

2021 ONLINE CONFERENCE: DIVERSIFYING PERSONA STUDIES ONLINE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE AND SPECIAL ISSUE

KIM BARBOUR UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE, KATJA LEE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA
AND CHRISTOPHER MOORE UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

INTRODUCTION

The online conference does not and cannot replicate the flow and feel of a face-to-face experience; instead, it offers something new.

We saw the timing and the mode of the conference as a chance to ask hard questions about the ground that persona studies has carved as an emerging field of study. We wanted to ensure that persona studies is a space for new voices and new directions of inquiry, and to provide a conference space that is entirely built around inclusive scholarship.

The purpose of framing the conference as *diversifying* persona studies was to expand the scope and reach of our ambition, invite new possibilities, to challenge the conceptualisations of the field, and to challenge ourselves to release a sense of ownership and control over what persona studies could be. We have always strived to make persona studies as a welcoming and inclusive scholarly exercise, but the risk of groupthink and boundary policing is ever-present, and the conference theme was intended to challenge this.

To this end, we were pleased to get submissions both from new scholars, including post-graduate students and researchers who hadn't engaged with the journal previously, and from researchers whose work had previously made substantial contributions to the journal as authors and peer reviewers. We were excited to see new methodological and theoretical approaches being explored, and to see questions being raised about the value and potential of existing work. It is through the inclusion of new ideas, new perspectives, and a diversity of both scholarship and scholars that persona studies will thrive.

While the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic drove our decision to run the conference as an online event, this format facilitated involvement from scholars in Europe, the United Kingdom, the Middle East, South Africa, and North and South America as well as in Australia. The decision to run the papers as pre-recorded sessions complimented by longer-format joint discussions, we felt, was really successful. The hope going into the webinars was that we could have the opportunity to explore overlapping areas and facilitate a lively discussion of our field, and this was absolutely the case. The four panel discussions were rich, engaging, and inspiring, and we were so grateful for everyone making the effort to participate despite challenges due to time zones and pandemic-related restrictions.

THE CONFERENCE

Keynote Address

It was exciting that the keynote lecture, presented by Professor Amanda du Preez, University of Pretoria, matched our ambitions, dramatically extending the boundaries of persona studies beyond the planetary with her engaging discussion of the astronaut's persona. Professor du Preez's exploration of 'how to astronaut' offers a range of definitions and conceptualisations of persona for our consideration. Du Preez's work suggests that filmic representations of astronauts are a symptom of our relationship with Earth, and argues that an astronaut is an agent that "performs or reveals perceptions about human mobility and displacement in the anthropocene" (2021). Drawing on art history, cinema, and the history of space exploration, du Preez considers the astronaut as the ultimate hero, displaced yet brave in the face of adversity. This presentation can be viewed here: <https://youtu.be/a5XmIz0KYXU>

Personas on Social Media

The opening webinar discussion for the conference was **Personas on Social Media**, hosted by Kim Barbour on 16 July 2021, featuring Jessica Hodgkiss, Christopher Moore, Travis Holland, Michael Humphrey, and Saira Ali discussing their research into persona performances in online spaces from YouTube to Instagram to the NASA website. The conversation ranged from the labour involved in persona performances to the impact of platforms affordances on our capacity to build interactions between people.

The playlist is available here:

https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLyh6UkSxGTEd0F-clcq-RXfkyb5p_Xyft

Personas in Embodied Space

The second webinar, also hosted by Kim Barbour, explored the theme of **Personas in Embodied Space**, was held 23 July 2021. The participants were building from presentations exploring activists, pop stars, and aggregated data personas, and the discussion ranged from considering the role of Harry Styles' clothes and Miley Cyrus' album *Bangerz*, to the impact of consumer data and bias in the production of design personas, and the memorialisation of murdered Brazilian activist Marielle Franco. Leonard Cortana, Janey Umback, Danielle Feldman Karr, Lisa Du Bois Low, Steve Holmes, Adriana Amaral, and Tatyane Larrubia explored ideas of race, gender, and representation in considering the intersections in their diverse engagements with persona studies.

