer than a hundred were self-portraits. Today, however, online, self-portraits are omnipresent. Pew’s Internet and American Life Project found that 92 percent of teenagers who use Facebook upload pictures of themselves (Madden et al. 2013). Selfies are so popular with young people that they have become a genre unto themselves, with their own visual conventions and clichés. The “MySpace angle,” for instance, is the practice of taking a selfie from above, which is said to make the subject look thinner. Social media users learn and teach one another canned poses, flattering camera angles, and facial expressions, such as the pursed lips known colloquially as “duckface,” which can be seen throughout photo-sharing sites like Facebook and Instagram. As Ori Schwarz (2010: 165) writes in his study of the Israeli social network Shox, “We are witnessing a shift from photographing others for self-consumption to documentation of the self for consumption by others.” While photographs have always been able to show perspective and identity, we now use them more than ever before to display ourselves (Winston 2013: 4–5).

This explosion in selfies has been explained, variously, either as evidence of an epidemic of narcissism among the young or as an empowering new self-presentation medium. (Twenge and Campbell 2009; Lee 2005). But the major shift in photography is not simply from film to digital but from the limited audiences that existed for family snapshots to the networked, potentially enormous audi-

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ences for all types of digital content. The ability to replicate digital photographs, the integration of cameras into mobile phones, and the popularity of sites like Flickr, Imgur, Facebook, and Instagram facilitate and encourage sharing photos with others. Facebook has more than 250 billion photos, and 350 million more are uploaded every day (Wagner 2013) in order to be seen by an audience whose comments, likes, and “shares” function as social currency and social reinforcement.



**Figure 1** Selfie by Rihanna (@badgirlriri)

The closest model we can draw on for understanding this shift is that of celebrity culture. Just as celebrities are individuals whose images are amplified through broadcast media and made available to wide audiences, so these new self-portraits are produced and carefully selected for promotional purposes (Schwarz 2010: 164). Indeed, selfies are like advertisements for the self, and curation of online photographs is a serious business. Previous studies have found that people who share online photos spend a great amount of time “selecting, modifying, editing, storing, or uploading” photographs and find responses from their audience sufficient reward for their efforts (Lee 2010: 270). Since both celebrities and “regular people” have accounts on Instagram, it’s perhaps not surprising

that “regular” selfies often emulate celebrity-related media, while celebrity selfies often closely resemble those of the nonfamous (compare Rihanna’s selfie in fig. 1 with those of noncelebrities in figs. 4, 6, and 8). Instagram selfies allow the platform’s users, whether celebrities or not, to show glimpses of their lives to others, connect with audiences, and receive instant feedback on their self-images.

### Instagram

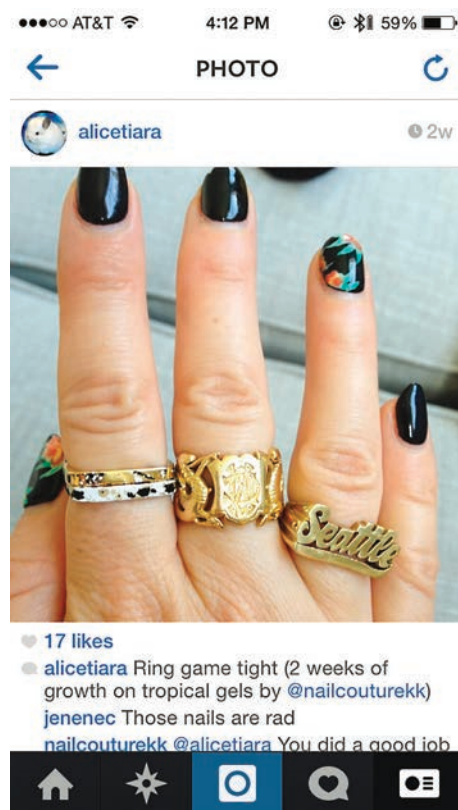
Instagram is a mobile application available for the iOS and Android mobile operating systems. The app allows users to upload photographs, manipulate them using filters, share them with other Instagram users, and comment on or “like” the photos of others. While Instagram has a website on which photos can be viewed, the site’s functionality is limited and users cannot upload photographs. As a result, the vast majority of activity goes on through the mobile app.

