

**SIDE 1/2** · THE CANON · Defining celebrity · Boorstin · Dyer · Rojek · Marshall · Turner · Parasocial · Authenticity · Micro-celebrity · Attention economy

**100% ESSAY · NO EXAM**

Compiled by AskSia · mapped to the MDIA5005 curriculum · asksia.ai/cheatsheet/unsw-mdia5005

**0 · Essay Blueprint** READ FIRST

★ This course is graded **entirely by writing** — there is **no exam**. Two tasks of equal weight: a **Practical Writing Task (50%)** and a **Research Essay (50%)**. The skill being marked is *applying theory to a celebrity text*, not recall.

So this sheet is built for the keyboard, not the exam hall: a **theorist + concept bank you can cite** (Side 1) and an **argument + writing engine** (Side 2). Win condition = a clear thesis, the right theorist, a tight case study, critical (not descriptive) analysis.

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**SIA** → *The marker is asking one question: "so what?" Every paragraph must turn description of a celebrity into an argument about media, power or culture. Name the theorist, then push past them.*

**1 · Defining the Field** GET THE WORDS RIGHT

**Celebrity** · a person (or persona) whose **name & image carry exchange value** in the media — known for being known, beyond any role or achievement.

**Fame / renown** · recognition earned for deeds or talent (older, "achievement" sense). **Notoriety** · fame for transgression.

**Star** · screen-specific (film/TV) image (Dyer); celebrity is the broader, media-saturated category. **Persona** · the public, constructed self, distinct from the private person.

**THE CORE PARADOX**

The celebrity is **ordinary and extraordinary** — "just like us" yet special. Managing that contradiction is the engine of celebrity culture (Dyer; Marshall).

Celebrity = a **process & an industry**, not just a person: produced by publicists, media, audiences. Always ask *who profits*.

**1b · Why Study Celebrity?** THE STAKES

Celebrity is a **symptom & engine of modern culture**: it shows how identity, value & attention work under media capitalism. To study it is to study how we are taught to be selves, consumers & citizens.

Three lenses run through the whole course — keep all three live in an essay:

- **Production** · the industry that makes & sells fame
- **Text** · the image & the meanings it carries
- **Audience** · reception, fandom & labour

**2 · Foundations** START HERE

**BOORSTIN** *The Image, 1962*  
 The celebrity is "a person who is known for **his well-knownness**." Fame is now a *manufactured* media effect, not a reward for greatness — a **pseudo-event** (an event staged purely to be reported). Critique: celebrity is hollow, image over substance.

**RICHARD DYER** *Stars, 1979*  
 The star is an **image** — a text assembled from films, publicity, promotion & commentary. Stars **embody ideology** and manage social contradictions (e.g. individualism, gender, success). The star is a *sign* to be read.

Use Boorstin to critique *manufactured* fame; use Dyer to *read a celebrity as a text* that carries cultural meaning.

**2b · Charisma & Aura** OLDER ROOTS

**Weber** · celebrity as **charismatic authority** — a secular, media-manufactured charisma that commands devotion. **Benjamin** · mechanical reproduction strips the original's *aura*; the star system manufactures a substitute aura to sell.

**3 · Rojek · The Typology** CELEBRITY, 2001

Celebrity = "the attribution of glamorous or notorious status to an individual within the public sphere." Three routes:

TYPE	SOURCE
Ascribed	lineage / bloodline (royalty)
Achieved	talent / accomplishment
Attributed	made by media, not merit

**Celetoïd** · attributed celebrity that is **compressed & short-lived** (reality contestants, viral & scandal figures). **Celeactor** · fictional celebrity.

Rojek: celebrity fills a **post-religious need for the sacred** in secular society — "cultural fascination," parasocial devotion.

**Staged authenticity** · the "real," backstage self we're shown is itself performed — there is no unmediated private celebrity.

**3b · Fame Before Mass Media** BRAUDY

Fame is ancient — heroes, saints, rulers. What's new is **scale & speed**: mass & then social media *industrialised* fame and made it look democratic. Useful for framing "is celebrity new?" questions: the impulse is old, the machinery is modern.

**4 · Marshall · Celebrity & Power** 1997

**P. DAVID MARSHALL**  
 Celebrity is a **system of cultural power** — a discourse where the meaning of the **individual in consumer capitalism & democracy** is worked out. The celebrity *sign* models how to be a person, a consumer, a citizen.

