'We belong to something beautiful'
Julie Vu’s and Madeline Stuart’s use of minority identity as a popular feminist self-branding strategy on Instagram
Raun, Tobias; Christensen-Strynø, Maria Bee

Published in:
Information Communication and Society

DOI:
10.1080/1369118X.2021.1889638

Publication date:
2022

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

• Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
• You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain.

Take down policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact rucforsk@kb.dk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.
'We belong to something beautiful': Julie Vu's and Madeline Stuart’s use of minority identity as a popular feminist self-branding strategy on Instagram

Tobias Raun and Maria Bee Christensen-Strynø

Communication Studies, Department of Communication and Arts, Roskilde University, Roskilde, Denmark

ABSTRACT
This article analyses the use of minority identity as a popular feminist self-branding strategy on Instagram. Zooming in on the internet celebrities, Julie Vu, a Canadian transgender model, beauty queen and makeup artist, and Madeline Stuart, an Australian photo/runway model with Down syndrome, we explore the ways in which they both engage in building and strengthening their self-branding practices by actively drawing on their own self-representational identity work as minorities. We situate Vu and Stuart within a framework of contemporary branding culture and popular feminism, and map their journeys as users of different social media platforms, as well as their locations within online celebrity categories, leading to an analysis of their current engagements with Instagram as their main self-branding platform. The article argues that minority identity, as it is expressed in the cases of Vu and Stuart, has become a significant, if not essential, element in the broader landscape of self-branding practices and strategies on social media.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 18 November 2019
Accepted 31 January 2021

KEYWORDS
Minority identity, self-branding, social media celebrity, popular feminism, Instagram

CONTACT Maria Bee Christensen-Strynø mariabee@ruc.dk
© 2021 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

In 2019, Julie Vu, a Vietnamese-Canadian transgender model, beauty queen and makeup artist, had her face featured on large billboards for the Canadian branch of the French multinational cosmetics brand Sephora as part of a large-scale brand campaign. Vu, who has built a career by climbing the ladder of online fame and celebrity categories, ¹ has several posts on her Instagram profile picturing herself in front of the billboards with her face next to the campaign’s tagline ‘We belong to something beautiful’ (see Figure 1).
These images do not, as such, stand out from the rest of Vu’s steady stream of posts on Instagram that mainly consists of glossy pictures of herself. But what is actually noticeable is the ‘we’ in the phrase ‘We belong to something beautiful’, which conspicuously contrasts the ways in which the visual depictions have an almost exclusive focus on Vu as an individual. This immediately prompts a question about the kind of ‘we’ that is being articulated and called upon when the only visible person in the posts – and on her Instagram profile at large – is Vu. While the most obvious response is that the statement points to an inclusive ‘we’ that is meant to embrace minority groups (i.e., the transgender community), which is supported by the fact that Sephora launched the ‘We belong’ campaign following a period of negative media attention that was sparked by controversies surrounding the company’s inclusivity and diversity policies, there are also other implications of taking on this statement. In the accompanying text to her image post, Vu proclaims: ‘As a transgender woman, I am so proud that members of the LGBTQ+ community are being recognized by a mainstream platform’, which (in addition to confirming her self-identification as part of a distinct minority group) explicitly enforces a validation of a kind of ‘we’ that is integrated within the framework of mainstream culture, a universal ‘we’. By aligning the inclusive minority ‘we’ with the universal mainstream ‘we’, Vu is clearly blurring the boundaries of – and establishing a coexistence between – her status as a minority advocate and as a mainstream celebrity that seems to fit perfectly with her own self-representation on Instagram. In this sense, she is also taking part in a process of sculpting and individualising the ‘we’ in ways that match the commercial logics of the Sephora campaign manifesto which encourage ‘standing fearlessly together to celebrate our differences’, honouring ‘self-expression’ (Sephora, 2019). The campaign is an understated form of commodity activism, thus the ‘we’ is both abstract, hence potentially all-encompassing, while also being a ‘we’ that hints at the emergence and mobilisation of social movements, not least through the choice of diversified cover faces. As noted by Sarah Banet-Weiser, in the twenty-first-century brand culture ‘marketers use brands as lucrative avenues for social activism, and social movements in turn use brands as launch points for specific political issues’ (2012, p. 16). This type of strategy can also be characterised as ‘safely affirmative feminism’ (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 4), as feminist politics is expressed in positive and generalised terms, which downplays the significance, struggles and discrimination of distinct groups of minorities through sugar sweet, all agreeable positive affirmation. Furthermore, the text ‘I’m finally in the right body’, written across the billboard, points towards the ‘wrong body’ narrative of transgender life, which has attained broad mainstream cultural recognisability and dominates the normative tale of transgender subjectivity throughout popular culture. Although the narrative of moving from a wrong to a right body is tied to a specified minority identity it also connects to a broader neoliberal promise of happiness and fulfilment, ‘in which working on the body is privileged as the route to realising or articulating the authentic self for all contemporary subjects, cisgender or trans’ (Lovelock, 2017, p. 740).

