

Celebrity in the Age of Social Networking Sites

Modes of Learning

For this module, the following modes of learning will be used:

- Interactive Module
- Online Readings
- Media

Introduction

Throughout the modules you have completed thus far, you have been introduced to social media from a variety of perspectives including identity management, community, as well as how the structure of social media allows for sharing content to a wide audience.

In this Module, we will explore social media from the perspective of celebrity. Building on our work from previous Modules, namely that social media allows ideas to spread quickly and widely, we will now look at the ways social media has changed what it means to be “famous”.

As you begin this module, please refer to the timeline and make note of any assessments or important dates. If you have any questions, ask your instructor.

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this module, you will be able to:

1. Define “celebrity” and “famous”.
2. Discuss the ways celebrity and social media intersect.
3. Describe the impact of “going viral” on an individual using the case studies of Zeddie Little and Blake Boston.
4. Define sponsored content using examples from YouTube and other social media sites.
5. Provide examples of how social media users have monetized their network participation to generate income.

Key Terms and Concepts

Listed below are some important key terms and concepts within this module.

- Celebrity
- Viral Media
- Monetization
- Sponsored Content
- Google AdSense

Celebrity in the Age of Social Media

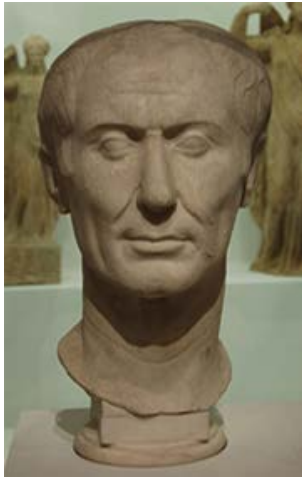
According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “Celebrity” can be defined as:

1. A famous person, especially in entertainment or sport.
2. The state of being well known.

Related to this is the definition of “Famous”:

1. Known about by many people.

Celebrity is not a new or recent invention; that particular people will become well known or famous has been a tradition for as long as humans have come together to form communities. For example, Julius Caesar is widely understood to be an early example of a celebrity, with biographies citing his charisma and talent for public speaking leading to his rise in power. Caesar was so well known and recognizable that he was featured on Roman currency both while he was alive and after his death.



In this Module we will explore how networked communication has changed the nature of how one might become “famous” or a “celebrity”. In particular, we will look at two ways that celebrity and social media intersect:

1. How viral media can lead to unexpected (or unwanted) celebrity;
2. How social media celebrity can be mobilized for profit.

While each generation has their own well-known celebrities who are “famous for being famous” (a current example being the Kardashian family) social networking sites, combined with viral media, have begun to transform what it means to be famous. In the examples we will now explore, it is also clear that not only is the definition of celebrity changing, we are also seeing a shift on who the spotlight might shine upon.

Viral Media and Unexpected Internet Celebrity

Returning to the memes we explored in Internet Cultures, image macros are one way that private individuals can be thrust into unwanted (or unexpected) internet fame. Many image macros rely on repurposed photographs where the subject may not consent to their likeness being used. Furthermore, they may not even be aware they have become the “face of a meme” until the meme featuring their

likeness gains enough popularity or goes viral enough that someone in their immediate social circle alerts them to its existence.

Let's look at two case studies of Internet users whose faces have become associated with memes: Zeddie Little aka "Ridiculously Photogenic Guy" and Blake Boston aka "Scumbag Steve". In both examples, the Internet users in question did not actively seek out fame, nor were they involved in their images becoming memes.

The first example is how a picture of Zeddie Little became known as the "Ridiculously Photogenic Guy", which was detailed in This Memetic Moment by Ryan Milner. In this case, Little was photographed while running in a race. This particular image captured widespread attention because Little appears unexpectedly photogenic for someone exercising. Of particular relevance to our discussions here is how Little was never asked if he consented to having his photo taken, nor was he initially aware of his growing fame.

