



MONASH University

Managing the self-social tension: digital feminine self-
production in an intimate public

Akane Kanai

BA (Hons) LLB (Hons) *UniMelb*

MSc Gender, Media and Culture *LSE*

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Abstract

This doctoral thesis examines youthful femininities in an intimate public on the blogging platform Tumblr, interrogating how the self is produced through identity work negotiating the postfeminist tension between the individual and the social. The public is built around a set of self-representative blogs narrating moments of everyday youthful feminine experience through GIFs and captions. My study analyses the circulation and readership of the blog, *WhatShouldWeCallMe* ('WSWCM') and five of its adaptations, in order to explore how young women negotiate the tension between the self and the social in this context of everyday, mediated sociality (the 'WSWCM public'). Motivated by the question of how highly individualistic, seemingly impossible and contradictory postfeminist subjectivities may be lived and enacted, I analyse how femininities are relationally produced in this blog-based public.

The thesis is principally divided into four data chapters. I first theorise the affective relational framework of the public and how it structures the way young women relate to others in the public. Young women are required to demonstrate awareness of normative postfeminist rules in managing their lives, in order to enact a (girl)friendly relationality of commonality with others. They must articulate this awareness without excessive disgruntlement, using humour and an upbeat register to portray emotionally resilient, appealing selves. In the next chapter, I outline how youthful feminine knowledges, classifications and modes of meaning making, together with Tumblr's infrastructures and the forms of the texts circulated in this public, shape how readers may participate and belong. In the following chapters, I highlight the entrepreneurialism of the blogs in extracting value from personal experience in ways compatible with postfeminist terms of successful femininity. Relational figures such as the best friend, boyfriend and Other girl are used to enact postfeminist individuality, signalling the self as independent but fun, desiring yet desirable. Personal experience is simplified, made consistent, and generic, in order to facilitate recognition and circulation by indefinite, unknown readers.

My findings indicate that postfeminism must be reconceptualised beyond a mediated sensibility to a highly personal set of governmental rules, knowledges, and cultures of sociality shaping the relationship of the self to the social. Far from indicating a solipsistic individuality, knowledge, labour and skill are invested to produce selves that generate a sense of commonality with readers through the premise of shared engagement with postfeminist

knowledges and culture. As such, while young women individually adopt branded practices to enhance their social value, the self is reduced into bite-sized moments of relatable experience, reinstating postfeminist normativity as a central part of youthful, Western femininity.

Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Publications during enrolment

I hereby declare that this thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

This thesis includes some material from three original papers published in two peer reviewed journals and one edited book, and one unpublished manuscript. The core theme of the thesis is the production of digital femininities in an intimate public on Tumblr. The ideas, development and writing up of all the papers in the thesis were the principal responsibility of myself, the candidate, working within the Centre for Women's Studies and Gender Research (under the supervision of Associate Professor JaneMaree Maher and Dr Amy Dobson).

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4	Kanai, A. (2015). Jennifer Lawrence, remixed: Approaching celebrity through DIY digital culture. <i>Celebrity Studies</i> . doi: 10.1080/19392397.2015.1062644	Published	100%	5%

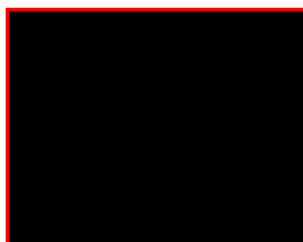
-	Kanai, A. and Dobson, A (in press, 2016) 'Gender and Digital Media' in Naples, N., Hoogland, R., Wickramasinghe, M. and A. Wong (eds.) <i>The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Gender and Sexuality</i> . Wiley-Blackwell.	Published	60%	N/A
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Main Supervisor signature:



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1 Introduction

Around four years ago, when pursuing a PhD was still not quite on my mind, I came across a blog that sparked my interest and was to prompt a line of inquiry culminating in this thesis. In what is now a commonplace genre of visual narrative found online, the blog's use of animated GIFs to articulate everyday circumstances and the feelings associated with them struck me as both funny and clever. Looping about three or so seconds of footage from visual media ranging from film and television to YouTube, these GIFs were paired with captions describing miscellaneous situations such as 'when my best friend's friend gets too close too soon', 'when someone critiques what I'm eating when I'm eating it', and 'when I'm drunk and trying to put on heels while standing'. This last situation was encapsulated in the first post I saw from the blog. It had been reposted from Tumblr, the blogging platform where it was hosted, to my friend Sophie's Facebook page. Below, I extract a screen grab of this post:



Figure 1. When I'm drunk and putting on heels. WSWCM

Viewed online, the movement of the GIF shows a cat perched precariously on a cardboard box, slowly but surely toppling over. This GIF extracts a moment from a YouTube video entitled 'Many too small boxes and Maru' (Mugumogu, 2010), where Maru, a famous internet cat, is filmed during his insistent and characteristic attempts to squeeze into boxes

that are too small for him. Sophie's friend who had posted it to her Facebook page, had written 'Look who it is' as an accompanying comment, to which Sophie had responded, 'If only I looked as cute as Maru doing anything'. Evidently, Maru stood in for Sophie – but also for a number of indefinite others who may have experienced similar difficulties in keeping upright while tipsy in party shoes.

