

## Hermione's feminist book club Celebrity activism and cultural critique

Helle Kannik Haastrup

MedieKultur 2018, 65, 98-116

Published by SMID | Society of Media researchers In Denmark | [www.smid.dk](http://www.smid.dk)

The online version of this text can be found open access at <https://tidsskrift.dk/mediekultur>

### **Abstract**

*In this article, I analyse how a celebrity can perform cultural critique and feminist activism using her Instagram account and online book club. The celebrity in question is British film star Emma Watson, famous for playing Hermione Granger in the Harry Potter franchise. Watson is performing her activism on gender equality and cultural critique by recommending feminist literature. This study undertakes an analysis of Watson's presentations of self on Instagram and in her letters in the Our Shared Shelf book club. The analysis takes its point of departure from theories of social media and celebrity culture and film studies as well as investigations of celebrity book clubs and celebrity activism. This case study of Emma Watson's performance of cultural critique and activism on specific media platforms demonstrates that Watson's authority is based on her star image as well as the fact that her book club letters and Instagram posts mutually reinforce one another's written personal arguments and visual documentation.*

### **Keywords**

*cultural critique, celebrity activism, online book club, Instagram, Emma Watson*

## Introduction

In this case study, I analyse how a celebrity can perform activism and cultural critique online and how the various ways in which these two activities are intertwined. Social media has the capacity to grant celebrities a special kind of agency (Thomas, 2014) by allowing them to communicate within a so-called "presentational regime" (Marshall, 2010). According to David Marshall (2010), this presentational regime is a characteristic function of social media that makes it possible for a celebrity as an individual to address the followers on her or his own terms. This is in contrast, argues Marshall (2010), to "representational media", such as films, magazines, newspapers, and television, in which a celebrity by definition has much less control over how she or he is depicted. Emma Watson has an Instagram account as well as a book club on the Goodreads website and thus possesses a combination of platforms on which she can perform her activism and cultural critique as she sees fit. Nevertheless, as K.M. O'Donnell (2017) has argued, in her previous analyses of Emma Watson's activism, "reading a book" does not qualify as feminist activism.

However, in this analysis, I hope to demonstrate that Emma Watson is not just recommending "reading a book" but is performing both cultural critique and activism as a role model, connecting reading with wider issues of feminism, such as empowerment and education. Watson is thus giving advice on how to educate oneself from a personal perspective, one based on her work as an activist as well as her star image, using her Instagram profile and book club website as platforms. She also has a specific feminist agenda in her choice of books as well as works for gender equality in her activism, two aspects that are closely connected. The research question is thus: How is the film star Emma Watson performing cultural critique and activism through her use of specific media platforms?

Emma Watson is a young actor (b. 1990) who is famous for her role as Hermione Granger in the *Harry Potter* films (2001-2011). Since 2014, she has acted as UN Goodwill Ambassador in connection with UNWomen and the HeForShe campaign for equality. Since her role as Hermione (the bookish and fair-minded trusted friend of Harry Potter who fights for the less fortunate), she has appeared in a number of other films, often playing the role of the ingénue, but most recently as the avid reader-heroine Belle in Disney's live-action version of *The Beauty and the Beast* (2017). Watson has endorsed both clothing and make-up for international fashion and cosmetics companies as well as been on the cover of high-end fashion magazines. Additionally, she is often seen on the red carpet at awards shows and when her movies open in theatres. In this article, I argue that celebrities can deploy their star image (Dyer, 1979) and presentation of self on social media (Marshall, 2010; Marwick and boyd, 2010), in this case using Instagram and an online book club as platforms for activism and cultural critique.

Celebrity activism can take many forms. In this context, I consider how activism is represented on these two specific platforms, with a focus on solidarity and through the use of strategies such as de-celebritisation and hyper-celebritisation (Chouliaraki, 2013). Watson performs cultural critique when she offers personal recommendations and,

through the book club, an invitation to shared reading and self-improvement (Collins, 2010). Because learning and education become important issues for her (Warner, 2012), she positions herself as a role model (Stacey, 1992). The empirical data is comprised of a group of selected posts from @emmawatson on Instagram and book introductions from the Our Shared Shelf book club. Since this is a qualitative study that analyses how cultural critique and activism are represented in distinctive ways, only a small selection of these posts will be analysed in depth, concentrating on visual representation on Instagram and two written letters from the introductions on Our Shared Shelf.

## Theory

The workings of the star image are central to understanding how the presentation of self online can be analysed. Within film studies, the star image is by definition a combination of many different texts, including the films that a film star has made, the characters that she or he has played, the ways in which she or he is depicted in the press (Wasko, 2003), and the products that she or he endorse. Taken as a whole, this constitutes what Richard Dyer (1979) calls a polysemic structure. In other words, the star image is an ever-changing constellation of different but interlocking media texts. There are, however, regular concepts that are relevant when analysing a star image (Dyer, 1979). The paradox of being simultaneously extraordinary and ordinary in order to project authenticity is central, describing the necessity of stars being both relatable and exceptional at the same time (Dyer, 1979). Stars also need to demonstrate achieved success through visible insignias of wealth, such as conspicuous consumption, to confirm the affluent lifestyle made possible by their status. In order to legitimise their status as rich and famous actors, it is customary for them to stress that they adhere to a Protestant work ethic and take the job seriously (Dyer, 1979).

The film star is thus a cross-media construct, telling a story of personal success and visible wealth, of how to be distinctive and exclusive, and of how to maintain the right balance between the ordinary and the extraordinary in order to appear authentic. This balancing act has become all the more visible with the emergence of social media impression management. Film stars today rely on social media as a platform for performing their star image as they see fit, making it about celebrity activism or their own business enterprises. Today, celebrities can possess a different kind of agency online by using social media platforms and choosing their own representations (Thomas, 2014).