According to the Milner article, Zeddie Little was not seeking fame prior to his photograph becoming the "Ridiculously Photogenic Guy". Milner describes exactly how much work went into uncovering the identity of "Ridiculously Photogenic Guy" in his article about Internet fame:

"As "Ridiculously Photogenic Guy" spread across social media, traditional media outlets began to join the conversation. The coverage started locally. On April 4, 2012, Paul Bowers of the Charleston City Paper, a free alternative weekly, identified the subject of the photo as New York's Zeddie Watkins Little, and also credited its photographer, King_of_Games, as Charleston's Will King. King did not hide his identity on his Flickr, but Little's identity was unknown until Bowers identified him by the race bib pinned to his shirt in King's photo. King spoke to Bowers on the record for his article, but by the time of its publication the City Paper hadn't yet tracked down Little for an interview. "We're doing our best to find Zeddie Little," Bowers wrote, "and if he does eventually pick up the phone, we'll barrage him with Seventeen magazine-style personal questions."

By April 5, Bowers still hadn't been able to get in touch with Little, but he had uncovered enough to publish more details about his life. He talked to Little's father, along with a former employer. Both confirmed that Little had grown up in Charleston, went to the College of Charleston, and worked at a local pizzeria before moving to New York. That same day, Christina Elmore covered the Little story in the Post and Courier, Charleston's major daily newspaper. She interviewed King as well as the friend who had coined the name "Mr. Ridiculously Photogenic Guy." A day later, the meme, and the story behind it, started receiving national and international coverage.

(Milner 2016)

In the case of "Ridiculously Photogenic Guy", it is important to note both his family and a former employer spoke with the press before Little himself had been contacted and made aware of his growing fame. A similar example of a private individual being thrust into the spotlight comes from our second case study, Blake Boston becoming "Scumbag Steve".

The "Scumbag Steve" image macro first appeared on Reddit.com in 2011. In this picture that originally appeared on his MySpace profile in 2006, Blake Boston is seen wearing a fur lined coat and a backward baseball cap. Typically the meme features a scenario where "Steve" is being self-centered and rude.

Recall how in the previous module the question of authorship in regards to memes is difficult and slippery.

In an interview his mother granted to The Daily Mail, Boston's mother describes how when the meme first went viral, her son received hate mail because some Internet users couldn't tell the difference between the actions ascribed to Scumbag Steve by anonymous authors, and her son's actual, real life behaviours. In this interview, she explains that the hate mail only began to subside after Boston began giving interviews allowing the "real" person in the picture to shine through.

Optional reading: [Interview with Black Boston's mother about her son becoming Scumbag Steve.](#)

Since then, Boston has chosen to embrace the "Scumbag Steve" nickname, treating it like an "alter ego" or a character he can put on and perform when people recognize him on the street. For Boston, this unexpected fame - even if his face is associated with Scumbag Steve being a jerk - is ultimately worth the negative associations as he is attempting to make a name for himself as a rapper. He has also used his position as an internet celebrity to help others who may be gain notoriety for having their face associated with an Internet meme.

For example, he has written an open letter to the woman who has become the face of the meme "Annoying Facebook Girl" to provide some suggestions about how to deal with her unexpected (and likely, unwanted) fame.

He writes,

"But here's what I need you to know. When you go off to college, and you're walking down the hall and a group of kids see you and scream, "Oh my god it's Annoying Facebook Girl," don't cry. You see. Some people can't distinguish the internet from real life. There are people who refuse to believe my name isn't Steve and that I am not really the scumbag (well not all the time, that is). Just remember who you are. And that you know you're a decent kid.

You're going to be in shock for a while, when you see what people have written. But the most important and self-preserving thing you can do is know that it's not you. You can't take this personally. I'll say that again, you can't take this personally. Hell if I did... well let's not go there.

The part that will suck though is that there will always be those people that somehow think YOU did this, that you made the meme, and that you could stop it if you wanted to. That you have some control over it. You don't. The internet birthed you and they'll decide when you (the meme) will die.