I was intrigued. I was interested in the way that *recognition* was being enacted through the blog on a number of levels. The blog did not name its authors nor did it provide any images of them; its listed pseudonym was 'wswcm', the acronym for 'WhatShouldWeCallMe', the name of the blog. However, when further browsing the contents of the blog, I was seemingly able to identify its mode of narration as feminine beyond the signifiers in the posts such as 'heels', 'best friends' and discussion of dieting attempts. Both Sophie's friend and Sophie had read this post authored by a stranger as personally relatable. I had read it in the context of Sophie's Facebook page and in line with her friend's comment, had imagined the moment as pertaining to her. But I had simultaneously *recognised* the moment as potentially applicable for me and for others. This post was voiced as personal, relating to its author, but also applicable to other readers at the same time who shared a similar socio-cultural, gendered and classed position in accepting the invitation to bond over this moment. Effectively, the post was an inside joke. Indeed, it came from a blog authored by two long distance 'best friends', young female law students living on opposite coasts of the United States, who used it to send humorous GIFs to each other (Casserly, 2012). Yet, others like me had read their way into the joke, through mobilising a shared social imaginary mixing heels, booze, disorientation and laughter, reliving and reconstructing a quotidian situation understood to be common. The post invited reading as an affective practice, understanding the post as an articulation of someone else's experience, whilst also recognising it as one's own. Further, the popularity of the blog spoke to a shared imaginary of a sizeable feminine audience. In early 2012, it went from 500 followers in its first week to 50,000 followers within its first month on Tumblr (Casserly, 2012). A few months after inception, it was attracting up to 1.5 million views per day (Eckerle, 2012), and media coverage by *Forbes* (Casserly, 2012) and *Allure* magazines (O'Neill, 2012), amongst others.

I subsequently discovered WhatShouldWeCallMe ('WSWCM') had evidently inspired other readers on Tumblr, who had created similar highly visual blogs to relate moments of their lives. Some explicitly stated they were a 'takeoff' of WSWCM; in others, this connection was only implied. There was a visible and knowing form of feminine

connection being displayed through these simplified, essentialised artefacts: a commonality of identity leavened with a degree of differentiation. Indeed, the responses showed that like me, others felt personally addressed by WSWCM, yet felt the need to articulate a slightly varied version of themselves in response. The blogs as a collective response to WSWCM offered a sense of the simultaneous importance of individuality and connection, in the connective differentiation they demonstrated with the original blog. Indeed, far from the narcissism often alleged in relation to young women's social media production (Tanner, Maher, & Fraser, 2013), this process of adaptation and re-interpretation was suggestive of desires to enact belonging through creating a relational space based around knowledges and feelings similar to those articulated in WSWCM.

Articulating both individuality and connection, these WSWCM-based blogs provide a rich space to explore negotiations of belonging through shared understandings and articulations of Western youthful femininity. Whilst I do not claim that this blog phenomenon can be generalised to speak to how young women in the West live their lives, it clearly speaks to and articulates *understandings* of youthful Western feminine experience that are accepted as common through the spread of adaptations of the popular original blog. Adopting a feminist cultural studies approach attentive to audience meaning making, these digital texts provide insights into how femininity is both understood and relationally produced. These adaptations, together with the popular original blog, articulate shared ideas relating to the contours and identifying features of youthful femininity, and show how such ideas position young women in relation to others. I contend the significance of this phenomenon is the way in which the identity work produced through the blogs produces a self-representative yet relational space: the adaptations speak to each other in their common, yet differentiated versions of femininity.

Drawing on Shifman's (2014) terminology, I denote these adapted blogs as 'follower' blogs and the original as the 'founder' blog to invoke their meme-based relational formation. A meme, according to Shifman (2014) is a group of digital items created with an awareness of group belonging, which scales into a shared social phenomenon through the circulation, mimicry and remix of many internet users. Memes are a quintessential mode of digital participation, and demonstrate the ways in which people relate to particular social ideas whilst being aware of how this stance positions them in relation to others. Digital media scholarship has theorised how memes showcase and reinterpret dominant cultural attitudes and can demonstrate how social boundaries are enforced (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Milner,

2012; Miltner, 2014; Shifman, 2014). Here, the WSWCM meme demonstrates essentialised and recognisable aspects of everyday, youthful, feminine, middle class Western life, within the terms of knowledge considered common of those insiders participating in the meme. Given it has been widely recognised by feminist scholars such as Gill (2007) that a postfeminist sensibility pervades Western media contexts, unsurprisingly, such articulations of feminine experience in the meme are entangled with themes of postfeminist and post-girl power femininity (Dobson & Harris, 2015). Across the meme, bloggers frequently cite situations, feelings and experiences to do with postfeminist luminous spaces of beauty, educational and career success and heterosexual romance (McRobbie, 2009), and position themselves in relation to others through these citations.