Because Instagram photos are typically taken via mobile phone, they tend toward the documentary, since mobile phones are continually present as users go about their day-to-day lives. The presumption is that users will post photos as they happen, as indicated by the hashtag #latergram, which implies that the photo was taken earlier than it was posted. The popular social media blog *ReadWrite* calls

“untimely posting” a “rookie mistake” and frowns upon posting after the fact: “We’ll all just feel like we missed out. Instagram is only fun so long as we play by its most basic rules” (Hatmaker 2013). However, while Facebook and Twitter encourage constant streams of updates, Instagram requires more selective posting. Most users post only a few times a day, and posting several times in a row is disfavored. In a blog post, marketer Carly Keenan (2013) advises brands that “the ‘feed speed’ on Instagram is still mostly laid back. If you start posting a lot, you might over-saturate your followers’ feeds, and you don’t want to force yourself into the noise too often.”

On the main Instagram app screen, users can browse through a stream of photographs from people they follow, explore popular photos or search by username or hashtag, take photos or upload previously taken photos, view comments or likes on their photos, and view their own profile (see fig. 2). Following on Instagram is unidirectional; unlike Facebook, a user may follow another without permission, and, like Twitter, there is generally no mutual expectation of following. This model creates an environment more conducive to fans or curious strangers than to known “friends,” as users can blithely add any account that looks interesting to their stream. As on Twitter, hashtags are frequently appended to photos and are not necessarily descriptive, and while hashtags may be used as metadata (indicating location, subject of photo, etc.), they also include jokes, memes, and asides. The most popular Instagram tags in September 2013 were #love, #instagood, #me, #cute, and #follow (Webstagram 2013).

Photographs are especially good for impression management, since the myth of photographic truth lends photography a credibility that text lacks. Johnny Winston (2013: 6) writes that Facebook users often post photographs for self-expression in lieu of verbal self-descriptions; a selfie at Machu Picchu is more effective than a clunky paragraph of text in conveying that one likes to travel. This situation is especially true on Instagram. Since the site consists primarily of photographs, it intensifies the importance of visual self-presentation. In addition to photographs, Instagram offers a few other identity cues: the user’s description of the photo and comments and likes by other users (see fig. 3). In the example below, Kardashian poses with her



**Figure 2** Main Instagram app screen





**Figure 3** Bathroom selfie by Kim Kardashian (@kimkardashian)

ting; and extratextual information about Kardashian and West themselves, who are extremely famous both individually and as a couple. Although the photo's 678,000 likes and multiple negative comments may also contribute to viewers' interpretations, the Instagram software makes user photos the central form of identity expression.

Instagram's photographs have a particular visual lexicon (Alper 2013). The app's filters are deliberately nostalgic and retro and emulate older, analog forms of photography, what Lisa Chandler and Debra Livingstone call "the visual language of digital imperfection" (2010). Filters instantly transform a picture taken today into a faded 1970s Polaroid or grainy 1950s black-and-white snapshot. Photos taken using the Instagram app are square, like Kodak Instamatic and Polaroid photos, rather than rectangular, the latter the result of the 16:9 ratio used by most mobile cameras. Many users further edit their photos using mobile apps such as ProCamera, A Beautiful Mess, and Hipstamatic, which allow additional filters, visual effects, borders, collages, text, and clip art. There is thus a normative presumption of digital manipulation, and many Instagram photos are highly edited, to the point where a popular tag is "#nofilter," indicating that no such manipulation took place. As Dong-Hoo Lee (2005) writes about digital photography in a study of young Korean cameraphone users: "It changes the way we take, print and store photographs. . . . The photographer can actively participate in the process of generating, transforming, reprocessing, and, finally, making meaning from images."

fiancée, rapper Kanye West. In the caption, she indicates that it is a "bathroom selfie [taken] right before Yeezus hits the stage" for a stadium concert. While users may form impressions based on Kardashian's brief description of the photo, there is far more intelligible information present in the couple's outfits, expressions, and poses; the genre of "bathroom selfie," in which the large mirror present in most bathrooms is used to take a full-body shot of one's outfit; the set-



## Method

## Instafame

This essay draws on textual and visual analysis from 2013 of forty public Instagram accounts with over ten thousand followers each. I conducted the analysis myself, but I worked with undergraduate students to locate and contextualize highly followed Instagram accounts. Such accounts were also collected by browsing secondary sites devoted to Instagram such as Web.stagram.com, reading blogs like *Rich Kids of Instagram* (Richkidsofinstagram.tumblr.com), and using the app's "explore" feature, which provides a curated selection of "recently interesting" photos (Instagram 2013). The goal in searching for highly followed accounts was not to collect a representative sample of Instagram users but to view a diverse array of popular users. Instagram has a binary model of privacy, in which users may set their accounts to either public or private, affecting all of their photos. All of the accounts analyzed for this project were public, as are virtually all of the most popular Instagram accounts.<sup>3</sup>

We recorded each user's name, bio, number of followers, and types of photographs posted and how frequently he or she used hashtags. We then attempted to classify users' accounts, which proved to be very difficult, as many highly followed Instagram users do not fall into any sort of traditional celebrity taxonomy. We found it especially challenging to explain *why* some accounts had become so popular. Trying to explain why the user "daniellejackson," a sixteen-year-old girl from Canada, had 13,590 followers, one student wrote, frustrated: "The only thing I can see as why she is so popular is her obsession with doing big hair and heavy makeup. . . . It's very confusing why this girl has so many followers just by posting selfies." The case studies in this essay are an attempt to delve deeply into individual accounts and locate a "reason" for their popularity.

