

#Chinfiesquad:
A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Commodification of Non-Confirming Self-
Representation on Instagram



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Abstract

Selfies are a form of self-representation that have been widely researched within the academic fields. However, there has been little attention to subversive selfies and the explanation of this phenomenon within the realm of social media. Michelle Liu who started her Instagram @Chinventures in the fall of 2016 has harnessed chinning, a subversive form of representing the self, and has gained a significant number of followers throughout the years. Currently, she has reached the status of being a microcelebrity on Instagram and has begun to collaborate with different corporate businesses for advertisements. Liu's ability to harness her microcelebrity status is specific to the ways in which she has cultivated her Instagram account and online identity, further supporting the popularity of her account through self-branding, constructing a consistent persona/identity, and engagement with her audience. These components will lead the analysis by looking at Liu's general Instagram page, and different posts between 2016 and 2018, including the sponsored content. The aim of this thesis seeks to investigate the ambiguity of the chinning phenomenon and its identity construction as a form of commodification on Instagram by using Critical Discourse Analysis.

1. Introduction of the Selfie, Instagram & Commodification

Selfies are intrinsically connected to social media, as social media work as vehicles for the proliferation of selfies.¹ Selfies often function as a tool to shape an individual's online self-representation. Consequently, people who share selfies on social media are acutely aware of how they represent themselves, which results in a continuous sharing of the "ideal self" through selfies (Wendt 7). Arguably, Instagram as a purely visual platform offers users an endless opportunity to represent themselves in an idealistic way, their images enhanced by various filters and at times Photoshop, which has led to informal shared ideas of what selfies should look like (Wendt 26). Visual representation is furthermore layered by the complex relationships between several prominent elements of Instagram, such as followers, likes, marketing strategies and at times commodification. As a reaction to the prevailing ideas of how one should represent him/herself, Michelle Liu started her Instagram page @Chinventures in September of 2016, where every posts features her "chinning," a way of taking selfies in which she takes a picture from an often low angle, holding the head backwards with the chin pointed downwards to the neck, thus creating many layers of chin. Rather than pursuing an idealistic self-representation that highlights always being happy and boasting a flawless appearance, chinning exemplifies a response to dominant selfie culture. At the time of writing in May 2018, Liu's Instagram feed has almost 70,000 followers. Liu's construction of a chinning narrative follows a norm that offers a route for her @Chinventures posts to be commodified on Instagram.

Besides chinning, the travel aspect of Liu's Instagram page reinforces its popularity, as she tends to take her selfies in front of iconic global touristic attractions or in other locations. In addition, Liu connects these threads to the hashtag "#travel," which is one of the most popular categories on Instagram.² This construction of a travel narrative helps to further establish chinning as a phenomenon. Arguably, Michelle Liu gained popularity because she is not entirely deconstructing conventional selfies, though Liu constructs a narrative that distinguishes herself from other Instagram users through the playfulness of emphasizing and mixing the popular travel category with a less established way of capturing the self.

Furthermore, as Instagram has transitioned towards being an advertising platform, meaning that "information of user activity has become commodified and sold to advertisers for

¹ Selfies are defined in the Oxford Dictionaries as "a photograph taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website." See <https://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/2014/11/10/selfie-one-year/>.

² Currently, Instagram features over 237 million pictures with #travel and over 325 million pictures with #selfie, showing the importance of these categories within the platform. In the theory and discussion chapter this thesis will further discuss the relevance of hashtags within Instagram.

them to better direct advertisements at specific audiences,” there is a sense of commodification of the chinning phenomenon (Cwynar-Horta 41). A consequence of this shift towards a commercial platform is that “marketers achieve direct consumer advertising through content deals with celebrities and Instagram influencers on the platform” (Cwynar-Horta 41). As Liu gained more and more followers on Instagram, she collaborated with businesses and advertised in several posts. For instance, in her sponsored post in January 2018, Liu offers a giveaway action to her followers. Her followers could win a set of 50 “limited edition chinning” stickers made by @Stickerapp, and she invited her followers to visit @Stickerapp’s Instagram feed. The example of promoting @stickerapp demonstrates how chinning has become tied to the commercial objectives of Instagram and how commercialization can influence the content of a user’s posts.

With almost 70,000 followers, Liu is a micro-influencer who is slowly emerging to become a microcelebrity, which makes hers an interesting narrative for corporate collaborators. Micro-influencers are those highly active social media users with less than 100,000 followers while being a microcelebrity tends to be a more professional practice (Mediakix par. 8). According to Alice Marwick, being a microcelebrity is a practice unique to social media, as microcelebrities “inhabit the celebrity subject position through the use of the same social technologies used by musicians, athletes, and actors” (“You May Know Me From YouTube” 334). Consequently, this means that individuals with a small number of followers (e.g., 5000 followers) can still become a microcelebrity by using social media the same way conventional celebrities do. With her current number of followers, Liu falls into the category of micro-influencers; but she continues to gather a fanbase, thus slowly growing to become a microcelebrity. Furthermore, since microcelebrities have a significant number of followers, they can commodify their Instagram posts. According to Influence.co, microcelebrities with “2,000 to 100,000 followers charge, on average, between \$137 and \$258 per Instagram post” (Barker par. 3). To indicate Liu’s micro-influencer/-celebrity status, MediaKix has written an article “The Top 20 Instagram Micro Influencers that Have Yet to Be Discovered,” featuring 20 micro-influencers with follower counts varying from 50,000 to 85,000 followers (MediaKix Team par. 1). While she does not feature in the article, with the number of followers Liu currently has she would fit the category of micro-influencer. By looking closely at Liu’s Instagram account, we see that Liu cultivates a practice which aids in her emergence as a microcelebrity. She encourages other users to take chinning pictures and embrace their “goofy selves.” At once, she undermines traditional approaches to self-representation on Instagram and yet subsequently embraces consumer culture as a form of self-representation.

Therefore, the present thesis will investigate this ambiguity of the chinning phenomenon and its identity construction as a form of commodification on Instagram by using Critical Discourse Analysis (hereafter CDA). It will argue that Michelle Liu's chinning is a form of subversive self-representation, whilst also conforming with a commercialized construction of identity on Instagram in the context of consumer culture.

2. Theoretical Framework Introduction

As selfies reign supreme in this social media era, there have been many studies conducted on the proliferation of the selfie. Scholars such as Lev Manovich and Brooke Wendt have researched the selfie especially within the realm of Instagram. According to Manovich, Instagram has become the platform "where nothing is in real-time and instead every photo's composition, colors, details, posting time, tags, and position in (a) user's gallery are rationalized and engineered," and where users are prompted to meticulously prepare their images for publication through an editing process (21). The individual takes control of his/her self-representation by taking many selfies until the perfect image has been shot with a smartphone; subsequently, they often apply a filter or enhance the selfie with Photoshop and select which selfies they wish to share with their followers and friends on social media. Wendt notes since Instagram is designed to post visuals only, it becomes the platform that strengthens selfie (45). Selfies never remain at just one, as one continuously reproduces selfies with the aim of producing an idealistic version of oneself has resulted in Instagram becoming *the* platform that fuels a user's desire and satisfaction (Wendt 38; Wendt 45). Consequently, this raises a lot of questions concerning (self-)representation on social media. Why do we want to be viewed in a certain way? Why do we have a significant interest in other people's appearance online? How does this self-representation, at times, evolve into a commodity? Though these scholars have mostly focused on the cultural norms around taking 'perfect' selfies, there is also a selfie culture that contradicts the idea of the ideal selfie that revises these standards, as Michelle Liu exemplifies.

By assessing the Instagram page of Michelle Liu, which focuses on subversive self-representation, this research explores how the practice of self-representation on Instagram can create and reproduce new forms of ideological approaches to the selfie while refraining from deconstructing the ideology of self-representation in the context of consumer culture. Liu's social media name, the information on her page, the pictures she takes, her hashtags and the captions she uses all present a curated image of her. Therefore, rather than looking at the

concept of self-representation, *how* chinning is performed, it is more important to look at the *practice* of chinning, thus study how Michelle Liu uses Instagram to practice her chinning identity and how this has led to the possibility of commodifying her posts. Joseph Davis sees Instagram as a commercial platform where commodification takes place at all times (41). Furthermore, Instagram is a platform where a consistent approach to self-branding, the construction of a consistent persona/identity, and engagement with one's audience are crucial elements to gaining followers and cultivating an online persona, which in turn provides a creative lineage that could lead to the attainment of microcelebrity status.

2.1. The Evolution of Representing the Self & the Kodak Moment

To understand today's selfies and chinning as a response to this, an explanation of the selfie's broader historical context is necessary. It has been argued that the selfie derives from the historical self-portrait (Iqani and Schroeder 409). The skills, tools and material resources required to create a self-portrait were only available to a few (Iqani and Schroeder 409), making the self-portrait a mark of the upper-class status; it was therefore seen as "high culture," a feature that only the elite could afford (Jameson 3).

