

A clown, a political messiah or a punching bag? Rethinking the performative identity construction of celebrity through social media

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Abstract

In meeting the changing demands of authenticity and visibility in social media, performances of identity and connections are discussed to entail new sociotechnical labours and digital literacies. Research has looked into the construction and presentation of celebrity identities, in light of these developments, but has paid little attention on the celebrities' experiences and perspectives, which is also due to the lack of willingness of industry insiders in this culturally sensitive business to be interviewed and genuinely talk about its problems. Twelve in-depth interviews with celebrities and entertainment industry practitioners were conducted between 2014 and 2015. Particularly, this article draws on the cases of two established celebrities in Hong Kong and China, and assesses how and why they were unable to actively construct and perform their preferred media identities, highlighting the blurring boundaries among traditional celebrities, micro-celebrities and ordinary people for their construction of online identities through social media, and also elucidating the opportunities and challenges posed by today's evolving media environment. We argue that social media only superficially open up a site of counter-narratives for celebrities to resist the identities imposed on them by the mainstream media and online audiences. The interviewed celebrities' contradictory experiences in their self-presentations in social media offer alternative angles to understanding the incoherent and unstable celebrity identity production processes, the blurring

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boundaries between celebrities and ordinary people through such processes as well as the celebrities' capacity to reclaim control in asserting their 'true' selves.

Keywords

Authentic self, celebrity culture, Hong Kong, identity construction, social media

In Western and Asian societies, traces of celebrities are ubiquitous in our daily lives – in TV shows, films and online content we watch; products we consume; images we attend to; role models and media personalities we mimic and even as benchmarks against which we judge ourselves and others. But do we all conceive of celebrity similarly across different cultures and contexts? Who produces, propagates and twists the meaning and manifestations of celebrity? And how do social media change its symbolic interaction? Most existing literature examining celebrity social media practices have tended to primarily rely on textual resources presented by the celebrities in a Western context (e.g. Ellcessor, 2018; Marshall, 2010). Although close analysis of celebrities' explicit self-presentations is critical, we sought to fill this gap – via our professional connections – by collecting their subjective insights through in-person interviews with an array of established television and music industry celebrities and the entertainment industry practitioners in Hong Kong and Greater China conducted between 2014 and 2015 (Leung, Cheng, & Tse, 2017, 2018). The two selected up-to-date cases presented in this article bear empirical and theoretical significance, and offer a timely examination of stardom and the media in an East Asian context, forging a dialogue between Asian and Western academic discourses. Empirically, they benefited from the direct, in-depth accounts of renowned celebrities and professionals. We revealed and analyzed their recollections and perspectives, overcoming the lack of willingness of industry insiders to be interviewed (Stokes, 2013), in this rather enclosed business. The first-hand information gathered from within the entertainment industry therefore provides a more comprehensive and up-to-date understanding of celebrity cultures in the context of continued upsurge of celebrities' public social media usage. Theoretically, the study reassessed how and why certain Chinese celebrities were *unable* to actively construct and perform their preferred media identities, highlighting the blurring boundaries among traditional celebrities, micro-celebrities and ordinary people for their construction of online identities through social media, and elucidating the opportunities and challenges posed by today's evolving media environment as they manage their multiple, perhaps incongruent, 'true selves'. The study also explored the celebrities' experience and perspectives reflecting on why and how local audiences and fans identify or misidentify with their performative images and influence the celebrities' own understanding of both their online and offline identities.

Theorizing celebrity

Traditionally, the term *celebrity* describes famous individuals in any profession, but particularly in sports and the entertainment industry. This star system can be traced back to the emergence of Hollywood's film industry and to public discourse in America in the 1910s (DeCordova, 2007). Since the launch of free-to-air commercial television in Hong Kong, celebrity culture has blossomed in the late 1960s. The meteoric rise of local pop songs and TV shows and their penetration into mass society as free entertainment gradually overshadowed films and Cantonese opera. The 1980s saw the first influx of Hong Kong and Taiwanese celebrity images into mainland China,

nurturing a trend of celebrity worship shortly after the fall of the bamboo curtain (Yue, 2007). Their prominence gradually increased, generating a sophisticated celebrity-manufacturing system and a fervent fan culture in China. More recently, influential Chinese celebrities began to appear across television, sports, fashion modelling, business and politics, marking a glittering era of celebrity in China (Edwards & Jeffreys, 2010; Yue, 2007).

