Summary

This dissertation examines the norm-challenging sex, gender, and body performativity of Lady Gaga, the affective communication of Gaga, and likewise the affective responses of her fans in both their online and offline fandom experiences. The research builds on analysis of chosen music videos as well as public performances of Lady Gaga, and on various offline and online ethnographic work amongst the fans of Gaga.

The research is inscribed in a cultural studies tradition, which emphasizes the importance of studying everyday and so-called low culture in order to understand contemporary culture and society. It focuses on the decoding and negotiating level of the cultural phenomenon and its potential impact by turning to the audience: the Lady Gaga fans. It is also placed within a poststructuralist mindset that emphasizes the constructedness of culture and identity related categories, and at same time, the possibility for change.

The dissertation acknowledges the culture-critical approach presented against pop cultural celebrity figures such as Lady Gaga, which points out acts of copying and thus of not contributing with new content to the arts as well as the emptiness of the pop culture industry and its money making mass productions. However, it views Lady Gaga’s position in popular culture as powerful in terms of cultural change because of her recognizability within mainstream popular culture and the consequently increased possibility to change the system. Hence, the examination of Lady Gaga in this dissertation appropriates modern culture as a culture concerned both with the economic dynamics of the cultural system in which it is inscribed and with the intense, personal and emotional experiences it can provide its audience. In this perspective, the fact that Lady Gaga earns a lot of money and is aware of the unwritten rules of the industry does not prevent the fans from perceiving her as authentic and real, and as someone who they love deeply and who fills their life with strong experiences and intense happiness.

The dissertation consists of seven articles, examining the performativity of Lady Gaga and the fan responses from different theoretical and methodological approaches, and of a framework, surrounding the seven articles in the dissertation. The latter introduces the various theoretical fields that underlie the research presented in the seven articles, an
overview of the methodological approaches applied in the articles, and a review of the hitherto Lady Gaga research. The framework also introduces the Gaga research of this dissertation and presents the following research questions:

- How do the sex, gender, and body performances of Lady Gaga differ from and resonate with existing discourses in mainstream popular culture?
- To what extent can Lady Gaga strategically construct an affective environment for her fans?
- How can the fandom of Lady Gaga be more fully understood through affect methodological analysis of the fan experiences?
- How can one of the world’s most famous celebrities be perceived as a person who shares her authentic self with the world?

The two first articles, *A Bad Romance: Lady Gaga and the Return of the Divine Monster* and *Crip Heroine or Mainstream Mock? Negotiating the Performances of Lady Gaga*, relate to the first research question and spring from discussions on the relation between body, media, ideals and academia, which are introduced in the theoretical framework. Here, Lady Gaga is placed within a rich tradition of artists reiterating the contemporary norms and ideal - and at the same time challenge the norms by presenting new identity related constellations - , and of a mutual exchange between the aesthetics of culture and the academic framework in which they are examined.

*A Bad Romance* springs from theories on the monstrous and crippled body, and empirically from selected music videos and live performances by Lady Gaga. It examines how Gaga transgresses dichotomies through her performances and establishes a new bodily discourse in which monstrous behavior and looks go hand in hand with beauty. Briefly reviewing the history of the monster and its social context, this article argues that Lady Gaga is an example of what can disrupt the order of society today, and thus of what the monster of the twenty-first century may look like: a monster offering a glimpse of a possible future where it is no longer tied to the freak show.

Building on data collected in online Lady Gaga fan forums as well as in public debates represented by articles from mass online media sites, *Crip Heroine or
Mainstream Mock? investigates how the performances of Lady Gaga make her a queer and crip heroine to some but at the same time produce heavy skepticism and criticism of the artist’s intentions. The article argues that Lady Gaga exemplifies a central dilemma that artists of mainstream popular culture face when trying to subvert dominant discourses. On the one hand, Gaga has to be careful not to deviate too much from the system of the mainstream in order to remain recognizable and thus maintain a powerful position of influence. On the other hand, if she is not accepted as part of the system, she risks being accused of being inauthentic and exploiting the people and bodies she tries to introduce into mainstream culture.

The two articles continue the debates on whether the performative work of Lady Gaga constitute the end of culture, or at least a cultural backlash, or a future in which new constructions of sexuality, gender, and body representations are possible. Together they conclude that while Lady Gaga challenges the norms of popular culture and paves the way for a more diverse visual culture, she is also limited by the expectations of popular culture.