This meme, then, presents the possibilities of exploring not only the negotiations of feminine identity work of young women, but how postfeminist discourses and affects are understood and reinterpreted in the identity work of this digital, social setting. Through the circulation of textual moments of everyday femininity which simultaneously describe and *enact* feminine sociality, the public formed around this meme provides a site to examine both the reception of postfeminist discourses and affects, as well as relational identity-making enacted through this reception. Moreover, the structure of the meme, demonstrating individuation and connection in its *relational* production of femininity, may be argued to show digital engagement with postfeminist discourses of individuality. As Gill (2007) contends, the contradictions of postfeminist subjectivity are held together by a grammar of individuality. The individuation evident in the follower blogs' adaptation of the 'shared' or standard femininity of the founder, along with corresponding moves by the founder blog to distinguish its branding as I discuss further in Chapter Seven, suggest the adoption of postfeminist requirements that women regard themselves as 'individuals'. As such, the meme presents the opportunity to understand postfeminism as more than a mediated sensibility (Gill, 2007) but as a set of shared knowledges and affective rules of conduct.

In this thesis, out of the dozens of varying adaptations of WSWCM, I analyse five follower blogs together with the founder to conduct a detailed exploration of the typical ways in which youthful feminine identity work is enacted and negotiated in the blogs. Across these six blogs, I have considered a total of approximately 800 blog posts in order to understand how this continuing process of identity work is collectively and relationally enacted. In conducting this research, however, I have found that the explanatory power of the meme in understanding the negotiations of femininity in the blogs was not sufficient in grappling with

the affective, relational nature of these negotiations. In particular, understanding this space simply as a meme did not adequately speak to the highly *intimate* quality of what was being expressed. I discuss what I mean by affect in more detail in Chapter Three, but it will suffice here to say that I mean to draw on affect as a loose form of emotion that is socially, rather than individually based (Wetherell, 2012). The relational identity work evident in the blogs shows not only how young women position themselves in relation to each other through luminous postfeminist frameworks of value (McRobbie, 2009), but articulate desires to be seen as *belonging* in this gendered social formation made through self-representative digital texts. Indeed, the blogs are at once social and highly personal. For this reason, while these blogs constitute a meme, I have drawn much more substantially on Berlant's (2008) work on intimate publics to theorise the affective negotiations of the blogs, as I go on to discuss below.

Accordingly, in this thesis, I analyse the founder and five follower blogs in the WSWCM meme, theorising the femininities produced through the intimate public made through their circulation ('the WSWCM public'). I identify the WSWCM public as the affective-discursive space comprised of the circulation of WSWCM texts through liking and reblogging on Tumblr, and their adaptation and readership more broadly. As postfeminist discourses are predicated on an imperviousness to social influence, this blog-based social formation is of interest, not only for exploring the reception and understanding of such discourses, but in showing how they are *comparatively* re-articulated in relation to the other blogs in the public. The research questions I pursue here are: what type of relational identity work is being done in the WSWCM public, and how does this identity work interpret and re-articulate the postfeminist tension between the individual and the social? In what follows in this introductory chapter, I further explain my key definitions of identity work, relationality and intimate publics, which constitute central conceptual frameworks operationalised in this research. I then set out my focus on the postfeminist tension between the individual and the social that this intimate public can be used to explore, and the relevance of digital culture for unpacking how this tension is negotiated. Following this are my chapter summaries which provide a map of my analysis in this thesis.

Identity work, relationality and intimate publics

Drawing on a feminist cultural studies tradition of privileging texts and audiences as sites of social analysis, my research positions this meme and its public as a relational space through which the reception and mobilisation of postfeminism as a set of discourses and affects can be examined. I ask what these digital artefacts as a group can tell us about the negotiation of the individualising assumptions underlying postfeminism, and how they are re-interpreted and remade through identity work.