Celebrity is theorized as multifarious archetypes: a discursive cultural sign when the eminent personality is constructed rather than the real person behind it is treated as having cultural importance and superiority (Marshall, 1997); symbolic interaction which is enhanced by the social media (Ferris & Harris, 2011; Marwick & boyd, 2011); attention capital based on their ability to attract and convert the public's attention to viewership and sales, and satisfy the mass media's commercial interests (Van Krieken, 2012); institutionalized charisma when celebrities' everyday activities are portrayed as charismatic under the spotlight (Weber, 2006); a system of rationalization through which audiences are encouraged to see celebrities' personalities as legitimate, culturally valuable, and as an expression of social spirit and popular culture (Marshall, 1997); a para-religion where celebrities are treated as idols for adoration and embody fans' projected identifications and desires (Ward, 2011) or even a messianic political and humanitarian influence, whereby celebrities become quasi-political figures or philanthropists (Kapoor, 2013). These complex and contested relationships between celebrity and identity have motivated sociological study of celebrity in Western cultures (Kapoor, 2013; Marshall, 1997; Rojek, 2001; Shils, 2010; Turner, 2010; Van Krieken, 2012).

In linking celebrity culture to identity politics, it is crucial to distinguish between identity and identification. Laclau (1994) sees identity as an essence that defines a person in terms of intrinsic qualities, birth, biology, and perceived life experience, whereas Hall (1990) describes identification as the work involved in constructing identities, including the processes, contradictions, and complexities. The notion of identification thus challenges the dichotomous definitions of identity: an intrinsic, authentic quality or an artificial, externally imposed persona (Dunn, 1998). Identities are often contradictory, negotiable and changeable (Miller, 2011). This theoretical account considers the instability of culture a reflection of identity crisis in a material and socio-historical context.

Celebrity, identity and new media

The advent of advanced technology in the 1990s has further complicated the post-structuralist interpretation of identity. Early studies of online culture found that online interactions demonstrated ample identity play (Poster, 1995; Rheingold, 1993; Stone, 1995; Turkle, 1995). Technology enabled the possibility of creating multiple identities, such that the existence of a 'centered and stable self' can no longer be assumed (Gergen, 1996). However, as the Internet became a mass medium, different forms of online self-representation have 're-centred' identities (Miller, 2011, p. 161), and people increasingly began to use social networking profiles to represent their offline selves. Thus, in contrast to the findings in the 1990s, studies examining Web 2.0 have indicated that offline and online worlds have become better integrated, leaving little room for identity play, and forcing individuals to maintain consistent identities in social media. Meanwhile, fans can now directly engage with celebrities online. The power relationship between celebrities and fans has become less polarized, yet their power differentials persist (Marwick & boyd, 2011).

The significance of visible personae in different mediated formats is further elevated in the global flexible economy, where the metanarrative of the self is deployed in the conscious construction and maintenance of a branded self-image in order to acquire cultural and economic value

(Hearn, 2008; Marwick & boyd, 2010). Under the conditions of promotional culture, celebrity 'becomes a generalizable model of profitable self-production for all individuals' (Hearn, 2008, p. 208). And in social media, inventories of personalities are offered to users to construct valuable identities (Hearn, 2008, p. 198), while attention and publicity are seen as social status to be cultivated and commanded in managing multiple audiences through balancing authenticity, availability, and self-censorship (Marwick & boyd, 2010). As the division of different contexts is destabilized, not only are the norms of information sharing and public intimacy reconceptualized and co-constructed among different connected users (Lambert, 2016; Marwick & boyd, 2014) but also in personal branding, the conflicts between maintaining authenticity and blatant self-promotion become more visible (Marwick & boyd, 2010). As Marshall (2010) argues, in the expanded intertextual zone between the representational and presentational cultures, the public self is presented through multiple layers of interpersonal connections; while the private self is produced and performed to the public as the public self, public-private self and transgressive intimate self (Marshall, 2010).

Apart from the strategic management of networked audiences, the aura of authenticity can also be achieved through aligning different facets of the self in social network (Ellcessor, 2018). In connected celebrity activism, ongoing connective practices among different artefacts, interactions, people and meanings can knit together different facets and activities of a public persona in a coherent star text, and therefore make its performance more culturally legible (Ellcessor, 2018). The connected nature of online celebrity activism allows the celebrity to alternately take up different positions, and unifies and gives meanings to their presentational self; their works, projects and appearances are connected and circulated among different followers, while conferring authenticity and authority in both their cause and celebrity (Ellcessor, 2018). Following Goffman and Mead, Robinson (2007) also argues the expressions 'given off' matching the expressions 'given' thus validate the cyberperformer's identity signalled in online interactions, while 'each manifestation of the "I" is predicated on the self-ing of other "I's" who form the cyberother' (p. 104), in collective spaces that require sequential interactions, such as blogs. To ensure successful identity performance, the user must be literate in the relevant community languages and values (Robinson, 2007). The celebrity's seemingly 'genuine' self and onstage persona could also be bridged by direct and immediate communications with fans in social media, as shown in Lady Gaga's case (Bennett, 2014). According to Bennett, the resulting sense of intimate confession and partnership between the celebrity and her fans are vital to encouraging and strengthening fans' active engagement in her activism, which in turn reinforce her authenticity and citizenship that inspire others.