The intricate ways in which online personas and internet celebrities like Vu become diversity advocates for more or less explicit commercial purposes in order to and as part of building, maintaining and developing their online identities as self-brands, are at the core of this article’s central theme and analytical focus, which is the use of minority identity as a popular feminist self-branding strategy on Instagram. In line with Banet-Weiser, we understand the concept of self-branding as a complex cultural phenomenon, entailing the ‘making and selling [of] immaterial things – feelings and affects, personalities and values – rather than actual goods’ (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 7). Branding often involves some kinds of commodification but it is also more than an economic strategy and it extends beyond a mere business model (Banet-Weiser, 2012, pp. 4–5). Self-branding has become an imperative both within and beyond a social media sphere for large parts of the workforce, not least within the creative class (Whitmer, 2019, p. 2).
The apparently frictionless ways of merging corporate interests with personal ones have already been discussed at length by media scholars in studies of online celebrity categories and dynamics (e.g., Abidin, 2018; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017; Jerslev & Mortensen, 2016; Marwick, 2013) and in the critical self-branding literature (e.g., Gershon, 2016; Hearn, 2008) of which Banet-Weiser’s work on ‘authenticity’ and ‘the ambivalences of brand culture’ (2012) together with her newer work on ‘popular feminism’ (2018) lay the important ground for the framing of our argument in this article. However, in the context of social media celebritification and brand culture as vehicles for the neoliberalisation of political messages, including postfeminist and popular feminist self-branding practices, minorities are primarily inscribed as part of a listing of sub-identities such as age, race and class (cf. Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 75), which dulls the idea of these intersecting categories of identity as actual ‘players’ in the field. Furthermore, within transgender and disability studies there is a huge lack of work that focuses on issues of social media celebrity and self-branding. Our study is generated by an ongoing dialogue with these fields and their evident overlaps, focusing on social media users who actively draw on their own identity work as minorities.

Vu is far from the only example of a person who has gained visibility and fame from promoting and self-identifying with transgender issues, let alone minority issues. Nonetheless, she epitomises a very interesting way of performing particular forms of femininity and celebrity that stands out in relation to acquiring further knowledge of the sophisticated ways in which the logics of social media celebritification and self-branding practices operate. Another notable figure and social media celebrity is Madeline Stuart, who is an Australian photo and runway model with Down syndrome. Like Vu, Stuart has gained fame through her self-representation on social media, and in similar ways uses her online visibility as a platform for activist and commercial purposes. Her presence is thus marked by an explicitly expressed desire for visibility and inclusion of people with disabilities, but with herself as the undivided centre of attention. Also similar to Vu, Stuart invokes the rhetoric of the duplex understanding of the ‘we’, which in her case can be exemplified through an Instagram post made in connection to her becoming an ambassador for the social impact platform Awareness Ties (see Figure 2). Here Stuart is depicted in what appears as a glamour fashion shot, which carefully accentuates her position as a professional and successful model while simultaneously highlighting her political voice and agenda through a quote (from herself) written across the image that reads: ‘Only through inclusion can we find the true meaning of humanity’. Again the ‘we’ comes to channel both the inclusive minority ‘we’ that points to Stuart’s explicit connections to Down syndrome and disability communities, and to the universal mainstream ‘we’ that consolidates the value of her voice in a broader cultural context.
Exactly this amalgamation of minority self-representation and commercial – as well as cultural – value is an interesting and relatively unexplored phenomenon, and one which points towards potential changes in how we can understand identity-political activism within the framework of the market logics driving social media platforms. Hence, it is not only relevant to uncover these mechanisms, but also to seek a greater understanding of how the changing conditions are accelerating new forms of minority identity-related empowerment and action in continuation of mainstream media cultures.

We have come across Vu and Stuart through our separate work on social media and transgender (e.g., Raun, 2016, 2018), and social media and disability (e.g., Christensen-Strynø, 2018; Christensen-Strynø & Eriksen, 2020), and have in recent years been in lively dialogue about the two of them as significant and overlapping cases which point to new configurations and entanglements of minority activism and self-branding practices. Conducting a dual reading of Vu and Stuart allows us to pinpoint some of the broader shifts concerning minority groups’ use of and succumbing to the increasing market logics of social media, which exceed the specificities of transgender and disability self-representation respectively. Vu and Stuart are interesting cases as they have both grown and developed their media practice and visibility tremendously to a degree that we have not come across before in any other transgender or disability social media users. They both actively and strategically embrace the premises of social media’s attention economy and they both seek inclusion within the parameters of normative femininity. What we want to highlight with these two cases is the ambivalent and complex ways in which minority politics runs through mainstream channels and normative logics, which puts a different face on activism. Highlighting ambivalence as a particularly crucial signifier and a desired reading strategy is also why Banet-Weiser’s work (2012, 2018) resonated so well with us. As she states:

I try to avoid the simple assumption that situates branding and consumer culture as oppositional to ‘real’ politics and culture […] Rather than generalize all branding strategies as egregious effects of today’s market, and think wistfully of a bygone world that was truly authentic, it is more productive to situate brand cultures in terms of their ambivalence, where both economic imperatives and ‘authenticity’ are expressed and experienced simultaneously. (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 5)

In our reading of Vu and Stuart we deliberately refrain from offering a more ‘paranoid’ reading, exposing and demystifying capitalist and normative structures (Sedgwick, 2003), reducing their gendered self-representation ‘to a matter of normative (re)production and/or subversive deconstruction’ (Raun, 2014, p. 16). We do not engage in an in-depth analysis of Vu and Stuart, but single out analytical themes and characteristics running through their online self-representation, and relate those to broader cultural and media theoretical questions, especially concerning branding as a cultural phenomenon and new forms of minority politics.