At the turn of the twentieth century, photography became available for the masses due to the development and increasing accessibility of the film camera. As described by Gen Doy, "with the boom in popular photography around the turn of the twentieth century, self-portraiture proliferated" (qtd. in Iqani and Schroeder 409). Technological developments of the photo camera, such as the shutter release and self-timer made self-portraiture with photo cameras possible (Peraica 20). According to Wendt, Kodak (a major camera company in the twentieth century) helped influence the norms of how today's society take selfies (12). Kodak was the first camera company to develop an affordable and easy-to-use camera for the masses and advertised to consumers the camera's ability to "stop time," preserving such moments in a lasting memory (Ferraz Muse 126; Wendt 14). When Kodak cameras first became affordable to the masses, Kodak's cameras were mostly used in the private sphere, preserving family memories such as birthdays and weddings. The mass development of the Kodak camera incited the term "Kodak moment" which "was a common expression to refer to any moment worth remembering" (Ferraz Muse 126; Wendt 14). That is, because of the development and mass availability of the Kodak camera, a necessity arose to preserve good memories, which became an integral business model for Kodak (Ferraz Muse 125; Wendt 14).

As the popularity of the photo camera increased in the twentieth century, Kodak began to place more emphasis on the individual. As a result, the "camera became marketed as a device

intended to serve the individual more than the family,” meaning that Kodak promoted the camera as a device with which individuals could build an identity (Wendt 15). As Wendt explains, “Kodak advertised the camera as a device capable of building identity: they’ll decide what to shoot. And they’ll establish a concept of ‘self,’ by recording their lives in pictures” (15). At the turn of the twenty-first century, similarly to what happened to Kodak’s camera, there was a boom in the development of the mass-affordable smartphone. Along with the rise of smartphones, smartphone companies seemingly “copied” Kodak’s messages into their commercials. Pictures and videos taken by smartphone cameras are preserved as memory-making devices, placing the individual at the center of memory preservation and continued identity construction (Wendt 17). Though it is important to note here that despite the similarities, there are also major differences between the Kodak camera and the smartphone. Kodak was analog, and smartphones are digital. Kodak also made the film that went into all cameras and developed that film into pictures; people paid for various services and equipment to develop pictures, as Kodak’s founder George Eastman said: “you press the button, we do the rest” (qtd. in Saganic par. 3). Conversely, smartphone cameras can instantly snap pictures and have more functions that connect their users to the web within seconds.

Furthermore, unlike Kodak’s camera, the smartphone developed alongside the Internet and social media, meaning that smartphone pictures instantly can be shared with a global network of people. Photos have become about more than preserving memories of self-representation: in a sense, their use has encouraged the publication of a visual ideal self. Smartphone companies know that users nowadays are acutely aware of how they represent themselves; as a consequence, several smartphone companies advertise their phone’s front camera’s ability to take the best selfies. For instance, Samsung advertised their Galaxy S7 and S7 Edge’s “selfie mode,” a tool to enhance selfies with the front camera. Another example is HTC’s advertisement of their camera’s Live Makeup tool, “the surefire way to make sure all your selfies turn out the way you want” (“Live Makeup par. 2; “What is Selfie Mode par. 1”). Establishing an ideal version of the self has become more easy and comfortable with the rise of the smartphone and the reality that nowadays everyone is in charge of building their own identity online.

The development of Kodak’s message of preserving happy memories and the development of smartphone cameras and the ability to take selfies have influenced the prevailing ideas of how one represents him/herself on Instagram. Instagram stated in a blog post that “Instagram has always been a place to share the moments you want to remember” (“Introducing Instagram Stories” par. 7). On Instagram, users share moments of their lives with

their followers, often emphasizing happy moments and their own individuality. By carefully selecting their Instagram posts, individuals curate an image of how they want to be perceived. Kodak initiated the commodification of memory preservation “by communicating to us that it is possible to achieve self-perfection with the press of a button” (Wendt 18). According to Cwynar-Horta, “agency in self-presentation is limited as the construction of an individual’s identity is mediated through our visually ingrained culture and the images that surround us” (43). The happy, idealistic selfies that prevail on Instagram become blueprints by which users copy visual representations into their own selfies, though the common forms of representing the self can be traced back to Kodak’s early advertisements on photographing happy moments. In combination with Instagram’s encouragements to share happy moments, contemporary Instagram users seem to use selfies for idealistic self-representation, which Liu deconstructs with her Instagram account. While exposing herself in a non-conventional manner on Instagram, through the many likes, comments, and followers she receives Liu has been able to harness her Instagram popularity and subsequently, her chinning approach to selfies becomes commodified.

2.2. Commodification in Context of Consumer Culture

To understand the mechanisms of Liu’s commodification of chinning as a form of self-representation on Instagram, it is necessary to comprehend Instagram in its respective cultural context of consumer culture. According to Jean Baudrillard, “[w]e are at the point where consumption is laying hold of the whole of life,” meaning that we are living our lives in a way that always supports the capitalistic system (29). In other words, capitalism structures society in which we no longer work to survive, but we live to consume and simultaneously support the capitalist system in doing so; we live in a consumer culture (Jameson X). Instagram is not a free space, it is a corporate business that aims to create revenue (Iqani and Schroeder 410). The users on Instagram support the capitalist system when entering this realm, which includes Liu. When she travels around the world and posts selfies on social media, it appears as if her selfies are merely part of her leisure time. In reality, she becomes an object for other Instagram users to consume. By generating many followers on Instagram, she supports Instagram’s business model and eventually generates a small income for herself, as indicated by the several advertisements on her page. Moreover, if her Instagram account continues to garner more and more followers, she may potentially be able to convert her selfies into work that supports her financially.

Thus, users are consumable objects on Instagram. According to Iqani and Schroeder, “selfies are media commodities,” since users on Instagram “are enrolled, knowingly or not, in a corporate-owned service, which is ultimately profit oriented and sells advertising space” (410). This means that sharing images within the consumer-capitalist space of Instagram, one “sells” him/herself for comments and likes, which results in the commodification of identity and popularity. In the case of Liu, she constructs an image of herself through pictures that produce high numbers of likes and plenty of comments; since she started her account, she has received thousands of likes on her posts. High numbers of likes and comments on a post are often favorable, leading to a high number of followers and eventually the interest of corporations who want to advertise on Instagram. As a result, Best argues that identity “becomes a product that we visually consume” (63). Similarly, Iqani and Schroeder agree with Best that “self-portraits turn the image of the self into a commodity that is made public and consumable by others” (411). Posting selfies on a platform such as Instagram is a form of advertising the self, a type of self-branding that others can consume (Gomez Cruz and Thornham 2).

2.3. Becoming a Microcelebrity on Instagram

The Internet offers everyone the opportunity to engage on social media and the chance to become a microcelebrity. Well-known celebrities such as musicians and actors differ from the microcelebrity in the sense that microcelebrities are dependent on their popularity on the web, especially within social media culture (Senft 25). To become a microcelebrity, the user should be aware of the following vital aspects important to cultivating an image, such as branding themselves, constructing a consistent persona/identity, and engaging with their audience. The following paragraphs will explain how each of these factors offers a significant contribution to becoming a microcelebrity.

The first notable feature of microcelebrity is self-branding. Becoming active on Instagram means that users need to “sell” themselves through visuals to gain likes, followers or comments. To sell oneself on Instagram for followers or likes “involves the reorganization of our personal lives and relationships on the model of market relations,” meaning that we present ourselves in a certain way “for economic gain” (Davis 41). Davis calls this way of reorganizing personal lives “personal branding,” which involves defining a strategy “of cultivating a name and image of ourselves” (42). Ultimately, users are highly aware of the opportunities Instagram offers to curate an image of oneself. To gain followers, “microcelebrities carve out unique brand identities for themselves within a niche space” (Quantum Singapore par. 8). Consequently,

within a niche space, the microcelebrities gather followers with the same interests. However, someone who, for instance, cultivates their name within the subculture of hashtag #beauty should not only produce content that features makeup (brands) but should have a personality that suits the category as well. A man interested in sports and games is not likely to create content on Instagram that focuses on beauty and makeup. In the case of Liu, she created a travel narrative, which means that the content of her posts should include travel elements such as tourist attractions, presence in a foreign country, pictures on airplanes, geotags and so on, making it likely that she will gain followers with interest in travel. Furthermore, Liu's Instagram account exemplifies self-branding, as she recognizes and uses the value of being goofy and funny by chinning. The fact that she can distort her appearance by taking a selfie from a low angle creates and reproduces this authentic way of taking selfies in every picture as a way of selling her personality within the category of travel.

The second feature of becoming a microcelebrity is constructing a consistent persona/identity. Besides self-branding, it is crucial to build a constant relationship with the audience. According to Alice Marwick's *The Status Update*, being a microcelebrity means being "highly edited, controlled, and monitored, conforming to commercial ideals that dictate 'safe-for-work' self-presentation" (5). Furthermore, Marwick notes in her article "You May Know Me From YouTube" that the microcelebrity carefully constructs a persona of him/herself which remains constant as others consume it by deliberately and strategically sharing information with the audience to boost their network of followers (338). Chinning as a recurring theme becomes one way of constructing such a consistent persona. For instance, when looking at Liu's Instagram account, in all the 107 pictures that she posted she enacts chinning. Liu's followers know what to expect from her, and her posts always come as no surprise to her followers, as there is always a chinning and a traveling aspect present in her posts. She situates her posts within categories by using hashtags such as #selfies #travel, and her posts are always geotagged to show the specific places she has visited.