Social media, with their strong focus on promoting identity, have quickly become "an elemental part of new media culture" (Marshall, 2010, p. 35) and are significant to celebrity culture as well. The social media profiles of celebrities can be regarded as condensed versions of the ways in which their public selves are performed and, by extension, how "we" ideally perform ourselves publicly online (Marshall, 2010, p. 35). The visual representation of success by traditional celebrities has thus become a matrix for how to present oneself – a specific kind of impression management (Marwick, 2016). David Marshall (2010) makes a

useful distinction, based on the theories of Erwin Goffman (1959) and his microsociology of everyday life. According to Goffman, we shift between a "front stage" in public spaces and a "backstage" when we are in our homes, and we conduct ourselves in different ways on these two "stages". Basically, Marshall argues, the presentation of self online will always be a strategic performance when celebrities have a social media profile, but it is important to distinguish between different types of self-presentation. The presentation of self can be either a presentation of a public self or of a public private self (Marshall, 2010, pp. 44-45). The public self includes posts with official images taken by professional photographers for publicity purposes, film posters, magazine covers and articles, red carpet appearances, etc. The public private self on the other hand is presented with posts such as family photographs, selfies, snapshots, and everyday-like communication. This distinction between different presentations of self works as an aesthetic distinction as well.

For the celebrity, the attraction and advantage of having a social media profile generally comes down to the level of control one has over the textual output and the option of parasocially connecting with an audience (Marwick & boyd, 2010). The parasocial relationships of television and radio is firmly based on the celebrity, like the studio host, never actually communicating face to face with the audience (Horton and Wohl, 1961). In contrast, social media possess affordances that permit the celebrity to communicate directly with a member of the audience, though this kind of communication remains an exception to the rule (Thomas, 2014; Marwick, 2016). The typical mode of celebrity communication on social media is that of broadcast communication, thus upholding the parasocial relation to the audience (Marwick & boyd, 2010). The attraction for the audience in following a celebrity on Instagram is thus not to communicate with her or him but instead to experience 'closeness' in terms of access to the celebrity as well as the temporal immediacy (Marwick & boyd, 2010; Thomas, 2014) that arises when a celebrity posts on Instagram and the post pops up in one's personal feed. The celebrities followed on Instagram are usually those favoured by a younger audience, and the typical strategy is to give the audience a peek "behind the scenes", granting access to the public private self (Marwick 2016). In summary, even though audiences are well aware that the presentation on Instagram and social media in general is a performance and that the relationship is parasocial, it is nonetheless the public private presentation of self (Marshall, 2010) that is usually the attraction, revealing the ordinary as well as the extraordinary (Dyer, 1979) everyday lives of exceptionally successful celebrities (Marwick, 2016).

Qualitative empirical audience analysis into the ways in which audiences use celebrities indicates that celebrities can be used as a resource on various levels (Stacey, 1992; Gamson, 1994). Jackie Stacey's study focuses on how film stars were used as inspiration for both empowerment and consumption for moviegoing women in post-war Britain. In Stacey's analysis of her empirical material, the women reveal how they had been inspired in their youths by the strong female characters depicted onscreen, such as Hollywood stars from the 1940s and 1950s, including Bette Davis and Joan Crawford. The point here is that

it was the characters that these actresses played that inspired the women in the audience (Stacey, 1992). Based on the qualitative data, Stacey distinguishes between two modes of identification: There is the *cinematic identification* that the audience experienced in the theatre watching the film, and there is what she calls the *extra-cinematic identification*, describing how the star also had relevance as a role model for female spectators in everyday life outside the cinema. Her conclusion is that film stars and, by extension, celebrities are to be regarded as valuable resources, and not just in terms of consumption through endorsements for fashion and beauty products, through the transfer of a star's image to an advertisement in order to sell products (McCracken, 1989). The film stars were also role models who inspired women to be more self-assertive and confident in their everyday lives, despite the vast differences between post-war Europe and the glamour of Hollywood cinema (Stacey, 1992).

This film star or celebrity role model status can also be expressed in specific media texts, such as interviews in which the celebrities offer advice. This is discussed in Helen Warner's (2013, p. 383) analysis of how celebrities can inspire not just through their star image but also by giving educational advice in celebrity interviews with a journalist. Warner's example is how the film and TV star Sarah Jessica Parker – known for her role as Carrie Bradshaw in the TV series *Sex and the City* – gives specific "tips" on how to educate oneself in terms of lifestyle and fashion in *Harper's Bazaar* and *People Magazine* (Warner, 2013, p. 390). However, this is done within the framework of a regular cultural intermediary, that is, the journalist writing for *Harper's Bazaar*. By extension, film stars can inspire one both to be a more assertive self (as argued by Stacey above) and to further educate oneself. When film stars give advice on social media or on a personal website, the stars' agency is most apparent within the "presentational framework" and has "cut out the middle man", that is, the journalist. At the same time, the stars position themselves as role models, with the authority associated with their star image.

From a different perspective, this interest in film stars and their media presence has also made them attractive as promoters of humanitarian organisations. The United Nations began using celebrities as spokespeople in the 1960s, with the comedian Danny Kaye acting as a goodwill ambassador, travelling the world and advocating for children's rights to education (Wilson, 2014). Traditionally, employing celebrities as goodwill ambassadors for the UN thus became a way of making complex political issues and campaigns relevant and engaging for the general public (Wilson, 2014, p. 27). The goodwill ambassadors can be seen as celebrity activists who use their fame and "their capacity to bring the world's attention to particular causes, struggles and issues" (Marshall, 2017, p. 1). Lilie Chouliaraki (2013) has investigated the strategies film stars use to represent their humanitarian efforts. She argues that two strategies of solidarity in particular can be discerned when celebrity humanitarians are represented in the media. Chouliaraki's analysis emphasises the necessity of what she calls a "sceptical discourse" towards celebrities, implying that celebrities are good at getting attention but that their efforts should not be confused

with finding political solutions to problems (Chouliaraki, 2013, pp. 83-84). When celebrities campaign for a particular issue, they may inadvertently "run the risk of hiding complex connections and realities that are demanding other and more complex solutions" (Chouliaraki, 2013, p. 84). In her analysis of how celebrities are represented in the media, Chouliaraki distinguishes between two strategies of solidarity regarded as characteristic of the film stars Audrey Hepburn and Angelina Jolie, both well known for their humanitarian work.