Later work (the "presentational self"): on social media we all run a **public, strategic version of the self** — celebrity culture becomes a template for ordinary identity online.

Use Marshall to argue celebrity is *productive* — it does ideological work, shaping audiences as subjects, not just entertaining them.

**5 · Turner · The Demotic Turn** UNDERSTANDING CELEBRITY, 2004

**GRAEME TURNER**  
**Demotic turn** · the rising visibility of "**ordinary people**" as **media content** — reality TV, talkback, user-generated content, social media.

**Key move**: this is *not* a democratisation of fame. The celebrity **industry** still selects, controls & profits; ordinary people supply content cheaply. Visibility ≠ power.

Turner's definition to quote: celebrity is a **genre of representation, a commodity** traded by the promotions/media industries, *and a cultural formation* with a social function.

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**SIA** → *"The demotic turn" + "it's not democratisation" is the single most-applied idea in this course. Have a 2-line version ready for any influencer/reality-TV question.*

**5b · Couldry · Media Rituals** WHERE POWER HIDES

Celebrity sustains the **myth of the mediated centre** — the media's claim to speak for society's "centre." Celebrities *embody* that claim, and access to visibility is unequally distributed power, not a neutral stage.

**5c · The Field Today** SITUATE YOURSELF

Celebrity studies is **interdisciplinary** — media, sociology & cultural studies (key readers: Holmes & Redmond, *Framing Celebrity*; Marshall, *The Celebrity Culture Reader*). A strong essay **positions itself** in this conversation rather than treating one theorist as the last word.

**6 · Parasocial Interaction** THE RELATIONSHIP

**HORTON & WOHL** *1956*  
 Audiences form an **illusion of a face-to-face relationship** with a media figure — "**intimacy at a distance**." The performer seems to address *you* personally; the bond is one-sided (parasocial).

Written for early TV — now the **master concept for influencers**: direct address, comments, "authentic" intimacy, DMs all intensify PSI. Explains loyalty, "stanning," and the rage when a parasocial bond is betrayed.

**Parasocial relationship** = the durable, longer-term version of repeated PSI.

**6b · The Mobility Myth** STERNHEIMER

Celebrity sells the **aspirational dream** — "anyone can make it." That myth of social mobility *obscures* structural inequality: the rare success story hides how closed the system really is. A sharp critical move for any "ordinary person made famous" case.

**7 · Gamson · Audiences** CLAIMS TO FAME, 1994

**JOSHUA GAMSON**  
 Audiences are **not dupes**. They knowingly play the game of "**is this celebrity real or manufactured?**" — enjoying both the image and the machinery behind it. Authenticity is a negotiated *game*, not a fact.

**8 · The Backdrop** CRITICAL THEORY

**Adorno & Horkheimer** *culture industry, 1944* · mass culture is standardised & sells "pseudo-individuality" — celebrity as product.

**Debord** *Society of the Spectacle, 1967* · life mediated by images; the celebrity is the spectacle's human face.

Use these for the **political-economy / critical edge** — who owns the image machine.

**8b · Celebrity Capital** DRIESESS 2013

Media visibility is itself a **capital** (after Bourdieu) — convertible into money, influence & access. Explains why fame earned in one field (sport, reality TV) transfers to others (politics, business, advertising).

**9 · Authenticity & Self-Branding** THE CENTRAL TENSION

**SARAH BANET-WEISER** *Authentic™, 2012*  
 In **brand culture**, even "the authentic self" is branded & sold. Authenticity is the **most valuable commodity** precisely because it claims to be *outside* the market — an ambivalence the celebrity exploits.

**Self-branding** · curating the self as a consistent, marketable brand. **The authentic self** · the performed "real me" that audiences reward — and that collapses if it looks staged.

The influencer's bind: must seem **reliable & real** while running a commercial operation. Authenticity is *labour*.

**AUTHENTICITY STRATEGIES**

- **Backstage access** — "behind the scenes," the unfiltered moment
- **Confession** — vulnerability, struggle, the apology
- **Ordinariness** — flaws, routines, "just like you"
- **Consistency** — the same "real" self across platforms

All are *produced* — read them as strategy, not truth.