The final feature of being a microcelebrity is engaging with the audience. Given the microcelebrity establishes their fanbase online, "popularity is maintained through ongoing fan management" ("You May Know Me From YouTube" 338). To preserve and enlarge the established fanbase, the microcelebrity should engage with the audience and "share information strategically with this audience to boost their popularity and attention within a network" (*The Status Update* 6). For instance, Liu often uses the same hashtags in her posts, she engages with her audience by inviting her followers to comment on her posts, and she has organized a giveaway of stickers to her followers. This is all part of a strategy to boost her network of

followers. The microcelebrity must constantly be building a strategy and cultivating an identity through daily or weekly updates. It becomes apparent that being a microcelebrity is a practice, “something one does, rather than something one is” (“You May Know Me From YouTube” 338). At least several times a month, Liu posts chinning pictures on Instagram. All her posts in 2018 have ended with a question that invites her audience to comment on her posts, demonstrating that Liu aims to engage with her audience. The importance of this form of engagement is that Liu shows interest in her followers’ opinions while making her followers feel connected to her.

One consequence of being a microcelebrity on Instagram is that gathering a wide network of followers possibly attracts the attention of corporations. Marwick notes in her article “Instafame: Luxury Selfies in the Attention Economy” that there is an intrinsic connection between the practice of being a microcelebrity on a social media platform and consumer culture (138). Commercial interests drive engagement and support from users who have a large following base, and practices of constructing a persona on Instagram mirror aspects of consumer culture. Being a microcelebrity means consistently performing an identity that becomes a form of self-branding on a platform such as Instagram. As established in the previous paragraphs, it becomes clear that to become a microcelebrity, the user should adhere to the following key criteria: self-branding, constructing a consistent persona/identity, and engaging their audience—each of which applies to the case of Michelle Liu. The next chapters will discuss how these established elements will function as a guide for the analysis, as well as how Instagram affords these possibilities and how Liu carries out these practices in the analysis.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Questions and Case

This thesis focuses on the commodification of chinning in the context of consumer culture, self-identity, and Instagram. For this reason, this research has chosen to see chinning as a subversive form of self-representation on Instagram, with a specific focus on the page of Michelle Liu. The decision to focus on Liu’s page as the object of study is based on the fact that Liu runs a current and evolving Instagram page that has thousands of followers and presents a solid case to exemplify the tension of deconstruction and conformity to self-representation on Instagram.³ Furthermore, she is the most prominent practitioner of chinning on Instagram. When looking for #chinning or #chinfies her pictures appear as the most relevant and popular within these

³ I reached out to Michelle Liu, but unfortunately she was not able to answer questions within the timeframe of this analysis. Some understandings of motivations as to why she started her chinning account have been drawn from various news articles where she gave interviews.

categories. Through analysis of Liu's Instagram account, this thesis seeks to better understand the concept of the microcelebrity and the construction of a commodified subversion of self-representation on Instagram. To that end, I developed the following research question: *How can the commodification and construction of Liu's chinning narrative be understood in the context of consumer culture that considers the concept of being a microcelebrity on Instagram?*

There have been numerous trends that embrace imperfect selfies. Chinning, however, is a particularly interesting way of representing the self, as with chinning the individual does not show their "best" side. Furthermore, Michelle Liu's Instagram page has been picked up by different media companies, with some seeing her as "the new Instagram hero" (Buckley par. 1). At first sight, chinning is most prominently visible on her Instagram page, signifying her mockery of established beautified selfie norms on Instagram. However, when looking more closely, the traveling aspect evident in every picture appears as an additional thread that connects her chin-fies (chinning selfies).

To understand how the commodification of chinning and how the affordances of Instagram help to establish this narrative, the following sub-questions have been formulated. How is a microcelebrity defined within the context of Instagram? How does chinning fit in the context of self-representation on Instagram? Where does chinning fit within broader methods of representation and the commodification of the self throughout Instagram? How did the construction of the chinning narrative help to establish chinning as a commodity on Instagram?

3.2. Critical Discourse Analysis

Concerning research methods, this project applies critical discourse analysis. An analysis of different signs and symbols that both confirm and resist the established norms of self-representation on Instagram in the context of consumer culture will give a better understanding of Liu's commodification of chinning. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a suitable method for this, as CDA focuses on investigating discursive power by studying different texts and spoken discourse ("Aims of Critical Discourse Analysis" 17). This research is interested in understanding self-representation and commodification in the context of a specific social media platform, for which this thesis will look at how Liu's performance of chinning is reproduced, as well as how she rejects certain media and social discourses. Consequently, CDA is then suitable to better understand these complex online methods of representation through symbols and structures and to understand how others make sense of these evolving objects and interactions, such as how Liu constructs and shares her Instagram posts, quantities, captions, hashtags and comments of other Instagram users.

As previously mentioned, CDA focuses on investigating power and discourses in society. Discourses in society shape knowledge through “complex communicative events, consisting of text and context (“Critical Discourse Analysis” 470). Chinning is a form of self-presentation that challenges dominant discourses of self-representation of social media on the one hand, while simultaneously the construction of a chinning narrative on Instagram (and becoming a microcelebrity) reproduces and reifies dominant discourses of consumer culture. Within the realm of a commercial platform such as Instagram, advertisers, and users with many followers have subtly situated themselves around different power structures, with advertisers able to influence the content of Instagram posts. Advertisers collaborate with Instagram’s (micro)celebrities/influencers and harness their wide range of followers to promote their products and have those followers buy or be interested in specific products, or even to gain exposure for a product. Liu has obtained a significant number of followers since she started her Instagram feed; however, she has only been advertising on her page since the end of January 2018. There is a significant difference in the way she approached her followers in her early days in comparison to now. This shift will be elaborated on in the analysis and discussion chapter. CDA will be applied in this thesis to look at how Liu constructs her Instagram page, especially looking at the following elements: self-branding, building a consistent persona/identity, and engagement with the audience.

The analysis will first focus on @Chinventures’ main Instagram page, which is the page where users can see all of Liu’s posted pictures, her profile picture, her biography and how many followers she has. Second, this research will analyze nine selfies she has posted. At the time of writing, she has posted 107 pictures, and as it would be too much to examine them all for this thesis, a selection of nine photos has been made: three pictures from 2016, when she just started the account; three posts from 2017, when she gained more followers throughout the year; and three pictures from 2018, which are the sponsored posts. Looking at her postings in

different periods of time will provide insight into the process of commodification and how her behavior has shifted towards microcelebrity status over time.

4. Analysis

Through the analysis of Michelle Liu's Instagram page, this thesis finds that through the discourses of commodification on Instagram, Liu has created a persona that is well-thought through and curated in the fashion that helps to define her as a microcelebrity/influencer. Different consistent elements within Liu's Instagram page establish an identity that Liu herself creates and curates. In the analysis chapter, the selected posts will show such recurring elements as hashtags, captions, picture, location, and comments. Furthermore, the analysis will demonstrate a shift in Liu's posts that tie in with Davis' definition of self-commodification, in which she begins to present herself in a certain way for economic gains.

4.1. The general page

As discussed previously, Michelle Liu's popularity on Instagram is due to several ideological factors tied to consumer culture. Even though chinning deconstructs connotations of beautification regarding selfies, the overall construction of Liu's chinning persona ties in with the ideology of microcelebrity status and consumer culture.



Figure 1. Michelle Liu's Instagram page.

As discussed in the theory section, self-branding is essential; it is one of the crucial features of being (and becoming) a microcelebrity as well as curating an image of oneself (Best 63). Figure 1 shows a screenshot of Michelle Liu’s Instagram page. The chinning feature starts with her social media name, the portmanteau @Chinventures. Her profile picture is a selfie featuring her chinning with a cityscape in the background, suggesting she traveled somewhere, perhaps abroad. Her profile description also includes the two most important forms of her self-branding: “Chinchelle Travel 🌍 •Major Attractions 🏰 •Chin pics ☺️ I haven’t chinned everywhere, but it’s on my list.”⁴ This description further indicates what followers can expect of Michelle, for instance with “major attractions” implying that she takes pictures in front of iconic tourist attractions while she travels. There is no picture available on her Instagram where she appears in a normal fashion that conforms with the traditional standards of self-representation on Instagram.

The combination of travel and chinning situates Liu’s Instagram account within a unique niche; however, Liu herself appears to take charge in branding herself. Travel is one of the most popular categories on Instagram. Often, travel pages on Instagram post pictures of idyllic travel destinations, including iconic tourist attractions that influence users’ perception of those places (Ritschel par. 3). Figure 2, for instance, shows pictures on Instagram that appear when searching with the hashtag #travel. The most popular photos with this hashtag show beautiful, idyllic landscapes, and happy, beautiful people. Liu’s pictures not only subvert the

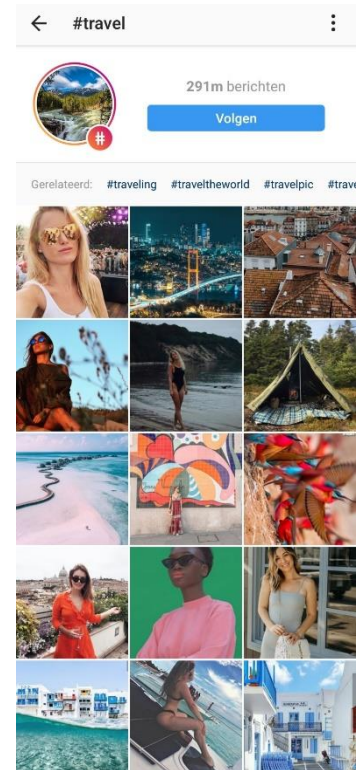


Figure 2. Result when searching for #travel on Instagram on May 26 2018.