**Vu and Stuart in the landscape of celebrity categories**

A central component in Vu’s and Stuart’s present self-branding practices on social media is their respective journeys as users of different social media platforms, and not least their locations within the landscape of celebrity categories. As part of our analytical work, we have included an illustration of the most important characteristics of Vu and Stuart’s celebrity status and strategies (see Figure 3).
The processes of self-branding and the ways in which minority identity come to matter are intertwined with platform logics and cultures, as well as the celebrity strategies applied and the celebrity status gained. In relation to Vu and Stuart it is rather interesting how they seem to have moved through a landscape of celebrity strategies and categories that bears witness to their rising popularity and to a changing social media sphere that has also been outlined in the research literature. As our illustration shows, concepts such as micro-celebrity (Marwick, 2013; Senft, 2008), Instafame (Marwick, 2015b), internet celebrity (Abidin, 2018) and influencer marketing (Hund & McGuigan, 2019) are some of the central categories that have been useful to map and characterise Vu’s and Stuart’s social media practices as they have developed over time. While the concept of micro-celebrity points to the distinctive self-portraying tactics and practices, such as intimate connection and interaction with one’s followers and the sharing of personal experiences and views (see, e.g., Abidin, 2018; Jerslev, 2016; Marwick, 2013, 2015a, 2015b; Raun, 2018; Senft, 2008, 2013), internet celebrity functions as an attempt to describe some of the structural changes in online celebrity that are not dichotomous with traditional celebrities and traditional media platforms in the same way as micro-celebrities. Rather than a niche of dedicated followers with the same special interests or identity positioning, internet celebrities have a larger and broader following and are thus characterised by a high degree of visibility and a large number of followers which exceeds that of a micro-celebrity (Abidin, 2018, pp. 15–16).

Although an overarching categorisation as internet celebrities or influencers would probably suffice when describing Vu’s and Stuart’s current social media practices, we find that it is crucial to understand the entanglement of the different categories at play and how these have shifted over time, both in terms of reach (attested through the fact that their follower counts are still steadily increasing, especially on Instagram) but also with respect to the forms of activist, as well as commercial, expressions they are enabled to practice.

Both Vu and Stuart started out as micro-celebrities with their explicit claim of speaking to minority issues, creating awareness about transgender and disability identities, ergo their initial presence on social media is identity and community empowerment. Their self-presentation has a variety of traits in keeping with micro-celebrity, although this might be most pronounced in Vu’s initial YouTube videos. Vu uploaded
her first videos to YouTube in 2011 under the name Princessjoules, which she also uses as channel/profile names on Twitter and Facebook. After half a year on YouTube, she came out as transgender, and she is known for very openly documenting her transition. Vu has posted very candid videos from operating and recovery rooms, as well as close-up photos of her scars after breast augmentation and genital surgeries in the style of an online diary (see also Raun, 2016). In line with the strategies and traits that characterise micro-celebrities, Vu exhibits a high degree of ‘emotional vulnerability’ (Marwick, 2015a, p. 344). She cries in front of the camera, physically and mentally inviting her audience to follow along in her painful journey. Video is used as a tool for exchanging information about transgender issues and procedures, where interaction with kindred spirits and allies is the paramount aim. This is further underpinned by her direct gaze into the camera, her informal chattiness, addressing the audience as a you. The audience is also regularly invited to share feedback or questions, and she makes herself available to fulfil the needs of the audience for advice and guidance.

The majority of Stuart’s photos relate to her professional life as a model, but in line with the characteristics of the micro-celebrity she also shares traditionally more personal events with her boyfriend, family, and, for instance, a lengthy hospitalisation in connection with a heart operation. Stuart’s self-presentation on social media thereby draws on performative doings by which she makes herself accessible and recognisable to her followers and fans via her high visibility and sometimes in direct exchanges with them. She also regularly sends out greetings to her fans, e.g., in connection with holidays such as Christmas. Stuart hereby maintains and performs an identity as a micro-celebrity who expresses recognition of and care for her followers.

However, Vu’s and Stuart’s visibility and following have grown to an extent that they are no longer ‘just’ micro-celebrities. Their current celebrity status stems from a highly active and strategic use of social media, which now includes a multitude of platforms online (Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, etc.) and offline (fashion shows, beauty pageants, etc.), as well as traditional media platforms (talk shows, newspapers, billboards, etc.). Their self-branding is now also mediated and shaped by assistants and agencies, helping to professionalise their look and relationship with the public. While it is evident that Vu and Stuart have succeeded in transforming their initial micro-celebrity status into something that looks like more sustainable careers, at the same time, it is interesting to note the ways in which their political engagements have shifted from personal and peer-oriented exchanges into more authoritative and professionalised expressions that are reliant upon ‘the perpetuation of consumerism, as if liberation’ (Usher, 2020, p. 185). In this regard, it is also worth noting that Vu and Stuart function as influencers, each having cultivated a self-brand that is strong enough to sell other brands and products. As influencers they translate their social media practices into various forms of capital, turning their online fame into an economic means of life.