There will also be those people who assuage their guilt by telling you how great it is, how lucky you are to be a meme. Just smile. What they are really saying is, thank god it wasn't me."

(Doctorow, 2012)

The events that make up these two case studies illustrate the unpredictability of Internet fame. Boston's letter to "Annoying Facebook Girl" reminds us that this is not something that you can ever prepare for, as it is very difficult to know what content will go viral, and what will fizzle out quickly. This letter also serves as a reminder than hoping for (or fearing) viral fame is not necessarily useful. Instead, a tangible thing that you can do moving forward is think carefully before sharing a new picture or video to your

social networking profile. Before clicking post, share, pin, etc., take a moment to remember that the image you share may very well take on a life of its own.

Similarly, it is important to take a moment to remember that there are real people such as Blake Boston or Zeddie Little who have been transformed into the Scumbag Steves and the Ridiculously Photogenic Guys. In the case of Little, he did not ask for his photograph to be taken, nor did he give permission for his likeness to be shared to Flickr and then Reddit.

Similarly, Boston did not expect his mom's photograph to be taken from his MySpace page and used to represent "that guy everyone hates". Both men have taken their associated memes in stride, which is in part why their stories were selected to be included in this Module. However, as Milner notes, for every "Ridiculously Photogenic Guy" there is also a "Star Wars Kid" who "was so traumatized by his viral fame that he dropped out of high school and entered a psychiatric institution, and would later sue the families of the other kids who leaked the video" (Milner, 2016).

By sharing these memes featuring individuals traumatized by their unexpected and unwanted time in the spotlight, it may serve as an ideal case study to talk about the double edged sword of Internet fame, but it also strips those featured of their agency and desire to be forgotten.

Sponsored Content: Monetizing Internet Fame

As we explored in the Internet Culture module, knowing what will become a viral hit is difficult to anticipate in advance. In this Module, we added the important observation that the ease by which a funny picture or interesting videos are shared via social media can thrust someone unexpectedly into the spotlight. This was demonstrated by what happened to both Blake Boston and Zeddie Little. What happens next is highly dependent on the individual, but in some cases may lead to the newly famous person attempting to monetize this fame.

In the case of "Scumbag Steve", Blake Boston ended up accepting his unexpected notoriety in part because he hoped that being associated with Scumbag Steve would help propel his music career. Zeddie Little, on the other hand, finds his meme amusing but appears less interested in spinning it into a new career.

Another example of spinning momentary internet fame into a larger career trajectory comes from Adam Nyerere Bahner, more commonly known by his stage name Tay Zonday. In 2007 Bahner uploaded a video to his YouTube channel entitled "Chocolate Rain". His unique singing voice and the catchy melody made this into an instant Internet classic and has since been watched over 111 million times. Since then, Bahner has left his previous position as a graduate student and has found consistent work doing voice acting and other media appearances.

In an attempt to cash in on the viral hit, Dr. Pepper paid Bahner "a lot of money" to record in "Cherry Chocolate Rain", a YouTube video featuring Diet Cherry Chocolate Dr. Pepper. This would be an example of sponsored content. Bahner received financial compensation for creating a video he might not otherwise have made. In this case, a song in the vein of Chocolate Rain but instead of being about racism the lyrics has been changed to being about a carbonated beverage.

Watch: ["Chocolate Rain" Original Song by Tay Zonday](#)

Watch: ["Cherry Chocolate Rain" Original Song by Tay Zonday](#)

Sponsored content occurs when a content creator receives money from a company wishing to promote their product or service to the creator's audience. The content does not necessarily have an editorial tone ("you should buy this" or "I recommend you use this particular service") but does inform the viewer that the product exists. In turn, it is hoped that the viewer makes a positive association between their social media celebrity and the product being advertised.