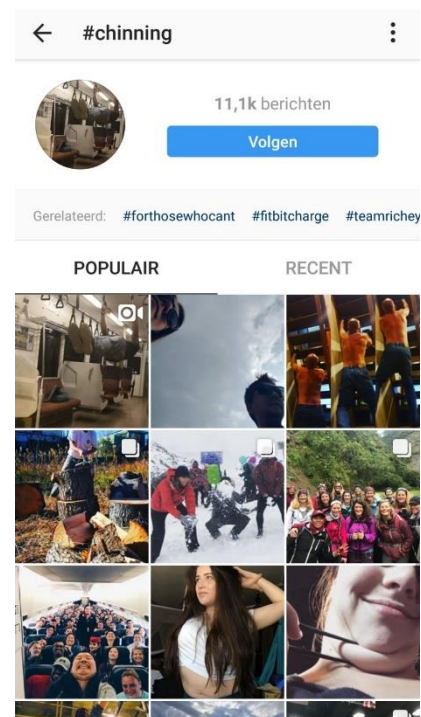


Figure 3. Result when searching for #chinning on Instagram on May 26 2018.

⁴ “Chinchelle” is a combination of Michelle’s name and the word chinning.

common representation of the self on Instagram, but chinning also subverts the commonplace idealization of iconic travel destinations. Clearly, her form of differentiation appeals to many people, as signified by the number of followers she currently has. Furthermore, the comments in the analysis will also show that Liu receives positive comments across her posts. Within Instagram, hashtags serve as one of the most important forms of self-branding. As the rest of the analysis will demonstrate, Liu has become quite consistent in her use of hashtags in her posts.

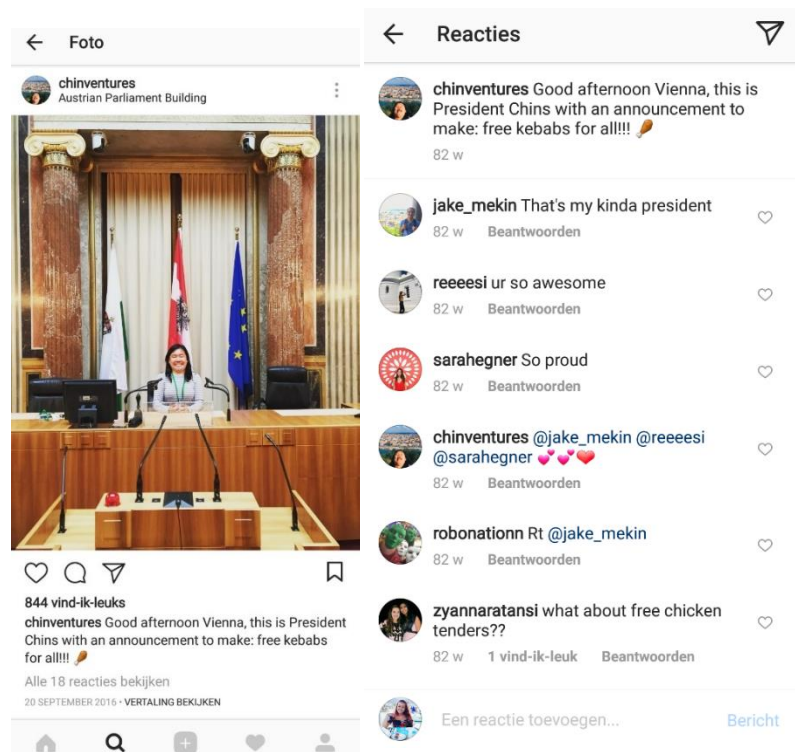


Figure 4. Liu's Instagram post on 20 Sept. 2016 at the Austrian Parliament Building.

Using hashtags within Instagram is useful to incite a broader engagement with one's audience, as hashtags allow other users to find Liu within different categories on Instagram (Loren par. 2). As figure 3 shows, when searching for #chinning, Liu's picture is one of the first to be shown.

4.2. Chinventures in 2016

This section of the analysis will look at several Instagram posts in from September 2016 onwards, when Liu first started her Instagram account. Figure 4 shows one of Liu's posts in September when she visited the Austrian Parliament Building. The second Instagram picture of the analysis (see figure 5) was posted on 5 October 2016, where Liu enacts chinning from a low angle in front of the München Rathaus. The third Instagram picture of the analysis (see figure 6) was posted on 20 November 2016. Here, again Liu stands in front of an iconic tourist attraction: the Eiffel Tower in Paris.

4.2.1 Self-branding

As Liu started her Instagram account in September of 2016, the posts of this year were crucial for cultivating a name (self-branding). There are consistent elements across these three pictures through which Liu established herself as a goofy traveling persona. First of all, there is a visible travel element in each of the selected posts: figure 4 features the Austrian Parliament, figure 5 was taken in front of the München Rathaus, and figure 6 in front of the Eiffel tower. All these pictures have been taken in a different country and geotagged, which are essential elements tied to traveling Instagram pages.

On Instagram, using hashtags is useful as a form of self-branding. Within the travel category, hashtags such as #travel and #travelling or hashtags with location and country are popular ways to cultivate a traveling narrative. However, as these figures show, Liu did not use any hashtags. This indicates that in this early point of Liu's career, Liu was not concerned with self-branding or possibly did not know the importance of hashtags as a form of self-branding on the platform. The visuals of the posts

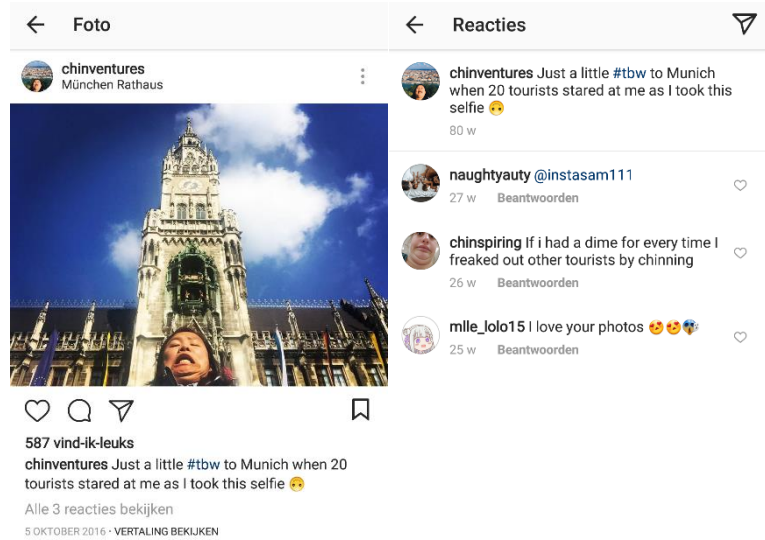


Figure 5. Liu's Instagram post on 5 Oct. 2016. In front of the Munich New Town Hall.

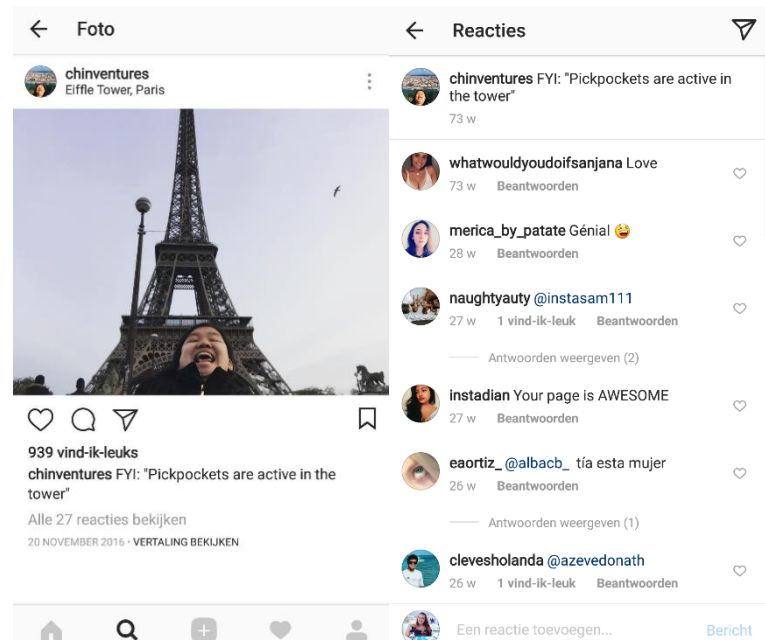


Figure 6. Liu's Instagram post on 20 Nov. 2016. In front of Eiffel Tower.

are the most prominent in showing the traveling aspect of her account, as she enacted chinning at a different location in every post, including some iconic attractions like the Eiffel Tower.

Aside from the travel narrative, Liu establishes herself as a funny, goofy person. In figures 4 to 6, she enacts chinning in every picture in front of impressive attractions and places.