It is also argued that the social affordances of digital media, which is relevant to the expectations of ongoing communication and interaction in micro-celebrity practices (Marwick & boyd, 2010), may expose users with extensive social networks to more asocial behaviours such as cyberbullying online (Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009). But, the perceptions of real bullying and hurtful or offensive behaviours may differ in different contexts (Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009). For example, continued aggressive expressions in flaming may be interpreted as a means to 'let off steam and stress' (p. 62), and as masculinist displays of prowess and skills within the community (Vrooman, 2002). Meanwhile, the participatory nature of social media has allowed space for the formation of collective identities through ongoing production and negotiation of personal narratives and public discourse, which is especially important for identities less relevant to social groups, such as the LGBTQ identity (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning/queer; Gal, Shifman, & Kampf, 2016).

Taken together, the appropriate performances of connections require new kinds of sociotechnical labours and digital literacies among networked publics in meeting the demands of reconceptualized networked visibility and authenticity (Lambert, 2016; Marwick & boyd, 2014). It follows that the practices in the construction and presentation of celebrity identity, and their implications, could also be reshaped by social media technologies. Again, to understand the symbolic and affective power of both celebrity and audience, and their evolving boundaries in Hong Kong and the broader context of East Asia, this article uniquely investigates the dynamics of how celebrity identity is constructed and nurtured *from the celebrities' viewpoints*, corresponding to the interpretation among fans and the general public in social and cultural contexts. Supposedly, celebrities are the key agents in the media and entertainment industry who personify and perpetuate stardom as a sociocultural phenomenon. They must cooperate and negotiate with media agents in constructing their chosen identity – for monetary reasons and for defending their personal values, political vision, humanitarian goals, family, privacy and even self-actualization and the public interest. Their views therefore have both practical and theoretical significance. Analyzing their reflections, attitudes and perceptions was intended to provide a comprehensive understanding of the interactionist construction of media celebrity in Asia, and of the impacts of Asian audiences on them. Theoretically, the existence of alleged ‘intrinsic star quality’ and seemingly straightforward celebrity performances in social media were questioned. Based on a Western theoretical framework in consideration of the socio-economic, historical, political, and technological situation in East Asia, below we will empirically discuss how a celebrity identity is constructed through different approaches in identity management in social and traditional media in Hong Kong, in part, through the celebrities’ manipulation of social media technologies and also the online audiences’ influences to them.

Case I: Denise Ho

Denise Ho is a Cantopop singer and film actress. Since winning Hong Kong’s 15th New Talent Singing Award in 1996, she has released more than 20 Cantonese recordings and received numerous awards. Ho established her own charitable foundation, the HOCC Charity Fund, in 2007, and founded the BigLove Alliance in 2013, a non-governmental organization (NGO) advocating LGBT rights in Hong Kong. In March 2015, Ho parted with East Asia Music (Holdings) Ltd., her agency since 2004, and became an independent artist. In 2016, she was named as an influential political figure in the BBC’s 100 Women list (BBC, 2016).

Crafting celebrity identity amid the global upsurge of ICT

The ubiquity of information and communications technology offers an opportunity to construct, present, and manage one’s identity in cyberspace autonomously, democratizing the process of celebrity formation. However, the process may also reinforce one’s powerlessness. Technological advances have altered, broadened, and called into question society’s very notion of celebrity, making it socioculturally contingent and complicating its identification.

Ho thinks the meaning of celebrity has evolved and become increasingly inclusive. The rise of reality TV and the Internet has blurred the boundary between celebrity and anonymity. A single video or blog post can generate fame overnight. Such change signifies loosening of the exclusive status systems, but Ho hesitates to categorize the newly famous as celebrities. Rojek (2001) calls

them ‘celetoids’ due to their short lifecycles as public figures, while the media industries manipulate them in their own interests (Turner, 2010, p. 218). Ho recalls an example:

Particularly in Taiwan, when there is a fad, a person becomes a topic and [...] attends variety shows [...] becomes a talking point for some time. Shall we consider this type of person [a] celebrity? The person made his name well-known. But his [fame’s] lifespan might be very short. Perhaps he would disappear after two weeks ... it’s difficult to define [celebrity].

Ho’s example resonates with the ‘demotic turn’ of growing visibility of ordinary people as part of the celebrity culture on websites, TV, radio and the like (Turner, 2010, p. 216). The general public can easily identify with ordinariness of ‘celebrities’, which gives them hope and excitement about their own possibility of achieving fame outside of their everyday routine, regardless of how ephemeral that renown may be. The digital democratization of celebrity culture induces compulsion to become famous with no particular claim to fame. Success exposes overnight micro-celebrities to a competition for attention and scrutiny shortly before they lose their lustre, followed by lingering criticisms.

Digital surveillance

Television has long allowed people to evaluate and adjudicate public figures’ conduct, placing celebrities under surveillance (Van Krieken, 2012). But the widespread use of modern communication technology has enabled interactive communication between celebrities and audiences, empowering viewers to scrutinize celebrities at any given moment. In Ho’s view, although the Internet has enabled more interaction and closer relationships with her audience, celebrities now pay a higher price for their popularity: ‘[As a celebrity] you lose your freedom and privacy, even more extremely in this age ... It seems all things [related to celebrities] are the public’s business’.