The first strategy of solidarity focuses on *de-celebrification*, which occurs when film stars wear relaxed, plain clothing in order to distance themselves from their Hollywood image. They characterise their work for the UN as an *obligation* and choose a *controlled appearance* when discussing troubling encounters with people in distress (Chouliaraki, 2013, p. 93).

The second strategy of solidarity concerns *hyper-celebritisation*, which can be understood as when film stars use their Hollywood image as a means to an end in humanitarian work, characterising their work for UN as part of who they are, and displaying explicitly emotional reactions when characterising stressful encounters (Chouliaraki, 2013, pp. 92-93).

Rather than understanding these two strategies as mutually exclusive, I would argue that they can be regarded as positions at work for the same celebrity in different performances, in different types of media texts. When analysing representations of celebrity activism, it makes sense to take into account more than just how authority is connected to star image.

Celebrities can also use their star image to endorse literature in book clubs: As argued by Jim Collins (2010, p. 23) book clubs in general, and celebrity book clubs in particular, usually offer a personal, non-academic way of enjoying books and very often present an alternative to the more exclusive academic canon. This *personalisation* of cultural consumption (and enjoyment) is, in the words of literary critic Harold Bloom (qtd. in Collins, 2010, p. 23) necessary in order to "clear your mind of the academic rant." The personalised choice of books thus does not adhere to the traditional arbiters of taste as the literary critic or cultural journalist and is also understood in stark contradiction to the "top down" literary prizes and awards, from the Nobel Prize to the Pulitzer Prize (English, 2005, pp. 109-110). Jim Collins (2010, pp. 3-4) sums up three characteristics of celebrity book clubs: The book club usually includes *brand name authors* to ensure recognition even beyond the celebrity having the book club (Collins, 2010, p. 3). The book club has a strong emphasis on *reading as sharing*, in the sense that you are reading "along with" the celebrity whose authority on books you appreciate (Rooney, 2005, p. 206). Cultural critique enters the equation because of the implicit *questioning of cultural hierarchies* involved in choosing books outside the academic canon (Radway, 1997, ctd. in Collins, 2010, p. 4). The celebrity book club thus offers a different take on reading culture as something one does with others (as well as with a celebrity). You are reading books that are chosen by a particular celebrity, and you are reading something other than the academic canon. Additionally, you are invited to participate in reading literature in order to improve and, by extension, educate yourself (Collins, 2010).

## Methodology

The empirical data consists of the Instagram account @emmawatson (active since 2014 and with 47.5 million followers) and the Our Shared Shelf Book club (established in 2016 and with 215,294 members). Both the account and the book club are public and are thus accessible when one follows the account on Instagram or becomes a member of the Our Shared Shelf book club group on Goodreads respectively, which is what I did in order to gain access to the data. This is a study of a single case, namely Emma Watson as she presents herself in specific media texts on specific media platforms, thereby qualifying as embedded units of analysis (Yin, 2009, pp. 46-47). This analysis concerns examples of how Watson performs activism and cultural critique through her social media posts and letters. Watson has produced a total of 102 posts on Instagram (from July 8<sup>th</sup> 2014 to June 10<sup>th</sup> 2018) and 17 online letters, including a "welcome letter" (from January 8<sup>th</sup> 2016 to April 30<sup>th</sup> 2018). The analysis focuses on images, videos, and written text, with individual posts and letters being identified by date, platform, and links in order to allow readers to find them online.

The division of the posts on Instagram into selected activities arose from patterns in the empirical data, but it also reflects the established theoretical perspectives presented above: In order to give an impression of the scope of the material and how the posts are distributed within the various categories of activities, primarily based on Dyer (1979) and Chouliaraki (2013), a brief quantitative overview is included: UN activities (21 posts), activism in general (39 posts), book club-related activities (23 posts), fashion activities (11 posts), and film promotion activities (9 posts). Significantly, there are no public private presentations of self with friends or family, which is a marked contrast to what has become widespread practice for many of the most-followed celebrities on social media (Marshall, 2010; Marwick, 2015). The 17 book club letters conform to a combination of four typical themes, based primarily on concepts from Collins (2010) and Warner (2013): the personal book recommendation, the description of the ritual of reading the book, the educational and empowering feminist message of the book, and references to Watson's activist work.

The Instagram analysis thus focuses on the visual depiction of the three types activities (those related to book club and the two forms of activism) and the analysis of the letters on the Our Shared Shelf website concerns two letters ("the welcome letter" and a "book introduction") and how they exemplify the depiction of the four typical elements (personal recommendation, reading ritual, education and empowerment, and activism).

Dyer (1979) argues that, as a media text, film stars are a cross-media construct. Watson's performances on these two platforms are only part of the whole picture but are significant as examples of media texts that play together and are authored (as far as we know) and performed by Emma Watson (Marwick, 2015, p. 147). The affordance (Gibson, 1979, p. 119ff) with regard to Instagram is to communicate primarily through photographs, thereby privileging visual performance and instant sharing using the application as well as feedback in the form of "likes" and comments. In contrast, the letters introduc-

ing new books afford writing, measurement of “views”, and the invitation of “comments” on the discussion board. I do not, however, include the ongoing dialogue between the audience and Emma Watson because this is not present in the material I have analysed. Whereas it would be interesting to look into the activities in the comments and the discussion boards as well as comments on Instagram, these are not included in the analysis since the main focus is on how Emma Watson presents herself on these platforms. Both platforms thus provide examples of a film star who prefers “one way communication” (Marwick & boyd, 2010). Dialogue exists but only between members or followers (and sometimes moderators in the book club) but never with Emma Watson. The analysis of the selected posts and letters includes information on “likes” on Instagram and “views” on the letters on Our Shared Shelf in order to indicate the audience feedback.