From the beginning, Vu’s social media practice has combined activist and commercial elements. In some of her early YouTube videos, she presents product reviews and recommendations based on gifts she has received in exchange for publicity or from cosmetics brands she works for. As Vu’s celebrity has grown, so too has the number of product reviews, recommendations and sponsored content, predominantly featuring makeup, hair and skin products, but also sex toys. The commercial aspect is even more pronounced on Instagram, typically through frequent tagging of the product/brand she is wearing in the photo, and through the many aestheticised close-up photos of the product itself, primarily cosmetics, bags and perfumes. The exclusivity of the various brands and Vu’s self-representation reinforce one another through the aestheticised filters that characterise the imagery of both her and the brand. Her Instagram universe thus falls within the realm of what Emily Hund and Lee McGuigan term ‘shoppability’ or ‘shoppable life’:

The term shoppable life is meant to capture both the idea that social media users perform and document aspirational lifestyles whose constituent elements can be bought instantly, as well as the notion that sociality unfolds within platforms that increasingly encode marketplace logics, capacities, and proclivities into their physical designs and cultural forms. (Hund & McGuigan, 2019, p. 3)
Vu’s self-representation is not only highly aestheticised but also supplied with information and tags, which makes it easy and frictionless for the followers to ‘shop my look’ as she explicates in the accompanying text next to the image (e.g., Instagram post, July 4, 2019).

In the case of Stuart there are no direct product reviews or sponsorships, but rather a continuous highlighting and crediting of brands, events and people she surrounds herself with in the fashion world. Unlike Vu, but in line with some other influencers, she has launched her own brand. Since 2017, Stuart has been a fashion designer and proprietor of the online clothing retailer 21 Reasons Why. The brand name is a direct reference to the ‘extra’ chromosome often identified as the (biomedical) explanation of the definition of Down syndrome, highlighting and reflecting the simultaneous presence and intertwining of commercial interests and self-identification as a disability advocate.

**Vu’s and Stuart’s visual self-presentation on Instagram**

Instagram plays a key role in Vu’s and Stuart’s social media presences as a forum where the self-commercialising processes they cultivate have become particularly prominent and evident over time. The importance of visual self-control and self-presentation is intensified on Instagram due to the prevalence of selected (static) images, and because Instagram privileges the photograph in an edited and staged form above other information, such as explanatory captions or comments (Marwick, 2015b, pp. 143–144). In the cases of Vu and Stuart, the accompanying text and hashtagging serve an important supporting function in terms of positioning the photo within an identity-political framework.

Instagram is a haven for the production of distinct forms of visual aesthetics and stylistic compositions of bodily and material expressions that harmonise with commercial branding logics. It is a platform dominated by commercial displays and exchanges, and it has swiftly and seamlessly been taken up and incorporated into influencers’ repertoire of sponsored content (Leaver et al., 2020, pp. 101–103).

As mentioned, Vu is primarily known for her videos on YouTube; her Twitter and Facebook profiles are mainly used to refer to and repost her YouTube videos. However, her Instagram profile has grown to become an equally, if not more, important platform than YouTube. From the beginning, her use of Instagram was glitzier and more staged, downplaying a sense of authenticity and intimacy. The overriding focus is on her as a picture-perfect model at all times, with makeup and an endless array of new outfits, which often consist of short or dainty dresses and bikinis that accentuate her slim and fit body, and its feminine connoting contours. Vu’s perfectly shaped body and hyper-feminine appearance constitute a sexualised visual attraction that is often positioned in front of luxurious hotels, swimming pools and shops, or in exotic destinations (including India and Thailand) as picturesque backdrops (see https://www.instagram.com/p/B2OY2GbHtJZ/). It appears as if she has endless leisure time for travelling and shopping. There are very few of the classic selfies that are otherwise characteristic of Instagram (Gilles & Edwards, 2018, p. 185); rather, these are clearly staged and posing images, photographed by someone other than Vu herself. Both Vu’s self-presentation and the images appear exceedingly aestheticised, as if she were styled and photographed by professionals. The images on Instagram attest the presence of a team around her, although they never appear in the images as they do with Stuart.