The term ‘identity work’ is used in this thesis, given the investment of continuous labour constitutes a central feature in the production of mediated identities according to scholars from different fields of media study, including studies of celebrity (Dyer, 2004; Nunn & Biressi, 2010; Rojek, 2001), reality television (S. Collins, 2008; Hendershot, 2009) and their intersections with digital media (Andrejevic, 2004; Banet-Weiser, 2012; Keller, 2014; Marwick, 2013; Ouellette & Wilson, 2011; Senft, 2008). Such labour attaches the self to subjectivities created through discursive practices (Hall, 1996). As Hall (1996) writes, because identity is made within discursive formations and attendant social and historical contexts, attention must be paid to the strategies and the investments through which identity is articulated. Buckingham (2008) notes that identity’s Latin root *idem* implies both similarity and difference, reflecting that identity is both assumed to be unique and consistent but crucially, enacted in relation to a collective or social group. Identity, then, is always practised *in relation to* a larger idea; and, as Hall (1996) argues, it is relationally made through positing difference to what it is not. Yet postfeminist normativity, as I discuss below, provides subjectivities which may not be readily or seamlessly inhabitable for young women regardless of how much effort they invest in differentiating and delineating themselves. Indeed, in digital contexts, the labour in continually managing the contradictions of a carefree but feminine individuality has been made evident by scholars such as Dobson (2011b, 2012) and Ringrose and Barajas (2011), and as such, I focus on identity as work in this thesis.

Identity, then, is work and is also a process that is enacted *relationally* (Buckingham, 2008; Hall, 1996). In the WSWCM public, as I discuss further in Chapter Five, participants are relationally positioned as authors and readers of shared texts in a meme, though these positions may overlap given the insider knowledges these texts invoke. In this thesis, I draw in particular on Skeggs’ (2004, 2009) framing of relationality, emphasising contemporary identity work as the struggle to be identified as of *value* through particular relations to objects and to others. Subjects draw on a relationality or disposition to others in order to concretise a sense of who they are and where they fit to extract symbolic value. For others deemed to be

of little symbolic value, they are designated as the ‘constitutive limit’ of the self. Skeggs notes that the resources and competencies required to accrue value are differentially available, transferred and exercised. In a contemporary Western Anglophone context where the self, particularly the *mediated* self, is dominantly understood in terms of the accrual of exchange value (Skeggs & Loveday, 2012; Skeggs & Wood, 2013), such an understanding privileges middle class subjects who can mobilise cultural capital, self-reflexivity, productivity and self-awareness in the pursuit of self-making. Identity is thus an ongoing, laborious process predicated on relationalities which construct insiders and outsiders on the basis of class and other overlapping signifiers of value such as gendered normativity. Understanding the making of the self through the accrual of exchange value provides a useful framework with which to understand femininities informed by postfeminist ideals of the classless, colour-blind, self-regulating market actor (Gill, 2007).

I now come to the notion of the intimate public as a framework through which to explore the relationality of the blogs and shared notions of femininity they express. In Berlant’s words, intimate publics operate when ‘a market opens up to a bloc of consumers, claiming to circulate texts and things that express those people’s particular core interests and desires’ (2008, p. 5). Through the circulation of particular commodities, affects, as well as discourses (Warner, 2002), an intimate public thus expresses what its participants feel to be common amongst them, a feeling that is particularly important for ‘nondominant’ people (Berlant, 2008). Berlant’s (2008) articulation of the intimate public is useful as it both foregrounds the affective nature of belonging, and is attentive to the marketised way in which it may be enacted. As such, it is capacious enough to accommodate highly commercial postfeminist notions of subjectivity, as well as providing a framework for understanding how the affect of intimacy which circulates in the WSWCM public may be attached to negotiations of postfeminist discourses.

According to Berlant, nondominant people are cognisant that they share a history of oppression based on being viewed as ‘generic’ in a certain way. Within an intimate public, feeling similar to others offers a feeling of proximity to politics, but importantly, Berlant specifies, whilst providing a sense of *relief* from it. Terming this space the ‘juxtapolitical’, this affective recognition based on sharing in the same conventions and discourses provides:

permission to live small but to feel large, to live large but to want what is Normal too...The intimate public legitimates qualities, ways of being, and entire lives that have otherwise been deemed puny or discarded (Berlant, 2008, p. 3).

Berlant thus pinpoints the intimate, personal, and social intersections of belonging, highlighting the affective pull of being recognised through shared understandings such as those of everyday femininity shown in the blogs.

The central problem of the intimate public, then, is that of individual invisibility; its solution is a shared, affective imaginary centring around recognition of the individual within common conventional practices. Accordingly, the act of *expressing* the self individually as an insider in an intimate public, based on knowledge of the type of things that produce commonality and obtaining recognition thereby, is a powerful form of legitimation. Such a sense of text-based connection is evident here in the widespread adaptation of the founder blog and the development of the WSWCM meme. The meme produces an attendant intimate public of participants where commonality may be felt and produced through the circulation, readership and authorship of blog posts as I discuss further in Chapter Five. However, as I argue in Chapter Seven, recognition sometimes requires strategic individual differentiation for the purposes of self-branding. Hence, when I refer to the WSWCM public, I invoke the relationality of the intimate public, a space rich in feelings of common recognition, negotiation and marketised value.