The analysis of posts and letters on Instagram and the book club is divided into two main sections based on the kinds of activities that are included: The analysis of activism includes UN activities and activism in general types of posts on Instagram as well as references to activism in the letters on Our Shared Shelf. The cultural critique is prominently represented on both platforms, especially in writing on the Our Shared Shelf book club (including elements of the personal book recommendation, the ritual of reading the book, and the educational and empowering feminist message, references to activism) and visually on Instagram (including both activism in general and book-related activities).

### **Activism: The UN, Time's Up, and Women's Day**

Activism on social media can be a tool for connecting and mobilising people (Tufekci, 2013). Celebrity activism on social media often works in two typical ways: as either interventions from occasional political commentators (as exemplified by the film star John Cusack on Twitter; Thomas, 2014) or as statements by a representative of a particular organisation, which thus become central to the ways in which one visually or verbally presents oneself on social media (as exemplified by the film star Leonardo DiCaprio on Instagram, who is an environmental activist). This section focuses on how activism is performed on Emma Watson's Instagram platform. Watson's activism concerns her work as a UN goodwill ambassador and her work as a feminist activist in general.

The official ambassadorial work connected to the UN is predominantly communicated as a public presentation of self (Marshall, 2010) while feminist activism in general mixes public and public private presentations of self – from being directly involved in the Time's Up activities to celebrating Women's Day on March 8<sup>th</sup> by wearing a pink jacket with a slogan.

The UN ambassador work posted on Instagram works to document and communicate that the UN work is in progress and is taken seriously, thereby displaying Watson's moral obligation (Chouliaraki, 2013) as well as offering insight into the film star as adhering to a Protestant work ethic (Dyer, 1979). The first photo on her Instagram account

is the official black-and-white portrait photograph of Watson for the UNWomen and HeForShe campaign (with 1,211,805 likes), in a sense setting the stage for what this account will be about – representing her work as a gender equality activist (Watson, 2014). The choice of black and white emphasises seriousness, as does the determined look on Watson's unsmiling face, with her hair in a ponytail. The message is that Watson is ready for her (new) job. The photograph is a public presentation of self but, as the first post on the account, frames our perception of Watson as a film star undertaking activist work in a serious and determined manner, see Figure 1.



Figure 1: The Official UN portrait of Emma Watson on Instagram (Watson, 2014)

When Watson is doing UN work, she is impeccably dressed, usually in stylish but very formal-looking trouser suits in black/white, indicating that Watson can hold her own on this stage as well. However, there are also posts depicting Watson having fun during her work as UN ambassador, showing her having a laugh with the Prime Minister of Canada. This post depicts her at work with a national leader in a very formal setting, with the Canadian flag in the background, and has received 1,258,402 likes (Watson 2016a). Similarly, there is a post in which Watson (2016b) is at a podium, giving a speech at a summit in Davos and smiling as well as clenching her fist, thereby demonstrating determination through a bodily gesture. This photo has received 1,178,273 likes. These two posts thus mark a stark visual contrast to the official UN portrait, depicting activist work as fun and engaging as well as demonstrating that Watson – as a newcomer and an outsider in the traditional political system – has no trouble being at ease in this environment.

The other types of activist posts within “activism in general” are the posts associated with the Time’s Up movement, comprised of statements and photos as well as one exam-

ple of a photo depicting a more personal ritual celebration. Emma Watson is one of the founding members of the Time's Up organisation, alongside a host of other Hollywood actors, aiming to provide legal support to women outside the media industry who have experienced abuse of power. This is a consequence of the momentum of the #MeToo movement in Autumn 2017 and the allegations in the *New York Times* concerning abuse of power towards women in the film industry (Kantor & Twohey, 2017).

On Watson's Instagram account, Time's Up is presented in a number of posts, with statements and links as well as photos. These include a post with a short version of the organisation's mission statement, with a hashtag implicitly inviting the audience to share it: "Time's up on silence. Time's up on waiting. Time's up on tolerating discrimination, harassment and abuse. #Timesup." Another post includes a link to the *New York Times* article (Watson, 2018a; Watson, 2018b). Both are examples of posts in which Watson is sharing official information about Time's Up as an organisation, and these posts garnered 990,220 and 757,831 likes respectively. There were also several posts in relation to the Golden Globes Awards, with one in particular taking the form of a statement visualised as a sign: "Why I wear black today: Because we are grateful to the many survivors and allies we have spoken out and forced the conversation about sexual harassment, sexual assault, and gender bias into the spotlight." This statement explains why the actors' black clothes should be seen as a marker of solidarity, and the post received 814,009 likes (Watson, 2018c).

However, as an example of public presentation of self, Watson also appears in an official group photo of film stars and their activist women companions, all dressed in black, as an example of a visual manifestation of the solidarity not only between "Hollywood" and traditional women activists but also with the Time's Up organisation. This post on Instagram received 3.1 million likes (Watson, 2018d). This group photo with the film stars and NGO representatives dressed in black to make a point can also be regarded as



Figure 2: Emma Watson (front row, first from the right) Time's Up group photo with film stars and NGO representatives dressed in black at the Golden Globes event (Watson 2018d).

a use of the hyper-celebritisation strategy, as argued by Chouliaraki (2013), because it is a manifestation of the collective star power of group of film stars – from Meryl Streep and Susan Sarandon to Nathalie Portman and Emma Watson – expressing their solidarity at a high-profile Hollywood live media event, see Figure 2.

