

Rethinking microcelebrity: key points in practice, performance and purpose

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ABSTRACT

Since Terri Senft coined the term ‘microcelebrity’ a decade ago, it has become a key focus for studies of digital celebrity, describing both the ‘bottom up’ production practices of potentially billions of ‘ordinary’ people on social networks sites, and a new category for the famous. Through statistical and qualitative examination of the practices and reach of the top 20 ‘digital first talents’ represented by UK-based agency Gleam Futures and then focused analysis of the Instagram accounts of power couple Zoe Sugg and Alfie Deyes, this article offers three key ways we might ‘rethink’ microcelebrity. Firstly, that what began as a ‘prosumer’ activity in the 2000s is now a professionalised and commercialised group production practice and while microcelebrities are portrayed as symbols of individualised emancipation – building fame on their own terms and challenging the cultural hegemony of corporate media – they now work within the mainstream. Secondly, how performances across social media create sophisticated ‘repressive ambiances’ for audiences, which perpetuate consumerism as liberation through deliberately fostering parasociality with audiences and directives to emulate. Finally, how this follows similar ‘networked’ displays of other reality-based celebrities and argues for the inclusion of the term ‘applied’ celebrity as a means to understand their practices, performances and purposes.

KEYWORDS Microcelebrity; applied celebrity; professionalised production; networked reality; parasociality; authenticity; consumerism

Introduction

Ten years ago, Terri Senft coined the term microcelebrity to describe ordinary people – the audiences of traditional celebrities – using social media to build fame. She identified how such microcelebrities were ‘amping up’ their popularity (Senft 2008, p. 25) through analysis of ‘camgirls’ who allowed audiences tantalising glimpses into their private spaces, with what Marshall (2014, pp. 163–164) later described as a ‘micropublic’ forming around their displays. While Turner (2013, p. 74) acknowledges that such microcelebrities ‘borrowed from the publicity and promotions’ of traditional celebrities, a quickly accepted narrative identified it as a new category, with fame viewed as ‘a continuum, rather than a bright line’ separating celebrities from followers (Marwick and Boyd 2011b, p. 141). Microcelebrities – as understood by Gamson (2011), Marwick (2013a, 2013b), Marwick and Boyd (2011a) and Senft (2008,

2013) – are ordinary people engaged in cyber-self-celebrification, as a ‘bottom up’ process, largely outside the commercial imperatives of corporate media.

This article considers whether such understandings of microcelebrity still reflect the reality of practice, performance and purpose, focusing on those represented by self-described ‘digital first’ talent agency Gleam Futures. The article demonstrates the production and dissemination practices developed to maintain visibility of ‘self as brand’ (Duffy 2015, Hearn 2008, 2013, Marwick 2013a) and how what began as a ‘bottom up’ individualised process in the 2000s is now an area of professional media work, similar to other ‘networked reality’ personalities (Usher 2015, 2016). The case study offered here argues three interrelated ways we might ‘rethink’ microcelebrity. Firstly, a statistical and qualitative analysis of the practices of the top 20 Gleam Futures microcelebrities in terms of social media reach identifies their practice as not only an individual non-commercial activity, but also often an individuated, professionalised group production practice with a number of media workers producing content as if the individual blogger. Secondly, examination of the Instagram accounts (personal and product related) of microcelebrity power couple Zoe Sugg (*Zoella* 2009–current) and Alfie Deyes (*PointlessBlog* 2009–current) identifies sophisticated patterns for layering image, text and tags, and highlights their purpose as portraying consumerism as liberation. This develops repressive ambiances – a term devised to highlight how consumer culture is ever-present and how it deliberately fosters parasociality with audiences. Performances of authenticity and authority intertwine with constant directives to emulate. Such ‘networked’ – that is, multiplatform and concurrent – reality displays are similar to other reality-based ‘self-brands’ such as the Kardashians, and building from these points I argue for the expansion of Rojek’s (2001, pp. 17–20) taxonomy of achieved, ascribed and attributed, to include applied celebrity. This term aims to clarify how reality-based celebrity culture works across presentational (social) and representational (mainstream) media (Marshall 2014, p. 164) and is co-opted into the capitalist imperatives of culture industries.

Understanding microcelebrity

Senft’s (2008, 2013) and Marwick and Boyd’s (2011a, 2011b) early explorations of microcelebrity and the dynamics of personal branding and strategic self-commodification focused primarily on the individual with the influence of public relations and marketing teams seen as an exception rather than a rule. Jerslev (2016, p. 5240) argues, referencing Gamson (2011) and Marwick (2013a), that there is a ‘widespread conception of YouTube as a bottom up social media platform’ and that ‘young microcelebrities are not enlisted into the powerful and commercialised systems sustaining celebrity culture’. Jerslev (2016, p. 5240) lists some alternatives to ‘microcelebrity’, including ‘YouTube stars’ (Snickars and Vonderau 2009), ‘YouTube celebrities’ (Lange 2007, Gamson 2011, Marwick 2013a), ‘Internet celebrity’ (Gamson 2011), ‘Web stars’ (Senft 2008) and ‘Internet famous’ (Tanz 2008). However, microcelebrity not only describes ‘microfame’ (Sorgatz 2008), or the presentation of self as if a celebrity ‘regardless of who is paying attention’ (Marwick 2013a, p. 11), but is also a production process which celebrates – a process by which ‘ordinary people or public figures are transformed into celebrities’ (Driessens 2013, p. 643). As Marwick (2015, p. 347) clarifies, microcelebrity ‘can be further understood as a mind-set and set of practices’ with ‘authenticity’

and ‘everydayness’ key to performance and ‘clicks, shares and likes synonymous with success’. Smith’s (2014) study of YouTube star Charlie McDonnell focused both on his use of social media to communicate with his audience as individuals and his professionalised production techniques. Such developed models for audio-visual production support ‘microcelebrities’ endeavours as commercial entities. Just as the term ‘celebrity’ describes not only an individual, but also a process (see Dyer 1979, 1986, Marshall 1997, 2014, Turner 2010, 2013), so too ‘microcelebrity’ encompasses how and why someone becomes famous through use of digital technology and platforms.