The presentations and webinar are available here:

https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLyh6UkSxGTEdTBgGec4RmHsbN_m1Y_91t

Personas on the Page

Our third webinar, **Personas on the Page**, explored innovations in persona production and performance in written mediums and our conversation focused a great deal on the contexts of writing that inspire authors to devise alternative, multiple, or experimental approaches to their own identity performances. Joining moderator, Katja Lee, on 30 July 2021, Romy Roomans, Megan Nolan, Steffen Moestrup, Christine Isager, and Anya Shchetvina unpacked the various ways that persona performances adjust or adapt to tension, conflict, or new contexts in order to, for journalists, 'get the job done'; update an existing tradition to respond to new media environments; or articulate a space for queer, trans, and racialized experiences and intellectual traditions. A key concept that emerged from this discussion was the idea of a multiplicity of

personas that can be accessed, like “flipping” through a “back catalogue” of previous persona performances¹.

The playlist that inspired this webinar discussion can be found here:
<https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLyh6UkSxGTEfWMAseiRgRZHNMsShwZns>

Personas Across Media

The fourth webinar, **Personas Across Media**, featured Bethany Usher, Marie Bennett, Tessa Vannieuwenhuyze, Aidan Moir, and Robert Boucaut. This panel provided a clear response to the challenge of diversifying persona studies through an eclectic but connected set of ideas and two key themes. The first theme was a clear commitment to the embeddedness of persona research as a core methodological feature. Embeddedness requires attention to the researchers’ personal cultural experience as well as the specificities of the broader culture and times of the people, objects, and places whose personas are under investigation. This theme overlapped with the second that drew a renewed attention to the collective dimension of persona. It is because of the various histories of identity theories, and approaches to celebrities and public figures that inform much of what has been achieved in persona studies, that the collective dimension of persona is often under-appreciated. Of particular interest to us in that conversation was the notion that persona identities are neither individual nor collective, (nor purely human or non-human), but a complex and ongoing negotiation between these factors. The conversations in the webinar highlighted attention to both themes in ways that suggested a dynamic range of future trajectories for the field.

The playlist for these papers can be found here:
https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLyh6UkSxGTEekI2HI08ELY_YD7KTLhwlv

Archive Update

In addition to the keynote and four panels, the Persona Studies YouTube channel introduced one additional playlist: Archive Update. In Archive Update scholars who had previously published scholarly or creative work in the journal were invited to reflect upon their work and any developments in that research that may have since transpired. These brief presentations made salient connections between past work on gaming, politics, work, bio-metrics, and Instagram and ongoing developments in the field, and showcased how persona research is changing, evolving, and always laying foundations for future work. We hope to make the Archive Update playlist an evolving space, as contributors reflect on the development of their work in the field. If you are interested in contributing to Archive Update, please contact the journal via our email address.

You can access this playlist here:
<https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLyh6UkSxGTEe1TUGfSwWiD8RTLLPohXXp>

THE FUTURE OF PERSONA STUDIES

Inspired and guided by the lively conversations at the conference, the Managing Editors at *Persona Studies* identified several key thematic concepts to develop in future special issues. In 2022, Katja Lee will be leading *Life Writing & Persona*, a special issue investigating the ways in which personas are produced, managed, used, and disseminated in the contexts of life writing. Taking “life writing” here in the very broadest of senses to include a range of forms and genres of representation/self-(re)presentation, this issue will explore the productive sites of overlap in how life writing studies and persona studies theorize performativity, authenticity, strategy,

agency, and reputation, but also use this as an opportunity to stretch both fields in new directions. Submissions for this issue are now closed.

Later in 2022, Kim Barbour and Michael Humphrey will be co-editing a special issue on *Persona & Domesticity*. This issue will explicitly shift focus from the public to the domestic sphere, and consider the role of persona performances in everyday life and interpersonal relationships. Further details about this issue, including deadlines for abstracts and expressions of interest will be available on the journal website early in 2022.

Additional special issues on Emotion, The Face, Journalism, and Niche Creators will be forthcoming in 2023 and 2024. Individuals interested in partnering with our Managing Editors on these special issues, or developing and leading their own themed issue on a different topic are encouraged to inquire via the journal's email address. Abstracts, full manuscripts, and creative practice submissions on topics not related to these special issues are always welcome and continue to be accepted at the journal on a rolling basis as outlined on the journal's website.