Stuart’s Instagram profile has been active since May 2015 and has at present 1,643 posts, corresponding to a posting frequency of slightly less than one photo per day. This is significantly fewer than on her Facebook profile, to which she has uploaded more than twice as many photos, and where it is not unusual to see updates from Stuart several times daily. Stuart’s presence on Instagram thus appears more controlled and bounded, but nonetheless offers a frequency of photo sharing around once daily, upholding the sense of a moderate and continuous flow. Unlike Facebook, where Stuart’s posts often refer to other online materials on subjects, she finds relevant to comment upon and draw attention to, her Instagram profile creates the sense of a more exclusive and targeted presence. Also supporting this impression is the strong visual composition and polish of the images, keeping in line with Instagram’s standard display format, where photos on a person’s
profile are presented in a simple grid layout. Furthermore, nearly all of the images are of Stuart herself, either depicted alone or with other people, and where professional work-related scenarios such as fashion shows and photo shoots intermash with seemingly more private situations. Although Stuart, unlike Vu, sometimes uses her Instagram profile to showcase her personal development and challenges, such as fitness routines explicitly connected to her efforts of losing weight or her hospitalisation, these narratives appear to seamlessly integrate with a coherent and credible narrative about everyday life as a public figure. Because Stuart’s Instagram activity largely involves a consistent positioning of herself as a successful celebrity disability advocate, the more personal ‘outlier’ photos serve as occasional intimate insights.

On Instagram, both Vu and Stuart appear controlled in ways that exclusively centre attention on their prosperous everyday lives and growing careers. Their self-presentations appear more as a one-way communicative message of see me and follow my desirable life than as community-building exchanges. They are oriented towards a networked public (an imagined, unseen audience) rather than networked intimacy (a small, intimate group of friends) (Leaver et al., 2020, p. 103). On Instagram, both Vu and Stuart cultivate visual expressions that largely draw on self-presentations of unimpeded luxury and glamour in the form of fashionable clothing, expensive hotels, personal trainers and dance instructors, and festive events and celebrations with (other) famous people.

In addition to the previously introduced categories and stages of online celebrity, the term Instafame can be attributed specifically to Instagram. Marwick proposes this term as a variant of micro-celebrity (Marwick, 2015b, p. 137). Unlike micro-celebrity, Instafame reflects a more conventional status hierarchy in which success is the result of an ability to visually mimic traditional mainstream celebrity culture, and where interaction with the audience is not a must (Marwick, 2015b, p. 149, p. 152):

Instafamous tend to be conventionally good-looking, work in ‘cool’ industries such as modeling or tattoo artistry, and emulate the tropes and symbols of traditional celebrity culture, such as glamorous self-portraits, designer goods, or luxury cars. (Marwick, 2015b, p. 139)

Marwick’s description of how visual iconographies such as glamour, luxury, wealth, a conventionally desirable appearance and influential relationships are hailed (Marwick, 2015b, p. 141) is in line with the forms of self-representation practiced by Vu and Stuart on Instagram. The success of minority persons such as Vu and Stuart on this platform is proportional to their ability to incarnate and draw on the visual iconographies outlined above – the ‘picture-perfect, luxury-oriented, hyper-feminine Instagram Influencers’ (Leaver et al., 2020, p. 111). The noteworthy commonality in the use of Instagram by Vu and Stuart is the intensification and honing of self-commercialising expressions; in the case of Vu, this is particularly evident in the frequent sponsored engagements and paid partnerships, and with Stuart it can be seen in the promotion of various fashion designers and brands, including her own fashion line. Instagram is thus the medium where the fusion of pronounced commercial messages with the declared minority identities of Vu and Stuart becomes exceedingly clear.

Visibility as empowerment in and of itself

Although active on many platforms, the celebrity of Vu and Stuart is largely tied to particular ones. YouTube, Facebook and Instagram are visually oriented platforms, each of which is uniquely suited to Vu’s and Stuart’s visually driven self-representation and careers in the modelling and beauty industries. Visuality is a main ingredient in their identity battle, as both expound a conviction that visibility is inherently empowering when it comes to minorities.

In the description of herself on YouTube (written in third person), Vu highlights how she has shared ‘her transition and life experiences authentically on YouTube in hopes to educate and change people’s perspective on transgender people’ (about section, PrincessJoules), and as quoted previously, she takes great pride in being a cover face for Sephora, emphasising how empowering it is for her as a transgender woman to be
‘We belong to something beautiful’: Julie Vu’s and Madeline Stuart’s use of minority identity as a popular feminist self-branding strategy on Inst

recognized on a mainstream platform’ (July 24, 2019). In a similar manner, Stuart’s original profile description on Facebook stated: ‘I am a model, I hope through modelling I can change society’s view on people with disabilities, exposure is creating awareness, acceptance and inclusion’ (Madeline Stuart’s Facebook, 2015), thus explicitly equating her own social media visibility with a potential transformative force. They hereby subscribe to an individualised identity politics in which visibility is a prerequisite for social change, offering the opportunity for acceptance and understanding as well as inducing pride and self-worth. The boundaries between Vu’s own stated politics and commercial slogans blurs and overlaps as seen in the Sephora campaign, and she is also actively using her minority identity to campaign for other brands such as Aquarelle, with an image of herself in a bikini in a swimming pool with a can of vodka soda, accompanied by the caption:

Before transitioning, I never really felt comfortable in my own body. For me, being in a bikini by the pool and enjoying a can of @Aquarelle vodka soda at this moment is so liberating. Aquarelle has encouraged me to embrace my authenticity, live my truth and be comfortable in my own skin, all of which is an unexplainable feeling. (see https://www.instagram.com/p/CEo7QkHJtcV/)

Vu is not only using her own story in the branding of other products, she is also using her commercial engagements to voice her experiences as a transgender woman.