Microcelebrity is a ‘familiar mode of cyber-self-presentation’ (Turner 2010, p. 14), which favours ‘performances of...private’ life (Jerslev 2016, p. 5239), as part of the ‘game of celebrity’ (Senft 2013, p. 350). Explorations often argue that perceived opportunities for individual-to-individual contact help create ‘parasociality’ (Horton and Wohl 1956) and this is crucial to building visibility. Examinations of how fandom develops via social media demonstrate how parasociality has moved beyond Horton and Wohl’s (1956, pp. 215–229) original arguments, related specifically to television. Social media creates at least ‘the illusion’ (Usher 2015, p. 308) of ‘uncensored glimpses’ (Marwick and Boyd 2011b, p. 141) and of a two-way relationship. These temper the idea that there is little or no obligation on the part of either the celebrity or the audience to the relationship (Horton and Wohl 1956, p. 216) as there can be loss of in-group solidarity and social capital if members of the micropublic pull away (Usher 2015, pp. 308–309). As Senft (2008, 2013) and Smith (2014) highlight, boundaries blur as microcelebrities appear in the audience’s social media feed alongside friends and family. The ‘temporality of permanent updating, of immediacy, and of instantaneity’ (Jerslev 2016, p. 5239) of social media offers audiences a sense of continuous intimacy. Parasociality, as clarified by Giles (2010, p. 97), also occurs during mutual acts of online production with audience members responded to, acknowledged and rewarded for participation in promotional activity (Usher 2015, pp. 315–316).

However, arguments that microcelebrity is ‘part of the daily practice of millions of consumers’ on social media (Hackley and Hackley 2015, p. 469) oversimplify practices. As highlighted in research examining bloggers both through and beyond the lenses of microcelebrity, interplays between authority as an expert in relation to authenticity as an everyday or ‘ordinary’ person are significant components of practice. Arnould et al. (2003) examined relationships between bloggers and digital consumers, arguing that while authenticity and authority weave together, the authoritative voice is paramount. Nisbet and Kotcher (2009, p. 329) describe the success of bloggers as reliant on the balance of authority or prestige with their ability to act as ‘connective tissue’ between products and readers. Jerslev’s (2016) study of *Zoella* focuses primarily on Sugg’s performances of authenticity, such as in informal greetings, references to ‘not being an expert’, mis-read brand names for leading beauty products and expressions of ‘love’ for followers. Her performances appear spontaneous, showing ‘ordinary expertise’ (Bonner 2003 cited Jerslev 2016, p. 5242) – and often an ‘accurate ordinariness’, such as the display of her sometimes ‘messy’ and other times ‘perfectly styled’ home. Abidin and Thompson (2012, p. 467) argue that such bloggers ‘like mainstream celebrity models . . . entice consumers to desire and to seek, through vicarious consumption and emulation’. Like Marwick (2015), they

identify ‘everydayness’ as developing acceptance of authenticity and highlight how individuals negotiate competing ‘values of intimacy and business’ (Abidin and Thompson 2012, p. 475). Their argument moves towards how microcelebrities might become co-opted into the mainstream and are professionalised, although bloggers are still identified as primarily ‘independent entrepreneurs’ (2012, p. 467). Brooke Duffy (2015, p. 48) takes the idea of professionalisation further, specifically in relation to fashion blogging, and questions whether the notion of independence is a ‘myth’ as the field is ‘increasingly hierarchal, market driven and self-promotional’. Jerslev’s (2016) discussion of *Zoella* mentions Gleam Futures, but still focuses primarily on Sugg as an individual worker and thus fits the ‘authentic, autonomous’ understanding of bloggers, which Duffy (2015, p. 48) questions.

Penz and Hogg’s (2013) discussion of how bloggers primarily sell themselves with products as an extension of this narrative highlights the commonality between these arguments in analysing how the individual has the primary aim of selling consumer goods. Differences in opinion as to whether it is the authentic or authoritative voice which is key to the success of such influencers may be reconciled if we consider authenticity as ‘not a property of, but something . . . ascribe [d] to a performance’ (Rubridge 1996, p. 219; original emphases) and therefore not fixed, but changeable according to purpose. This also clarifies Marwick’s (2015, p. 347) discussions of fame as something ‘one does rather something one is’ and how she views authenticity as ‘never absolute, and always positioned in distinction to something else’ (Marwick 2013a, p. 11). Microcelebrities form and use constructive and instructive patterns, through which ‘audiences access [. . .] the real person’ (Marshall 1997, p. 82), for specific purposes. In the next section, I broaden my theoretical framework to support understanding of both the nature and hyperreality of such self-performances. This frames how we might explore microcelebrity as it shifts from an individual to an individuated group professional practice, where networked reality displays of consumption work as repressive ambiances and where components of other areas of celebrity culture are usefully ‘applied’.

Networked (hyper)reality: self-performance and the ‘repressive ambience’ of consumerism A number of studies of social media performances argue the theoretical and methodological usefulness of Goffman’s (1956) *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (for example, Usher 2015, 2016, Mackey 2016). Certainly, as Mackey (2016) identifies, Goffmanian language translates easily to digital self-performance for specific promotional goals. Goffman (1956, p. 13) identified performance as ‘a period marked by . . . continuous presence before a particular set of observers’, which aims to influence them in some way. The place where it occurs acts as a ‘front’, and if the performance can be replicated, then a pattern or routine forms. He argued that the construction of persona can either be sincere, where the performer believes ‘the impression of reality which he stages is the reality’ (1956, p. 10), or cynical, only aimed at influencing the audience to a specific end. Performances are ‘moulded to fit into the understanding and expectations of society’ and will tend to ‘exemplify the officially accredited values of the society’ (1956, pp. 23–24), such as, in this analysis, consumerism.

Giddens (1991, p. 24) argues that our societal experiences are ‘inseparable from its own media’ which ‘re-organise time and space’, in a way which emphasises remote events and peoples in our everyday lives. Experiences which might be ‘rare in day-to-day life . . . are encountered

routinely' through media representations of them, which helps to shape our understanding of how to respond. Thus, in modernity, 'the media [did] not mirror realities, but in some part form[ed] them' (1991, p. 24). For microcelebrities, like longer established celebrity figures such as film stars, displayed self-fulfilment reflects the 'idea that satisfaction is found [. . .] in, consumption and leisure' (deCordova 1990, p. 108) and as Arnould et al. (2003) discuss in relation to bloggers there is a hyperreal quality to this construction of consumer self in digital space. However, Giddens (1991, p. 24) caveats his discussions with a disclaimer that this does not mean that 'the media has created an autonomous realm of "hyperreality", where the sign or image is everything'. His critique of hyperreality is largely based on Baudrillard's work on simulation and simulacra, but applying earlier discussions from *Les Systems des Objects* (Baudrillard 1968) and *La Societe de Consummation* (Baudrillard 1970) offers particularly interesting insights into how the hyperreality of the consumer displays of microcelebrities work to influence audiences. Baudrillard attempted to 'work out a theory parallel to Marcuse' which considers the 'paradox of the liberation of affluence' (Gane 1991, p. 30) or the 'mental dynamic' of symbolic relations around consumerism considering 'purpose through the force of signs' (Baudrillard 1968, pp. 70–71). He built from Marcuse's (1955, 1968) discussions of 'repressive affluence and consumption' to offer an account of how consumerism works as an 'ambience' rather than 'aggression' in a purist Marxist sense (see also Gane 1991, pp. 28–29). For Arvidsson (2005, p. 239) this is key to the success of developing successful online blogging brands as they too develop 'a particular ambience, comprising sensibilities and values, which may then condition consumer behavior' (Arvidsson 2005, p. 244; emphasis added). Following Baudrillardian logic, this ambience works as a 'repressive' force, fostering false attachments and emotions, which restrict self-identity display to identifiable consumer messages.

