

# **Fast marketing, furious interactions: an interstellar community on Instagram**

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## **Abstract**

Richard Dyer (1979) proposed that ‘the star’ is social phenomenon, image and sign. Using this theory, I conduct a content analysis of the Instagram posts made by two stars of the *Fast and Furious* (2001-2017) franchise in 2017 in order to critique Dyer’s categories. This article argues that social media generates another category - the stars as interstellar community. This is demonstrated by the visible networking that adds a level of exclusivity to these stars and their lives, even as social media makes these stars appear more accessible to fans. I propose two levels of community; the interstellar community that is networking between stars to create exclusivity. The second level is star to fan community, emphasising the star’s presence in the lives of fans.

I focus on the stars’ posts that refer to the franchise itself to demonstrate how this interstellar community is conversing through Instagram in a public forum. Finally, this article considers how these posts converge with and diverge from Dyer’s idea of stars as commodity, construction and ideology. This content analysis is conducted with a view to create codes and a methodology that can be applied and replicated across other social media platforms and across other stars’ social media content.

**Keywords: *Fast and Furious*; social media; Instagram**

## **Fast marketing, furious interactions: an interstellar community on Instagram**

### **Introduction**

With eight films released so far, the *Fast and Furious* franchise shows few signs of slowing down. The cast continues to grow with each new film, while the box office figures peaked with the seventh instalment taking over \$1.5 billion at the worldwide box office (Box Office Mojo 2015). The stars include Vin Diesel, Michelle Rodriguez, Dwayne Johnson, and Jason Statham. The subject of fast cars, street racing, and the increasingly bombastic nature of the action spectacle have all contributed to drawing in audiences.

However, it is the presence of the stars of this franchise on social media that is in the subject of this article. Film stars and their use of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter have been underexplored in academic discourse. In discussions of celebrity more widely, Kowalczyk, and Pounders (2016) have explored how social media platforms are changing the way consumers and celebrities engage. Their work 'seeks to understand how and why consumers use social media to engage with celebrities' (2016, p.346). Kowalczyk and Pounders found that consumers use social media for reasons that included keeping abreast of career information about the celebrities that they follow. However, followers also used social media to 'learn about information pertaining to celebrities' personal lives' (2016, p.347) and this included a desire for authenticity from the star. This authenticity should demonstrate the 'true self' of the celebrity and can help to foster emotional attachments between fan and star.

While the degree to which any celebrity's Instagram posts can be labelled authentic is open to debate, signifiers of realism are nonetheless important in maintaining a *sense* of authenticity. Furthermore, an awareness of the process of mediation is an increasingly important part of creating the 'reality' effect for a contemporary audience. For example, Vin Diesel often holds the camera himself while speaking to his fans. His amateur camerawork works towards persuading the viewer that this is not a video filmed or edited by a publicist or a social media manager. His speaking to a mass audience through directly addressing the camera is what Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn describe as 'a desire for the mark of authenticity, for the social legitimisation of one's existence' (2005, p.101). By addressing the camera, recording his thoughts, and then distributing the videos to an audience, Diesel and similar stars appear to require public validation. The videos become proof of their existence to many people beyond those that know them and serve as evidence of the legitimacy of their celebrity. Authenticity is promoted through a range of techniques such as jump cuts, direct address, and the improvised camerawork employed. Stars desire an authentic appearance in order to convince their followers that these posts contain the 'real' star.

Ledbetter and Redd (2016) focus specifically on the parasocial (one-sided) nature of the interaction (PSI) and engagement between fan and star. Their work investigates how 'celebrity posting behavior might motivate PSI' (2016, p.602). The results 'suggest celebrities may develop PSI when posting frequently, and such posting may enhance credibility when it leads to the perception that the celebrity is interesting and an effective problem-solver' (2016, p.614/615). However, Ledbetter and Redd's study does not analyse the content of social media posts and focuses on Facebook and Twitter rather than Instagram. I have chosen Instagram as the main focus in this article as

celebrities often prefer to manage their own Instagram accounts, and favour this platform to others for a number of reasons including the possibility of unlimited followers and higher levels of engagement from fans (Pham 2018).

