

# Authenticity as Performativity on Social Media

Allan S. Taylor

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## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: A PERSONAL INTRODUCTION

When I first started my academic career, my main area of teaching was in media production—particularly in campaign design and commercial content. I remember my students used to overwhelmingly say that they wanted to create images, campaigns or social media shorts that they described as ‘authentic’. This used to surprise me: as an academic who emerged at the intersections of media, performance studies and visual culture, I had a certain perception of authenticity. I was from the school of thought that nothing could be considered authentic, given that most things could be described as performance, simulacra or other distanced imitations. I could understand if it was meant to be in the style of documentary or realism. But authentic?

When probed they would say things like, “you know—real,” or “like real life”, which was even more problematic for me. Were they aware of the hours existentialists pondered on the term authentic? How had a philosophically rich term been applied to digital platforms, advertising and other promotional media? How could anything be considered authentic when we are so far removed from reality that even if the media artefact reflected everyday life in the twenty-first century, that our lives are already removed from what we might consider to be ‘authentic’. Or, alternatively if identity is predominantly performative and socially constructed, how can the authentic exist or be accessed if our day-to-day life is a series of performed interactions? Or when we say authentic, do we mean authentic to the execution of the act? Authentic to type?

It became something of a personal bugbear, but I continually noticed that, as a term, it was uncontrollably gaining traction. In the world of

media and cultural studies, people are discussing authentic influencers, authentic self-branding, authentic campaigns, authentic voice in public relations and journalism, authentic selfies all unproblematically and unquestioningly when these (admittedly deep) queries remained for me around whose definition of the authentic was being used and how. The more I searched, the more I wanted to balance the resurgence of the authentic in media production with its philosophical and psychosocial origins. In some circumstances, it has been treated as though it is self-evident, when in fact authenticity as a term is inherently problematic due to the number of questions it raises, least of all the essentialist position of categorising phenomena into precarious binaries of either ‘authentic’ or ‘inauthentic’, real and unreal, truth and untruth and so on.

These writings originally started as a book on the performativity of social media, but as I wrote and researched, the question of authenticity persisted. And so, rather than discredit or discard the authentic, I decided that I had to resolve this impasse—even if it was only to settle it for myself—and present a position that could provide an alternative explanation for the reappearance of the authentic. Authenticity, or the desire for it, is clearly a cultural trend that cannot be ignored. The chapters herein represent my attempt to retrospectively analyse the usage of the term and provide new critical frameworks for the authentic in relation to social media practice, using the framework of performativity as the theoretical lens.

This is not a book about how to be authentic, or that tries to dictate what is and is not authentic as a rule or method. It is a challenge and examination of how the authentic is used, an analysis of what people have described as authentic to try and tease out what they mean, as well as a foundation on which to build further definitions and methodologies. There are times where authenticity is inferred through the outright inauthentic, and there are times it is left open for further discussion. Part reader, part alternative theory and part manifesto, my hope is that the contents will provide a pause for thought so that we can all critically evaluate what we as a field of scholars mean by authenticity rather than rely on implicit assumptions or inherited meanings. Whether others confirm, contest or critique my perspective, it is an opening position that I hope will evolve in years to come.

The first chapter constructs a theoretical framework for authenticity based on the lens of performativity, and defines the authentic as an affective Derridean ‘trace’ that disappears as quickly as it appears. The

attainment of authenticity thus becomes a never-ending quest, as the performative interval of the authentic cannot be sustained. This supports the temporal and time-based nature of social media practice in general while proposing how authenticity may appear on social media and consequently disappear.

The second chapter illustrates the neoliberal authentic: a dangerous proposition of the authentic put forward by neoliberal culture that equates self-actualisation with productivity, while concealing the labour required for sustaining such visibility. It also introduces the term performative authenticity to describe the stylistic concerns of appearing authentic on social media as differentiated from the achievement of authenticity. In conclusion, it poses the question how ‘real’ is the real social media users want to see?

Subsequently, I discuss authentic self-representation with particular reference to selfies and I attempt to describe if such representation is possible. A series of factors such as context, location, time and embodiment are all variables in this. The selfie can be a site of affective transference from creator to audience and moments when the authentic appear can affect change in the offline world and structure a path towards self-actualisation.

In the fourth chapter, I describe authentic influence and differentiate authenticity as capital for the influencer and the operation of influence as a performative device. Invoking Girard’s concept of mimetic desire, I analyse how internalisation operates as a factor in authentic influence, and that the desire to become the influencer through mimesis can sometimes have negative consequences.

Lastly, I look at meme creation and sharing as an attempt to either find or create authenticity through visual deconstruction, and to reveal the trace of authentic affect. By remapping statements into different cultural contexts, users attempt to reveal the authentic; but because of the persistent evolution of the meme, it keeps evading the audience.

I conclude on how several factors will affect our view of authenticity in the future including the continual encroachment of digitisation on production techniques and whether it is possible to reconcile authenticity and the neoliberal framework in which it resides.

I would like to end this preface and introduction by thanking all the women who supported my academic career—without whom I probably would never have got the opportunities I have today. They are my PhD supervisor Dr Sian Bonnell, who took a chance on me and my PhD research proposal when it seemed like no one else would; Dr Julia Dane of

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Leicester, UK  
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Allan S. Taylor

# CONTENTS

<b>1</b>	<b>Reanalysing the Authentic in Social Media Practice: Towards a Performative Framework</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>The Neoliberal Authentic and Performative Authenticism</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Authentic Self-Representation</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Authentic Influence</b>	<b>81</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Repetition, Remix and Reproduction: Memes as Visual Deconstruction</b>	<b>109</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Conclusion: The Elusive Authentic</b>	<b>133</b>
	<b>Index</b>	<b>141</b>



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## LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 3.1	Selfies as an ‘anchoring’ strategy: photograph of the author in Paris denoted by the Eiffel Tower	63
Fig. 3.2	Twitter images depicting the death of Mohammad al-Chaar	65
Fig. 3.3	From selfiesatfunerals.tumblr.com	68
Fig. 3.4	Still image from Nikkie Tutorials <i>The Power of Makeup</i> video (Tutorials, 2015)	70
Fig. 5.1	<i>One Does Not Simply Walk Into Mordor</i>	113
Fig. 5.2	The meme evolves into an everyday context	114
Fig. 5.3	<i>One Does Not Simply Get Down On Friday</i>	115
Fig. 5.4	Mahmoud Ahmadinejad takes Boromir’s place	116
Fig. 5.5	Miss Vanjie and <i>Redrum</i>	120
Fig. 5.6	Miss Vanjie and <i>The Simpsons</i>	121
Fig. 5.7	Miss Vanjie meme in a scene from Call Me By Your Name. Posted by Twitter user @daniellismore	122
Fig. 5.8	RuPaul makes the loop complete	123
Fig. 5.9	The Handforth Parish Council Zoom call	125
Fig. 5.10	Tolvin is interpolated into <i>Star Wars</i>	127
Fig. 5.11	Jackie Weaver and <i>Lord of the Rings</i>	127