If we consider 'everydayness' and 'authenticity' as primarily a professionalised performance for which the purpose is primarily the perpetuating of consumer culture, Alison Hearn's (2008, 2013) discussions of 'branded self' in relation to reality TV personalities, as argued by Senft (2013), are equally applicable to microcelebrities. Like the networked reality stars of shows such as *Keeping up with Kardashians* (2007–current, *E!*), microcelebrities can work as commodity signs – 'entities that work and at the same time, point to [themselves] working' (Hearn 2008, p. 197) – across multiple mainstream and social media platforms, often seemingly at once and in real time. Microcelebrity fame-making also broadly reflects Turner's (2010, 2013) and Couldry's (2004) discussions of how through reality TV ordinary people can be made extraordinary, although not just through 'systems of representation' (Turner et al. 2000, p. 11), but also by social media self-presentation. Microcelebrities are new examples of the 'ordinary/extraordinary paradox' (Dyer 1979, 1986, see also Holmes 2005, p. 10), simultaneously 'ordinary' and 'special' (Turner et al. 2000, p. 11), as they build huge numbers of followers and commercial brands, seemingly by doing something millions of us also engage in – 'being ourselves' on social media.

Rojek's (2001, pp. 17–21) taxonomy of fame – which Turner (2013, pp. 24–25) highlights as the most useful for *Understanding Celebrity* – was published just at the outset of the reality TV explosion, a half-decade before the social media boom of the late 2000s and seven years before the publication of Senft's first discussions of microcelebrity and Hearn's discussions of

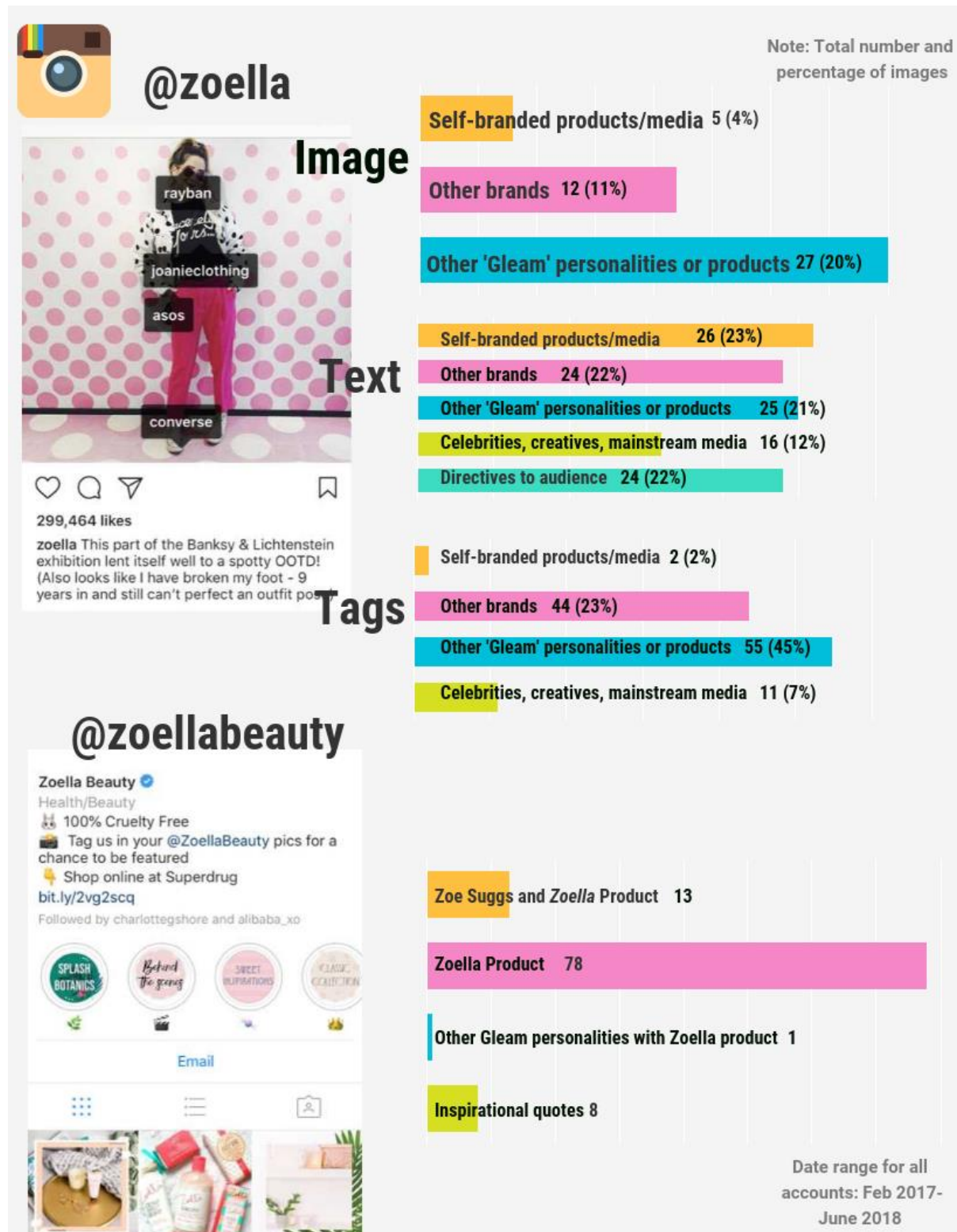
‘branded self’. As such, it is useful to consider whether his categories articulate the networked display of contemporary reality-based celebrity culture. Rojek (2001, p. 17; original emphases) identifies celebrity status as coming ‘in three forms: ascribed, achieved and attributed’. Ascribed celebrities are predetermined by lineage, but can be added to or subtracted from by selfaction. Achieved celebrity ‘derives from perceived accomplishments of an individual in open competition’ (2001, p. 18). ‘Cultural intermediaries’ create attributed celebrity through the strategic development of an ‘illusion of intimacy’, and this area of celebrity culture therefore links to Boorstin’s (1962) discussion of pseudo-events. Many analyses of the relationships between reality TV and the celebrification of ‘ordinary’ people place such personalities within the ‘attributed’ category, created for the media, by the media. However, Rojek’s definition does not capture the self-determination or independence articulated by studies of the biggest ‘stars’ of reality TV or microcelebrities. Indeed, there are examples of reality-based celebrities who sit in or across all three categories. The next section explains how the research site and method developed to identify the three key ways we might ‘rethink’ microcelebrity, focusing on production practices, performance and purpose, and how they may lead to extension of Rojek’s terms for categorising celebrity culture.