Recently, Instagram introduced a feature giving its users the ability to create short video clips. Popularly known as "Vinstagram," it was widely perceived by technology analysts as a competitive move against Twitter's popular Vine app. The short videos have increased rapidly in popularity since they were introduced and frequently appear in the explore feature. For the purposes of this essay, we focused on static images, which are still the vast majority of Instagram's content.

3. Out of the top one hundred Instagram accounts on Web.stagram.com as of March 2014, only two are private. @louist91, for instance, has 2,884,101 followers but only follows 21. He is a member of the popular boy band One Direction, suggesting that fans follow him in the hopes that he will follow them back.

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## Instafame

The most popular Instagram users are primarily “traditional” celebrities whose fame is conferred by mainstream media or entertainment, such as television shows or professional sports. (They are skewed to those popular with youth; stars like Tom Hanks and Julia Roberts do not have Instagram accounts.) An analysis of the top one hundred Instagram users based on number of followers (as of September 2013) found the following breakdown:

**Table 1 Most Popular Instagram Accounts, September 10, 2013**

Category	Examples of Instagram Users	Percentage of Sample
Celebrity—musician	Justin Bieber, Beyoncé	34
Celebrity—actor	Zoey Deschanel, Channing Tatum	15
Brands	Nike, Starbucks	13
Celebrity—reality TV	Kim Kardashian, Snooki	13
Celebrity—athlete	Kobe Bryant, Carmelo Anthony	8
Other	Barack Obama, HairAndNailFashion	7
Celebrity—other	Oprah, Miranda Kerr	6
YouTube celebrity	Jenna Marbles, Rebecca Black	4

Another category of highly followed Instagram users is composed of those who have achieved microcelebrity on another platform, such as the four YouTube stars in the top one hundred. Fashion blogger Rumi Neely of *Fashion Toast*, for instance, has 342,000 Instagram followers. The user @brittanyfurlan, who has 284,000 followers, is famous primarily for her funny videos on Twitter’s Vine. The top one hundred also boasts a wealthy Dubai businessman (@hhhofficial); a Brazilian social media strategist who posts pictures of action figures; a company that sells Twitter and Instagram followers; and several themed accounts, such as @SneakerNews and @CelebrityHollywoodGossip.

While some of these accounts reflect fame “native” to Instagram, for many others Instagram is a platform for amplifying fame achieved in another medium. Much like Twitter, however, Instagram gives celebrities—or their handlers—an opportunity to create glimpses into the “backstage” moments of their lives. But while tweets are easy to ghostwrite, Instagram photos are not; a publicity photo is easily distinguished from a revealing candid. Sometimes Instagram’s genuinely candid photos are too revealing: Bieber, the second most popular user on Instagram, recently came under fire for a photograph in which a member of his entou-

rage held a bag of what was alleged to be cocaine. As on Twitter, many celebrity accounts may be highly managed and controlled by entertainment companies, but markers of authenticity are harder to falsify given the norm of posting documentary photography on Instagram.

In an e-mail interview, Jessica Zollman (2013), Instagram's founding community manager, cited three methods that young Instagram users employ to obtain recognition: leveraging existing social networks, using hashtags, and connecting with the larger Instagram and digital photography community. First, most young Instagram users use the app to connect with their peer group. As Zollman says: "Kids follow EVERYONE from their schools and school districts. It's like a gossip drama who's-he-dating-now what-party-did-she-go-to who-wore-it-better hot bed. If you go to a small school, that's maybe 300 people. A big school? Bingo" (ibid.).

Second, concerning the use of hashtags, an article on *ReadWrite* advises that "strategically tagging photos, especially using the most popular hashtags on Instagram, can lead to a flood of new likes and followers" (Titlow 2012). While few of the highly followed users we analyzed used more than one or two hashtags, users actively seeking followers frequently append dozens to their photos, hoping to attract users who use the explore feature to browse by hashtag. For example, more than 24 million Instagram photos contain the explicit quid pro quo offer "#followforfollow." A randomly chosen selfie by user @sofiavultaggio has eleven tags: "#erice #love #sun #summer #followme #followforfollow #follow4follow #likeforlike #instagood #instalove #instacool."