Richard Dyer (1979) proposed that ‘the star’ is a social phenomenon, image and sign. Using this theory, I have conducted a content analysis of the Instagram posts made by two stars of the *Fast and Furious* (2001-2017) franchise in 2017. This article argues that social media generates another category - the stars as interstellar community. This is demonstrated by the visible networking adding a level of exclusivity to stars and their lives, even as social media makes these stars appear more accessible to fans. I propose two levels of community; the interstellar community that is networking between stars to create exclusivity. The second level is star-to-fan community, emphasising the star’s presence in the lives of fans.

## **Methods**

For this study, I have primarily analysed the Instagram posts of two stars of the *Fast and Furious* franchise; Vin Diesel and Tyrese Gibson. Though there will be some reference to other stars of the franchise such as Michelle Rodriguez and Jason Statham, Diesel and Gibson make for the most illuminating case studies. Diesel is a producer on the franchise and therefore considers promotion a key role, whereas Gibson has taken a much more personal approach to his Instagram feed. I limit my focus to the stars’ posts made in the year 2017 as this was the year of release of the most recent film in the franchise. I wish to highlight the stars’ use of social media not only as a method of communicating with fans, but also as a means to network with other stars, thus forming

an online interstellar community. There are several factors to consider when analysing the posts of a celebrity on any social media platform. In the case of Instagram posts specifically, there are five major factors that require attention. The post will either contain a photo or a video clip. The content of this still or moving image must be considered. The text that accompanies the image must also be analysed. Within the captions, there may be the use of hashtags and there may be the use of @ in order to communicate with another Instagram user. Hashtags and @s are particularly important in creating and maintaining a sense of community, as well as the final factor, which is the use of 'likes' and comments on posts. The visibility of this interstellar community to fans is significant. I will consider how the audience of the *Fast and Furious* franchise is becoming increasingly aware of the behind the scenes interactions of the films' stars. I will also demonstrate how social media is being used in traditional ways (by posting posters, trailers, publicity photos) to market the films to a diverse audience. The diverse audience of this franchise has been considered in previous academic work surrounding the franchise.

## **Race and Racing**

Mary Beltrán (2013, p.76), for example, has pointed towards the 'growing importance of the US Latina and Latino audience' and notes that the *Fast and Furious* franchise seems to take place in an 'urban, multicultural, and presumably postracial world' (2013, p.76). Beltrán describes the skin hues and heritage of several of the stars, and argues that the populating of the story world with diverse extras is a defining element of what she calls the 'multiculti action film' (2013, p.76). This focus on racelessness, multiculturalism, and postracial trends in modern film is illuminating, but in analysing

how these films appeal to diverse viewers, Beltrán focuses on the films, their promotional materials and the critical reception. Beltrán highlights that Rodriguez and Diesel took part in ‘Spanish-language press junkets in Mexico and Miami’ (2013, p.81) to emphasise the bilingual nature of the marketing campaign. However, this does not place the necessary emphasis on the social media use of the films’ stars in order to explain the popularity of the *Fast and Furious* franchise.

This is a particularly glaring omission as a *Variety* article about the Most Influential Latin celebrity of 2014 includes *Fast and Furious* star Michelle Rodriguez. She is named the fifth most influential female Latin star in part due to her ‘sharing glimpses of her life via Twitter and Instagram’ (Rico and Mundhra 2014, p.40). Rico and Mundhra also note that ‘Latinos use the internet up to 30% more than the general market to keep up with pop culture trends’ (2014, p.40) and that ‘8 out of 10 people surveyed describe their relationship with Latin celebrities who have strong social media presence as “more fulfilling and enjoyable”’ (2014, p.40). This strong social media presence involves what Ledbetter and Redd (2016) consider to be posting frequently, as well as the level and type of self-disclosure that the star engages in.