There are also public private posts from the Golden Globes event, such as a post with two photos of Emma Watson alongside other stars, including Jessica Chastain and Nathalie Portman, in slightly blurry images, with everyone smiling to the camera. This post received 3.2 million likes on Instagram (Watson, 2018e). A post such as this gives the highly formal event a more relaxed and personal twist, stressing the hyper-celebrity version of solidarity between film stars as well as highlighting the extraordinariness of the group photo, in contrast to an indexical snapshot-aesthetic in the more relaxed setting when the stars are just “hanging out”. These images thus contribute to the impression of a dedicated activist who is active in Time's Up and whose commitment surpasses expectations, through her work with the UN. The images furthermore confirm Watson as an established film star, undertaking activism and having fun with her colleagues.

Watson also posts what one might call ritual or anniversary activism posts, such as when she posts a photo on Women's Day depicting herself with her back turned to the camera and her head slightly tilted (so that it is obvious that the photo is of Watson), and wearing a pink jacket bearing the statement: “Girls just want to have fundamental human rights.” This post received 5.4 million likes (Watson, 2018h). This is also the case for her posts with photos of film industry colleagues (with Watson not participating), making statements and appearing on the red carpet at awards shows, such as the 2018 Olivier Awards (1.6 million likes) (Watson 2018f) and the 2018 Cannes Film Festival with female filmworkers on the stairs of the Festival Palace (1.8 million likes) (Watson, 2018h).

Significantly, the number of “likes” peaks when Emma Watson is performing her activism as a private public presentation of self (Time's Up snapshot and Women's Day) outside the official realm of the UN, including the public presentation of self in the Time's Up official group photo. This implies that photos of Watson's “activism in general” with a personal touch carry more weight in the attention economy, presumably because they make Watson's agency more obvious. Her public presentations of self in relation to the HeForShe campaign receive fewer “likes”, even though these posts are central to the Instagram feed in a different way because they support the impression that she is a serious and hardworking UN goodwill ambassador.

### **Cultural critique: Hermione's book club and the personal book choice on Instagram**

Cultural consumption and the star system have been closely intertwined in the form of product placement and film promotion (Lowenthal, 1961; Wasko, 2003; McDonald, 2013) as well as regular endorsements of luxury products (McCracken, 1989). This dynamic,

however, functions differently in relation to a celebrity book club because its credibility is based on the fact that it is about reading and sharing – rather than selling – books (Collins, 2010). Emma Watson's recommendations grow out of her work as a feminist activist, and she gains authority through her star image and her strong association with Hermione, the *Harry Potter* character who loves to read. As a feminist book club, Our Shared Shelf seems to have sought to provide a new twist to the general role of book clubs in selecting non-academia approved books (Collins, 2010; Radway, 1997, p. 11) and further narrowing this down to feminist books, ultimately aiming for self-education and empowerment (Stacey, 1992; Warner, 2013). With Watson presenting herself as the feminist curator who is eager for the audience to join her in learning more, she acts as a role model in the form of a reading companion.

The Instagram posts and book club letters are interrelated and address the “activism in general” type of post. On Instagram, there are two kinds of posts that are of particular interest: “the book selfie” and “the book giveaway”. *The book selfie* is the presentation of the latest choice for the book club and is shown with a self-portrait of Emma Watson holding the book and placing it at the centre of the frame. Sometimes the book even covers half her face, thus making it as much about the book as about her. An example of this is the presentation of the book *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race* by journalist Rennie Eddo-Lodge, see Figure 3, which received 5.7 million likes (Watson, 2018f). The book selfie is an example of what Marwick (2015, p. 142) argues is the ability of the Instagram selfie to allow the celebrity “to show glimpses of their lives to others, connect with audiences.” This is because the selfie makes it explicit that the celebrity has indeed taken the picture and is sharing it immediately. The book selfie also becomes a good example of how an extraordinary star can perform “being ordinary” on Instagram,



Figure 3: *The book selfie* (Watson, 2018f)

both in terms of choice of photographic genre and in terms of setting (i.e. the photos are close-ups, and in the background one can see what appears to be a domestic setting). One could thus argue, following Chouliaraki (2013, p. 92), that Watson's book selfie represents a form of de-celebritisation, presenting Watson wearing casual clothing and even offering a glimpse of her closet in the background. We get a peek into Watson's public private presentation of self, which is an exception to the rule on her Instagram account since the only selfies she posts are those with books. The book selfie also serves to document that the film star Emma Watson literally has had the book in hand. Not every book in the book club is presented on Instagram, but when they are, it is in the form of a book selfie. This reinforces the connection between her self and the literature. One additional advantage of including the book selfies on Instagram is the exposure to her many followers on that platform, which is confirmed by the number of "likes" relative to the other posts on activism.

The other significant way of presenting literature on Instagram is through "the book giveaway", such as "The Book Fairy project", an organisation with which Watson is collaborating, which allows you to donate your books, which will then be given away for free. This is depicted with posts showing Emma Watson in a video or a photograph placing books signed by Emma, in public places for people to pick up free of charge around the cities of London, New York, and Paris. The video from Paris shows Emma Watson running around incognito, placing books for people to take with them and getting 12.8 million views, the highest number for "the book giveaways" (Watson, 2017a). These posts depict Emma Watson as a de-celebritised film star, dressed in ordinary clothes, smiling to the camera, and putting her index finger in front of her mouth, indicating that this is a secret operation. She thereby pokes fun at how she makes her followers accomplices to her efforts to share books in public places. This is another way of giving tribute to literature and reading as part of everyday life – a film star on a square in Paris, in the Tube in London, and in the subway in New York. This is also a way of presenting literature as a gift to be shared and of stressing that books can be read, borrowed, donated, and found (emphasising that a purchase is not expected).