The third article, A Strategic Romance? On the Affective Relation between Lady Gaga and Her Little Monsters in Online Communication, is the first of four articles in the dissertation that deals with the affective level of the fans experience of Lady Gaga. This article investigates the online communication between Lady Gaga and her fans through an affect analytical approach in order to answer the second research question. Taking Lady Gaga’s Facebook page as a point of departure, it examines how Lady Gaga, through verbal and visual communication, focusing especially on strategies of authenticity and intimacy, establishes a private and personal space online where she can trigger cues that affectively attune the bodies of her fans. Analyzing the responses from her fans, the article concludes that while it is possible strategically to plan a communicative affective framing, it is far from certain that it will result in affective responses.

The reason for choosing affect as the main focus in the study of the relation between Lady Gaga and her fans is due to its providence of an understanding beyond semiotic meaning of the fan experience and thus a more complete fandom study. The following three articles “We Could Belong Together”: On Affective Fan Experiences of
Lady Gaga, “People Can Say What They Want. The Truth Is in the Crowd” – On Intensity Peaks and Crowd Mobilization in the World of Lady Gaga, and “And then It Begins to Thunder Inside Your Chest”: Visual Research Studies of a Lady Gaga Audience Experience, contribute to the field of affective fan and celebrity studies, and relate to the third research question. The articles do not provide the ‘final answer’ and only truth, but instead different methodological approaches and thoughts that can be further developed in the future.

Through the lens of the experience economy, on the levels of staging, co-creation, and self-direction in the experience of Lady Gaga, “We Could Belong Together” argues that authenticity, interaction, and empowerment are key elements of the fandom in question. This theoretical framework is used to examine the passionate dedication of the fans and thus the affective states of Gaga fandom. It also argues that the personal investments of her fans, the unwritten rules, hierarchies, and norms of fandoms, as well as the hunt for positive affect may also trigger states of negative affect. The article is based on online as well as offline ethnography amongst fans of Lady Gaga.

Empirically departing from a selection of Facebook posts by Lady Gaga and theoretically from rhythm analysis and vibration theory as well as classic and recent crowd theory, “People Can Say What They Want. The Truth Is in the Crowd” examines popularity peaks in the communication of Lady Gaga. By counting frequencies, measuring amplitudes (or intensities), and listening to timbres in the activity of Lady Gaga’s Facebook followers, the article shows how affect clusters around Facebook posts and how it varies in intensity and quality, how crowd behavior emerges in this online space, and how Lady Gaga as a crowd leader is celebrated as a form of non-superhero imbued with affects of everyday love and happiness.

Investigating the affective bodily states of Lady Gaga fans at a concert in Denmark in September 2014, “And then It Begins to Thunder Inside Your Chest” discusses how the creative anthropological method known as the visual research method can be applied fruitfully to data that are difficult to access using regular methods such as interviews. This is the final article that examines methods through which the affective level of the Gaga fandom experience can be read. Through the lens of audience memory studies it argues that the embodied concert experiences can be relived through memory.
work at a workshop following the concert, and that photos of the fans at the concert can be viewed as *freezings* of affective concert moments containing a *punctum*, which, in spite of its lack of linguistic meaning, can be read as the experienced affect within the bodies of the fans.

The seventh article, *“Everyone Is so Cynical”: On Authenticity in the World of Gaga*, raises the question presented in the fourth research question and thus investigates the level of authenticity of Lady Gaga. Following a review of how the term authenticity is generally perceived today, and how it has been and is currently linked to different musical expressions, the article draws on online and offline fieldwork conducted amongst Lady Gaga fans in 2013 and 2014 in order to discuss if and how Lady Gaga is perceived as authentic by her fans. It argues that in spite of widespread skepticism concerning the sincerity of the artist, her fans, first, experience Lady Gaga as authentic and, second, reiterate perceptions of authenticity linked to rock music. This indicates that we may be leaving the era of *inauthentic authenticity* characterizing the pop music.

The dissertation views Lady Gaga as a great example of how sex, gender, and body ideals are negotiated through media, and, at the same time, influence academic debates on the topic. In addition, the study of an artist such as Lady Gaga emphasizes that fans are important to examine because they provide insight into how people in general appropriate culture, e.g. how media platforms play a role in their consumption practices, and into how celebrity figures reflect the social norms and values of contemporary society, while at the same time serve as symbolic leaders who can guide the public in new directions.

Lady Gaga has in the studies of the dissertation been appropriated as a phenomenon inscribed in a history and tradition of female artists who express new significations of sex, gender and body aesthetics in popular culture, and who therefore are able to connect with the fans on a deep, personal and emotional level that may even change the lives of the fans. And even though Lady Gaga states “My Artpop could mean anything”, the fans agree that, to them, it means happiness, empowerment, comfort, inspiration and love.