In figure 4 for instance, she calls herself “President Chins” in the caption and announces, “free kebabs for all.” The same ironic situation takes place in figure 5, where she enacts chinning in front of the München Rathaus. As her caption already suggests, this form of self-representation is not ordinary as she suggested with her caption since “20 tourists stared at me as I took this selfie.” In figure 6 she enacts chinning in front of the Eiffel Tower, all the while she seemingly deconstructs the romantic connotations of the Eiffel tower, adding a layer of humor and sarcasm to her experience.

4.2.2. Constructing a consistent persona/identity

When establishing a consistent persona/identity on Instagram, recurring elements and familiarity are crucial to success. The selected pictures all have the same two recurring elements: chinning and travel. Furthermore, these recurring elements need to exist in service to her identity as a goofy traveler. At this point in the evolution of her chinning persona, there is no consistency in her captions. Her captions say something about the content of her pictures, whether they are funny (figure 4), describing her experience (figure 5) or informative (figure 6). Furthermore, as mentioned previously, there is no use of hashtags in these posts. The only hashtag she used is in figure 5, where she used the hashtag #tbw, which implies Liu took the selfie a while ago.⁵

4.2.3 Engagement with the audience

Since microcelebrities establish an online fan community, engagement with their audience is essential to maintaining and increasing their network of followers. At this stage, there is little personal interaction with her audience. Figure 4 shows the only visible interaction of these three selected posts in which Liu reacted to three users who commented positively on her post.

⁵ #Tbw stands for “throwback Wednesday.” Throwback is an internet trend in which users share an experience of the past, indicated with hashtags such as #tb #throwback #tbt #tbw.

However, Liu consistently geotags her pictures, which is a form of engagement with her followers and the location itself. Liu's geotagged pictures show that she has been traveling to various places, which adds to her travel narrative and allows her to engage with those audience members who connect with these places physically or emotionally. For instance, one user commented on Liu's post in figure 6 that she loves France. Furthermore, another

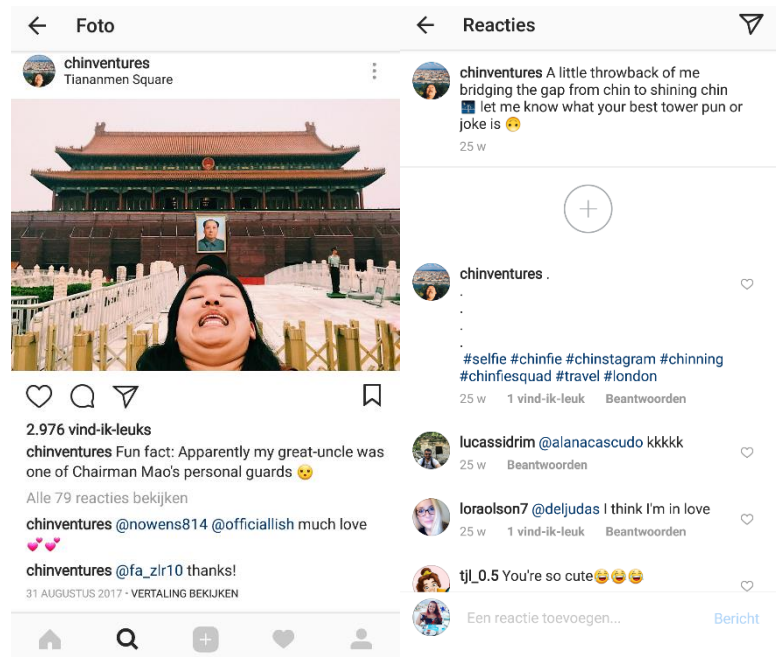


Figure 7. Liu's Instagram post on 21 Aug. 2017 In front the Tiananmen Square.

purpose of geotagging posts is visibility: geotagged posts are categorized within Instagram, so that when searching for a location such as New York or London the results show all pictures geotagged with these locations. This affordance allows Liu to engage with other Instagram users who have tagged their posts with the same location. Especially by geotagging iconic tourist attractions, Liu inserts herself into popular spaces that other users have visited.

4.3. Chinventures in 2017

In 2017, Liu posted 59 pictures in total. Figures 7 to 9 are the selected posts for this analysis, as there is a year between the chosen posts of 2016 and 2017. Figure 7 shows an Instagram post of 21 August of 2017, where Liu enacts chinning in Tiananmen Square, one of the most famous squares in Beijing. Figure 8 is a post from two months later, a selfie in front of the London Bridge, in which we can see there has been a

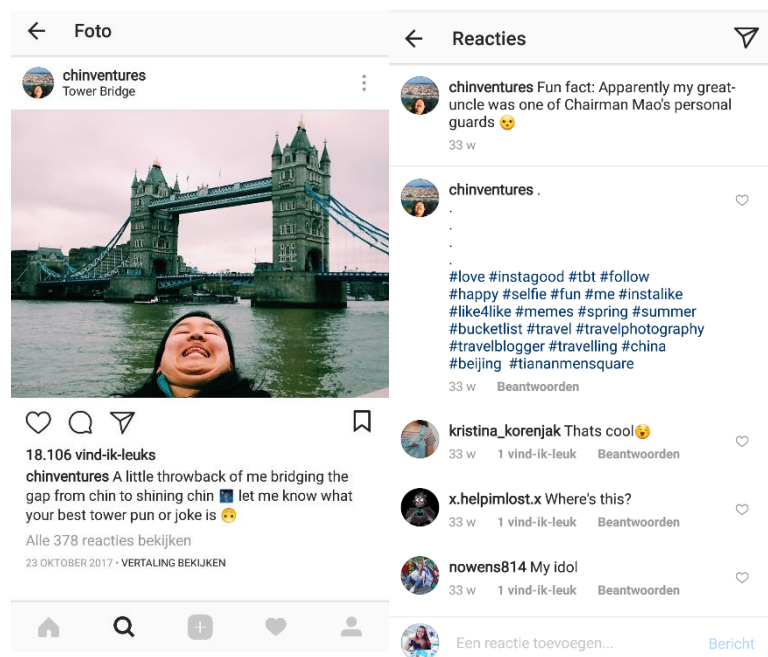


Figure 8. Liu's Instagram post on 23 Oct. 2017 In front Tower Bridge

significant increase in the number of likes and a shift in how she uses hashtags and engages

with her audience. Figure 9 is the last Instagram post of 2017, posted on 31 December 2017, in which Liu enacts chinning in front of Walt Disney's Castle, Florida.

There has been a significant shift in the number of likes Liu receives on her posts and the captions she used, as well as a shift in the way Liu engages with her audience. There are also some consistent elements, such as the traveling aspect, chinning and geotags. In 2017, it becomes clear that Liu's behavior shifts more towards what would be seen as a microcelebrity's. However, it

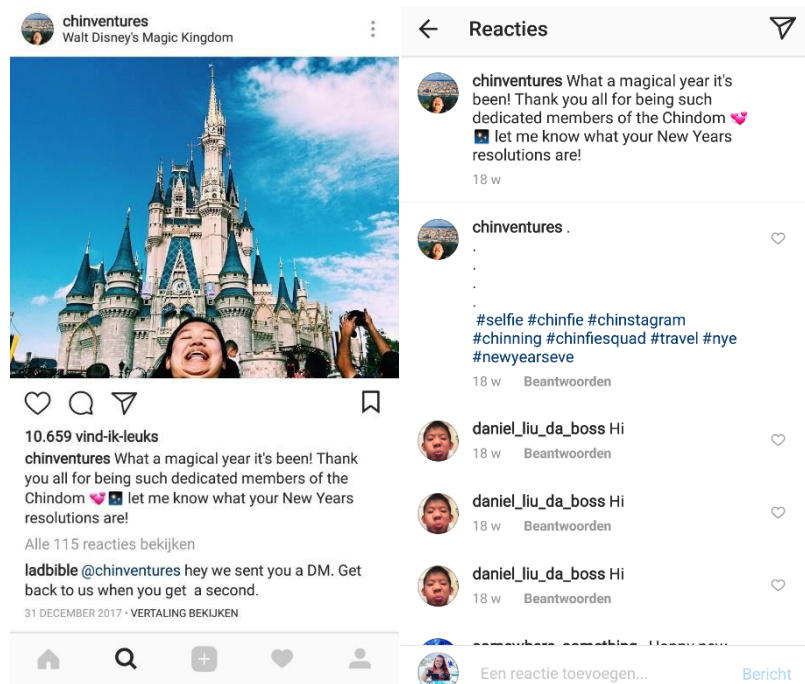


Figure 9. Liu's Instagram post on 31 Dec. 2017 In front Walt Disney's Kingdom Castle, Florida (USA).

is difficult to ascertain when or precisely how Liu began to gather many followers; perhaps it was influenced by the many news articles written on Liu's chinning that explicitly mentioned her Instagram account around October 2017.⁶ Figure 8 is the most liked post of 2017 and was posted on October 23, around the same time that many of these articles were published, indicating that external factors were influencing Liu's follower and like count. Liu receiving positive attention from the press arguably has boosted her follower's network: most of these articles highlight several of Liu's posts, and explicitly mentioned her Instagram name.⁷

4.3.1 Self-branding

Liu's self-branding has evolved throughout the year. To cultivate a name means maintaining her brand. First and foremost, she continues the chinning travel narrative that she started this Instagram page with. Figures 7 to 9 all are selfies in which she enacts chinning in front of tourist attractions in different countries. Liu has geotagged every location, meaning that her followers know where she has taken these pictures.