**10 · Micro-Celebrity & Influencers** THE DIGITAL TURN

**THERESA SENFT** *Camgirls, 2008*  
 Coined **micro-celebrity** · treating yourself as a **brand** & your audience as a **fanbase**, "amping up" popularity online — a *practice* anyone can adopt, not a status.

**ALICE MARWICK** *Status Update, 2013*  
**Instafame**; ordinary users adopt celebrity techniques for attention; the **attention economy**; context collapse & the imagined audience (with boyd).

**CRYSTAL ABIDIN** *Internet Celebrity, 2018*  
**Visibility labour & calibrated amateurism** — the studied "imperfect" relatability that makes influencers feel authentic and sells.

**10b · The Influencer Economy** HOW IT PAYS

Value chain: **attention → trust → conversion**. Sponsored posts, affiliate links & data monetise the parasocial bond. The bind: every ad risks the authenticity that makes it work — Banet-Weiser's ambivalence, lived daily. Authenticity is *ongoing labour*, never a settled fact.

**11 · Attention & Platforms** THE ECONOMY

**Attention economy** · attention is the scarce resource; visibility is monetised (ads, sponsorship, data). Celebrity = a machine for capturing it.

**Platform logics** shape who becomes visible: algorithms reward engagement, frequency & controversy; **metrics (followers, likes) become a public score** of worth. The platform, not talent, is now a gatekeeper.

Link to Turner: platforms *look* democratic but concentrate reward — a few "win" the attention lottery.

**12 · Scandal & Transgression** THE RUPTURE

Scandal is **structural**, not accidental: it poses norms, generates coverage, and tests the parasocial bond. The "**authenticity contract**" breaks when the private self contradicts the brand.

**Redemption narrative** · apology → reflection → comeback. Celebrity culture sells the fall *and* the return. Gender & race shape who is forgiven.

**12b · Gossip & Intimacy** THE EVERYDAY

Gossip is **social glue & moral policing** — circulating celebrity talk defines a community's norms about success, bodies & behaviour. Tabloids & feeds sell the feeling of **knowing** the celebrity personally: parasocial intimacy packaged as product.

**13 · Theorist Index** QUICK CITE

WHO	KEY TERM
Boorstin	known for well-knownness
Dyer	star as image/sign
Rojek	ascribed/achieved/attributed; celetoïd
Marshall	celebrity = power
Turner	demotic turn
Horton & Wohl	parasocial
Banet-Weiser	authenticity / brand
Senft / Marwick	micro-celebrity
Abidin	visibility labour

**SIDE 2/2** APPLY & WRITE · Concepts glossary · Frameworks · Gender & body · Reality TV · Fandom · Case-study method · Research essay · Writing task · Referencing

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**14 · Concepts Glossary** CITATION-READY

**Parasocial interaction** · one-sided illusion of intimacy with a media figure (Horton & Wohl).

**Demotic turn** · ordinary people as media content; not democratisation (Turner).

**Celetoid** · compressed, short-lived attributed celebrity (Rojek).

**Pseudo-event** · event staged only to be reported (Boorstin).

**Self-branding** · curating the self as a marketable, consistent brand.

**Micro-celebrity** · self-as-brand, audience-as-fanbase practice (Senft).

**Visibility labour** · the ongoing work of being seen (Abidin).

**Attention economy** · attention as the scarce, monetised resource.

**Affective economy** · emotion that circulates & accrues value (Ahmed).

**Context collapse** · multiple audiences flattened into one online (Marwick & boyd).

**Commodification** · turning a person/identity into something bought & sold.

**Celebrity capital** · accumulated visibility convertible to economic/social value (Driessens).

**Charismatic authority** · power from perceived exceptional appeal (Weber); celebrity = secular charisma.

**Aura** · the unique presence of an original; mass media trades aura for reach (Benjamin).

**Calibrated amateurism** · studied "imperfect" relatability that reads as authentic (Abidin).

**Mediatisation** · social life increasingly shaped by media logics (Couldry & Hepp).

**Mediated centre, myth of** · media's claim to speak for society's "centre" (Couldry).

**Encoding / decoding** · texts read in dominant, negotiated or oppositional ways (Hall).

**Prosumer / producer** · audience that both produces & consumes content.

**Authenticity** · the performed "real self" audiences reward — a commodity, not a fact.

**Persona** · the strategic public self, distinct from the private person.

**Anti-fandom** · investment *against* a celebrity; dislike as engagement.

**15 · Analytical Frameworks** PICK A LENS

**CELEBRITY-AS-TEXT** *Dyer*  
Read the celebrity like a text: **image, publicity, performance, reception**. What meanings & ideologies does it carry? Best for close analysis of one figure.