To be present and circulate widely is a crucial part of both Vu and Stuart’s identity politics – also if this means associating or attaching themselves to various brands/products and industries – compensating for and challenging the marginalisation and pathologisation of transgender and disabled people within the media, advertising industry, law, policy, etc. As advocates before and alongside Vu and Stuart, ‘[t]o demand visibility is to demand to be seen, to matter, to recognize oneself in dominant culture’ (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 22). Their activism is centred on visual representation, thus showing that minorities can incarnate desirable subject positions and deserve broad circulation, rather than facilitate more concrete collective actions that advance social movements. Vu’s and Stuart’s politics of visibility also align itself with the expressions of popular feminism that Banet-Weiser analyses, as they privilege becoming visible as individual entrepreneurs – as beautiful, agentive and technologically savvy representatives of the proclaimed political categories, transgender and disability, rather than offering a critique of the structural ground on and through which these identity categories are constructed, or being visible as a collective. They both seem to believe in visibility as leading to something (accept, equality, etc.) while also having a belief in the power of visibility itself (the transformative effects of being visible to and circulating among a large audience no matter the purpose or context). Hence, ‘visual representation becomes the beginning and the end of political action’ (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 23).

As the ability to put a body and a face on the minority is at the forefront of Vu’s and Stuart’s identity politics, the predominantly text-based platform Twitter is not where they are most active or popular, despite the proven political potential of that platform as a forum for information sharing and exchange (Murthy, 2013). In their pursuit of broad and massive exposure and inclusion in mainstream culture, both engage in self-representation within a (hetero)normative-oriented ideal of femininity and use more mainstream-oriented platforms such as Instagram. Notably, both have eschewed the more sub-culturally connoted platform Tumblr, which is also predominantly visually oriented (Cho, 2015, p. 44) and seen as a safe space for minority groups (Marston, 2019; McCracken, 2017) with the implicit expectation that users only seek out and interact with profiles whose identity affiliation and self-representation they accept (Tiidenberg, 2016, p. 1574).

It is remarkable how many followers and the massive amount of exposure that Vu and Stuart have gained, which is radical in the sense that minority positions hereby become visible in a degree not seen before in mainstream culture. Furthermore, it is pivotal that they act as both subjects and objects of representation, as women – and in particular minoritised women – have historically been excluded from the
realms of production. But their empowerment is bound by and depended upon the terms and definitions set up by broader commercial and branding culture (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 70). Hence, Vu and Stuart appear within a circuit of visibility driven by profit, competition and consumers, and they both acknowledge the neoliberal premises of the attention economy; thus, they embrace ever-expanding markets, entrepreneurialism, a focus on the individual, and they never question or challenge it (Banet-Weiser, 2018, pp. 11–12). Both Vu and Stuart seem perfectly in sync with a neoliberal order, offering ‘no critique – immanent or otherwise – of neoliberalism’ (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 12). In this sense, they both seem to be invested in becoming visible and earning success as popular feminist subjects, and hereby broadening the subject position (so that it also pertains to transgender women and women with disabilities), rather than challenging the inherently (hetero)normative beauty ideals that it rests upon, and the neoliberal foundation of individualised entrepreneurship that it builds upon. Although the means through which Vu and Stuart communicate their identity politics can be problematised as a grovel to heteronormative beauty ideals, it is important to bear in mind the dilemmas they face in seeking to create images of themselves as desirable women. Thus, to be recognised as such within mainstream culture is a particularly hardwon struggle for many transgender women and women with disabilities. However, transgender narratives and self-representations are often subjected to scholarly work that are invested in exposing heteronormative structures (Raun, 2014). To detect heteronormativity or ‘transnormativity’ figures as the main scope and conclusion of the analysis, which for instance is the case in Joanna McIntyre’s reading of the transgender mainstream media celebrities Caitlyn Jenner and Jazz Jennings (McIntyre, 2018). But Vu’s incarnation of a normative female beauty ideal is no different than most other prominent cis-gendered female beauty influencers. The difference is that minorities are more prone to critique in terms of upholding oppressive gender norms attached to ideal femininity, as this kind of critique is often directed towards minority groups, both from within and outside of their respective communities. Furthermore, it nevertheless seems evident that a self-commercialising and self-promoting style is most effective when one wants a larger audience to pay attention.

**Minority identity as brand**

The self-branding strategies of Stuart and Vu are inscribed in self-commercialisation, both in the capitalisation of content and in the particular way they behave in front of the camera and address their audience to attract attention and increase their visibility. In the theoretical work of both Senft and Marwick, self-commercialisation is already an integrated part of micro-celebrity’s self-performance, and thus not intrinsically alien to the authenticity and intimacy that is invoked. Senft defines the practice of micro-celebrity as ‘the commitment to deploying and maintaining one’s online identity as if it were a branded goods, with the expectation that others do the same’ (Senft, 2013, p. 346). Marwick also emphasises that micro-celebrity is inscribed in a form of neoliberal subjectivity thinking termed ‘the enterprising self’ (Marwick, 2013, p. 169, p. 192). However, it is clear that thinking of oneself as a marketable brand has been intensified and promoted by an increasingly commercially controlled internet, and is expected of influencers and internet celebrities.