Context of research: postfeminism and digital sociality

In this section, I set out the focus on this thesis on the postfeminist tension between the individual and the social, drawing on scholarship identifying contradictions in postfeminist subjectivity centred around the enactment of individuality (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009; Negra, 2008). I then locate this tension in relation to discourses of a ‘new’ sociality arising with the popularity of Web 2.0 and post-Web 2.0 digital platforms. I have already noted how the individuation of the blogs in the public is suggestive of engagement with such individualising postfeminist discourses, but here, I additionally contextualise the public in relation to these discourses of social media potentiality.

This thesis is centrally concerned with postfeminism as a set of mediated discourses and affects which construct forms of Western feminine normativity in relation to women’s life trajectories and their relationships with others and themselves. I interrogate how a set of seemingly impossible ideals of contemporary femininity are interpreted and enacted by young women in light of the dominance of such ideals within media, including digital media.

The central postfeminist theme with which I engage is the aspirational vision of individual efficacy and imperviousness to social context. This research examines a digital context of sociality in order to understand how a postfeminist articulation of individuality is taken up in the digitally collated identity work of young women, as postfeminism's most visible and most scrutinised subjects.

Postfeminism has had multiple meanings. However, the Western portrayal of the 'pastness' of feminism as a collective social movement (Tasker & Negra, 2007) now underpins the dominant understanding of postfeminism in contemporary scholarship. Distinguishing definitions of postfeminism as a type of epistemological break, historical shift and backlash, Gill proposes that it be conceptualised as a 'sensibility' (2007, p.254) which feminist media scholars ought to take as their critical object. This sensibility, Gill argues, offers a highly neoliberal, politically sanitised version of femininity (2007, p. 252). Some tenets of liberal feminism are taken as common sense but overall feminism is viewed as dated, relevant only at a point which is always imagined in the past, or elsewhere apart from the West. Such an articulation of postfeminism has resonated with many scholars' understandings of recurring media narratives, resulting in an explosion of scholarship on postfeminist media culture, explored in Chapter Two. Increasingly, it is difficult to think about youthful mediated Western femininity *without* thinking of postfeminism. As Dobson and Harris (2015) state, young girls and women now must contend with the struggles of living in both a postfeminist and post-girl power context, with intensified expectations of their capacity to thrive in associated neoliberal economies.

This thesis both draws inspiration from and interrogates the arguments of Gill and Scharff (Gill, 2007; Gill & Scharff, 2011) and McRobbie (2009) relating to the solipsistic, autonomous subjectivities that such a postfeminist media and institutional culture produces, in concert with neoliberal social formations. Viewing neoliberalism as a mobile set of practices and beliefs which privileges market exchange as an ethical framework in and of itself (D. Harvey, 2007), Gill and Scharff (2011) highlight the way that both neoliberalism and postfeminism entail the imagining of a particular, individual subject. This subject is autonomous, active, self-regulating and entrepreneurial. Correlating with McRobbie's (2009) top girl, she is empowered, desiring and ambitious, with emphasis placed on her modern feminine *capacity*. Indeed, Gill and Scharff characterise postfeminism as a gendered form of neoliberalism which has 'almost entirely replaced notions of the social or political, or any idea of individuals as subject to pressures, constraints or influence from outside themselves'

(2011, p. 7). Overlapping and entangled with post-race understandings of the individual in a 'colour-blind' world (Eng, 2010), the individual is presumed to be able to draw on commodified attributes to live gender as a style, or aesthetic (Banet-Weiser, 2007) rather than be impacted through it as a historical, institutional and cultural formation.

Yet, how *practicable* are these forms of subjectivity by young women? For young women, is being a 'top girl' (McRobbie, 2009) understood as doable? Feminist media scholars have highlighted the tension between the individual and the social is a highly fraught line for young women to manage, requiring the selective acceptance of certain forms of social value while refusing their influence in personal decision-making (Dobson, 2015; Gill, 2007; L. Harvey & Gill, 2011; McRobbie, 2009; Ringrose, 2013). The question remains, then, of what place the social can take in young women's lives in view of such discourses. It is in this embattled space where the tension arises between the individual and the social. Gill's and Scharff's (2011) suggest that postfeminist subjectivity replaces notions of the social, demonstrating quite a thin, brittle idea of individuality, premised on an untrammelled view of individual agency and progression. At the same time, in feminine media genres like 'chick flicks' and lifestyle television, Negra (2008) illustrates that much of postfeminist media is *retreatist*, offering conservative fantasies of serenity, hyper-domesticity and the nuclear family as a bandaid for the attritions of life under neoliberalism. Within these discourses, moneyed heterosexual social and economic figurations provide a place of belonging and comfort. While both retreatist and empowerment discourses rely on an insulation from social influence, Negra's observations on retreatism are illustrative of a conception of the social in postfeminist culture in which the individual is offered a place.