**CIRCUIT OF CULTURE** *du Gay / Hall, 1997*  
Analyse across 5 linked moments: **representation · identity · production · consumption · regulation**. Stops you doing "just" textual reading.

**POLITICAL ECONOMY VS CULTURAL STUDIES**

**PE** = ownership, industry, who profits (Turner, critical). **CS** = meaning, identity, audience agency (Gamson). The strongest essays *combine* both.

**SEMIOTIC READING** *Barthes / Hall*  
The celebrity as **sign**: signifier (image, body, name) + signified (youth, success, rebellion...). Ask what **myth** the sign makes seem natural.

**CELEBRITY CAPITAL** *Driessens, 2013*  
Treat visibility as a **convertible asset** (Bourdieu) — fame buys endorsements, influence & access. The lens for celebrity-to-politics/business pipelines.

**16 · Gender, Race & the Body** ALWAYS RELEVANT

Celebrity is **gendered & racialised**: who can be "authentic," who is policed, who is forgiven differs by identity. The female celebrity body is hyper-scrutinised & disciplined.

**Postfeminist sensibility** *Gill; McRobbie* · self-surveillance & "empowerment" sold as choice. **Popular feminism / misogyny** *Banet-Weiser 2018* · both amplified by celebrity.

Apply **intersectionality** — gender, race, class & sexuality together — when reading any celebrity case.

**Politics of representation** · who gets to be visible, "relatable" or believed as authentic is unevenly distributed. **Visibility can be both reward & surveillance** — being seen is not the same as having power.

**17 · Reality TV & the "Ordinary"** DEMOTIC APPLIED

Reality TV manufactures "**ordinary**" **celebrity** at scale — the clearest case of Turner's demotic turn. Participants supply cheap content & emotional labour; the format owns the value.

Read for: **the authentic/constructed tension** (it's "real" but heavily produced), the celetoid life-cycle, and class/gender framing of who's cast as a "character."

**17b · Celebrity Domains** PICK YOUR TERRAIN

DOMAIN	FOREGROUNDS
Music / film	star image, ideology (Dyer)
Sport	body, nation, scandal
Politics	celebrity capital, authenticity
Reality TV	demotic turn, celetoid
Influencer	micro-celebrity, visibility labour

Each domain spotlights different theory — choose one that fits your set readings.

**18 · Fandom & Audiences** THE OTHER HALF

Fans are **active producers** of celebrity meaning, not passive consumers (cultural-studies view). Their labour (sharing, defending, creating) sustains the celebrity.

- **Stan culture** · intense, organised, identity-defining fandom
- **Affective economy** · feeling circulates & builds value (Ahmed)
- **Anti-fandom** · investment *against* a celebrity; hate as engagement
- **Parasocial breakup** · grief/frag when the bond ruptures

**SIA** → *An essay that treats the audience as an active force, not a backdrop, almost always reads as more sophisticated.*

**18b · The Active Audience** HALL

**Encoding / decoding** (Hall): a celebrity text is read in **dominant, negotiated or oppositional** ways — meaning isn't fixed by the producer. This is the counter to the culture-industry "dupe" model: celebrity meaning is *contested* by fans, critics & anti-fans.

**19 · Case-Study Method** A REPEATABLE MOVE

Analyse any celebrity text in 5 steps:

1. **Describe** the text briefly (who/what/where) — minimal
2. **Name the concept** it best illustrates (e.g. visibility labour)
3. **Apply** the theorist — does the case fit, extend, or trouble the theory?
4. **Read critically** — power, gender, who profits, what's hidden
5. **So what?** — what does it tell us about media & culture *now*?

**PARAGRAPH ENGINE**  
claim → evidence (the case) → theory → analysis → significance ("so what")

**19b · Worked · Mini Case** METHOD IN ACTION

**Text**: an influencer's "day in my life" vlog.  
**Concept**: calibrated amateurism + visibility labour. **Theory**: Abidin — the "ordinary" framing is *produced* to read as authentic.  
**Critical**: unpaid emotional labour + hidden sponsorship. **So what**: "authenticity" is the product; **Turner's demotic turn isn't empowerment** — the platform captures the value.