The Internet enables forging and facilitating of the psychological connection between celebrities and admirers, who can conveniently garner the celebrity news that they crave online, in turn accelerating the formation of certain individual star’s fame and overall celebrity culture (Ferris & Harris, 2011). But as boyd (2008) pointed out, the Internet collapses contexts. The virtual public comprises multiple audiences – family, personal friends, fans, business contacts, but also anonymous netizens worldwide. They typically have disparate ideological values, so there will always be someone directly criticizing celebrities for their public image or personal lifestyle targeting at the celebrities’ online handles. Damaging comments, true or misguided, tend to ‘go viral’. Ho has observed that this has triggered an unhealthy relationship between celebrities and the public. Today’s celebrities are trapped under an ideological scrutiny that limits not only their symbolic influence but also their physical behaviour. She explains,

It’s like lying on the chopping board. People who dislike us can randomly ‘shoot an arrow’ at us or slap our face ... I think today’s celebrities ... have become punching bags, another identity for us. [...] Now, they [critics] can tell you in the face.

Ho also conveys her thoughts on the influence of the Internet on celebrity culture. She believes that the Internet controls celebrities’ behaviours, making them more hesitant about speaking their minds.

You have to consider very carefully before every action ... stand on the safest platform ... [so as to reduce] trouble. This gradually turns into a type [of attitude]: I don't need to care about things unrelated to me. This is ... rather scary, I mean, this attitude.

She offers two reasons why celebrities have become more careful with their words. First is economic concerns, which become especially apparent when a celebrity is asked by journalists to comment on controversial social, political, or cultural issues. Second is the fear of criticism; the online media readily magnify and propagandize celebrities' remarks as sound bites and make them headline subjects. Hyper-digital-surveillance has taken over the media and the entertainment industry (Miller, 2011, p. 131). Celebrities, as part of the larger entertainment industry, often need to abide by the existing rules to maintain their 'institutionalized' charisma (Shils, 2010, p. 92), or their career may be at risk. Celebrity power is structured within the ideology of the media system and organized around the social ideals of gendered identity, appearance, behaviour, and political outlook (Van Krieken, 2012).

Ho also acknowledges the economic value of celebrity and that, as in all kinds of industries and organizations, the rewards to different roles vary among different types of creative workers. Although a famous celebrity might earn more than her manager, producer, publicist, or technician, she needs to sacrifice her freedom and privacy to a greater extent. Public personalities generate 'attention capital' that can be used to increase viewership and sales for advertisers (Van Krieken, 2012, p. 80). The concepts of privacy and anonymity, first brought up by the capitalist socio-economic structure in the West during the industrialization in the late 19th century, have begun to erode amid the boom of media celebrity; and the invasion of privacy is gradually being perceived as reasonable, being driven by the public's interest. The general public now believe they have the right to peep into celebrities' private life as an extension of their entertainment (Miller, 2011). 'Celebrity' comes to signify quintessence and vulgarity, supremacy and subservience.

Multiple identities

Ho also comments on a celebrity's ideal role in society. She has attempted to resist the mainstream and redefine celebrity, by negotiating her identity as a charismatic opinion leader of moral and social causes and an advocate for justice, human rights and democracy, offering spiritual support to improve society. Ho seems eager to bridge her public and private personae, leveraging her public visibility not for commercial sales but for political and moral ideals. She feels her mediatized political identity has successfully transformed many Hong Kong citizens into fans and supporters and undeniably promoted her brand image. She hopes she has encouraged some of them to heed dissenting social voices and to consider sociopolitical issues, rather than only creating sensationalized politainment aimed at generating economic returns (Kapoor, 2013).

Compared with celebrities who typically strive for a coherent and impeccable image by portraying themselves as at-birth superstars (Davisson, 2013), Ho has displayed self-acceptance and a desire to be able to wander between public and personal identities, by disclosing her 'backstage' persona in a way that resonates with her fans. She writes a newspaper column and sends social media messages directly to her fans to claim and craft her own identity (Davisson, 2013). She admits that she has become more outspoken on social issues, which was not easy. In November 2012, during Hong Kong's Gay Pride parade, she came out as a lesbian 'on the spur of the moment' in front of her parents, top executives of her record company and thousands of spectators (South

China Morning Post, 2013; Li, 2017). She was the first Hong Kong celebrity who had publicly declared a lesbian identity. In addition to being more open about her sexual orientation and political stance to the mass media, she also agreed to write columns for Apple Daily (2015), a local newspaper, being empowered to craft and claim multiple identities.