Research site and method

By July 2017, the 42 talents represented by Gleam Futures had a combined reach totalling more than seven billion YouTube views, 80 million channel subscribers, 40 million Twitter followers, 54 million Instagram followers and 18 million Facebook ‘Likes’. Gleam is owned by ‘talent manager’ and media PR executive Dom Smales (DGMT and Chanel) and his first clients were Nic and Sam Chapman, better known as beauty blogging brand *Pixiwoo* (2008–present), who introduced him to their brother Mark and, his now wife, Tanya Burr. Next, Smales convinced another close-knit crowd of bloggers, Zoe Sugg, better known by blog name *Zoella* (2009–present), her boyfriend Alfie Deyes (*PointlessBlog* 2009–present) and friend Louise Pentland (*Sprinkle of Glitter* 2010–present), to join him. The careers of two more personalities – Sugg’s brother Joe and Alfie Deyes’ sister Poppy – launched because of their associations with this core group. Eight out of the top 20 Gleam Futures personalities, in terms of social media followers (Figure 1), are from these two intimate and increasingly intertwined social circles and all cross-promote, appearing regularly in each other’s social media content.

The case study uses both quantitative and qualitative analysis to examine practices as both digital self-performers who present and manage their identities as individuals and content producers and how they are represented in the same ways as mainstream celebrities on reality TV or in news media. Firstly, pertinent content was identified through statistical analysis of social media platforms, which highlighted the top 20 personalities in terms of reach, ranked by combining their audiences across social media platforms (Figure 1). This identified five sites for performance as well as other key web sources for analysis, including the Gleam Futures website, associated LinkedIn profiles and news media content. Self-presentational (social) and representational (news and television) media were categorised by whether another ‘professional worker’ or a member of the ‘micropublic’ could be identified as being involved in production or promotion. These were linked together with a view of the Web as both a ‘site and surface’ for communicative action (Taylor and Van Every 2000) or what Erving Goffman

(1956) might have described as the 'front' for presentation of self. This analysis identified *Zoella* and



Blog as the most popular and financially lucrative brands represented by Gleam, and the second component of the case study offers analysis of their Instagram accounts particularly, analysing

how they work together to create ‘repressive ambiances’ of consumer culture for audiences (Figure 2).

Initially planned as including the last 100 images from four profiles, 327 images in total were examined from their personal (@Zoella, n = 100; @PointlessBlog, n = 100) and ‘shop-window’ (@Zoellabeauty, n = 100; @PMMerch, n = 27)1 Instagram pages. Images, captions and tags were considered separately to establish levels and type of promotional activity and how they layer Figure 1. Top 20 Gleam Futures ‘digital first talents’ by networked reach accounts particularly, analysing how they work together to create ‘repressive ambiances’ of consumer culture for audiences (Figure 2). Initially planned as including the last 100 images from four profiles, 327 images in total were examined from their personal (@Zoella, n = 100; @PointlessBlog, n = 100) and ‘shop-window’ (@Zoellabeauty, n = 100; @PMMerch, n = 27)1 Instagram pages. Images, captions and tags were considered separately to establish levels and type of promotional activity and how they layer Figure 1. Top 20 Gleam Futures ‘digital first talents’ by networked reach (1 July 2017). This ‘multi-method approach involving contemporaneous and retrospective interrogation of web objects’ allows exploration of relationships between producers and users (Foot and Schneider 2006, p. 211). In short, this is a mixed-method case study, which uses elements of quantitative and qualitative analysis at different points to offer a cohesive overview of production practice, performance and purpose of contemporary microcelebrity.

<Insert figure 1 here>

‘Rethinking microcelebrity’ point one: a professionalised group production practice

As shown in Figure 1, content production happens across four open-source social media platforms (YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram) and via blogging. These sites are inescapable ‘fronts’ for maintaining visibility (Goffman 1956). There are structured patterns for production and dissemination of content, identified, for example, in the banners of YouTube television channels, which highlight ‘New Video Every Sunday’ or ‘Videos up each Wednesday and Monday’. Gleam’s ‘content producers’ now manage production with videos, at times, shot in studios, dressed as informal settings, ensuring higher production values than home web cams. While Smales is keen to emphasise that fame was not their ‘end game’ but a result of ‘their hobby’ (The Independent, 5 January 2017), this is now a managed business turning out content and publicity materials from bases in both LA and London. Job adverts and staff LinkedIn profiles highlight the working patterns of staff as they use ‘technological affordances and immediate social context’ (Marwick and Boyd 2011a, p. 115) to further network reach and, increasingly, to build consumer brands, with the microcelebrities themselves at the epicentre of their work.

Roles include content producers and development editors, executive producers, social media strategists, brand partnership managers and talent coordinators and managers. Gleam also employs legal and business affairs executives, senior administrators and, of course, Chief Operating Officer Smales (LinkedIn and Gleam Futures website, September 2018). In

Goffman's (1956) terms, practices of 'digital first' personalities are both cynically produced and very controlled, with clearly established fronts and patterns, but with many of the staff and mechanisms for production hidden from audiences. Such professionals appear to lead decision-making. The role of 'Talent Manager', for example, includes 'developing each talent's strategy keeping it realistic, timely but ambitious', 'managing talent's image' and to 'manage talent's revenue by securing new opportunities and diversifying income streams' (Gleam Futures job advert, September 2018). This highlights the oversimplification of understanding microcelebrity as a 'bottom up' practice that millions of 'ordinary' people engage with online. While we all may have equal access to social media platforms, we do not have the same access to professional production technologies or support.