⁶ Different news sites simultaneously picked up upon Liu's chinning adventures on Instagram <https://www.independent.co.uk/travel/news-and-advice/instagram-chinning-travel-blogger-selfies-photos-michelle-liu-chinventures-a7998931.html>; <https://www.self.com/story/chinning-travel-selfies>; https://www.buzzfeed.com/bradesposito/chinning?utm_term=.lc5lgNoBmZ#.ygM3pNRDmd

⁷ The articles mentioned in the previous footnote all mention Michelle Liu her social media name, highlighted several posts of her, and explain why what Liu is doing with her Instagram page.

The most critical shift in Liu's self-branding is the use of hashtags. Unlike in 2016, there is a consistent use of hashtags in these posts. For instance, in figure 7, some hashtags Liu used are descriptive and fall within the travel category; they explain the content of her posts, such as #china, #travel, #beijing. Other hashtags Liu used in this post such as #love, #instagood, #tbt are the most used hashtags on Instagram and operate to gather more likes and followers. In figure 8, Liu also uses hashtags: recurring hashtags such as #travel, #selfie, and hashtags that explain the content of her posts such as #chinning and #london. In figure 9, Liu again uses hashtags that mostly correspond with the previously analyzed posts. Hashtags such as #selfie, #chinfie, #chinfiesquad have been used before, and hashtags such as #travel #nye #newyearseve describe the content of her posts.

4.3.2. Constructing a consistent persona/identity

The most significant shift in her persona is her construction of captions. Whereas in 2016 there is no regular use of captions, as some were informative, some funny, and yet others descriptive, in 2017 she shifted towards consistency in her captions, which now generally involve wordplays with the word "chin." Even though the caption of figure 7 does not include funny wordplay, this caption is representative as this caption says something about the content of the picture taken at Tiananmen Square, as well as Liu's background.

The captions of figure 8 and 9 involve a play of words with the word chin, as the caption of figure 8 is "A little throwback of me bridging the chin from shining chin," followed by the caption of figure 9 in which she thanks her followers of her "Chindom."

4.3.3 Engagement with the audience

As Liu gathered a significant number of followers in 2017, it is essential for her to engage with her audience to enlarge and maintain her microcelebrity status. For instance, figure 7 received almost three thousand likes, which is a significant improvement compared to the number of likes Liu received on her posts in 2016, of which the most liked post received 966 likes.

In figure 7, Liu interacts with users by commenting on her posts, and the comments she receives are positive throughout. For instance, Liu replies to a follower with "thanks" and "much love" followed by two heart emojis aimed at another follower. Two months later, Liu posted a selfie in front of the London bridge (figure 8), where again we see there has been a significant shift in quantities of likes, and where she also engages actively with her audience. This post's like count and amount of comments have significantly raised compared to the post of figure 7. Furthermore, there is a difference in her caption, as Liu invites her followers to

comment on this post by writing: “let me know what your best tower pun or joke is.” The invitation works effectively too, as numerous users reply to Liu in the comments with comments such as “Are you a tower? Cuz I think Eiffel for you” and “I don’t know about you, but my favorite pizza is leaning towards pizza.”

Liu’s last Instagram post of 2017 (figure 9) sees a similar mode of engagement with her audience, as she thanks the followers of her “Chindom” and invites users to let her know what their New Year’s resolutions are. Some users replied to this post, such as “my new years resolution is to make my double chin into a triple chin,” while another user commented on this post with “worry less, chin more.” Liu’s caption here, in which she thanks her followers, is a form of appreciation that speaks to followers, as without her followers she would not be a microcelebrity at all. Her chinning- and travel-related posts are subverting the average representation of the self, as well as idyllic travel pictures on Instagram. While her deconstruction of the average representation is liked by many users, Liu is aware that without the appreciation of her followers she would not retrieve the microcelebrity status. Through this post, she speaks to her “chindom” community, which are her followers and all the users who like her Instagram page. Thus, her subversive construction of self-representation draws on a commercialized identity of a microcelebrity.

4.4. Chinventures in 2018

As Liu has gained tens of thousands of followers since she started her Instagram page, she has become an interesting influencer to corporate businesses, which has allowed her to begin commodifying her chinning posts. In 2018, Liu posted three advertising posts for two companies. On 31 January 2018, Liu posted her first sponsored post (see figure 10) in collaboration with StickerApp, a printing company specialized in

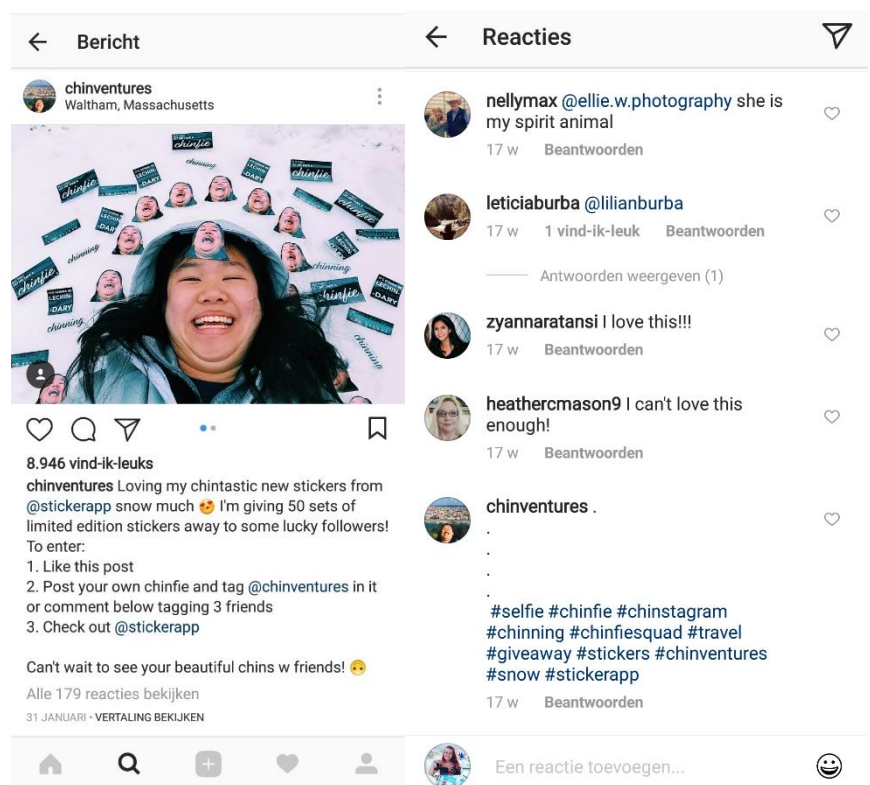


Figure 10. Liu’s sponsored content in collaborated with StickerApp posted on 31 Jan. 2018

custom-made stickers.⁸ In this post, Liu presents fifty sets of her limited-edition chinning stickers created by StickerApp, which her followers can win. As described in her caption, to win a set of stickers, users must follow the instructions by liking the post, posting their own chinfie and tagging @Chinventures, commenting on the picture or visiting StickerApp's Instagram page. The second sponsored post (see figure 11 and 12) on Liu's Instagram page is in collaboration with Chili's Grill & Bar, for which she posted sponsored content about Chili's twice. Chili's Grill & Bar is an American casual dining chain with restaurants in over thirty-two countries world-wide.⁹ On 12 March 2018, she posted the first sponsored content, and the next day on March 13th she posted another.

4.4.1 Self-branding

As Liu gathered many followers in 2018 and posted over 100 posts on her account at the time of writing in May 2018, she has

arguably already established herself as a brand. Consequently, Liu's chinning narrative provides an interesting route for collaboration with corporations. Figure 10 shows a sponsored post wherein Liu enacts chinning while surrounded by a set of chinning stickers, followed by the caption "Loving my chintastic new stickers." Here, Liu's chinning brand becomes commodified as the motivation

behind this post is the promotion of @Stickerapp. She enlarges her brand by giving her audience two options: either they can invite other users to take a chinning picture and tag her in the picture, making her name will appear in the other's timeline; the other option is to tag three friends in this specific post. When users tag three other friends, they are introducing new users to the @Chinventures account.