Literature and reading are also viewed as things to be shared in Watson's personal introduction letters for the Our Shared Shelf book club. The Our Shared Shelf book club on Goodreads is technically a reading group led by Emma Watson and managed by moderators. Watson writes the introductions and chooses the books, with a group of moderators creating threads on the discussion boards and managing the reading group. There are also competitions in which one can win books and videos with Emma Watson interviewing big-name authors.

The two letters to be analysed from the book club are the introductory "welcome letter" (Watson, 2016c) and 2018's first introduction, which is for the non-fiction book *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race* (Watson, 2017b), mentioned above in the analysis of the book selfie (Watson, 2018f). According to Jim Collins (2010, p. 83), it is important for celebrities with book clubs to have the ability to "convey a pas-

sion for books without profit (...) a delivery system at their disposal to get their advice to a national audience (...) a talent for making amateur readers believe that their recommendations can be expressions of their own personal taste." In the case of Our Shared Shelf, there are *no obligations to buy books*. Instead, sharing is key, as suggested by the "book giveaways" analysed above. The *delivery system* is the Our Shared Shelf section on Goodreads but the book club is also, as we have seen, promoted via Emma Watson's Instagram presence. This means that Watson reaches members on Goodreads but also to some extent appeals to the much larger audience on Instagram. Regarding Watson's ability to communicate that she is a *reliable authority* on literature (Collins, 2010, p. 88), her letters are supported by her gender equality work as a goodwill ambassador for the UN and her other activist activities as well as being implicitly connected to her star image.

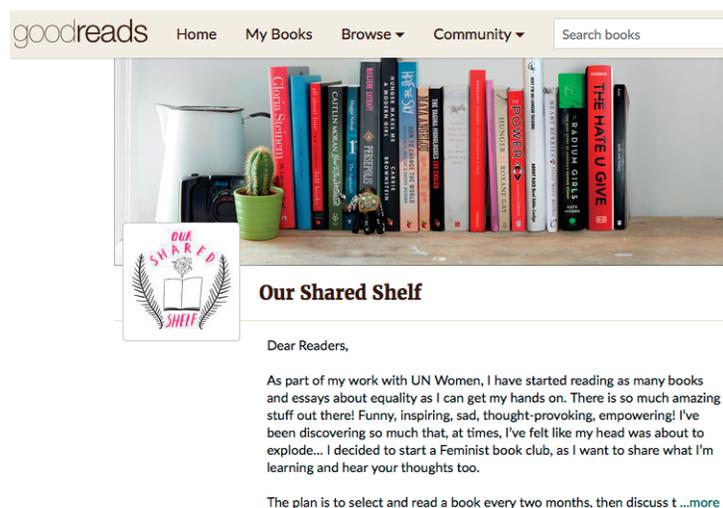


Figure 4: The Our Shared Shelf Book Club on Goodreads (Watson, 2016c)

"The welcome letter", which has 34,033 views, presents the book club to potential new members, explaining why Watson has decided to create this feminist book club. The reason for this project is explained in terms of her work as UN goodwill ambassador and because there is "so much amazing stuff out there," and "I want to share what I'm learning and hear your thoughts too." She thus invites members to share and participate: "Everyone is welcome. I would be honoured" (Watson, 2016c). The welcome letter has Watson presenting herself as a feminist, as a passionate reader, and as someone who wants to learn and discuss. Watson nevertheless maintains the parasocial relationship and the hierarchy between star and audience: The celebrity shares and addresses the members as an audience, not as individuals (Marwick, 2015). Watson also reveals the workings of the book club and states that a new book will be introduced every other month "to give everybody the time to read it." On the basis of the list of books on Our Shared Shelf, femi-

nist books seem to be defined as books written by women and addressing feminist issues from various perspectives, including fiction and non-fiction. Not all of the books are from big-name authors, and the list includes more obscure women writers as well.

"The book introduction letter" is exemplified by the introduction to *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race*, which was posted on December 31<sup>st</sup> 2017 (Watson, 2017b) with 27,556 views. In this letter, Emma Watson begins addressing the widespread racism in society in general while also making it a *personal issue*: "There is so much racism, both in our past and in our present, that is not accounted for. I know this to be the case from my own education, and I know there is so much more for me to learn" (Watson, 2017b). The racism issue has become personal for Watson because questions apparently have been raised regarding whether she is a "white feminist" who fails to acknowledge that women of colour can experience gender inequality differently (O'Donnell, 2017). Her reason for reading this book is thus presented from the outset as relevant to her personally: "I am not supposed to have favourites, however this was the most important book for me this year" (Watson, 2017b). This comments on Watson's *reading ritual* as well.

She is also self-reflexive regarding her position as a white, privileged, middle-class woman, asking the question: "What are the ways that I have benefitted from being white?" However, the presentation of *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race* must also be understood as a strategic move to maintain her star image, activist profile, and status as a respectable role model and activist in solidarity with all women. In relation to Instagram, it is interesting that the *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race* is posted as a book selfie and is so far the most popular of such posts, appearing in Watson's feed in between the many Time's Up posts. Activism and cultural critique are thus interspersed and interconnected.

Watson also connects her own story with wider historical developments: She reminisces about "when I gave my UN speech" (Watson, 2014) and finally concludes the letter by stating that she has learned a lot since then, about different ways of being a feminist. She is thus once again stressing the necessity of learning about the world as well as about one's self through literature – and how *educating oneself* through life is necessary even for a well-read film star such as Emma Watson. She thereby both positions herself as a role model and invites the audience to engage in an extra-cinematic identification (Stacey, 1992).

The *empowerment strategy* is likewise emphasised in the letter's concluding direct address to Our Shared Shelf members: "Everyone has their own journey, and it may not always be easy. (...) You're not alone. And even if you are, in a particular moment... remember you come from a long line of feminists who did this work, in the outside world but also inside themselves" (Watson, 2017b). Emma Watson is thus writing herself and her personal story into the much larger historical narrative of feminist activism and is inviting the reader to do the same.