Third, some young Instagram users opt to become active in the online community of mobile photography enthusiasts by going to Instagram meet-ups, trading photography techniques and tips, and working on improving their Instagram photos. A recent paper by Megan Halpern and Lee Humphreys (2011) discusses how mobile phone photographers, or "iphoneographers," are engaging in the process of building an "art world" by sharing and critiquing one another's work. Young iphoneography enthusiasts may be as focused on building fame as microcelebrity practitioners are, but they aim to do so through appreciation for their artwork rather than through promotion of a celebrity self-image.

In the following case studies, I examine three highly followed Instagram users who are using microcelebrity techniques to achieve attention and popularity online: Cayla Friesz, Leandra Goodridge, and Kane Lim. These individuals all use the social media platform to create personae, share personal information through their photographs, and strategically appeal to their audiences. While we

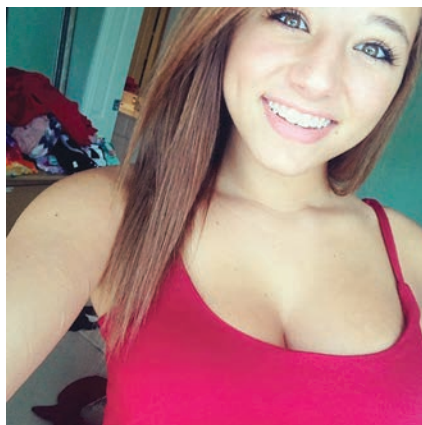
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found several highly followed accounts that do not fit this mold—@everydayim cheerleading, for instance, has 122,820 followers but primarily posts pictures of cheerleaders around the world—for the purposes of this essay we focus on the Instafamous, who use digital pictures, particularly selfies, to create affective bonds between audience and microcelebrity subject.

### She's Instagram Famous: Cayla Friesz

Friesz, or “Freeezy,” appears to be a fairly ordinary Indiana high school sophomore. Her Instagram is full of selfies, along with pictures of friends, food, and concerts. Somewhat inexplicably, she has 31,496 followers; a basic selfie garnered 4,246 likes and 144 comments, including “Damm your sexy!! :)” from @thug\_life53 and “Damn I feel so ugly now HAHA” from @laurenmelissarae (see figs. 4 and 5). The very fact that she is “Instagram famous” confers enough prestige upon her to have inspired others to create multiple fan pages for her. The blog *Cayla Friesz Fashion* (caylafriesz-fashion.tumblr.com) tracks down the origin of each piece of clothing she wears in her photographs (mostly from mall stores like Urban Outfitters and Pacific Sunwear) and answers questions from fans, like “You know the gif where Cayla shows what she changes into when she gets home from school? I was wondering if you could please find a shirt like the one she’s wearing in the gif? Doesn’t have to be exact. :)”

When an anonymous Tumblr user asks the blog’s proprietor, “New to your blog so not to be annoying but what is this Cayla famous for? Thanks!” the proprietor



**Figure 4** Selfie by Cayla Friesz with 4,246 “likes”



**Figure 5** Selfie by Cayla Friesz

replies, “shes instagram famous.” In other words, the fact that Friesz can garner thousands of fans on Instagram is enough to make her notable; she is famous for being famous, but not even in the Paris Hilton sense that she has access to mainstream media’s star-making machine. Instead, she is admired for her ability to attract attention. The profile of a Twitter account called @Freeeezyfans reads: “This is a Twitter fanpage for the amazing and beautiful Cayla from Instagram. I am NOT her! This is just a site for us fans, to show our LOVE !!” When asked why Friesz is so popular, @Freeeezyfans answers, “Cause she’s gorgeoussss!!” Friesz’s followers may wish to have her wardrobe or figure, but they feel that way primarily because her selfies and outfit posts have been vetted as belonging to someone “famous.”

Friesz posts little personal information about herself aside from pictures; her account on GifBoom, an animated GIF site, is private (though it still has more than three thousand followers); she does not have a Twitter or a Tumblr account; and her Facebook is private. With only pictures to go by, fans debate and argue over the facts of her life. On a fan-maintained GifBoom account that reposts Friesz’s pictures, one fan asks, “@freeezy everyone says you live in Indiana do you?” Two people respond that she lives in Florida, to which the maintainer of the fan account says: “no she’s at indiana cause on her [Instagram] it has her school name in a polling pic so I searches the school to see what state it’s in. That sounds very stalker ish lol I dont usually do that I only wanted to know what state.” Six comments later, with the Florida versus Indiana debate in full swing, @kevinferren chimes in “ur fuckin retarded she sits next to me in art, she goes to [high school] and she a freshman we live in [town name] indiana! so if u think u know everything think again bitch.” The conversation escalates and ends with another user calling @kevinferren a “dick.”