The way in which Vu and Stuart present a self-brand where activism and advocacy coexist with and are communicated through commercial logics is controversial. As noted by Banet-Weiser:

> We want to believe – indeed, I argue that we need to believe – that there are spaces in our lives driven by genuine affect and emotions, something outside of mere consumer culture, something above the reductiveness of profit margins, the crassness of capital exchange. (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 5)

This might be particularly true in relation to minority identity-political issues. And yet, in today’s social media sphere, the relation between authenticity and economic imperatives are ambivalent, expressed and
‘We belong to something beautiful’: Julie Vu’s and Madeline Stuart’s use of minority identity as a popular feminist self-branding strategy on Instagram

Likewise, in today’s inescapable terrain of self-branding, an affinity is proposed between the needs of the self and the needs of the market, hence an authentic self is also a marketable self (Whitmer, 2019, p. 3). But Banet-Weiser maintains that to build a successful self-brand online reinforces normative structures and ideals, thus it is still primarily reserved for white, middle-class, cis-gendered, and heterosexual women (ableness is not listed but assumed) (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 86, 2018, p. 13). Although we do not necessarily disagree with this observation, we nevertheless want to challenge it by pointing out how minority identity is used as a strategic branding strategy by Vu and Stuart, which becomes a significant and valuable signifier that sets them apart from others, and hereby helps to propel their success. Specific identity labels and ideological causes have become means by which social media users can brand themselves as different from others (see also Pruchniewska, 2018). We argue that the declared minority identities of Vu and Stuart are not a hindrance to success but rather an enabling factor, but it presupposes that they are also recognisable within the implicit beauty ideals of popular feminism and tap into a neoliberal notion of individual capacity and empowerment through visibility and mobility.

In neoliberal and meritocratic understandings of identity battles, individuals – propelled by talent, drive and determination – make themselves deserving of celebrity by fighting their way up. Jo Littler (2018) points to meritocracy as one of the most prevalent social and cultural conceptions of our time, contributing to the reinforcement of a neoliberal ideal of society that values individualised, competitive and exclusive forms of success. Littler also identifies a trend, or a strategy, she calls ‘neoliberal justice narratives’, in which commercial messages and interests are positioned as means of combating social inequality (Littler, 2018, pp. 67–69). Recognising and incorporating the importance of minoritised social categories such as gender, race and class – and, as we argue, transgender and disability – into narratives that testify to the necessity of achieving success within the framework of the meritocratic ideal gives rise to an amalgamation of commercial value and social justice. As Littler writes, invocation of minority positions can be seen as an effective and powerful tool in the continued development of a neoliberal social order.

In the cases of Vu and Stuart, transformation is a key part of this narrative, be it Vu’s medical and surgical transformation or Stuart’s weight loss. Stuart has maintained a focus on bodily ‘health’ in the form of training and fitness photos, often relating to a background story of weight loss challenges. To a certain extent, Stuart allows the audience to follow her change on Instagram and showcases the transformation ingredients, i.e., fitness activities, while Vu’s transition process is confined to YouTube. In contrast, Vu’s Instagram profile presents a fully-transitioned ideal figure, though with an ever-present identification of herself as transgender. In both cases, underscoring that they have lived through a physical transition is a marker of authenticity, and a validation of well-deserved success. The bodily adjustments serve as affective reassessments of their minority identity, while also tapping into transformation narratives that circulate more broadly, and where making changes that makes one more recognisable within cis-gendered, heteronormative beauty norms (including slimness) connotes success and is attributed to individual willpower and determination (see Christensen-Strynø & Eriksen, 2020).

Aesthetic labour

Slowly minorities like Vu and Stuart are able to achieve a certain degree of celebrity and make money from their social media practices or use these practices as a springboard for other job opportunities. However, it is undeniable that platform owners profit the most from our online presence, influencers or not, and to such a great extent that they are now political, cultural and financial superpowers (Zuboff, 2019). As Hearn and Schoenhoff point out influencers might be able to make a living but they are generally unpaid or underpaid, and are subject to precarious working conditions (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016, pp. 207–208). Unlike traditional celebrities, who often have lucrative advertising deals, influencers are dependent on a constant
stream of smaller sponsored posts, appearances and endorsements to generate earnings (Abidin, 2018, p. 94). The ‘celebrity capital’ of social media users is indeed founded on recurrent visibility, thus the social media sphere involves a constant struggle for visibility as it needs renewal and repetition, otherwise the celebrity capital will fade (Driessens, 2013, p. 552).

Social media celebrities such as Vu and Stuart deliver unfathomable amounts of creative and affective labour, such as signalling presence and accessibility by continuously creating and uploading content, and by devoting extensive time and energy to commenting and responding to questions and enquiries. This is often not recognised or remunerated as labour, but rather devalued as vanity and narcissism, which is often the case with cultural preferences and practices that are associated with women (Senft & Baym, 2015, p. 1591; Tiidenberg, 2018, p. 97).