In This Issue

In this issue we are delighted to present seven full-length versions of work presented at the Diversifying Persona Studies conference.

In "Oscar: An Institutional and Contested Persona Reading of the Academy Awards", Robert Boucaut argues that the Academy Awards have, over the years, cultivated a contested, non-human, and institutional persona in the figure of 'Oscar'. A "composite" persona with distinctively human elements, Oscar is a Taste-maker, a Community Leader, and Hollywood Man yet the collective construction and expression of these performances challenges the notion that persona production and performance, particularly for institutions, requires a central authority.

Hannah Arendt's conceptualisations of the public/private divide have long informed persona studies theory but, as Michael Humphrey convincingly argues, how we use her work can have the effect of obscuring the fact that the affordances of persona are not evenly distributed. Analysing how a Black mother relaunches her YouTube family vlog after divorce, "The Social Oikos: Examining Arendt's Concept of the Public-Private Divide Through the Lens of a YouTube Vlog", asks us to reconsider how personas are formed in unjust cultures and reflect upon the unequal burdens, limitations, and potentials of the masks of persona work.

In "A Commonwealth Princess? The Instrumentalisation of Meghan Markle's Race to Construct Her Royal Persona", Jessica Carniel also reflects upon the persona work of racialised American women. Arguing that Meghan Markle's biracial identity was mobilised to create a royal persona that could serve the interests of the monarchy, this paper situates Markle as both an insider and outsider of the royal family during her tenure as a working royal. As a biracial, American divorcee Markle represented both an opportunity and a challenge to the royal brand, but the biracial "Commonwealth princess" persona was fraught with problems and deeply embedded in maintaining the established British social order of monarchy and colonialism.

Joni Salminen, Soon-gyo Jung, and Bernard J. Jansen also explore the potential harmful effects of persona but from the perspective of data-scientists creating and implementing data-driven personas. In "Data-Driven Personas Considered Harmful? Diversifying User Understandings with More than Algorithms", the authors detail some of the significant problems with the production and application of data-driven personas as well as some of the unrealistic expectations they can engender. As organisations continue to betray a keen and ongoing interest in using data-driven personas, illuminating their many problems and flaws is a crucial and timely project.

The Poet persona, Meghan P. Nolan outlines in “The Involuntary Masks of the Poet: Examining the Evolution of the Poet Persona through P. D. James’s Adam Dalgliesh” has a long and storied history. In the character of Dalgliesh, Nolan traces those aspects of the Poet persona which have withstood the test of time but, it is through his roles as professional detective and celebrated poet, that he comes to exemplify the persona and condition of the modern Poet.

Also keenly interested in the construction of poet personas, “Portrayal by Inappropriate Interaction: Persona Meets Persona in Journalistic Profiling” by Christine Isager and Steffen Moestrup, examines how journalists attempting to interview and profile Danish-Palestinian poet Yahya Hassan become engaged in a “mutual performative challenge”. The mutual constitution and reconstitution of personas that occurs during these “rhetorical maneuverings” can serve particularly useful, aesthetic, and even ethical functions and can provide journalists with a productive and disruptive means to pursue their craft.

In the final article, we come full circle and return to the pressing question of how to make sense of non-human personas that are collectively constructed. In “‘My Battery is Low and It’s Getting Dark’: The Opportunity Rover’s Collective Persona”, Travis Holland explores the construction of a persona for Opportunity, the NASA Mars Exploration Rover, during the collective outpouring of grief by the general public when the rover was declared no longer operational or, it seemed, ‘dead’. Looking at a sample of the 30,000+ digital postcards written to or in honour of ‘Oppy,’ Holland suggests that this persona-building may be messy, contested, and decentralised, but nevertheless represents a “collective achievement.”

Thank you to all conference participants and attendees who made this online event so rewarding, as well as to Caitlin Adams for her technical assistance during the webinars.

Kim, Katja, and Chris

END NOTES

¹ At the request of presenters, the ‘Personas on the Page’ webinar discussion is not available to view.