As shown in Figure 1, blogging is part of the production practices of half of the top 20 Gleam stars and particularly those who have crossed over into the mainstream. Self-brands were firstly blog names for 'break-through' talents, the Chapman family (Pixiwoo), Louise Pentland (Sprinkle of Glitter) and Zoe Sugg (*Zoella*). The blogs were first hosted on open-source platforms, and in *Zoella's* case it is published using BlogLovin', although all now also have specially designed websites, managed by Gleam. Those who use blogging to lead their 8 B. USHER content practice often negotiate authenticity and authority in a way that traditional journalists do not. They are both the writers and the brand, and success of each of these components is dependent on the audience accepting her as both authoritative and authentic.

As influencers with significant commercial power, these personalities are also the subject of celebrity news and features. Journalism's processes of celebrification have always used public/private, extraordinary/ordinary dichotomies to build visibility, and just as the private lives of the reality TV stars are negotiated onto front pages by agents, Gleam 'talents' are negotiated into mainstream print media via Gleam Futures' press officers. Manager Dom Smales may well declare that these are a new bright 'future of celebrity' where fans feel 'much closer to the talent than they would be to someone like Katy Perry' (The Guardian, 7 August 2016) but his role in it is an old one. This is reflected in increased levels of tabloid news content, such as on *MailOnline* (2003–current), which has produced more than 250 articles about the top 20 stars, and 208 about Sugg alone (*MailOnline* archive, July; McDemott 2016). Sugg has also appeared in *British Vogue* (1916–current) and *Glamour* (1939–current) magazines, as has Gleam stable-mate Tanya Burr, and both make regular appearances on daytime television chat shows. They are beginning to appear on reality TV too, with Sugg featuring on the first celebrity edition of *Great British Bake Off* 2010–present, BBC (2010–2016); Channel 4 2017–present), Love Productions and Jack Maynard appearing on 2017's *I'm A Celebrity....Get Me Out of Here* (2002–present), ITV, ITV Studios Australia, November 19–21, 2017. Maynard quit after a tabloid backlash following journalists scrolling through previous social media posts and finding racist and homophobic tweets from many years earlier (*The Sun*, 27 November 2017). This is an easy way to create controversy around microcelebrities, with Sugg facing a similar backlash a week earlier for using words such as 'slag' and 'chav' in tweets (*The Sun*, 16 November 2017). These posts were from before each was professionally managed and now all Gleam talents largely stay away from controversial topics. In short, this area of microcelebrity is an individuated group professional production practice. A number of creative

professionals, both at Gleam and beyond, sustain the visibility of ‘talents’ across presentational and representational media.

Rethinking microcelebrity point two: interplays between authority and authenticity and the repressive ambience of consumerism

Fulfilment of ‘authentic self’ through consumerism and leisure is the dominant theme across social media content and this narrative is located predominantly in white middleclass British homes. This is the staging area for the work of Gleam ‘power couple’ Zoe Sugg and Alfie Deyes, who take the top two spots in the ‘top 20’ personalities by social media reach. Sugg performs as a clean-living girl next door or a big sister, excited about her new make-up, clothes and sweet treats, even though she is now a 28-year-old living with Deyes in Brighton. Jerslev (2016, p. 5233) describes her life as a ‘girlish lifestyle/ lipstick universe with herself as the visual center’, and highlights that while her posts identify her followers as ‘between 18 and 25’, they are largely ‘tweens and teenage girls’ (Sheffield 2014 cited Jerslev 2016, p. 1). Sugg earns a reported £50,000 a month (The Independent, 13 March 2016) from her ventures, which now extends beyond the display of consumer goods and into the production of them. A patent application filed on her behalf by Gleam (4 October 2016) trademarks her brand against more than 2000 services and goods ranging from eyebrow tweezers to fake pearls and educational materials (Zoella 2016). Deyes also sells *PointlessBlog* ‘Merch’, including phone covers and hoodies. The pair constantly cross-promote and are often involved in the same organised advertising, as demonstrated by analysis of their personal Instagram accounts. For example, they both posted pictures highlighted as ‘Ads’ for ‘World Nutella Day’ (@pointlessblog and @zoella, 9 February 2018), in which they were depicted feeding each other Nutella treats while gazing lovingly into each other’s eyes (@pointlessblog, 3 February 2018).

Promotional activity on YouTube often takes place in what are described as ‘haul’ videos (e.g. ‘Asos Haul’ [*PointlessBlog*, 5 August 2017], ‘America Haul’ [*Zoella*, April 4 2018]), in which item after item of consumer goods are displayed. Personalised narratives of how these make their day-to-day lives better hide the fact that this is essentially advertising. However, examining both their personal Instagram accounts produced by them and their ‘shop window’ accounts produced by social media marketers employed by Gleam offers interesting new insights into the complexities and layering of promotional performances. There are three elements to posts: the image itself, the text-based caption underneath and ‘tags’ to other Instagram accounts, made visible when the picture is ‘tapped’ on a smartphone or tablet. Figure 2 demonstrates how these three elements work to promote not only their own merchandise and media platforms, but also those of other Gleam personalities, mainstream consumer brands and a range of travel destinations and leisure activities. As Baudrillard (1968, 1970) argued, these foster false attachments, restricting development of truly authentic identity, by enforcing performances of self-identity only in relation to the imperatives of capital. Both Sugg and Deyes consume for content, described as them both ‘living’ their ‘best life’ (@zoella, 29 March 2018) and as their ‘work’ (@zoella, 16 April 2018; @pointlessblog, 2 March 2018). They engage ‘the spectator in a form of identification’ (Marshall 1997, p. 14), by performing as knowing, but authentic, consumers who directly interact with followers and encourage them to follow suit.

Of the 100 analysed images from the personalised @zoella Instagram account, 45% promote either her own or another brand consumer goods in either the image, caption or tag and 45% other Gleam Future personalities or their products. Similarly, 33% of the last 100 Instagram posts on @PointlessBlog include promotion of consumer items and 40% other Gleam media or products. However, at first glance, promotional activity is often not immediately apparent. It is layered across captions and tags to encourage interactivity, with clickable tags and purchases and replies encouraged with phrases such as ‘link to pre order is in my bio’ (@zoella, 27 April 2018), ‘tag a friend’ (@zoella, 28 April 2018) or ‘spontaneous Boots haul with @markyferris (I vlogged don’t worry)’ (@zoella, 3 June 2018).