Watson is performing cultural criticism not only by curating the books and choosing the feminist perspective but also by presenting an alternative to the academy as well as in some respects to what Jim Collins (2010) characterises as “conglomerate mainstream literature.” The cultural critique, as performed by Emma Watson, is about reading feminist literature and emphasising *educating oneself* and being *empowered* (Collins, 2010; Warner, 2013) through knowledge, as stated in both “the welcome letter” and “the book introduction letter”. “The book introduction letter” specifically emphasises that it is important both to realise that “the members” are all part of a *historical context*, “a long line of feminists” and that Watson herself is well aware that everyone approaches feminism from different life situations. Nevertheless, her statement “You’re not alone” emphasises that this is a *shared experience* (Collins, 2010). The book club thus offers different and more explicit instructions as to how to understand oneself as part of a feminist community that belongs to Our Shared Shelf. On Instagram, “the book selfies” contribute visual documentation of *the reading ritual* as a public private presentation of self, and the “book fairy videos” make it about sharing – rather than consuming – literature, presenting Emma Watson as de-celebritised and ordinary, stressing her sincerity and authenticity as well as, implicitly her connection to the character of Hermione.

## Conclusion

This case study of Emma Watson’s performance of activism and cultural critique has demonstrated how her activity on Instagram and Our Shared Shelf complement each other within the presentational regime (Marshall, 2010), showing Watson’s visible agency (Warner, 2013) as well as inviting the audience into extra-cinematic identification (Stacey, 1992). Watson has many followers but is not engaging in any dialogue and is thus adhering to a traditional parasocial relationship, maintaining asymmetrical, one way-communication with her audience (Marwick, 2010). Her performance on Instagram is likewise primarily a public presentation of self, particularly in relation to her performance in the “UN activities” and “activism in general” posts. These posts demonstrate that she is eager to perform, that she is in control of her appearance, that she takes her activism seriously as an obligation but also enjoys it in an informal way. Her public private presentations include the posts such as the Golden Globes snapshot and “the book selfies”, demonstrating her personal engagement in her performance of both activism and cultural critique. She presents herself on Instagram through a combination of ordinary and extraordinary appearances and thus renders her appearance both authentic and personal, particularly in “the book selfies” and snapshots. This is also supported by the strategies of solidarity, in which she is de-celebritised, as in “the book-related” posts, but also hyper-celebritised, as in the group photo of Hollywood stars at the Golden Globes. Unlike most film stars on Instagram, her public private presentations of self are all related to her professional

performances as a feminist activist and cultural critic, and there are no photos showing her with her family or personal friends.

The personal point of view is instead presented in her book club letters, which recommend feminist literature and reading rituals as a path to empowerment and which set an inclusive agenda. Likewise, in her introduction letter to *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race*, she specifically refers to her own personal experiences and to how reading is a means of continually educating oneself and to learn about history as well as about society. This is in turn supported by "the book selfie" post in her Instagram feed, placed between the posts on the Time's Up mission statement and the Golden Globes Awards. The Our Shared Shelf book club and her engagement with feminist literature thus seem congruent with her work as an activist for solidarity and gender equality for all women.

This case study has shown that Watson's authority as a cultural critic is based in part on her activism as seen on Instagram, solidifying the star image of Emma Watson as both relevant and prominent. Emma Watson's status as a film star and continued relevance as both a cultural critic and activist is further emphasised by the over 47.5 million followers on Instagram, granting her public attention since this translates into leverage and influence in the attention economy (Marwick, 2015). In terms of method, the division of posts on Instagram into different kinds of activities (UN activism, activism in general, book-related posts) as well as the four typical elements of the book club letters (personal choice, reading ritual, empowerment and education, activism) make it possible to demonstrate and distinguish between how these articulate different aspects of activism and cultural critique as well as where these coalesce and support each other across platforms. Significantly, the posts in which she presents her public private self are those with the highest number of likes on Instagram, indicating that the combination of the ordinary and the extraordinary in terms of authenticity remains central to establishing her authority for performing cultural criticism and activist work.

This analysis of Emma Watson's performance on two digital platforms can to a certain extent be used as a framework for investigating other celebrities who engage in activism and cultural critique, taking a cross-platform perspective when using the case study of embedded units of analysis. The analysis can also contribute to further discussions of how activism and cultural critique are communicated and based on different kinds of authority in digital media culture.

## References

- Brockington, D. (2014). The production and construction of celebrity advocacy in international development, *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 35 nr.1. DOI: 10.1080/01436597.2014.868987.
- Chouliaraki, L. (2013). *The Ironic Spectator. Solidarity in the Age of Posthumanitarianism*. Polity Press: Cambridge.