In previous work, Theresa Senft, danah boyd, and I have argued that micro-celebrity intrinsically involves reaching out to an audience on social media (Senft 2008; Marwick and boyd 2011b). Typically, this effort involves answering comments, e-mails, and instant messages or at least making an effort to acknowledge and foster fan relationships. Because Friesz is Instafamous, she does not fit this aspect of the model, which has as its basis blogs, websites, and Twitter. While she has created a specific persona that is consistent across her photos, she rarely responds to the copious comments she gets from fans on Instagram (although one claims, “i talk to her and. Tumblr all the time and. Even twitt’s”), to the point where a disgruntled follower writes:

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I've lost tons of respect for you I've the past few months because of your lack of showing care for your followers. I don't care if you have 30k followers, they all care about you, an they're always giving you great compliments, the least you could do is attempt to interact with them, if I were as lucky as to have a many followers as you I would be active with them, because I'd care about them as much as they would me. I mean sometimes people write you PARAGRAPHS on your photos, they took so much time to give you such a compliment, but yet you just ignore them. The least you could do is just say thank you sometimes. It's not gonna kill you. Think about it would ya? And I know you're probably gonna delete this photo or comment when you read it but whatever.

Friesz does not respond. Her interaction with fans is limited primarily to the image she puts forth via her Instagram photos, which is not dissimilar from how traditional celebrities interact on Instagram; Kardashian does not answer comments either. Using publicly accessible tools does not necessitate interactivity. Friesz's practices are distinct from forms of microcelebrity where practitioners interact to actively increase their audience.

This studied unaffectedness is similar to what Schwarz found on the Israeli site Shox, where users tried to "deny and conceal" their conscious attempts to gain followers. Successful performers on Shox were able to encourage followers while actively concealing that they were trying to do so (Schwarz 2010: 178). Whereas mainstream celebrities such as Miley Cyrus and Katy Perry ignore the vast majority of their Twitter or YouTube followers, Friesz declines to acknowledge not only her fans but also her very Instafame, instead breezily portraying herself as an all-American high school girl. Part of what makes her so appealing to young people may be this seemingly effortless cool in the face of fan adoration; much like the big man on campus or the high school queen bee (which, almost certainly, Friesz embodies in her day-to-day life, considering the endless parade of photos of parties and football games with equally attractive friends), she appears to find her popularity unworthy of comment and thus makes it seem deserved and, indeed, unsurprising. She exemplifies Zollman's characterization of popular teen Instagram users who piggyback upon their high school fame to reach larger audiences.

Instafame resembles popularity, but where high school social dynamics are limited by locale, Instafamous people like Friesz have the potential to reach an audience that rivals that of television networks in size, what we might call a mass audience. In this way, high school social dynamics in general, and popularity in particular, are amplified until they graduate into something that looks more like mainstream celebrity.

## The Pseudo-Celeb: Leandra Goodridge

Instafame

Leleboo\_phucku is the Instagram account of Goodridge, a young woman who is notable primarily for being a close friend of the Barbadian pop singer Rihanna. Goodridge frequently travels with Rihanna and posts pictures of her glamorous ensembles, designer clothes, and famous friends (see figs. 6 and 7). While Goodridge is not a celebrity, her proximity to celebrity has made her one on Instagram—much like Alli Simpson, the sister of pop singer Cody Simpson (1,058,027 followers); Eleanor Calder, the girlfriend of One Direction singer Louis Tomlinson (1,409,541 followers); and Abigail Anderson, a close friend of pop star Taylor Swift (31,185 followers). As Charles Kurzman and his colleagues (2007) write, celebrities have an aura that touches all whom they interact with: by meeting a celebrity briefly at an event or in an elevator, we hope that their status



Figure 6 Selfie by @leleboo\_phucku

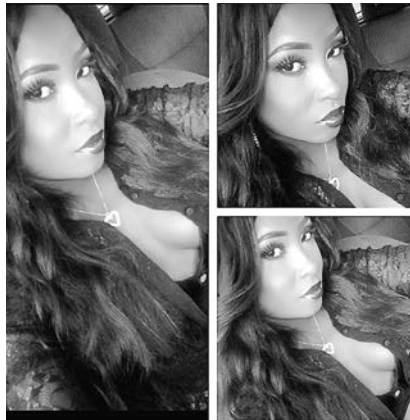


Figure 7 Selfie by @leleboo\_phucku

might rub off on us in some small way. Goodridge's Instagram fans, who fill her feed with compliments, may feel that being noticed by Rihanna's best friend brings them closer to the pop star. In Goodridge's account she lives the dream of many young Rihanna fans: she *actually* is best friends with Rihanna, able to share the perks of her fabulous lifestyle *in reality*. Similarly, comments on Anderson's blog plead, "OMS! You are so.beautiful! And you have so.much lucky to be Taylor best friend! Please answer."