As a celebrity, Ho perceives herself being strongly supported by the younger generation, LGBT community, and pro-democracy supporters in Hong Kong and Taiwan (Li, 2017). They may, as Kapoor suggests, feel that they can delegate their political beliefs to the celebrity (Kapoor, 2013). For Ho, this is a challenge, yet also a chance to broadcast her 'true' voice. 'I do not wish to write about gossip or something only about myself ... I really hope that it can be a platform for sharing our voices'.

Therefore, compared with her counterparts, Ho's approach in crafting her celebrity identity through social and traditional media is distinctive and is in part similar and in contrast to the discursive strategies of other celebrities (Bennett, 2014; Ellcessor, 2018). In her view, celebrities can always shape their identities by being more independent and exercising their power. Here, Ho is able to foster connection with her fans and encourage their participation in her activism on democracy and LGBT rights in Hong Kong by sharing her private life and political views with fans and the wider public directly through her social media handles, blog and newspaper column. But, the different facets of Ho's identities are not necessarily aligned towards the same goal – despite her desire to connect her public and private images, and that her performed visibility online has allowed her to build more liberal and LGBT online followings, as evidenced by her success in generating online crowdfunding for her sold-out concerts in 2016 (Yuen, 2016), Ho's revelation of her 'authentic' self has resulted in compromises in her singing career. On March 24, 2015, Ho announced through her column that she was no longer represented by East Asia Music and had become an independent artist (The Stand News, 2015). Although she did not know how her career would unfold, she said she had 'no fears, but unlimited hopes' and 'plentiful possibilities'. *However*, it is difficult to say whether or not Ho has been successful in claiming autonomy as a celebrity and maintaining multiple identities of her choice in advancing her career in entertainment and politics; in many ways, the ongoing negotiation of her 'authentic' identity is still performatively constructed through the social media and also affected by her imagination of the audiences' expectations and an interactional identification process. Meanwhile, whether or not Ho is able to encourage her fans to embrace their non-mainstream sexual identity and participate in LGBT activism are questionable too. For instance, in Li's (2017) participant research and interviews with Denise Ho's fans, they are constrained by the Chinese social norms and 'may not be able to afford to politicize their identities'. Li believes that 'there are inconsistencies of identity and fan practices, such as lesbian fans denying [Ho's] sexuality and straight fans enjoying queer reading ... [As] fandom is defined by ... the fabrication of one's public and intimate life' (p. 133).

Case 2: Hilary Tsui

Hilary Tsui began her acting career when she was 19 on Hong Kong television and in films. Since marrying Cantopop singer Eason Chan in 2006, her marriage, personal and family life, and 'frequent misbehaviour' have been regularly featured in the entertainment news. In 2009, she launched Liger, a fashion boutique, with her business partner. Currently a shop owner and a fashion blogger, she runs Liger shops in prime shopping locations in Hong Kong and Macau. They are known for carrying edgy foreign and local fashion labels. After giving birth, Tsui remains active in the fashion

scene as a renowned fashionista and fashion blogger across Greater China. She is also an avid marathon runner supported by Nike.

Identity and its public perception

According to Langer (2006), star identity embodies ‘idealizations or archetypal expressions’ that are ‘contemplated, revered, desired and even blatantly imitated’ (p. 185). Stars are thus ‘larger than life’ and this illusion can survive only by maintaining a distance between stars and the audience. Contact with stars must be ‘unrelentingly sporadic and uncertain’ (Langer, 2006, p. 185). In reality, the ongoing process of identifying stars with their careers may be more complex and dynamic – especially when they engage in roles that are not part of their public personae. Since the rise of digital media, traces of one’s celebrity status are inevitably stored online, enabling the public to revisit them unlimitedly. As such, ‘distant closeness’ between a celebrity and their audience is now less tactfully maintained. Apparently, Tsui resists identifying as a celebrity: she did not renew her management contract with Television Broadcasts Limited in 2001, and since then had no longer worked in the entertainment industry. She is still, however, featured in traditional and online media frequently. She became aware of the discrepancy between how people identify her and how she identifies herself, feeling embarrassed by constantly being introduced as a celebrity. Tsui attributes the public’s persistent perception of her as a celebrity largely to having a famous husband. Her celebrity status remains, while her power is enhanced and exploited by the media, due to the association with her husband, female celebrities and wives of other male celebrities, with whom Tsui feels she is constantly being compared. She is identified differently by the public – as an actress, fashion blogger, fashionista, socialite and celebrity. Supposedly, being regarded as a celebrity is not bad for her fashion business, yet Tsui is also uncomfortable with the unsolicited attention from the media. Overall, the attention capital derived from these identifications is exploited by the media and partnering fashion brands to advance their interests (Turner, 2010), while creating inconvenience and stress for the celebrity herself.

Public versus private life?

Horton and Wohl (2010) suggested that the public image of a celebrity can be understood as a ‘persona’ with which a sense of intimacy is encouraged, and that the audience appreciates the symbolic persona as a real person, even though the image ‘... is to some extent a construct – a façade – which bears little resemblance to his private character’ (p. 48). Although their public life is constructed in and through the media, a persona also ‘... creates an acceptable façade of private life ... behind the contrived public image’ (Horton & Wohl, 2010, p. 49). This implies that neither public nor private identities are intrinsic, and both involve deliberate construction and transformation under public scrutiny.