However, Michelle Rodriguez is just one of several stars of the franchise and, if the number of her Instagram followers (4.4 million) is one method of measuring her popularity, then she is certainly not the most popular of the *Fast and Furious* stars. It might be argued that it is less significant which single star is the most popular on social media and instead what is more important is that there are several stars in the franchise that have a social media presence. Peter Gutiérrez (2015) points towards ‘a trend that is seeing not only the films, but also their marketing and merchandising, firmly premised

on the notion that *teams presented as quasi-families* is the superior paradigm for action movies' (2015, p.39). Gutiérrez argues that these ensemble action movies 'help foster a synergy' where the big name characters 'have a multiplying effect on one another's power and presence' (2015, p.39). Gutiérrez discusses the diversity of these ensembles as well as the traditional elements of movie marketing that go along with them; posters, fast-food figurines, etc. However, the social media presence of stars in action movie ensembles is not highlighted.

There is an increasing amount of scholarly work considering the interaction between film stars and fans, and the engagement between film stars on social media platforms such as Instagram. Dyer's ideas are in need of updating in the age of social media as this adds another type of text through which audiences can engage with stars. Dyer argues that 'we never know them as real people, only as they are to be found in media texts' (1979 p.2). Though social media only confirms this, the media text that is a star's Instagram feed can be in some cases a significant site of revelation and an opportunity to be closer to a potentially more authentic construction of the person behind the star image. This is particularly pertinent when considering that some stars are responsible for their own social media accounts, rather than having them managed for them. In the case of Vin Diesel, Michael Moses, co-president of marketing at Universal Pictures, claims that Diesel curates his social media accounts himself, ensuring that 'the voice is authentic and all the posts seem real because they *are* real. He doesn't have a social-media team. He maintains that. He has an authentic relationship with his fans' (Busch 2014). This is a difficult proposal to accept, particularly when comparing the Instagram accounts of *Fast and Furious* stars Diesel and Tyrese Gibson. In Gibson's posts, we see the highs and lows of his life, whereas Diesel's account may be self-curated, but it is

carefully crafted to only reveal the admirable and positive sides of Diesel's life and personality. Though authenticity is being manufactured in both Diesel and Gibson's accounts, an analysis of Gibson's posts reveals a star that is less concerned with promotion of an ideal celebrity life, and more with manufacturing an experience of celebrity life that balances positive and negative events and thus provides a mediated image that is more closely associated with the genuine and the personal.

When considering the star as social phenomenon, Dyer debates whether stars are a phenomenon of production or consumption (1979, p.10). Social media further complicates this debate with stars' social media accounts becoming another tool in the marketing of films, and studios even investing extra money into ensuring the stars are using their social media accounts to promote upcoming movies. A recent *Variety* article revealed that *Fast and Furious* star Dwayne Johnson 'is asking for a \$1 million social-media fee as part of his package for the upcoming "Red Notice"; that includes promoting the film on the likes of Twitter and Facebook' (Lang and Kroll 2018). This comes after Johnson's social media presence helped to build 'pre-awareness and awareness on *GI Joe* and *Hercules*' (Busch 2014). Access to the social media accounts of film stars is becoming a part of the investment that studios make when distributing films. This also complicates the notion of stars having a separate self and a public self-representation. I argue that with film stars using social media, the separation of self and public self-representation is maintained. However, within the social media posts of some of these stars, there is a further separation to consider. If stars are using their accounts and specific posts for the purposes of marketing their films, then this is clearer evidence of performance and role play. However, there is another type of social media



post that offers followers of these stars a closer and potentially more personal view of star's lives.

### **Getting personal: Tyrese Gibson**

The social media account of *Fast and Furious* star Tyrese Gibson is an excellent example of this. Gibson has shared many posts about the *Fast and Furious* franchise, the drama behind the scenes of the films and what could be labelled more personal posts about the custody battle he has been involved in over his daughter. An Instagram post at the end of 2017 reflects on many of these issues:

You get time alone and to self reflect..... You get to really think and process..... Man 2017 I'm done with you.... I'm gonna proudly hold this L for that video [#CryRese](#), beefing with the rock, speaking out so much in so many details about my life, the psych meds, the endless Baby momma drama it's been 20 years and I have NEVER moved or conducted myself on any level this way (Gibson 2017).