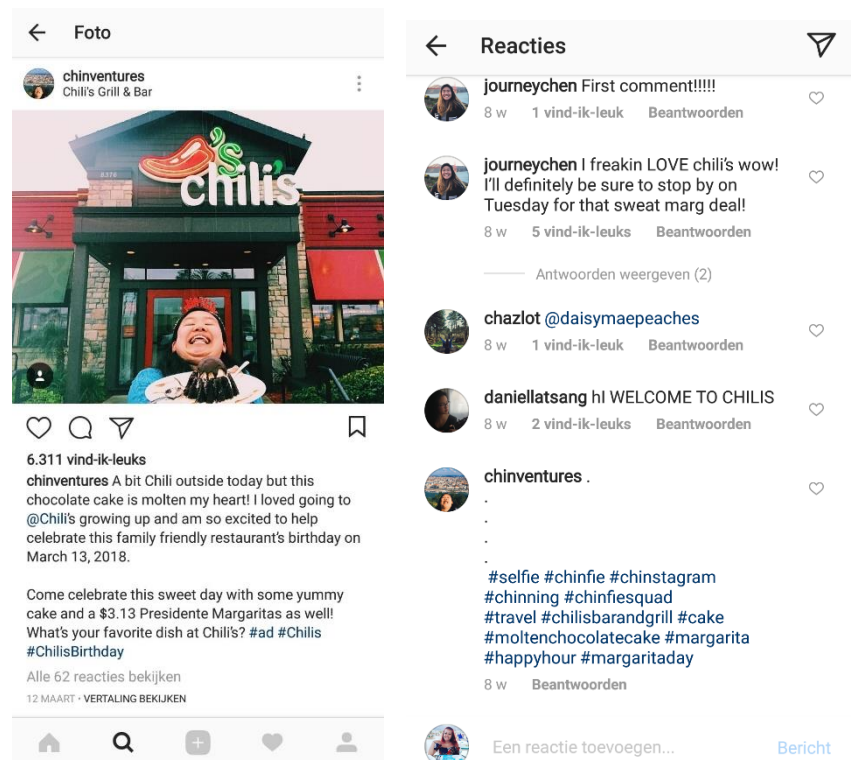


Figure 11. Liu's sponsored content in collaborated with Chili's posted on 12 March. 2018

⁸ See <https://stickerapp.com/about-us/> for more info on StickerApp.

⁹ See <http://www.chilisjobs.com/our-story/> for more info on Chili's Grill & Bar.

Furthermore, as a form of self-branding, Liu uses the same recurring hashtags, such as #chinfie, #chinning, #selfie.

Figure 11 and 12 show sponsored posts in collaboration with Chili's. In both these posts, Liu's chinning brand is central, though it quickly becomes clear that the intention of these posts is economically motivated. For instance, in figure 11 she says "Quen(chin) my thirst for the \$3.13 Presidente margaritas that are tequila(a) for! [...] Who else is excited for these celebra(chins)." Moreover, the hashtags Liu used are still consistent, as she used her branded hashtags which she previously has used such as #selfie, #selfie, and #chinfiesquad.

4.4.2. Constructing a consistent persona/identity

Even in sponsored posts, Liu uses the same familiar elements as in her regular posts. In both

sponsored posts, Liu's trademarks are visible: she enacts chinning, uses funny puns and hashtags in the caption, and the pictures are geotagged. In the sponsored content on 12 March (figure 11), she holds a chocolate cake while she enacts chinning in front of the restaurant, with the Chili's logo catching the attention. The caption "A bit Chili outside today but the chocolate cake is molten my heart"

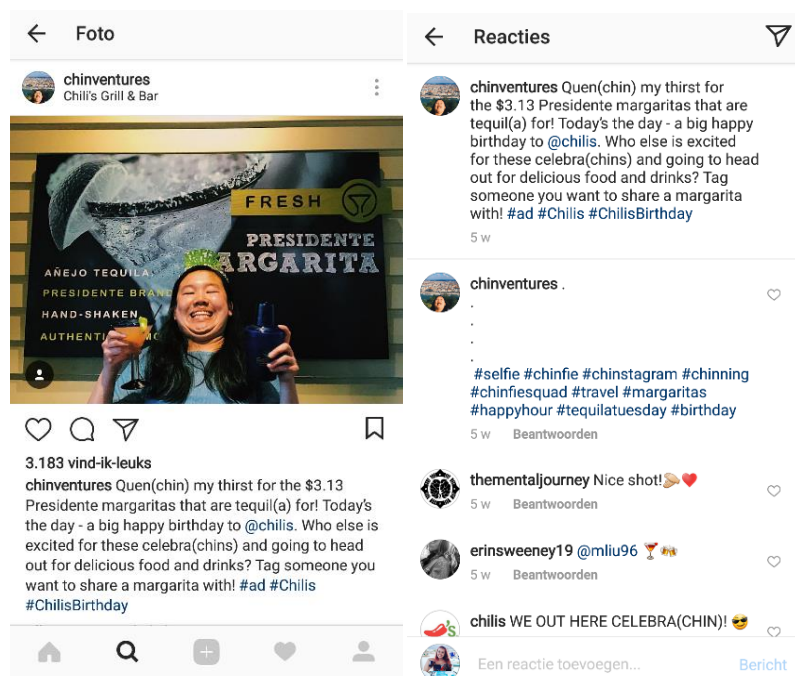


Figure 12. Liu's sponsored content in collaborated with Chili's posted on 13 March. 2018

consists of several clever puns which give the advertisement a lighthearted touch. The ad emphasizes Chili's delicious chocolate cake and the Presidente margaritas for only \$3.13.

The next day Liu posted another sponsored content (figure 12) of Chili's including all the familiar elements of her chinning personality. Liu enacts chinning in front of Chili's margaritas sign, while she holds a margarita in her left hand and a handshaker with Presidente logo in her right hand. Liu emphasizes the sponsored content more in her caption and combines it with her chinning trademark, which leads again to clever puns as she says "Quen(chin) my

thirst for the \$3.13 Presidente margaritas that are tequila(a) for! [...] Who else is excited for these celebra(chins).”

4.4.3. Engagement with the audience

Similarly to the analyzed posts of 2017, Liu engages with her audience through her captions as she invites the audience to comment below her posts. The sponsored post with @Stickerapp is an exceptional post, as this is a promotional event whereby users could win a set of stickers. In her caption in figure 10, she invites users to take a chinning picture of themselves and tag @Chinventures, followed by the comment that she “can’t wait to see your beautiful chins with friends.” Here she suggests that she will look at chinning pictures of her audience, which is a more intimate form of engagement on a personal level. In the sponsored posts with Chili’s, Liu also engages with her audience through her captions, where she invites users to comment on her post. In figure 11, she asks people what their favorite dish at Chili’s is and invites followers to come to Chili’s to celebrate their birthday. Some followers replied to the comment that they are going to stop by at Chili’s, and others commented with their favorite dish at Chilli’s. In figure 12, she similarly invites users to comment on the post, saying that users should tag someone that would like to share a margarita with them.

5. Discussion

The analysis chapter used the three important features of being a microcelebrity as the connecting thread through which the posts between 2016 and 2018 were analyzed: self-branding, constructing a consistent persona/identity, and engagement with the audience. Arguably, Liu’s commodification of chinning is tied to the construction of her microcelebrity persona. It is important to note here that Liu cultivated these elements to become a microcelebrity, yet not everyone who follows these steps will gather massive amounts of followers and become “instafamous.” There are several factors out of Liu’s direct control that influenced the rise of her Instagram account, such as many news articles that been written on her Instagram page, which arguably boosted her follower network. For instance, the Daily Mail has written an article about Liu on 13 October 2017, which has been shared 20 times by readers of this article on their social media (Stern par. 1). The following paragraphs will, therefore, discuss the details of Liu’s Instagram account and analyze posts that speak to Liu’s followers and serve to explain her growing network of followers. Her unconventional way of taking selfies appears a “ground-breaking” strategy, though the relationship she has cultivated with Instagram and her followers happened slowly and methodologically. She started her account

almost two years ago and she is still in the process of building her network of followers. Even though this form of self-representation on Instagram is unconventional, the analysis has shown that Liu has structured her Instagram in accordance with a microcelebrity status as soon as she began to receive more likes and followers. Liu's analyzed Instagram posts from 2016 until 2018 show a shift revealing that she consciously constructs a persona of a chinning traveler that corresponds to the main features of being a microcelebrity. Being a microcelebrity, or rather the process of becoming a microcelebrity is a conscious construct and Liu demonstrates that being a microcelebrity is something one *does* (*The Status Update* 6).

To become a microcelebrity on Instagram, one should construct a persona using the affordances of the platform (Jerslev 5328). Affordances such as the use of captions and geotags, a powerful biography, interesting profile picture and the possibility to post pictures and videos on the page can all help in curating and constructing a persona. For instance, Liu's general page consists of several travel elements, such as her social media name @Chinventures, her profile picture that shows a location on the background, her biography that explicitly says "travel," "major attraction" and "chin pics." By writing this in her biography, Liu familiarizes her audience with the content of her posts. These three keywords appear prominently throughout her Instagram page. From the very first post until the most recent one, Liu always enacts chinning, usually while traveling and often with significant attractions in the background. Another essential affordance of Instagram the hashtag, which helps to categorize and organize content. Travel is one of the most popular and liked categories on Instagram, so by cultivating a brand within this space using hashtags such as #travel, #travelling, and #adventure, Liu situates herself in these niche spaces in which Instagram users can find her by searching for these hashtags.

As she started the Instagram account in 2016, the posts of that year were crucial to cultivate her name and online public persona that has become a form of self-branding (Davis 41). For Liu to become visible to other Instagram users, she needed to use the affordances of Instagram to gain followers, such as setting her account on public and using hashtags and geotags. Even though Liu did not use hashtags in the analyzed posts of 2016, at that time she was already using geotags that increased her visibility and improved the user engagement of her posts. Furthermore, Liu received many likes and comments on those pictures, which also enlarged her visibility to other Instagram users. Instagram users can see comments and liked pictures of people who they follow in the follower's activity feed, so followers of users who commented and liked Liu's posts possibly have seen Liu's pictures appearing in the follower's activity feed. When looking at Liu's posts of 2016, it becomes clear that Liu intended to gather

followers, but she was not aware of the practice of being a microcelebrity. Her initial goal was to subvert traditional self-representation in which users seek to represent themselves in an ideal way: either happy, beautiful, and idealistic—or, of course, all three. It is not forbidden on Instagram to post forms of self-representations that are not traditional, yet it is somewhat unusual.