Tsui draws a clear distinction between her public life as a celebrity and her private life as an ordinary person, and she suggests such distinction can be illustrated and sustained by her careful use of social media, which give her some control over the exposure of her private life. However, Tsui also ambivalently confesses that she is reluctant to share her private life with the public, and instead she has used social media mainly for work purposes since starting her fashion business in 2009. In that sense, her freedom of sharing her ‘authentic’ life via social media is highly limited. She intentionally links her social media platforms to the website of her fashion shops. She explains,

I opened a public account [on Facebook] for work. So you can see my Facebook, Instagram, and Weibo [accounts], but I tend to use Instagram more. I am quite straightforward. I don't share my private life on purpose. In other words, I don't post anything about my daughter. It is purely for work.

She further clarifies that the posts that usually appear on her social media platforms fall into several categories: concerning her engagement in running; her 'look of the day', in promotion of her fashion business and her endorsements of specific fashion brands and events, as requested by her commercial sponsors. Although she is generally mindful of the target audiences and the content before sharing, there are moments when she lingers between the public and the private and when divided audience judgments about her semi-public identity emerge. For example,

I make careful consideration before posting ... The posts that I'd like to share include sports, fashion, or ... I know they want to see whether I'm with my husband [in the post]. Sometimes I take a ... photo of the back [of my husband] ... I don't do it on purpose. It's really spontaneous. For example, it's his birthday and we hope to make him happy ... making people happy. I may post one about the family or a photo of Eason's silhouette.

Meanwhile, Tsui remains well aware of her influence as a celebrity and has deliberately used social media to promote running and to 'radiate positive energy' to the public. Here Tsui seems to be actively and successfully engaged in a self-identification process using social media, attempting to mediate public perceptions of her private self and publicizing herself as an energetic, sporty, and stylish figure. Compared with promoting her own fashion style and business, she claims that sharing her running experience gives her a greater sense of satisfaction, but insists that she is not using social media to improve public image or to serve any utilitarian purpose. Rather, she explains that her social media posts express her 'true' self – defending her private and authentic identity from being eclipsed by the public image endlessly propagated by the media. It is self-actualization and emotional fulfilment rather than a commercial tactic:

In fact, I didn't make it so complicated, because I was just being myself. Perhaps 10 years ago I would pour water on the paparazzi. If Instagram had existed, I would have taken their photos and posted them there. I could be like that ... I'm not a singer or an actress, so I don't need to establish a good image ... [but] my personality.

Van Krieken (2012) pointed out that audiences structure and organize their perception of celebrities 'around ideals of gendered identity, appearance and behaviour' (p. 73). They can closely monitor and manipulate celebrities through the mass media by holding them up against certain norms and ideological values. In this respect, celebrity identity is partly subject to the control of its portrayal in the mass media and how audiences receive, interpret, and respond to such messages. The power relationships among audiences, the media and celebrities are further complicated by the paparazzi and the instant news feeds. The paparazzi's basic interest is the attention capital of the celebrity and the rewards from circulating such capital – typically without the celebrity's consent. The invasion and irresponsible manipulation of celebrities' private lives for commercial gain raises ethical questions about where the boundaries between the public and private spheres lie (Van Krieken, 2012).

In Tsui's view, the paparazzi blur the boundary between the public and the private, and this has changed Hong Kong's entertainment industry in the past 20 years. She says in the past, proper

celebrity interviews conducted by print journalists were the major source of celebrity news. Now, the paparazzi's scandalous and invasive reporting has overtaken, which she feels is one of her biggest challenges, intruding her private and family life, also undermining and overshadowing her power to construct her own identity. She used to scold the paparazzi, but now she become more mild-mannered and strategic when dealing with them, 'now I feel I am a bit abnormal, pretending I don't see them'. The paparazzi's style of journalism presents a challenge to Tsui, which has an immense impact on her self-identification as a public figure. Tsui once assumed that she always appeared on magazine covers and became the target of the paparazzi because of her status as the wife of Eason Chan. No matter how hard she tried to distance her private identity from her public one, Tsui felt that it was very difficult for her to control the extent to which her private life was shared with the public. And the paparazzi only sought to collect a 'partial truth' – unexpectedly taking a picture of the celebrity or anyone closely related, or verbally agitating him or her for a controversial response and then fabricating the context. Tsui recalls a recent encounter:

It's always the case that the paparazzi waited for my daughter by her school ... I have stated repeatedly in interviews and on Weibo that they should not disturb the kid ... So [why] do they need to keep covering this? ... Sometimes it's funny that if there is a paparazzi car waiting for us, my husband will say, 'I can go distract them' ... 'Well, they didn't follow me. They are waiting for you. The target is you'. So that means we need an alternative. My daughter was affected by such ... well, paparazzi's reporting style.