<insert figure 2 here>

Performed authenticity disguises their authority when selling consumer goods. In the 13% of images on the *Zoella* and 15% on the *PointlessBlog* Instagram pages depicting them together, the consumer item promoted is never immediately visible in the picture, but is included in the caption underneath or via tags. At first glance, it appears to be of an intimate moment, with the item or service being ‘lived’ and simultaneously promoted layered in textual elements. Paid-for content, including Samsung (16 March 2018), Go Ape (16 April 2018) and even the Royal Air Force (25 April 2018) for Deyes and benefit make-up for Sugg (18 December 2017), are distinguished by ‘Paid Partnership’ above the picture and ‘#ad’ in the caption. However, the majority of ‘other brands’ promoted are exchanged for the goods themselves. This includes making memories’ (@zoella, 15 February 2018) and ‘falling in love with’ tourist destinations – arranged by Gleam with tourism boards – such as Amsterdam (@zoella, @pointlessblog, 15–16 February 2018) and New York (@zoella, @pointlessblog, @poppydeyes, @markferris, 30 March–6 April 2018). Other regularly featured consumer activities range from eating in cafes and restaurants (e.g. @milkbarstore, @zoella, 31 March 2018; @gbpizzaacomargate, @zoella, 26 January 2018) to shopping online for clothes on ASOS (@zoella, 5 February 2018), again often with other Gleam ‘talents’. Instagram acts as a signifier for consumerism displayed not through expensive luxury goods, but lots of cheaper items, which any (at least any middle-class western) boy or girl might be able to afford. In the hyperreal Gleam Future world, more stuff is more and this highlights Baudrillard’s discussion of the ‘paradox of the liberation of affluence’ (cited Gane 1991, p. 30) and the ‘mental dynamic’ of ‘purpose through the force of signs’ (Baudrillard 1968, pp. 70–71). Their Instagram works as repressive ambience because consumerism is displayed as a life ‘best’ lived and followers are encouraged to emulate.

<Insert figure 3 here>

Smales has described how ‘the rise of “digital first” talents’ is ‘fuelled by a seismic shift in the way that a generation are consuming their media and entertainment’, with audiences ‘hungry for more interactive relationships with their peers and idols’ (The Independent, 5 January 2017). Explorations of microcelebrity as a cultural phenomenon often argue that ‘back-stage access’ to private lives and perceived opportunities for direct, individual-to-individual contact create ‘parasociality’ with their audience. On *Zoella* and *PointlessBlog* Instagram pages, lines between real celebrations with Gleam ‘friends’ (@pointlessblog, 26 April 2018) and staged promotional activities are blurred, such as during days spent together at Sugg and Deyes’ home

‘shooting an early . . . birthday’ for her new book, on ‘all things “hosting . . .”’ (@zoella, 15 March 2018). Glean personalities constantly produce content for and about one another, for example taking and sharing pictures for Instagram. Similarly, when Sugg and Deyes interact with their micropublics in the ‘text’ comments under captions, they acknowledge them as participants in the construction of their brand. Emulation is two way, with comments such as ‘What are your plans? (I like to know so I can steal some of them for myself?) xx’ (@zoella, 14 April 2018) and ‘Whatcha up to this weekend? x’ (@pointlessblog, 8 June 2018). Often thousands of fans respond to such requests, not only embracing opportunities for unfettered glimpses into their ‘real’ life, but also opportunities to be part of display. For this, they might be rewarded by the ultimate affirmation – direct attention – such as ‘oh gawd!! THAT ONE TOO! I honestly can’t pick’ (@zoella to @rhiasteward, 14 April 2018) or ‘have an amazing birthday’ (@pointlessblog to @kelsea_good, 8 June 2018).

Giddens’ (1991, p. 24) discussion of how media shape our realities and lived experiences clarifies how such repressive ambiances influence followers to see a ‘best life’ as one lived as a consumer and the ultimate ‘career path’ (@zoella, 21 April 2018) as being paid for doing so. Microcelebrity practices are similar to networked reality practices of celebrities such as the Kardashians, which also rely on parasociality, the performance of emotional bonds and mutuality of production to promote and build self-brands (see Usher 2015, pp. 315–316). Their work creates a sense of knowing the ‘real person’, achieved through mutual acts of media production and framed as individual-to-individual experience. Sugg’s power as a commodity sign is demonstrated no better than when considering how both the @zoellabeauty and @pbmerch Instagram accounts feature stand-ins – cropped images of faceless but similar girls who adopt her visual cues, such as stance, candyfloss and converse trainers. Suggs has discussed anxiety from maintaining her carefully cultivated image (e.g. *Zoella.co.uk*, 11 October 2016) and now articulates the professionalisation of her production practices as an attempt to ‘move on’ (16 April 2018), from her solitary performance as a teenager. However, she still sits on her bed playing with make-up even though the bed might be in a studio and the make-up may have her picture on it. The falsity of narratives of liberation through affluence is a repression not only for her audience, but for her too as she has to ‘be’ *Zoella*, which is, in essence, a teenage self-brand, even though she is no longer one. In the next section, I draw together these discussions of practice, purpose and performance of microcelebrity and propose the term ‘applied’ celebrity to articulate continuity and transformation from older areas of celebrity culture as my last point on how we might ‘rethink’ microcelebrity.

Rethinking microcelebrity point three: networked reality display and the case for ‘applied’ celebrity

The most successful networked reality celebrities do not sit comfortably within Rojek’s (2001, pp. 17–21) three categories of fame, but draw on methods from each and ‘apply’ them to build visibility. For example, narratives across social and mainstream media are of achievement in the ‘open competition’ (Rojek 2001, p. 18), of social media visibility and associated successes as influencers in business, design and innovation. This is articulated as the ultimate affirmation of self – as a brand – where life is ‘best’ lived in relation to consumer and leisure activities and the ‘best job’ is to be paid for recording and publishing it. ‘Ascribed’ visibility or ‘lineage’

(Rojek 2001, p. 17), of famous family members, friends and partners, is also an applied part of the narrative. For example, the Kardashians often refer to their experiences as the children of two famous father figures – Olympian Bruce (now Caitlin) Jenner and OJ Simpson lawyer Robert Kardashian. They also openly discuss how they ‘applied’ the ‘ascribed’ fame resulting from Kim’s sudden notoriety after the release of a sex tape to develop their own visibility. These relationships, and the building of a shared self-brand, are the main story arch for performances across social and television media. Similarly, as highlighted in the last section, Glean personalities continuously perform and display intimate and familial relationships. The role of ‘cultural intermediaries’ in building their fame has also been established across the previous two sections. However, each of the microcelebrities discussed here, at least initially, began independently using both social media and ‘representational techniques’ to perform ‘for public consumption’, in similar ways as the ‘attributed’ celebrity (Rojek 2001, p. 20). Like the ‘celetoids’ Rojek describes as a subcategory of that area of celebrity culture, their fame is also ‘organised around mass communications and staged authenticity’, but rather than commanding ‘media attention one day, and [being] forgotten the next’, they specifically use this to sustain and grow their social media audiences.