The fact that Liu has generated many followers and likes with her form of self-representation indicates that Instagram users can embrace subversive self-representation. Many comments on her posts are positive (see for instance comments in figure 4, 5 and 10) because she represents herself in an unexpected fashion that has remained consistent from the very beginning. Users also comment on Liu's posts by tagging their friends, which also hints at a possible awareness in self-representation: often on social media, users tag their friends when they think the post is worth showing or they can relate to the post. Users are likely tagging their friends in Liu's post because they believe it is worth sharing precisely due to Liu's subversion.

Since Liu gathered a significant number of followers in 2017, she started to cultivate her brand strategically by using microcelebrity practices and effectively creating a consistent persona. Elements such as the use of hashtags and consistency in her captions are essential to creating a persona within a specific category. It becomes apparent that when Liu commodified chinning, the content of the captions slightly changed as she became more persuasive in gathering followers, while the visual content of her pictures remained the same. The most significant shifts are the consistency in using recurring branded hashtags, such as #travel, #chinfiesquad, and #chinfie and the engagement with her audience. Especially the use of hashtags is a crucial development, since using hashtags allows more engagement with the audience (Kirilova 29). By using consistent hashtags as a form of self-branding, @Chinventures now appears as one of the most prominent accounts when searching for #chinfie or #chinning (figure 3). Thus, chinning has become tied to Liu's name. Furthermore, her captions also became more consistent. The analyzed posts of 2017 show that she shifted her captions towards inviting her audience to comment on her posts, as well as adding a funny description involving wordplays. Inviting users to comment on her posts has also increased her visibility on Instagram, as followers of any user who comments on Liu's post see her post appear in that follower's activities.

As Liu gathered a significant number of followers in 2018 and established herself as the "traveling chinning lady," she becomes an interesting persona for corporate businesses through which she can advertise for brands other than her own. Her own constructed microcelebrity persona still appears prominently in these posts, such as her enacting chinning, and funny

wordplays in the captions, the analyzed posts of 2018 nonetheless show there is a definite degree of commercialization in the sponsored posts. Chinning still appears prominently on these posts, though the motivation and persuasion behind these sponsored posts are most likely economical. For instance, in the post in collaboration with @StickerApp, Liu mentions this company multiple times. She says she loves her new stickers by @Stickerapp, invites her followers to check @Stickerapp's Instagram page and she has tagged @Stickerapp in the picture of this post.

This commodification of Liu's chinning could not happen without constructing a microcelebrity persona. The dominant economic power structures in which Instagram operates influence the content of the posts, as apparent in Liu's sponsored posts. Even though it appears that Liu initially did not intend to commodify her chinning personality, as she constructed her distinctive brand, gained a significant number of followers and became a microcelebrity, commodification seems to have been inevitable on this social media platform that relies heavily on advertising.

6. Conclusion

Liu's Instagram account, and her construction of a chinning personality that became commodified on a commercial social media platform exemplifies the presence of dominant power structures within social media platforms. To establish herself as a brand, Liu structured her chinning persona accordingly to a microcelebrity persona as described by Marwick and Senft. It becomes clear that the cultural context and power structures of this social media era shape and influence self-representation on Instagram. To gain many followers on Instagram, commodification is a necessary step. This thesis has explored how Liu's unconventional way of self-representation has evolved into a brand, a commodity, and how she became a microcelebrity. The analysis has shown that chinning and travel have always been prominently visible in each post on her Instagram account, but the way she presents her pictures through captions, hashtags and how she engages with her audience evolved. As a result, her persona became more consistent throughout the years.

To understand why and how Liu can call herself a microcelebrity, the sub-question "how is a microcelebrity defined within the context of Instagram?" needs to be answered. Drawn from a variety of literature focusing on microcelebrities and commodification, such as Alice Marwick, Joseph Davis, and Theresa Senft, the microcelebrity needs to adhere to three criteria: self-branding, a consistent persona/identity, and engagement with the audience. As shown in the analysis, Liu followed each of these steps, leading to the commodification of her chinning.

By cultivating her traveling chinning narrative since she started the account, of which the visual content remained consistent throughout the years, she created a name, a brand for herself. The affordances of Instagram allow the creation of a consistent persona through features such as geotagging, captions, and hashtags, which have contributed to the second element of being a microcelebrity. Lastly, interaction with the audience is important to satisfy the fanbase as well as to enlarge this base to remain firmly within the microcelebrity status.

This case study primarily focused on chinning, which is an unconventional way of presenting the self on Instagram. To that end, this thesis formulated the second sub-question “how does chinning fit in the context of self-representation on Instagram?” On Instagram, presenting the self is a conscious process in which the individual curates a version of him/herself and how the individual wants to be perceived and chinning is exactly the result of this conscious process (Wendt 26). Especially on Instagram, where individuals try to achieve the ideal version of themselves, there are informal ideas of what ‘good’ selfies should be, (Wendt 7). Chinning can raise awareness about these casual ideas of how selfies should look on Instagram. Liu’s popularity is indicated by many the followers she has gathered over the years and the many positive comments she receives on her posts. Liu consciously takes, selects and posts selfies that contribute to the image she wants to curate of herself. When she began to gather many followers, she continued to curate that persona in line with the expectations of her followers. One of the main reasons that she gained followers is due to her unconventional, funny selfies; to please her followers and gather more followers, Liu is thus expected to post chinning pictures while she travels.

However, chinning is more than a form of self-representation: it is the construction of a narrative and an identity that has become increasingly commodified on Instagram. The selfie is a form of commodification in the sense that others consume this visual self-representation on social media (Iqani and Schroeder 403; Best 63). Through chinning as a form of self-representation, Liu is ‘selling’ her personality to others to be consumed and validated through likes and comments. Liu created an Instagram account and started to post selfies of herself where she enacts chinning that generated many likes and comments, which also answers the next the sub-question: “where does chinning fit within larger methods of representation and the commodification of the self throughout Instagram?”

As established in the previous sub-question, chinning is more than a form of self-representation. Chinning has become a practice that eventually led to the establishment of a chinning narrative. In every picture she enacts chinning, she uses clever chin-related puns, and chin appears in her biography and in her Instagram name, as well as in the hashtags she uses.

This establishment of a chinning narrative is the foundation through which chinning can be commodified. The chinning narrative helped to establish Liu as a microcelebrity and being a microcelebrity attracts corporate interests, which answers the final question “how did the construction of the chinning narrative help to establish chinning as a commodity on Instagram?”

To finally answer the main question “how can the commodification and construction of Liu’s chinning narrative be understood in the context of consumer culture that considers the concept of being microcelebrity on Instagram?”, this thesis looked at different factors in relation to the chinning phenomenon, such as the platform, the context of consumer culture, and the concept of microcelebrity. Instagram provides Liu with a stage where she could construct her chinning personality. She has slowly become a microcelebrity, which has led to the commodification of her chinning posts. Instagram as a platform offers users the potential to construct their own identity, even if the identity may be subversive. Liu’s subversive self-representation became validated through the many likes and followers she has received over the years. Commodification then seems an inevitable part of establishing a growing fanbase. Within the context of consumer culture, constructing a chinning personality is tied to consumption (Baudrillard 29). Instagram is a free-to-use social media site owned by a corporate business and is thus designed to make a profit, as indicated by on-site advertisements and sponsored posts. Ultimately, this commercial platform offers Liu the potential to grow even more through branded advertisements. However, this raises the question of whether her identity remains authentic or if the company structures her identity in the branded posts.

This research is a small step to understanding the practices of commodification and being a microcelebrity, and of how these two things are intrinsically intertwined. At the same time, there are some limitations present in the case and scope of the research. First, Liu is but one example of many users who post unconventional selfies on Instagram, and not many such users gain as many followers as she does. The second limitation is the selection of the case. This research only chose nine posts, while Liu has posted over more than 100 pictures thus far. The outcome of this research may have been different when selecting other pictures. Because of this limitation, the results of this research cannot necessarily be generalized to the experiences of other microcelebrities. The last limitation is that Liu’s true intentions of starting her chinning account and whether she made a profit with the sponsored posts remain unclear to outsiders.

Nonetheless, Liu’s chinning account has provided some insight into our continually evolving relationship with the self, online representation, and social media. Instagram is a platform that offers users the ability to explore their identity based on photographs, captions,

hashtags, geolocation and a number of other different variables. Even if one's agency of visual self-representation "is mediated through our visually ingrained culture and the images that surround us" (Cwynar-Horta 43), Liu's subversive self-representation proves that Instagram offers individuals the opportunity to be subversive in unique, exciting and fun ways. Although Liu's chinning persona, at first glance, seems to subvert the norms of representation on Instagram, examining the evolution of her Instagram account highlights that in fact even subversive approaches to representation on social media can be harnessed for advertising and exposure purposes. It follows that Liu's @Chinventures account is two things at once, both subversive and mainstream. Consuming an identity on Instagram means creating an identity that is consumable, and commodification of the self is an inevitable step in that process.

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