She acknowledges that the paparazzi's actions are beyond her control, and that paparazzi are accustomed to fabricating news without considering the consequences. Tsui bewails the huge contrast between her self-image and her 'ill-tempered' image in the media, based on the ideal of femininity and motherhood rather than on being esteemed and idolized. She senses the loss of control over her public image to the paparazzi and fears becoming a target of public attention. Rather than using confrontation as a strategy, she now teaches her daughter how to embrace a 'proper' public image (which may involve concealing her personal identity and emotions) in front of the paparazzi. 'I can't waste my energy to denounce them [paparazzi] everyday ... I told my daughter, "You need to pretend that you don't see them. Just smile." So you have to instil this message constantly'.

Extended stardom in the fashion world

According to van Krieken (2012), '... celebrities are indeed "powerless," dependent on the allocation of attention from their audience' (p. 73). In order to gain power and commercial returns, celebrities are trapped by the need to hold the public's attention. However, celebrities also exert their symbolic power and be able to monetize fame. Although Tsui's quasi-celebrity status dissatisfies her, it also benefits her fashion business. Via social media, Tsui actively crafts her positive, authentic, multiple identities on social media as a mother, entrepreneur, marathon runner and fashionista. She is not merely a former actress or a singer's wife. Tsui has, to some extent, seized her attention capital from the media (mostly newspapers and tabloids) for her wilful use. In the social media age, she is empowered to take an active role as a media gatekeeper.

When she launched her business, consumers followed her blogs and her 'look of the day' and identified with and even imitate her sartorial style. Social media, such as Weibo and Instagram, allow her to keep her audience abreast of *her* accounts of news, empowering her as a citizen journalist.

Her collaborations with fashion houses are also important to her status in the local fashion industry. She recognizes the benefits of attending fashion events and describes her attendance as a win-win situation.

For example, tonight I will go to [an event organized by the fashion brand] Coach ... It might not be related to my store, but [it is useful] for self-positioning – my influence in the fashion industry and importance to brands. So I need to participate ... This serves as a complement. Also, they might be promoting their products or new collections through me.

While her presence promotes the brands' merchandise, such invitations from the brands strengthen her status as a significant influence in the fashion industry. She is identified professionally, but not overly reliant on the legacy of her former career or the celebrity of her husband.

The contradictory experiences of Tsui as a quasi-celebrity. Using her celebrity in her fashion career as an entrepreneur and socialite, vis-à-vis sharing of her private life to the public is both enabled by the more ubiquitous and direct scrutiny of the new media. Meanwhile, Tsui's agency to present her 'true' (professional, feminine, and wholesome) self, countering the mass media's criticisms on her unruly behaviours as a wife and mother, is also enabled by social media, through framing and limiting online sharing of her work, and (healthy) athletic hobbies and marriage. Thus, for her, the conflicts of the presentation of self online manifested less between self-promotion and authenticity (Marwick & boyd, 2010), and more in the discrepancy between her own understanding of her celebrity and the meaning of a (married, female) celebrity being imposed on her by mainstream media and the online audiences. Therefore, although Tsui's identity presentation strategies are similar to those of micro-celebrities (Marwick & boyd, 2010) and fashion bloggers (Duffy & Hund, 2015), who also sought to maintain their relatable and aspirational images in promoting their personal and/or affiliated brands, equally important, unlike them Tsui has also attempted to reclaim the definition of her identity through selective sharing in social media. However, it is not certain whether the resulting image is the same and coherent for all audiences, such as the fashion and amateur sport communities, and the wider public, as Tsui's fashion business continues to grow while criticisms targeted at her persist in the media.

Discussion

Denise Ho and Hilary Tsui hold similar and divergent views about celebrity identity, how they construct theirs, the best way to use it and how identities are constructed in the entertainment industry. During the interview, Ho demonstrates that her identity as a celebrity and her political, social and sexual identities are intertwined. The complexities and contradictions in the identification process involve externally imposed forces such as the media's power, cultural dynamics and struggles between her subjective perception and the public's expectations (Van Krieken, 2012). Ho is clearly discontented with the present media system, which, according to her, aligns itself solely with typical commercial logic, while celebrities are expected to be silent on sensitive issues such as sexual, civil and political rights. In the face of mainstream expectations and constraints, Ho has taken a more subversive and rebellious stance and resists the present system by negotiating a different, more idealistic celebrity role emphasizing charismatic spiritual leadership or, if necessary, political or cultural martyrhood (Shils, 2010). Ho has endeavoured to strike a balance between her entertainment career and advocacy of Hong Kong people's rights. In Ho's view, this allows her to

stay 'true' to herself and to explore the possibilities of being both a celebrated public figure and an ordinary person who strives to create a better society (Dunn, 1998; Miller, 2011), even the fact that it is rather difficult for a celebrity to sustain such an ideal yet incongruent identity under the ideological censorship of a digital panopticon.