**20 · Choosing a Case** SET YOURSELF UP

- Pick a case **narrow enough** to analyse closely (one figure/moment, not "social media")
- Choose one with a **visible tension** (authenticity vs commerce, fame vs scandal)
- Make sure **2–3 set theorists** genuinely apply
- Have concrete **evidence** (posts, coverage, images) you can cite

**20b · What Counts as Evidence** PRIMARY VS SECONDARY

- **Primary** · the posts, images, interviews, coverage, the body itself — the celebrity text
- **Secondary** · scholarly analysis (the set readings & beyond)
- **Describe primary, then analyse** — never let the text "speak for itself"

**21 · The Research Essay** 50% · ~2000 WORDS

A **thesis-driven argument** applying course theory to a case, backed by scholarly sources. *Not* a report or a biography.

**STRUCTURE**  
Intro — hook · context · **thesis** · roadmap  
Body ¶ — topic sentence · evidence · theory · analysis · link  
Concl. — restate · synthesise · "why it matters"

**WHAT LIFTS THE GRADE**

- A sharp, **arguable thesis** (a claim someone could dispute)
- Theory *used* to analyse, not just summarised
- Scholarly sources (the set readings + beyond), not blogs
- Critical voice — you evaluate, you don't just report

**INTRO SHAPE**  
hook (the case) → context (why now) →

**THESIS** → roadmap of the steps

**CONCLUSION SHAPE**  
restate thesis in fresh words → synthesise  
→ widen: "what this tells us about media"

No new evidence in the conclusion; do raise the stakes.

**22 · The Practical Writing Task** 50% · ~1500 WORDS

An **applied / shorter writing piece** (format set by your outline — e.g. analysis, feature, or critical commentary). Demonstrates the *same* theoretical thinking in a tighter, more crafted form.

**Nail it**: answer the exact brief, keep one clear line of argument, show theory *implicitly* through sharp analysis, and edit hard for the word count. **Confirm the current brief on Moodle** — formats change year to year.

**22b · Process & Timeline** DON'T CRAM WRITING

- **Start early** — both tasks reward redrafting
- Pick the case & theory *first*, then read around it
- Outline the argument before writing prose
- **Cite as you go** — never reconstruct references at 2am
- Final pass: cut 10% for word count & punch

**23 · Argument Craft** DESCRIPTION → ANALYSIS

**Thesis templates**:

"While X appears to \_\_\_\_, this essay argues it actually \_\_\_\_, revealing \_\_\_\_ about [media / power / authenticity]."

**Description** = what happened. **Analysis** = what it *means* & why. Mark every paragraph: have I said "so what" yet?

- **Signpost** — each topic sentence states the claim, not the topic
- **Critical voice** — "this suggests", "however", "more convincingly"
- **Engage** theory — agree, qualify or push back

**PHRASE BANK · STEAL THESE**

**Add**: moreover · furthermore · equally.  
**Contrast**: however · yet · by contrast.  
**Analyse**: this suggests · this reveals · which implies · more convincingly. **Cite**: as X argues · extending X · X overstates · against X.

**24 · Referencing & Integrity** DON'T LOSE EASY MARKS

Use the **required style consistently** (Harvard/APA — check the outline); cite every idea & quote; build a complete reference list.

UNSW counts as plagiarism: **copying**; **inappropriate paraphrasing** (changing a few words, same structure); **collusion**; **self-plagiarism** (reusing your own past work).

**Quote** sparingly & exactly; **paraphrase** = genuinely your own words + a citation. AI-/contract-written work breaches integrity rules.

**24b · Common Pitfalls** LOSE MARKS HERE

- **Description** » **analysis** — retelling the celebrity's story
- **Theory-dropping** — naming a theorist without using them
- **Case too broad** ("social media") — can't analyse closely
- **Moralising** instead of arguing
- No clear thesis; paragraphs that don't link

**25 · HD Checklist** BEFORE YOU SUBMIT

- Thesis is arguable & answered throughout
- Theory *applied*, not described
- Every ¶ ends on "so what"
- Case study close & specific
- Gender/power read where relevant
- Referenced & within word count

**SIA** → *Read only your topic sentences end-to-end — they should tell the whole argument on their own. If they don't, the structure isn't there yet.*