While Goodridge occasionally posts pictures of her family and friends, she mostly posts selfies; she sometimes posts three or four pictures of the same outfit, often bathroom selfies that show off her clothes. In her pictures, she usually



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wears stylized makeup, elaborate hairstyles, and tight, trendy clothes. As with Friesz, most of the comments on her pictures are compliments, and while many of Goodridge's poses showcase her figure, they are primarily from young women who admire her style rather than from young men who find her attractive. Comments like "You looking bomb bitch," "Leandra, how were yu born soooo #Beautiful!?" and "That damn body is just too much for the human eyes lol always killing self esteem" are all from young women, many of whom have usernames that refer to Rihanna, like "monetfenty" or "purplegalriri" ("Fenty" is Rihanna's surname; "RiRi" is her nickname). Overwhelmingly, Goodridge's followers refer to her curvaceous good looks while disparaging their own, wistfully exclaiming that they would like her to do their makeup or show them how to work out. Despite being ostensibly more "realistic" and "authentic," the medium of social media in this respect replicates the dynamics of television and tabloid magazines.

Unlike Friesz, Goodridge does respond to followers. Posting a fan's portrait of her, she writes: "I would never call myself or even entertain the thought of being famous fuck that .. But it warms my heart when people are inspired to draw a pic of me. . . . Thankz again for this drawing .. I LOVE IT." After posting a selfie she titled "Work Flow," user umm\_asha commented: "Ohh shit you work when ur in Barbados? That hustle don't stop chile yessssss." Goodridge responds, "Yes gotta make money lol . . . thankz guys." She frequently posts text notes, screenshots of short messages written in the iPhone "Notes" application, usually addressed directly to her followers. For instance, one text note calls out people "who come on Instagram and leave negative comments I don't get it." Instagram requires rethinking how microcelebrity is practiced within a medium where opportunities for audience interaction are minimal compared to other types of social media. On Twitter, the @reply makes interactions between celebrity practitioners and fans legible to all; bloggers often address readers directly in their posts and reply to individual commenters. Even when these interactions are quite minimal, their visibility conveys a sense of accessibility (Marwick and boyd 2011a). Instagram users like Goodridge work around these limitations by commenting on their own posts or posting images of text thanking or addressing fans, but these are clunky, makeshift efforts. Rihanna also frequently replies to her Instagram fans, but these individual remarks are so difficult to find in the sea of comments on each of her posts that an account called "Rihanna's Comments" painstakingly collects, screenshots, and posts them to interested readers.

Even "D-list" celebrities are usually famous for their own accomplishments, meager as they may be: appearing on a long-canceled television show, perhaps, or occupying one-half of a sex scandal. Pseudo-celebrities such as Goodridge, who,

like the members of Vincent Chase's posse on *Entourage*, are famous only for their association with the truly famous, can achieve their own measure of micro-celebrity on Instagram. Goodridge's endless selfies further a persona in which she, not her best friend, inhabits the celebrity subjectivity, and it is her hair, style, and body that are complimented by fans. Recently, Goodridge has reinvented herself as a makeup artist, with the enthusiastic support of her Instagram fan base. She posted a text note that read: "Question !?! . . . ,,,, y'all think I should become a make up artist !?! I mean I see some people worse than me calling themselves M.U.A.. Honest opinions only .. Tell me what y'all think." The post garnered 2,200 likes and 961 comments, the vast majority positive. Since then, Goodridge's feed has been filled with before-and-afters of her clients and makeup sessions. A few weeks after the first post, she posted, "I wanna thank all my followers for the positive and encouraging comments tbh I really appreciate it!!!!" Goodridge is attempting to use her Instagram fame and follower support to launch a career of her own, one that is singularly suited to the visual nature of Instagram.

It is too soon to tell whether Goodridge's career aspirations will attract fans separate from her persona as Rihanna's best friend. Her 149,000 followers come from her use of Instagram to picture herself as sharing Rihanna's possessions and environment. Any success that Goodridge achieves as a makeup artist will be built on this foundation. Thus instead of changing the dynamics of fame by extending celebrity to a larger pool of individuals than those singled out by mainstream entertainment, Goodridge and her ilk use Instagram in ways that reinforce these dynamics by reproducing the iconography of "traditional" celebrity.