Sponsored content can take the form of advertisements appearing at the beginning and/or end of a YouTube video. Cole and Marmalade, a YouTube channel devoted to two cats and the humans who care for them, sometimes agrees to advertise on their channel, such as the ad for cat litter appearing at the beginning and end of "10 Things Cat Owners Have Probably done". More recently, they have also begun to use their growing Internet fame to spread the message to their viewers about the importance of not declawing your pets, raising awareness about safety issues about cats, or other videos as part of their growing "cat awareness" playlist.

Watch: [10 Things Cat Owners Have Probably Done](#)

Read: [Cat Awareness Playlist](#)

Some social media celebrities who accept money for sponsored content might choose to hide this transaction. They may make a video, post a series of photos, or write a blog post extolling the virtues of a particular product, but do not ever disclose they were being paid to advertise it. This, when discovered, usually draws the ire of their fans who may have previously thought these were their personal opinions and recommendations based on an actual like of the product. For example, in 2014 Warner Bros. paid prominent YouTubers to promote their game Middle Earth: Shadow of Mordor without disclosure. In mid-2016 Warner Bros. was disciplined by the Federal Trade Commission for doing so. In the majority of cases - PewDiePie being the notable exception that indicated it was sponsored content - most of the YouTubers did not disclose they were paid for their reviews.



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In other cases, the content creator may intend to obscure that a particular post is sponsored, but accidentally leave information that indicate they were paid. Celebrity gossip sites like Jezebel collect screenshots of these "mishaps", such as in 2016 when Ramona Singer (from The Real Housewives of New York) left the instructions for her paid content in the caption of an Instagram post.

Read: [Ramona Singer Includes the Instructions for Her Sponsored Instagram Post](#)

We will return to sponsored content in Module 7, when we dive deeper into the behind the scene labour that goes into being a social media content creator, and the financial realities of attempting to make a living from being “Internet famous”.

Google AdSense

Sponsored content has flourished in part because it offers a break from more traditional forms of advertising such as banner advertisements, or the ads that appear alongside your Facebook news feed.

In What is Social Media we explored how social media in its most recent iteration (privately owned websites) primarily makes a profit by serving advertisements. Therefore, the most common way for content creators to profit from their work is to offer up the opportunity to place advertisements beside their content. Advertisers are willing to pay for this because content creators already have an audience, and the creator receives financial compensation for connecting advertisers with a potential buyer for particular products or services.

The specifics of how (or even if) advertisements can be placed depends on the particular site being used to share content, but generally this is an “opt in” system where a user must choose to participate. For example, if a user chooses to allow ads on their YouTube channel - generally in the form of advertisements that will play prior to their video - they will be paid based on the number of times their viewers have clicked on the ads. The specific steps to monetizing a YouTube account can be found below and the explanation about how to add AdSense to a blog or website are detailed below.

Read: [AdSense for YouTube: How to earn money from your videos](#)

Read: [AdSense blog/website: Discover how easy it is to user AdSense](#)

Further details about how a site is monetized, and how users can run afoul of the Google AdSense rules is included in the second reading associated with this Module, Elspeth Reeve’s “The Secret Lives of Tumblr Teens”.

In detailing the meteoric rise (and subsequent fall) of Jess, also known as the widely popular “Pizza” on Tumblr, Reeve describes the behind the scenes work that went into artificially increasing clicks on advertisements on Tumblr. Here, users were attempting to exploit a loophole where they were trading clicks with other users. Advertisers were angry when they discovered this, as the banner space and clicks they had been paying for would never convert into actual purchases.

Read: [Secret Lives of Tumblr Teens](#)

Reeve explains:

“With AdSense banners, users get paid when a reader clicks or views an ad. However, Google forbids “click fraud” – you can’t just click on an ad on your own blog all day and watch the money come in. Google has bots looking for that. So teens have schemes to evade the bots. There are a handful of secret Facebook groups and multi-member chats for Tumblr users with high follower counts-between 10,000 and 100,000 or even more-with names like Wallflowers 2.0 and GOATS. There they organize to trade favors, like agreeing to promote each other’s posts.