Each of these applications of the celebrification processes of Rojek’s original categories has the same key purpose, which clarifies how successful networked reality personalities grow such extensive followings. Organisation ‘around mass communications’ (Rojek 2001, p. 21) aims to develop parasociality in order to build a brand and promote. As such, for applied celebrity, parasociality is not a by-product of fame as Horton and Wohl (1956) originally articulated it in relation to television, but is understood as the means to achieve it. Microcelebrities act as symbolic transition points for organised labour centred on narratives of self-presentation and networked reality display, occurring across several platforms, seemingly at once. Success depends on the quality of relationships displayed by micropublics in return, through comments, likes, retweets, reposts and, ultimately, purchase of goods. Their self-brand works as an ambience, which perpetuates consumerism as liberation, because it comprises and shapes consumer sensibilities and behaviours specifically through building parasociality.

Increasingly, such microcelebrities are acknowledging the professional, group nature of their practice. For example, Sugg highlighted in an Instagram caption how she ‘built this career from the comfort of [her] own space’, but how ‘since moving into the office’ she feels ‘so much more productive and working with a bigger team is so much more rewarding and fun’. ‘Comfort’, she declared, ‘is the enemy of progress & I’m applying this into every area of my life at the moment and I’ve never felt happier . . .’ (@zoella, 16 April 2018). She articulates professionalisation as a means of reconciling the difficulties of her private life and work life being so intertwined. Mainstream news media attempts to unpick Zoe Sugg’s authenticity – such as through revelations that she used a ghostwriter for her novel *Girl Online* (Sugg 2014) – are similarly reframed as evidence of her being just an ‘ordinary girl’ who needed help (The Independent, 3 October 2016). Her followers demonstrate their acceptance of this with comments such as ‘you have such an amazing work space and motivation’ and ‘it makes me happy that you’re happy’ (Instagram, 16 April 2018). Thus, the success of such microcelebrities is no longer reliant on either the reality or the appearance of it being a ‘bottom

up' process. Rather, professionalisation of practice and the application of established celebrity techniques are accepted as markers of achievement for the 'ordinary person' who becomes famous via social media.

Conclusion

To define this area of celebrity culture succinctly in Rojek's (2001) language, applied celebrity derives from the application of longer established components, techniques and tools for building fame. It uses mass communications and staged authenticity to deliberately foster parasociality with audience members in order to maintain 'self-asbrand', and perpetuate consumerism as if liberation. Thus, the 'widespread conception [s]' identified by Jerslev (2016, p. 8) – that microcelebrity is a bottom-up prosumer process which sits outside mainstream corporate media practices – are now misconceptions of the reality of their work. The celebrification of ordinary people via microcelebrity practices involves the individual, a number of media and creative professionals, representational media such as television and news and audiences all working together simultaneously and seemingly in real time to build and maintain fame. Networked reality displays across both presentational social and commercial representational media are a dominant narrative for celebrity culture, and while early microcelebrity practice contributed significantly to their development, these are now assimilated into the commercial imperatives of the creative industries.

The three points for 'rethinking microcelebrity' outlined here focus on practice (now an individuated professional group activity), performance (reliant on interplays of authenticity and authority to deliberately foster parasociality) and purpose (the perpetuation of consumerism, as if liberation). The place where such displays first began – whether online or on television – becomes less significant when we consider how networked reality displays happen simultaneously across multiple platforms and timelines, applying celebrity practices, performances for the same commercial purposes. Gleam Future microcelebrities now have much less in common with Senft's camgirls than they do with mainstream reality TV personalities such as the Kardashians. As such, understanding the growing trend of 'applied' celebrity as an individuated group activity rather than an individual one is key to understanding this latest example of the 'ordinary/extraordinary' paradox in the ever more complex system of presentation and representation driving contemporary celebrity culture. The tools may be ordinary – we all have equal access – but strategic use to build visibility is extraordinary, reaching far beyond what most people do on social media every day. Microcelebrities are another example of the narrative that the famous are both simultaneously 'just like us' and a million times 'better' at being so.

Note 1. The @pbmerch Instagram page has not posted since February 2018 and had just 27 posts since its launch by Gleam Futures in October 2016.

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Figure 1: Top 20 Glean Futures ‘digital first talents’ by networked reach (July 1 2017)



	Blog Unique Monthly Users (million)	YouTube Subscribers (million)	YouTube Views (million)	Twitter Followers (million)	Instagram Followers (million)	Facebook Likes (million)
Zoella (Zoe Sugg)	1.1m	16.4m	987	8.76	11.1	2.64
PointlessBlog (Alfie Deyes)	N/A	11.3	471	4.30	4.9	1.73
Joe Sugg	N/A	7.9	1044	4.38	6	2.36
Caspar Lee	N/A	9	730	4.5	3.8	1.6
Marcus Butler	N/A	6.6	407	3.1	3.7	1.54
Tanya Burr	0.113	2.6	344	2.4	2.1	.803
Jim Chapman	0.093	2.5	178	2.09	2.3	1
Sprinkle of Glitter (Louise Pentland)	2	2.6	183	2.4	1.7	1
The Saccone Jolys	0.010	2.8	660	1.1	2.5	N/A
Niomi Smart	0.033	1.71	110	1.19	1.8	0.043
Pixiwoo (Sam and Nic Chapman)	0.019	2	293	0.487	1.2	.705
Lana	N/A	0.401	11.4	1.67	0.967	0.316
Claudia Salowski	N/A	2.52	122	0.308	1	0.107
Samantha Maria	0.246	1.82	163	0.208	0.592	0.037
Jack Maynard	N/A	1.2	91	0.46	0.669	N/A
Claire Marshall	N/A	0.830	45.7	0.036	0.368	0.353
SunKissAlba (Alba Ramos)	N/A	0.830	45.7	0.036	0.368	0.353
Inthefrow (Victoria McGrath)	0.116	0.549	38	0.156	0.779	0.035
Poppy Deyes	0.540	N/A	N/A	0.245	1.2	N/A
Josh Pieters	N/A	0.811	51.4	0.171	0.412	N/A