### **The Luxury Enthusiast: Kane Lim**

Lim is a twenty-two-year-old Singapore native studying merchandising at the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising in California. His Instagram account consists primarily of pictures of himself in expensive couture clothing; photos of his collections of designer shoes, clothes, and jewelry; and selfies with Singapore socialites (see figs. 8 and 9). Lim has 30,231 followers and was featured in several fashion blogs for his luxe style; he calls Singaporean socialite Jamie Chua, who owns the world's largest collection of Hermès bags, his best friend. His Instagram feed is a study in conspicuous consumption. Rather than post a picture of one pair of expensive shoes, he posts pictures of his massive collection and carefully notes the brand of each designer item he wears in each selfie. The caption to one popular Lim photo reads: "Every day is a battle. Dress to kill. Phuck what they think. @badgalriri for #rihverisland camo jacket. #dita shades, #cartier

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panthere and #guiseppezanotti. #mensfashion.” Accounts like Lim’s represent a fantastic orgy of consumerism and exist simultaneously as aspiration and matter-of-fact expression of extreme wealth.

Lim’s Instagram exemplifies the aesthetic shown on the popular Tumblr blog *Rich Kids of Instagram*, or *RKOI*. *RKOI* functions as both a critique of income inequality and a celebration of it. *RKOI*, which collects photos of young, good-looking people drinking magnums of champagne at nightclubs, snoozing on private jets, summering in the Hamptons, and driving Ferraris, reveals the louche nature of the most privileged people on earth. A photograph of a receipt from a Miami Beach club, for instance, reveals a tab of \$35,951 for one evening, including a 34 percent gratuity; the caption reads “nice tip.” This amount is more than half the average American family’s annual income and demonstrates what some might think of as the obscenity of extreme wealth. Such wealth, however, is glorified in large swathes of youth culture, from hip-hop songs to the *Real Housewives* franchise. (In fact, E! Online recently announced a reality show called “#Rich-Kids of Beverly Hills” directly inspired by *RKOI*; the teaser trailer is full of Instagram references, and one of the show’s stars says, “I think I’m somewhat Instagram famous in the Instagram world.”) While viewing such consumption on television may relegate it to the realm of fantasy, Instagram drives the point home that, yes, people do live like this, and they, just like you, use social media.

While Lim may have an immense amount of consumer goods, how he came to have such riches is not immediately obvious to his followers, who are presumably not as wealthy. A photo of Lim’s extraordinary Louboutin collection (see fig. 9) is



**Figure 8** Selfie by @kanelk\_k



**Figure 9** Kane Lim’s shoe collection by @kanelk\_k

captioned: “As my dear friend @upcloseandstylish says ! I SHOES to be happy !!! #christianlouboutin #louboutins #thispandareignwontletup #mensfashion.” It garnered comments like “wow you are wealthy! so many louboutins!” Lim responds, “I’m not wealthy i work hard.” The commenter responds, “how do you work hard to achieve that? thats like impossible!” to which Lim replies, with a (virtual) grin, “we Asians work hard.” While Lim may, indeed, work hard at his studies, it is unlikely that the average merchandising college student would be able to amass more than fifty pairs of Louboutin loafers (\$1,395 each) or four diamond Cartier love bracelets (\$10,200 each). Lim is rumored to be the son of Singaporean billionaire Peter Lim, one of the richest people on the planet. His wealth comes, presumably, from inheritance. Still, Lim furthers the mythos of meritocracy in stating that his shelves of designer clothes from Hermès and Balenciaga are the rewards of his labor.

Luxury Instagram accounts function as catalogs of what many young people dream of having and the lifestyle they dream of living. Decoupling extreme wealth from fame, they pull back the curtain on lifestyles typically unavailable to and unseen by most. Notwithstanding the expectation that people on social media will be more “authentic” than traditional celebrities, who typically are separated from fans by a layer of managers and agents (Marwick 2013a), this authenticity contradicts the photographic “truth” of an endless parade of luxury goods, in that it enables the audience to ask, “How can you afford that?” There *is* a difference between traditional celebrities and the highly followed. While most rich people are not famous, and many famous people are not rich, income inequality is deeply obvious when the wealthy person is brought into intimate high definition through his or her personal pictures. Lim affects a boy-next-door attitude even though the reason behind his appeal clearly is this immense wealth.