Here, Gibson refers to posts that saw him crying about not being able to see his daughter while directly addressing the camera (November 1st 2017, since removed), posts that saw him criticising his *Fast and Furious* co-star Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson (November 1st and 2nd 2017), and posts that revealed that he was taking medication (November 28th 2017). While all of this can be considered as Gibson constructing his own star persona, particularly performing in the role of a victim (of financial hardship and child abuse allegations), it also seems to offer a confessional and perhaps

therapeutic look at the personal as well as professional life of the star. Alexander Walker claimed that when Hollywood transitioned from silent films to the talkies, stars 'suffered a serious loss of divinity... their voices made them as real as the audiences watching them'(1970 p.235). Social media can be another step towards decreasing the divinity of some stars. Having an Instagram account and giving followers access to a star's problems, jealousy, hurt, sadness and fears makes that star much more relatable, perhaps. At the same time, Gibson becomes less of an idol and less godlike to his followers. When discussing stars as images, Dyer argues that the

general image of stardom can be seen as a version of the American Dream, organised around the themes of consumption, success and ordinariness.

Throughout, however, there is an undertow that, as it were, 'sours' the dream. (1979, p.35)

The images presented by Gibson on his Instagram feed represent this clearly. Alongside images of Gibson on a private plane (December 26th 2017), enjoying the view of a private beach (December 27th 2017), and wearing a range of suits and jewellery (e.g. December 4th 2017), Gibson also shares details of how his dream life has been soured by professional and personal conflicts. This is not a case of the paparazzi and the media gaining access to the more painful parts of Gibson's life, but instead it is the star himself giving fans access to his pain and conflict.

This assortment of images and representations on a star's Instagram feed makes their social media account sit awkwardly between promotion and publicity. Dyer argues that promotion includes 'texts which were produced as part of the deliberate creation/manufacture of a particular image or image-context for a particular star' (1979, p.60). On the other hand, publicity does not appear to be deliberate image-making; it is

what the press finds out or what the star 'lets slip' (1979, p.61). While Gibson's sharing of highly personal details, followed by deletion of the posts, could easily be considered 'letting slip' unflattering aspects about his life, other stars are more guarded on social media. In the case of some stars, it is clear to see that Instagram is used for promotional purposes only. Jason Statham's Instagram account does not 'let slip' any personal details about the star. Out of the 40 posts on Statham's feed in 2017, eight are directly promoting the release of the eighth *Fast and Furious* film using video clips or stills from the film, or one picture of Statham posing with fans (March 26th 2017). There are also many stills from promotional pictures taken for magazines including *Men's Health* (e.g. March 2nd 2017) and *Esquire* (April 27nd 2017). Very few of his posts include captions and there are certainly no details about Statham's private life in any of the posts. Significantly, he also never directly addresses his followers in video posts as stars like Vin Diesel, Tyrese Gibson and Michelle Rodriguez do. This is in sharp contrast to the 1539 times that Tyrese Gibson posted on Instagram during 2017, most of which have a long caption in which he addresses his followers and many of which feature video clips of him directly addressing the camera and therefore his followers. Gibson does use Instagram to promote the films he appears in, including over 80 posts that share promotional materials for the eighth *Fast and Furious* film, but the ratio of promotional posts to publicity posts is significantly lower than with the Instagram account of Jason Statham.

What a specific analysis of Gibson's account reveals is the importance of social media for star networking. Social media generates an interstellar community of stars to create exclusivity. The second level emphasises the star's presence in the lives of fans. The interactions of the stars of the *Fast and Furious* franchise have come under scrutiny

recently (e.g. Eames and Fletcher 2018) due to accusations made by some stars towards others, and passive-aggressive posturing of male stars, as well as comments made by a female star about the future of the franchise. Perhaps then, social media is creating a neo-liberal playground of ego-led competition, rather than a true community. There is certainly evidence then that these stars are often competing, rather than conversing. An analysis of Vin Diesel's Instagram account reveals both levels of interactions within his posts.