An “r4r” in the Facebook group is offering an exchange of reblogs, so each blog is exposed to a wider set of followers.

An “r4c” means a user will reblog a post for someone who promises to visit their blog, refresh it several times, click on the ad, and then refresh it several times – but only if you’re from a “premium country,” because Google pays more for clicks from Ireland, for example, than from the Philippines. An ad might specify “please no car/dating/clothing web sites!” because those ads pay less per click. The blog must be refreshed until a better-paying ad shows up, like one from a bank.”

Looking forward: The financial realities of being Internet Famous

In this Module we have revisited the topic of viral media from Module 5. This time, we have looked in detail at the case studies of Blake Boston (“Scumbag Steve”) and Zeddie Little (“Ridiculously Photogenic Guy”) who were private citizens until they found themselves thrust into the spotlight because their likenesses were both featured in popular image macros. In some cases, this unexpected fame via viral media can be monetized either through sponsored content (such as the Cherry Chocolate Rain music video) or by adding advertisements to a popular YouTube or Tumblr page.

While this Module may make it appear that becoming famous on the Internet is a path to financial success, “The Secret Lives of Tumblr Teens” provides an example of how fleeting this success can be. We will return the financial difficulties associated with being a full time social media content creator in Module 7, which may in part explain why people like Pizza gravitate towards get rich quick schemes like the attempts to artificially inflate the number of clicks on their monetized Tumblr pages.

In many ways, sponsored content is just the most recent version of celebrity endorsement – famous people are paid to pretend they use a particular product. On the other hand, following someone (even a traditional celebrity like an actor or a professional athlete) on their social networking profiles feels more intimate than watching them in more traditional forms of advertising, as social media allows (at least the potential) for interaction.

Therefore, a celebrity tweeting about a particular product may feel more like a personal recommendation, rather than a comment that was paid for by a particular company. As you spend time on social network sites either as part of this course or during your leisure time, keep an eye out for signs of sponsored content (identified or not). If you come across examples that you think are particularly interesting, please share them with your classmates on the course discussion board.

In conclusion, this information about celebrity and how it can be mobilized to advertise via social media is intended to provide another component to your toolkit to better unpack the interactions you may take part in as you visit social networking sites beyond this course. As with most of the content in this course, it is ultimately up to you to decide how you feel about sponsored content, whether it is something you agree with, if it is a potential source of advertising for your company, or even if it is something you might want to engage in on your own social networking site profiles.

Module Summary

In this module we have explored:

1. The definitions of being a “celebrity” and being “famous”.

2. How viral media has made it possible for unlikely or unexpected people to become famous, as was the case of Zeddie Little and Blake Boston.
3. The ways that celebrity can be monetized via social networking sites, via sponsored content and allowing Google AdSense to serve advertisements to your audience.
4. The Secret Lives of Tumblr Teens served as example of how much money can be made via Google AdSense, but attempts to scam the system will eventually be discovered and shut down.

Knowledge Check

The following questions provide an opportunity for you to see what you remember and understand so far. Answer the questions to the best of your ability.

Question 1: One possible definition of “celebrity” is “the state of being well-known.”

- A. True
- B. False

Question 2: Only athletes and actors are considered to be celebrities.

- A. True
- B. False

Question 3: Celebrity is a relatively recent concept, directly linked to social networking sites.

- A. True
- B. False

Question 4: Memes are a form of viral media.

- A. True
- B. False

Question 5: “Scumbag Steve” is based on the real actions of Blake Boston.

- A. True
- B. False

Question 6: Sponsored Content refers to when you allow a company to place a short promotional film on your social networking profile.

- A. True
- B. False

Question 7: Google AdSense will not pay for you to click on ads on your own website.

- A. True
- B. False

You have completed Celebrity in the Age of Social Networking Sites.

Remember to:

- ✓ Check the timeline before you proceed to the next module to ensure you have completed any assignments as required.
- ✓ Check with your instructor if you have any questions.

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