In addition, we now see, as identified by Elias et al., an intensification of beauty norms, particularly for women, which is felt most by those at the periphery of normality, i.e., transwomen more than cis women, and disabled women more than able-bodied women (Elias et al., 2017, p. 27). Female influencers are thus required to perform a large amount of ‘aesthetic labour’ under the constant surveillant gaze of their many observers. The body is the prime signifier of femininity and a woman’s value, and thus it is not praised for what it does or what it is capable of, but rather for its appearance:

In the hypervisible landscape of popular culture the body is recognised as the object of women’s labour: it is her asset, her product, her brand and her gateway to freedom and empowerment in a neoliberal market economy. (Winch, 2015; quoted in Elias et al., 2017, p. 25)

The body appears simultaneously as a women’s source of power and as ‘always, already unruly and requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodelling (and consumer spending)’ in order to conform to female attractiveness (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 62). The popularity and visibility of both Vu and Stuart balance on this knife’s edge, in which their aestheticised, remodelled and mobilised bodies are claimed as personal and political means of empowerment while also implicating endless labour and a constant state of depletion along the lines of the ‘cruel optimism’ highlighted as the lived experience of the neoliberal everyday (Berlant, 2011).

**Conclusion**

In this article, we have explored self-branding as a complex cultural phenomenon. We have zoomed in on the by now highly popular internet celebrities Julie Vu and Madeline Stuart, who engage persistently and strategically in building, maintaining and developing their online identities as self-brands, merging identity politics with commercial interest. As a central part of their self-branding practices we have analysed their respective journeys on different social media platforms and their location within celebrity categories, travelling from and beyond micro-celebrities to internet celebrities, earning the status of influencers, which is cemented in their current dedication to Instagram. We situate Vu and Stuart within the current wave of popular feminism coined and analysed by Banet-Weiser, as they express a profound belief in the power of visibility, both as a prerequisite for social change and in and of itself. Thus, having their individualised images on display and circulate widely within mainstream (online) culture is an essential part of their identity politics. We hold that minority identity – and its battle – is a significant, if not essential, element in the building of an authentic brand for Vu and Stuart. The minority identity and the special challenges it faces becomes a differentiating factor that provides significant added value, however, primarily filtered through safely affirmative feminist expressions. The kind of empowerment that Vu and Stuart praise is the minority’s inclusion and ability to succeed within mainstream culture communicated through and based on the restrained beauty norms of neoliberal premises.

**Notes**

1. Julie Vu is active on a variety of social media platforms, including Facebook (since 2007, now with 73,000 followers), YouTube (since 2010, now with 550,000 subscribers), Twitter (since 2011, now with 12,600 followers), and Instagram (since 2012, now with 134,000 followers). She also represented Canada in the Miss International Queen beauty pageant for transgender women. All figures relating to social media platform followings in the article are from 19.11.20.

2. Popular feminism is defined as forms of feminist expressions that circulate in and are framed to fit popular and easily accessible media platforms (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 1). In contrast to postfeminism, in which political motives are completely ignored or disregarded (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 61), popular feminism carries forward explicit feminist messages, but most often with a lack of further commitment to social change (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 4).

3. Stuart’s online presence is characterised by a high level of activity and a broad array of social media platforms (all established in the period May-June 2015), particularly Facebook and Instagram, where she has her largest followings (690,000 likes and 343,000 followers, respectively). She also has a Twitter profile (9100 followers), as well as a personal website and online shop.

4. The marketing-oriented classifications of influencers we refer to in our model are based on the level of visibility and interaction, as well as on the indexing of numbers of followers on different social media platforms. For more detailed information, see: Hawley (2020).

5. Transnormativity is, as formulated by McIntyre (2018), ‘a regulatory model of transgender being that assumes and prioritises certain trans experiences, representations, and behaviours’ (11), it ‘prioritises assimilation rather than seeking to displace or undermine the (hetero)normativities that “other” these subjectivities in the first place (12) […] Transnormativity validates trans women who demonstrate gender stability and exhibit hegemonic bodily/aesthetic coherence’ (20).

Notes on contributors

Tobias Raun is an associate professor at Communication Studies, Roskilde University. He is the former editor (2013-2017) of the new media section of Transgender Studies Quarterly (Duke University Press). He works within the fields of New Media and Gender Studies, in which he has earned an international reputation. He has published in journals such as Convergence, First Monday, and International Journal of Cultural Studies. He is the author of a book on transgender video blogging (2016), and he has co-edited a book on mediated intimacies (2018), both published with Routledge [email: tobiusra@ruc.dk].

Maria Bee Christensen-Strynø is a postdoctoral researcher at Roskilde University in the Department of Communication and Arts working within the fields of critical disability studies, visual culture studies, media studies and discursive/collaborative communication studies. Her research focuses on processes of visual mediation and representation, with a particular interest in the ways in which media shape ongoing becomeings of disabled embodiment. Currently, she is part of the collaborative research project Dancing with Parkinson’s (2019–2021) [email: mariabee@ruc.dk].

References


Sedgwick, E. K. (2003). Paranoid reading and reparative reading, or you’re so paranoid, you probably think this essay is about you. In M. Baraleand & J. Goldberg (Eds.), Touching feeling: Affect, pedagogy, performativity (pp. 123–152). Duke University Press.