### **Interstellar interactions: Vin Diesel**

Vin Diesel posted 311 times on Instagram in 2017. His feed is significant for the idea of an interstellar community as Diesel posts a range of pictures and videos of himself with other stars. In terms of the stars of the *Fast and Furious* franchise, Diesel posts nine pictures of himself with Tyrese Gibson, 12 with Paul Walker, 15 with Michelle Rodriguez and 7 with Jordana Brewster during 2017. His feed also contains pictures of Diesel with Dwayne Johnson, Chris 'Ludacris' Bridges, Jason Statham, Helen Mirren, Charlize Theron, Gal Gadot, Nathalie Emmanuel (all of whom have appeared in the franchise) and with *Fast and Furious* directors Justin Lin and F. Gary Gray. From the frequency of his posts with Gibson, Walker, Rodriguez and Brewster, one of two possibilities can be inferred. Either Diesel might consider these stars his closest friends and colleagues, or perhaps the relationship between his *Fast and Furious* character Dominic Toretto and the characters played by Gibson, Walker, Rodriguez and Brewster are more significant than others and this is what Diesel wants to highlight for fans looking at his feed. However, what is also notable is that Diesel does not always use an @ in the caption to ensure that the stars that appear in the photos are alerted to his post.

Diesel only @s Michelle Rodriguez twice, and Jordana Brewster and Gal Gadot three times each in 2017. He also reposts a single post from Ludacris, Nathalie Emmanuel and Tyrese Gibson, all of which are referencing the *Fast and Furious* franchise. The lack of @s would suggest that Diesel is unconcerned with ensuring that the stars that feature in photos with him will see his posts. When he wants to ensure this, he mentions them with an @ in the caption. Therefore, we must draw the conclusion that Diesel's interstellar networking is less about communication with his co-stars and more about representing the stars as interstellar community in the eyes of fans. This is similar to the studio period where photographs of stars at home would be released by the studios. However, in the case of Diesel, these pictures have not been released or staged by a studio, but by the star himself.

This could be seen as part of Diesel's job since he took on one of the producing roles of the franchise in 2009. This also helps to explain Diesel's consistent posting about the franchise throughout the year and his use of hashtags to ensure his posts become a part of on-going fan activity within Instagram fan communities. For example, Diesel uses #HappyTorettoTuesday in the caption of three posts during 2017. This is a hashtag that has been used 3450 times (as of June 2018), mostly by fans and a few times by Diesel himself. Similarly, Diesel also uses the shortened #torettotuesday twice during 2017, a hashtag that has been utilised by fans over 15,000 times (as of June 2018), but was not started by Diesel himself when it was first used in 2012. On the other hand, it is notable to add that the #HappyTorettoTuesday was started by Diesel on July 14th 2014 to announce that, "Filming ends this week... Fast Seven!" He also more pointedly uses #F8 four times in 2017, as well as creating nine posts during the year that contain official promotional content (TV spots, poster, etc.) for the eighth *Fast and Furious* film. The

frequency of Diesel's posts also suggests that he is using his Instagram feed as a marketing tool as well as a way of communicating with his fans about other aspects of his life. In January and February of 2017, Diesel was more focused on promoting his appearance in the third *XXX* film, and only 4 out of 61 posts were related to the *Fast and Furious* franchise. Unsurprisingly, as the release date for the eighth *Fast and Furious* film approached, the proportion of his Instagram posts directly referencing the *Fast and Furious* franchise increased dramatically. In March and April, over half of his posts were related to the *Fast and Furious* franchise (26 out of 48, then 27 out of 43). In the latter half of the year, the frequency of posts declined, as well as the ratio of *Fast and Furious* posts to other unrelated posts. However, Diesel was careful to continue to post throughout the year, maintaining his connection with fans, even if he was not directly responding to any of their many comments on his posts.