### **Conclusion: Microcelebrity and Aspirational Production**

Friesz, Goodridge, and Lim all engage in various levels of microcelebrity practice to boost their popularity on Instagram, and each embodies a different personal brand—all-American teenager, sexy Barbadian star, and wealthy fashionista. They use Instagram to provide interested onlookers with glimpses into their lives that fit these personae. They are far from the only young people to achieve Instafame in these ways. Similar to Friesz, MrBrent98, or Brent Rivera, a fifteen-year-old aspiring actor, has 609,000 followers. He posts primarily headshot-esque selfies staring into the camera. With his pinup haircut and teen-idol looks, Rivera receives thousands of comments on each post; a simple selfie posted on September

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2013 received sixty-eight thousand likes and more than two thousand comments, which range from “You’re literally gorgeous!!!!!!” to “I LOVE YOUUUUU.” Rivera has a YouTube page and Kik and Twitter accounts and asks fans, “Want Me To Notice You? #brentrivera.” While his acting credits are nonexistent, he has been able to create and leverage a celebrity persona simply through the strength of his conventional visual appeal. Rivera *looks* like a celebrity, and on Instagram, he is treated as one.

Other types of personae can be communicated through Instagram; a slightly different, yet equally potent, category of highly followed Instagram accounts is of people working at “hot” jobs in “cool” industries (Neff, Wissinger, and Zukin 2005). Chloe Norgaard (104,652 followers) is a rainbow-haired model who posts runway snaps, pictures with slouchy scenesters, and seemingly effortless up-to-the-minute fashions. Hannah Pixie Snowdon (101,063 followers) is a dark-haired, big-eyed tattoo artist who Instagrams her artwork, her tattoos, and her bearded boyfriend. Norgaard and Snowdon have significant cultural capital as subcultural trendsetters. Their Instagrams are more edgy than mainstream celebrities’ but still rely on aesthetic display and are aspirational for a particular segment of followers concerned with cutting-edge cool.

Microcelebrity entails a dramatic twist on aspirational consumption—the practice in which cheaper “entry-level” luxury goods marketed by brands like Chanel and Gucci are bought in an effort to evoke the aura of an unattainable brand (Welch 2002)—namely, *aspirational production*: microcelebrities creating content that portrays them in a high-status light, simulating the attention given to celebrities (Marwick 2013a). While nobody may actually be paying attention, aspirational producers want the audience to think that they are being snapped by the paparazzi even if their pictures are actually taken by a best friend or boyfriend. Doing so is not difficult when actual celebrities are taking bathroom selfies and posting mundane pictures of meals and cats. Nobody is booking Goodridge for a *Vibe* photo shoot, but she can take a bathroom selfie in her going-out clothes, just like Rihanna does. Likewise, while Lim is profiled not by *Vogue* but by B-list fashion blogs, when he Instagrams photos of his spectacular shoe collection he receives some fraction of the attention given to global style icons. By positioning themselves as worthy of the attention given to celebrities, and by using the visual tropes of celebrities, Friesz, Goodridge, and Lim position themselves *as* celebrities. And, like celebrities, their followers position themselves as fans and reach out to the Instafamous in a well-worn mode of address: the faithful supplicant and adoring audience.

To Zollman's taxonomy of the Instafamous we might add one more: the person whose persona itself is aspirational, in that such a person has the audience, the looks, the money, the access to celebrity, or the cultural capital an interested audience member might want. These individuals have succeeded in gaining immense audiences on Instagram, a free, easy-to-use technology available to virtually everyone with a smartphone and a data plan. Thus their fame seems attainable to the average onlooker. While many young people dream of fame, the work involved in becoming an athlete or a singer may be many steps removed from their day-to-day lives. Yet posting on Instagram, or tagging a selfie with #instafame, is relatively simple. And, as suggested above, the always-on, mobile nature of Instagram lends an air of authenticity and truthfulness that mere tweets or blog posts may not.

The techniques used by Instagram microcelebrities are part and parcel of an online attention economy in which page views and clicks are synonymous with success and thus online status. Many of those who achieve Instafame do it by using a set of self-presentation techniques that are increasingly common; researchers have observed microcelebrity practices in webcam girls (Senft 2008), political activists (Tufekci 2013), technology workers (Marwick 2013a), and fashion bloggers (Marwick 2013b). Such status-seeking self-presentation tactics are not unique to the Instafamous but are common to anyone trying to boost an online audience. Social media allow "average people" to reach the broad audiences once available only to those with access to broadcast media. But rather than overturn the traditional hierarchies of fame, the Instafamous reinforce them by appealing to audiences using the familiar trappings of thin but buxom bodies, sports cars, and designer clothes. Instagram, as software designed for personal visual display, further encourages replicating such imagery. Ultimately, any "demotic turn" endemic to modern-day celebrity offers greater access not to the everyman or everywoman but to those able to credibly inhabit celebrity subjectivity thanks to a set of physical and aesthetic criteria that are anything but common.

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