Tsui expresses similar discontent with the media's 'unauthentic' portrayal of her – a celebrity wife and mother (Turner, 2010, p. 224). Like Ho, she too resists the mass media's attempt to hold her against social norms and ideological values. Tsui's negotiation of her star identity is not based solely on industry's commercial logic but is also driven by her desire for self-actualization, emotional fulfilment and social uplifting. In response, she highlights her active crafting of a not overly-domestic or -feminine 'authentic' image, her energetic and sporty lifestyle, and her enjoyment of being a fashion consumer and trendsetter, and entrepreneur (Lind, 2013). However, her purposively crafted multiple public identities at times contradict her alleged rejection of identifying herself as a celebrity, indirectly undermining the authenticity the 'authentic online self' of a celebrity.

In discussing a celebrity's ideal role in society, Ho perceives a celebrity as a charismatic opinion leader (Weber, 2006) who is positive and uses her fame and social influence to mobilize her supporters to contribute to society (in her case, sexual equality – one of her ultimate goals; Shils, 2010). At the same time, she holds a more ambivalent view of a celebrity's role as an opinion leader. As she has become more outspoken socially and politically, she has faced increasing difficulties in resisting the mainstream and balancing her multiple identities (Van Krieken, 2012): she finds herself constantly negotiating her identities and reconciling the inevitable conflicts among them. Being a positive and socially responsible artist who uses her influence in a meaningful and constructive way concerns Ho more than just excelling as an entertainer who reaps economic gains.

Consumers are no longer satisfied with a celebrity's public performances and are eager to discover more about their private life and authentic self. To maximize their profits, traditional media often respond to, or fuel, the public's desire by actively shaping a celebrity's private image and exposing their private life – a seemingly more authentic self (Milner, 2005). As a result, the boundary between the public and private spheres has become increasingly blurred (Horton & Wohl, 2010, pp. 48-49). Tsui's case exemplifies celebrities' concerns about the problems arising from such blurring. To differentiate her authentic self from the contrived public image in Hong Kong, Tsui lingers between the public and private life, thereby creates an acceptable façade of private life via social media, improvises ways to 'collaborate' with the paparazzi and diversifying her identity as an entrepreneur and fashionista. Facing the paparazzi's intrusion and the public's online scrutiny, Tsui was once confrontational. However, she has gradually adapted to the system and improvised strategies for protecting and upholding the 'authentic' image of herself and her family (Johansson, 2006, p. 349), in large part by employing the social media. A boundary between the public and private spheres is performatively drawn through her use of social media, and she tactically makes use of the media system for her personal ends. Through social media, she can selectively display her private life and seize control of her attention capital to shape positive public responses (Langer, 2006).

In conclusion, celebrity identity is today no longer stable or based on any 'intrinsic' star qualities (Dunn, 1998, p. 33); and multiple media are often involved in crafting a celebrity's image and defining what it means to be a celebrity, at least in Hong Kong and China. This can result in multiple identities, which are easily changed and sometimes contradictory. In the cases of Tsui and Ho, apparently they actively reclaimed their 'authentic selves' by sharing their identities and connecting


with their followers on social media. Although they sometimes feel disturbed by the mainstream media's portrayals of and the online audiences' comments on themselves on a personal level, and admit that such manifestations are largely beyond their control and can sometimes be negative in nature, they could also boost the celebrity's popularity.

Both having derived structural power from their offline celebrity to online media, Ho and Tsui have resisted being imposed the mainstream definition of celebrity identity, and have somehow asserted their agency to craft their own images in social and traditional media. In doing so, their identity presentation and audience management are not as well thought-out and seamless as previous research may have delineated in their analyses of other celebrities' media strategies. For example, Ho and Tsui have presented their celebrity images through multiple means, by 'being cautious with' the sharing of their transgressive intimate selves, *and* spontaneously confessing certain aspects of their personal life (Marshall, 2010), like sexual orientation and family life. And, as the various facets of their images converge in presentational media (Marshall, 2010), they may not always be coherent (cf. Ellcessor, 2018), such as Ho's pro-democracy political alignment and former affiliations with (pro-establishment) sponsors, and Tsui's domestic roles and seemingly lavish lifestyle choices, which have resulted in media criticisms and career setbacks. Thus, as they challenge the identities imposed by the mainstream media, it is proved that they are not entirely successful in actively constructing their own images, because they are directly facing, negotiating with and be influenced by multiple online audiences all at once (Marwick & boyd, 2010), and are simultaneously still reliant on traditional media, including television, newspapers and tabloids, for their publicity. For future research, reception studies among fans (using focus group or 'nethnography') can testify our arguments regarding how divergent responses of fans towards celebrities' interactionally constructed public identities have undermined celebrities' autonomy in the process of identification. Alternative challenges faced by other types of celebrities while they construct their public and private identities in the digital age – such as political celebrities, intellectual celebrities and 'grassroots' celebrities – can also be further explored.

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