Even though Diesel does not respond to every comment on each post, he does attempt to maintain the semblance of interaction with his followers. The majority of Diesel's posts that are related to the *Fast and Furious* franchise in 2017 will be liked by over a million other Instagram users. Though Diesel's posts are frequently commented upon by fans requesting a response, Diesel does not publicly respond to these fans. Instead, what Diesel does to acknowledge the existence and passion of his Instagram fans is to occasionally post fan art or pictures that bear the watermarks of fan accounts. For example, on November 1st Diesel posted a picture of himself and Michelle Rodriguez with a visible watermark reading "MRANDMRSTORETTO|IG". He has also posted pictures bearing the watermark "@vinchelle" and "@LOVINGVINDIESEL" and often began the captions with the words 'Loving the Fan art....' or similar. These posts are ideally positioned to demonstrate to Diesel's followers that he appreciates them. This

may give fans the impression that their relationship with Diesel is not parasocial; he is communicating with them and acknowledging their fan activities, and promoting some Instagram accounts as perhaps his most dedicated fans. It is significant that two of the fan accounts mentioned above both revolve around the central relationship between Vin Diesel and Michelle Rodriguez's characters in the franchise. Here he is promoting the theme of family and love that has become central to the franchise.

Finally, Diesel also uses his Instagram posts to seemingly reach out to both his co-stars in the interstellar community and to his fans. Diesel uses his account to try to play down speculation about cast feuds on at least two occasions. On October 7th, he posts a *Fast Five* still of himself and Dwayne Johnson in character with their arms around each other. This post follows weeks of Tyrese Gibson criticising Dwayne Johnson in his own Instagram posts. Diesel captions the post with the words: 'Brotherhood... and all it's complexities.... I know there has been a lot of speculation as to why the Fast 9 release date was pushed... but it would be unfair to say it is anyone's fault.' This caption appears designed to both relieve Johnson of blame for a release date change, and to suggest that Gibson is not justified in his blame of Johnson. It also keeps fans updated on the process of making the films in the franchise and highlights one particular fan by revealing that Diesel is directly listening to those that communicate with him on social media. His caption continues: 'A woman named Jan Kelly responded to a question I had asked on Facebook, "who they would like to see me work with?" She said would love to see me work with Dwayne... I listened to her request and he became Hobbs.'

## **Conclusions**

This content analysis has been conducted with a view to create a methodology that can be applied and replicated across other social media platforms and across other stars' social media content. Dyer's (1979) claim that we never get to know the stars as real people is to some degree challenged in the age of social media. In the case of the stars of the *Fast and Furious* franchise, their Instagram posts are often self-constructed media texts, but these media texts can be more illuminating than any films, promotional materials, or traditional forms of publicity. The position of these stars as ideological icons of superiority is rarely challenged. However, in some cases, the stars construct themselves not only as commodities to help sell films but also as victims of unfortunate circumstances. The Instagram account of Tyrese Gibson reveals a star not only interested in selling films, cars and a perfect lifestyle. His posts, and the frequency and content of them, suggest a man using social media as a cry for help. Gibson offers his followers a highly personal construction of his life as opposed to Jason Statham's less frequent and less direct use of his Instagram feed. Hollywood stars can choose whether to decrease or increase their divinity through their use of social media as the feeds of Gibson and Statham attest.

Nevertheless, the interstellar community is represented as an elite group that do not necessarily communicate through social media, but they do use their posts to signify their position within the group. A significant proportion of Vin Diesel's Instagram posts appear calculated to protect the *Fast and Furious* franchise of which he is currently a producer. He uses his feed to reiterate the themes of the films through hashtags such as "#FamilyAlways" and to position his character as central to fans' enjoyment. Finally, Diesel uses his posts to both mediate between his co-stars and to mediate between the stars and fans. Drawing together the multicultural cast of the franchise in video and



picture posts, Diesel's use of Instagram helps to cement the ensemble as worthy of fans' attention. His sharing of fan art, as well as traditional promotional materials, gives fans the impression of interactions beyond the parasocial. Followers are told they are a part of the *Fast and Furious* family but are nevertheless kept at a distance by the hierarchical structure of the star/fan relationship.

### **Notes on contributor**

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