Around the time that feminist media scholars began interrogating postfeminism as a discourse constructing the individual in a relationship of independence from the social and from feminism as a collective form of politics, discourses of a 'new' form of sociality in the 'Web 2.0' movement were arising in relation to the growth of social media. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Flickr and YouTube exploded in popularity (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Social media appeared to connect people in novel ways compared to previous forms of media, making networks visible and providing enhanced modes of public sphere 'participation', with people now able to broadcast their own content to unknown audiences (Manovich, 2013). Though feminist scholars like Gajjala (1998) and O'Brien (1999) had previously raised concerns about the equalising forces of digital spaces, Web 2.0 seemingly heralded a new participatory culture where information was exchanged user to user, rather

than a uni-directional producer-consumer relationship (Burgess & Green, 2009; Manovich, 2013; van Dijck, 2013). In this context, Yochai Benkler (2006) enthused about the wealth of networks. Henry Jenkins (2006) argued there were three key terms relating to the digital revolution: convergence, collective intelligence, and participation. Jenkins did note that this 'participation' was not necessarily equally available to all, with white, middle class men exercising disproportionate influence. However, the overall tone relating to the mainstreaming of the internet and the widespread adoption of social media was celebratory, emphasising the power of inclusion, participation and the 'social'. The word 'social' in relation to the internet notably became commonplace in the proliferation of social media. In 2010, Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook predicted that in the near future every industry would be 'rethought in a social way' (Gelles, 2010).

At first glance, such a dominant view of 'people power' and the social does not straightforwardly match up with the individualist paradigm identified by feminist scholars in postfeminist discourses. Yet, I suggest, in examining scholarship of Web 2.0 sociality and scholarship on postfeminism, some key similarities can be identified between the optimism relating to 'networked individualism' (Rainie & Wellman, 2012) and possibilities of empowerment with ideas about the agency of the postfeminist individual. The assumptions of an equal landscape where actors are free to 'empower' themselves demonstrate strong correlations with discourses of postfeminist subjectivity, where women are assumed to be able to progress in a vacuum of social influence. As with postfeminism, an idealised subjectivity with traits of autonomy, entrepreneurialism and rationality is promoted to smooth over existing inequalities of the digital landscape between those who are subject to surveillance and those who benefit from it.

Van Dijck (2013) notes that claims of the social by platforms like Facebook tends to place emphasis on 'human connectedness' while strategically de-emphasising the automated connectivity and surveillance facilitated for profit by those platforms. The surveillance of digital life identified by scholars like Andrejevic (2004, 2011) and van Dijck (2013) has resonances with the conditions of performance of postfeminist subjectivity which require constant self-monitoring (Gill, 2007) and the extraction of value from the personal (Skeggs & Wood, 2013). Digital platforms facilitate tracking one's exchange value through likes, views and so on, providing techniques through which the postfeminist actor may monitor the value of the self (Banet-Weiser, 2012), in line with the digital 'like' economy (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013; Marwick, 2015) entangling identity-making with the needs of commerce and the

interests of social media companies. While control and freedom are key ideas which are sold in relation to consumer use of the internet, tools of digital sociality become increasingly automated and non-transparent (Carah, 2014; Dunes, 2013; Fuchs, 2015; van Dijck, 2013), in line with the way in which portrayal of individual control by the free, self-determining postfeminist subject is reliant on the obscurity of gendered and classed social structures.

One complication of my account of the neoliberal intersection of postfeminist and digital cultures comes in the form of renewed ‘popular feminisms’ (Banet-Weiser, 2015) which have arisen in digital spaces. Whilst it has been well documented how the internet facilitates and intensifies gendered harassment *through* its ability to connect and track people (Sarkeesian, 2015), it is important to acknowledge that feminist organising and activism has also blossomed online. Diverse sites like magazines, blogs and platforms such as Everyday Sexism that give voice to gendered harms contribute to the emerging visibility of collective feminisms in digital spaces (Keller, 2011; Keller & Ringrose, 2015; Powell, 2014). Such feminisms, I suggest, are not sufficient to counter an overall mediated ‘postfeminist’ sensibility. However, they point to some interesting intersections in the ways in which identity is managed that are valuable for my research here. Keller (2015) documents in one emblematic example how high profile online magazine editor and former teen blogger Tavi Gevinson ably combines feminist messages with the ability to source corporate sponsorship, through an influential, ‘cool’ and well-connected personal brand. Gevinson’s example highlights how feminism in this contemporary mediated context is often practised as a form of *individual* feminine identity, one that coincides with modes of digital and mass media visibility and corporate success (Rottenberg, 2013). More broadly, in view of the movement of both male and female celebrities endorsing feminism as a type of brand enhancement practice (Ringrose & Keller, 2015), the presence of feminism within popular culture raises further questions about the connections between identity, individuality and power. In this transforming and contested intersection, where even explicitly feminist practices of identity may coincide with neoliberal modes of branding, I suggest that postfeminism is still a highly useful, albeit partial, means of understanding the digital identity work of young women.