## Article: Hermione's feminist book club

- Collins, J. (2010). *Bring on the books for everybody. How Literary Culture became popular culture*. Duke University Press: Durham.
- Dyer, R. (1979). *Stars*. London: BFI Publishing.
- English, J.F. (2005). *The Economy of Prestige, Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Gamson, J. (1994). *Claims to Fame*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gibson, J. (1979). *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. London: Psychology Press.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of self in everyday life*. London: Penguin.
- Horton, D. & Wohl, R.R. (1961). Massekommunikation og parasocial interaktion: Et indlæg om intimitet på Afstand, *Mediekultur*, vol. 13, no. 26, pp.27-39, (1997). DOI: 10.7146/mediekultur.v13i26.1088.
- Kantor, J. & Twohey, M. (2017). Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades. I <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/us/harvey-weinstein-harassment-allegations.html> retrieved 10.06.18.
- Lowenthal, L. (1961). The Triumph of Mass Idols. In P. David Marshall (red.) *The Celebrity Culture Reader*. London: Routledge.
- Maguire, J. & Matthews, J. Eds. (2014). *The Cultural Intermediaries Reader*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Marshall P.D. (2010). The promotion and presentation of the self, *Celebrity Studies Journal*, vol.1, no.1, pp.35-48. DOI: 10.1080/19392390903519057.
- Marshall, P.D. (2017). Foreword: the Bridge of the Human Brand. In J. Raphael & C. Lam (eds.), *Becoming-Brands. Celebrity, Activism and Politics*. Waterhill Publishing: Toronto.
- Marwick, A.E. (2015). Instafame: Luxury Selfies in the Attention Economy, *Public Culture*, vol. 27, no. 1, pp.137-160. DOI: 10.1215/08992363-2798379.
- Marwick, A.E., & Boyd, D. (2010). I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately, *New media & society*, vol. 13, no. 1, pp.114-133. DOI: 10.1177/1461444810365313.
- McCracken, G. (1989). Who is the celebrity endorser? Cultural foundations of the endorsement process, *Journal of consumer research*, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 310-321.
- McDonald, P. (2013). *Hollywood Stardom*. London: Wiley Blackwell.
- O'Donnell, K.M. (2017). Celebrities and Conflicting Notions of Modern. In J. Raphael & C. Lam (Eds.), *Becoming Brands. Celebrity, Activism and Politics*. Waterhill Publishing: Toronto
- Radway, J. (1997). A Feeling For Books. The Book-of-the-month, Literary Taste, and Middle Class Desire. University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill.
- Raphael, J. & Lam, C. (2017). *Becoming Brands. Celebrity, Activism and Politics*. Waterhill Publishing: Toronto.
- Rojek, C. (2013). *Fame attack*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Rooney, K. (2005): Reading With Oprah. The Book Club that Changed America. University of Arkansas Press: Fayetteville.
- Stacey, J. (1992) *Star Gazing. Hollywood Cinema and Female spectatorship*. London: Routledge: London.
- Thomas, S. (2014) Celebrity in the 'Twitterverse': history, authenticity and the multiplicity of stardom Situating the 'newness' of Twitter, *Celebrity Studies*, vol. 5, no. 3, pp. 242-255. DOI: 10.1080/19392397.2013.845962.
- Tufekci, Z. (2013). 'Not This One': Social Movements, the Attention Economy, and Microcelebrity Networked Activism, *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 57, no. 7, pp.848-70.
- Warner, H. (2013). Fashion, Celebrity and cultural workers: SJP as cultural intermediary. *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 35, no. 3, pp.382-391. DOI: 10.1177/0163443712471781.
- Watson, E. (2014) (UN portrait of Watson) <https://www.instagram.com/p/qMVqXUH3EQ/?takenby=emmawatson> retrieved 10.06.18.

- Watson, E. (2016a) (Watson with Trudeau) <https://www.instagram.com/p/BK8JeeRgSyu/?takenby=emmawatson> retrieved 10.06.18.
- Watson, E. (2016b) (Watson at Davos Summit) <https://www.instagram.com/p/BLGWtgBAZby/?takenby=emmawatson> retrieved 10.06.18.
- Watson, E. (2016c) Our Shared Shelf. Dear Readers. <https://www.goodreads.com/group/show/179584-ourshared-shelf> retrieved 10.06.18.
- Watson, E. (2017a) (Bookfairies) <https://www.instagram.com/p/BVpeywxhU2e/?taken-by=emmawatson> retrieved 10.06.18.
- Watson, E. (2017b): "Our Shared Shelf discussion Announcements > First Book of 2018! Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race by Reni Eddo-Lodge", <https://www.goodreads.com/topic/show/19152741-first-book-of-2018-why-i-m-no-longer-talking-to-white-people-about-race> retrieved 10.06.18.
- Watson, E. (2018a) (Time's Up) <https://www.instagram.com/p/BdcSGMIh0qC/?taken-by=emmawatson> retrieved 10.06.18.
- Watson, E. (2018b) Time's Up New York Times link) <https://www.instagram.com/p/BdcSGMIh0qC/?takenby=emmawatson> retrieved 10.06.18.
- Watson, E. (2018c) (Why I wear black today) <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bdq02Bhi-E/?takenby=emmawatson> retrieved 10.10.18.
- Watson, E. (2018d) (Golden Globes group photo) <https://www.instagram.com/p/BdtBZelBp3g/?takenby=emmawatson> retrieved 10.06.18.
- Watson, E. (2018e) (Golden Globes portraits) <https://www.instagram.com/p/BdtpsMNBKsC/?takenby=emmawatson> retrieved 10.06.18
- Watson, E. (2018f) @emmawatson (Book-selfie) <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bdk3GQuBSL/?takenby=emmawatson> retrieved 10.06.18.
- Watson, E. (2018g) (The Olivier Awards) <https://www.instagram.com/p/BddQtluhNQR/?takenby=emmawatson> retrieved 10.06.18.
- Watson, E. (2018h) (Womens Day) <https://www.instagram.com/p/BgD3Ln2B87M/?takenby=emmawatson> retrieved 10.06.18.
- Watson, E. (2018i) (Cannes Film Festival) <https://www.instagram.com/p/BitUS0jTle/?takenby=emmawatson> retrieved 10.06.18
- Wasko, J. (2003). *How Hollywood works*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.
- Wheeler, M. (2013). *Celebrity Politics*. London: Polity Press.
- Wilson, S. (2014): Stardom, Sentimental Education, and the Shaping of Global Citizens, *Cinema Journal*, vol. 53, no. 2, pp. 27-49. DOI: 10.1353/cj.2014.0013.
- Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods* (4th Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Helle Kannik Haastrup  
Associate Professor  
Department of Nordic Studies and Linguistics  
University of Copenhagen  
[h.k.haastrup@hum.ku.dk](mailto:h.k.haastrup@hum.ku.dk)