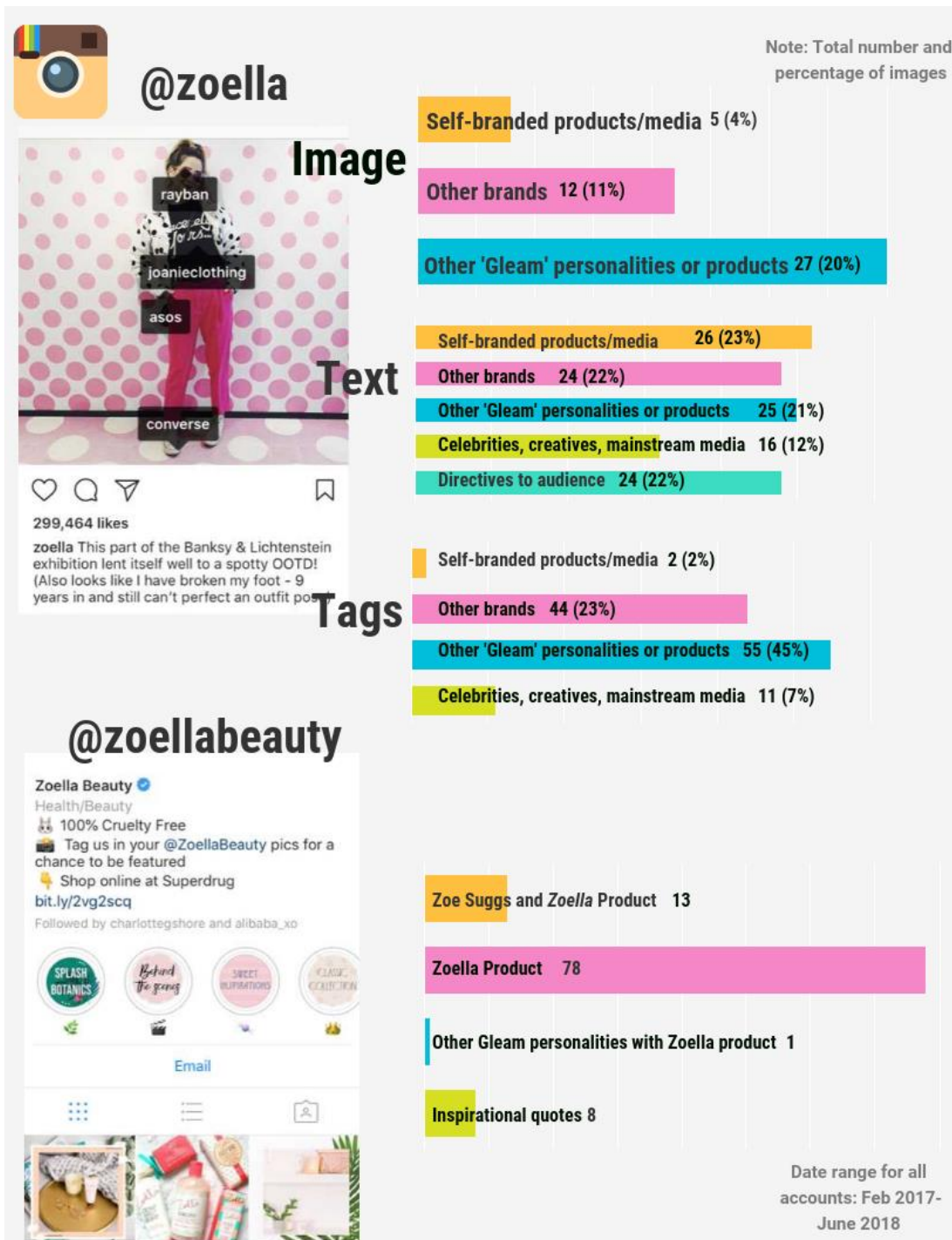


Figure 2. Analysis of Zoella and Pointlessblog Instagram accounts.



@pointlessblog

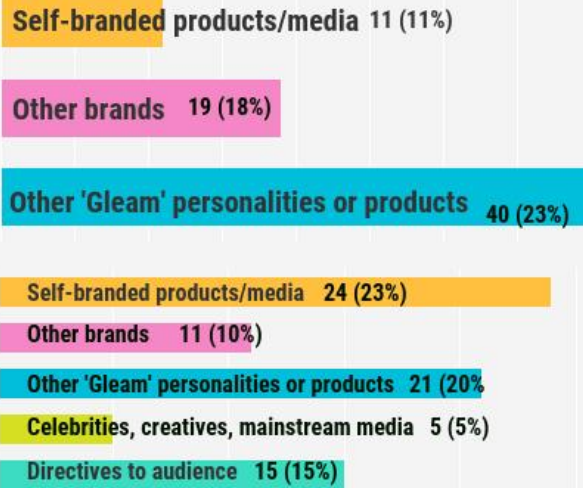
Note: Total number and percentage of images



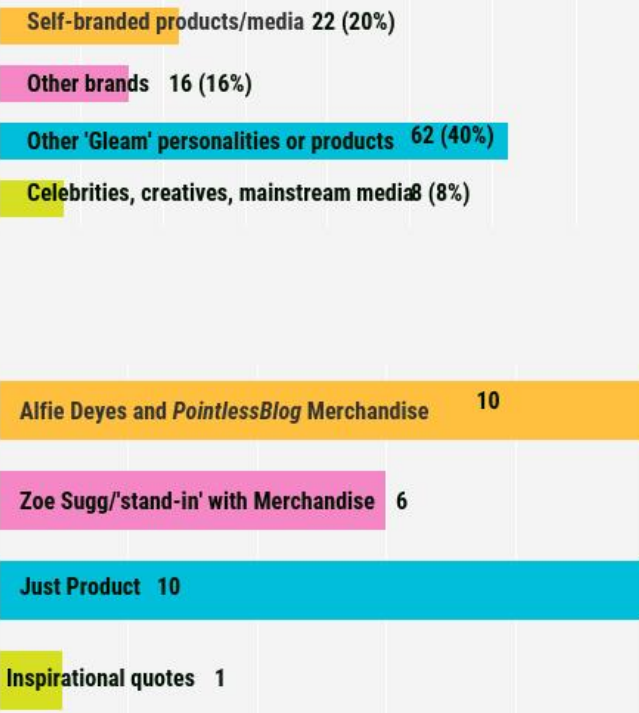
Image

Text

Tags



@PBMerch



Note: Total images: 27

Figure 2. Analysis of Zoella and Pointlessblog Instagram accounts.