It is important, then, to look for discontinuities and ruptures in the alignment between individualising digital media and postfeminist affects and discourses in the mechanisms of identity work. The case study of this research centres on an intimate public based on a relatively underresearched digital formation, the meme, on Tumblr, a platform which has also attracted little concerted scholarly investigation. I am interested in the negotiation of the

tension between the individual and the social in this intimate public, in which the relationality of commonality is shaped by Tumblr's collapse of strong distinctions between readership and authorship, affect and discourse, as I discuss further in Chapter Five. Scholarship analysing identity-making on platforms like Facebook (Brandes & Levin, 2013), Twitter (Charlesworth, 2014), YouTube (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Nurka, 2014), Bebo (Ringrose, 2010; Ringrose & Barajas, 2011) and MySpace (Dobson, 2011b, 2012) has contributed significant understandings of individual, *profile*-based identity work and its connections with postfeminist requirements to articulate individuality and autonomy. In contrast to the networked profile, the intimate public in its emphasis on group belonging provides a fruitful configuration of relations, ideas and identity work which so far has escaped sustained attention in the investigation of the negotiation of postfeminist individuality.

Chapter summaries

In Chapter Two, I argue that the WSWCM public, structured around the founder blog and five follower blogs, provides a relational space that enables new analysis into how the postfeminist tension between the individual and social is affectively and discursively negotiated. I situate this research within feminist media scholarship that has sought to understand subjectivity through attention to the mediated social configurations within which women audiences have been located, tracking the way women have been historically addressed as social subjects through mid-20th century broadcast media to contemporary media. In my discussion of contemporary media, I focus on how women are addressed through postfeminist understandings of the self as a perfectible project requiring labour and self-surveillance, using McRobbie's (2009) luminous domains as an overarching conceptual framework that translates gendered, social value into an individualist paradigm. Existing digital media scholarship has indicated that the highly networked and surveillance-heavy cultures of digital platforms facilitate the taking up of this individualising postfeminist address by young women. Yet, preliminary research on Tumblr is suggestive of different forms of relationality that may rework the ways in which this address is interpreted.

In Chapter Three, I explicate how my research methods are used to investigate the relational negotiation of the tension between the individual and social present in the WSWCM public. I do this first by explaining my affective-discursive approach, attentive to

both the relational structures of this public as well as the textual details of the circulation of feminine moments in it. I outline how I use McRobbie's (2009) luminous domains as a sensitising framework to guide my analysis of the interpretations of postfeminist individualising discourses.

Chapter Four outlines the affective relational framework of the WSWCM public that shapes the disposition of the self towards others, and how the self may be made available for circulation. Under the 'feeling rules' (Hochschild, 1983/2003) of the public, the individual under the premise of 'girlfriendship' (Winch, 2013) must demonstrate a double engagement with postfeminist terms of self-government as a form of pleasing sociality. Young women must show their implication within luminous domains of femininity, but articulate this implication in a fun, resilient way; they must work to have the right feelings for the right context. Thus, the blogs' accounts of managing femininity as an ongoing and laborious process nevertheless require the deployment of an upbeat affective register. Confessions of minor, acceptable feminine transgressions may be provided to readers on the basis that an overall capacity to package unpalatable feelings into an amenable form is demonstrated. Emotional management ensures the affective moments in the blog posts are not overly bitter, or angry, but humorous and available for digital circulation.

In Chapter Five, I set out how the technical features of Tumblr, the material qualities of WSWCM texts, and postfeminist knowledges shape the social imaginary of the WSWCM public, determining the terms of belonging within it. Through its norms of anonymity, frequent temporal connection and insider knowledge, Tumblr creates a 'stranger relationality' (Warner, 2002) ideal for the formation of intimate publics. In this digital context, the WSWCM public is formed through readers' competency in imagining themselves in relation to indefinite others, connected through a commonality in engagement with WSWCM texts. This readerly imagination requires the mobilisation of a social, feminine literacy, which I suggest is entangled within postfeminist classificatory knowledges and modes of meaning making. As such, postfeminist knowledges form part of a common social imaginary that binds the WSWCM public, and determines which readers may belong.

In Chapter Six, I show how the postfeminist tension between the individual and the social is played out through affective relations of proximity and distance with figures cited in the blogs, including the best friend, the boyfriend, the Other girl, the hot guy and the creep. Relations with these figures express the interpretation of postfeminist luminosities of appearance and sexuality in particular. Providing a means by which the self can be

relationally signalled as valuable, these essentialised, overdetermined figures materialise the negotiation of postfeminist social imperatives that young women be fun, desiring and desirable, yet prudent, responsible and ambitious. As such, while the self is constituted in a relation of ultimate independence from these figures, they are required as mechanisms through which the self may accrue exchange value, demonstrating an entrepreneurial understanding of personal relations.

Chapter Seven demonstrates how the postfeminist individual-social tension is managed through the adoption of branded practices through which the self is produced. The social is conceived as a market, and as such, the self is produced through a number of techniques requiring skill, knowledge and labour, to claim a valued niche in this market. These techniques include timely production of blog posts; articulating personal experience that is generic within the public's social imaginary; and attaching the self to recognisable, essentialised femininities circulating in postfeminist popular culture. As such, whilst accruing individual value as a brand, the self must be reworked to fit in the culture of circulation of the public under terms of postfeminist commonality. The self is made available for circulation through the investment of labour and the development of expertise in reducing the self into consistent, common moments.

In my final chapter, I conclude that the postfeminist individual-social tension, as interpreted in the WSWCM public, orients the self to the social in multiple, complex ways. Beyond constituting a mediated sensibility (Gill, 2007), postfeminism informs a prescriptive affective relationality, modes of social literacy and knowledge, and domains of value shaping how personal experience, relations with others, and the self become recognisable. It also provides pleasures of recognition when young women are able to demonstrate their competency in managing identity through these modalities. Belonging in the WSWCM public is premised on how well young women may simplify themselves into funny moments for circulation in the affective economy of the public. Whilst the blogs cannot speak to the veracity of the bloggers having 'actually' experienced the moments invoked in the blogs, this thesis demonstrates the material, affective and discursive negotiations taking place in the very relational identity practices evident in the textual production of the public. This research indicates that, as young women take it upon themselves to demonstrate management of their life projects in an engaging and appealing way, such affective individuality and responsabilisation is effected under the terms of portraying continuing attachment to postfeminist terms of living.

2 Femininity, media, and postfeminist identity work

Understanding relational identity production through a postfeminist address

Postfeminism, as Gill notes, is ‘infinitely flexible’ (2007, p.252) and as such, its identifying features are difficult to definitively pin down. Accordingly, in this chapter, I begin by clarifying how this thesis focuses on postfeminism’s individualising address, situating it through feminist media scholarship that attends to how women are socially addressed as audiences and/or digital media participants. Tracking historical shifts in the relation between women and media, I discuss the way the postfeminist address present in contemporary media constructs a knowing, individualised spectator, operating on the normative understanding of the self as a perfectible yet always unruly management project. As seen particularly in genres of media like reality and lifestyle television, McRobbie’s (2009) luminous spaces become frameworks for the spectatorial evaluation of others manage their feminine selves (or fail at doing so).

This chapter then follows shifts in the relational structures of digital cultures, and subsequent developments in scholarly understandings of the digital identity work of young women and girls. In initial research on gender and digital media, scholars tended to assume greater freedom in possible enactments of gender for digital participants, leading to conceptions of the digital user with similar characteristics to the autonomous postfeminist subject, a subject that is able to selectively and discerningly use the social to her advantage. Concurrent with shifts to increasingly surveillance-heavy and networked cultures, later scholarship has tended to be critical of such assumptions. Within this more recent scholarship, I draw attention to work identifying how regulatory digital cultures promote the production of identity under terms of postfeminist visibility. Feminist scholarship illustrates how these contemporary digital cultures are highly compatible with postfeminist injunctions to continually monitor, work on and improve the self within luminous domains. Yet, research also identifies expanding relational possibilities of more fluid, anonymous platforms such as Tumblr that diversify ways of doing gender. It is in this contested juncture that I position my exploration of how the postfeminist tension between the individual and the social is re-interpreted through the identity work of the WSWCM public.

Postfeminist luminosities: the refraction of the social through the individual

This research explores how the postfeminist tension between the individual and the social is interpreted and negotiated by young women through the relational space of the WSWCM public. As I discuss in this chapter, much research has been carried out in relation to young women's identity work on digital media, showing strong connections between postfeminist understandings of subjectivity and the technical and social features of digital cultures. Yet, much of this work focuses on profile-based platforms. This research aims to contribute new insights into feminist media work in this area, by interrogating a space of digital sociality, the WSWCM public, which is premised on a relationality of belonging and commonality. Through the blogs' articulation of femininities that are positioned in comparison to and in relation to each other, I explore young women's negotiation of an individualising postfeminist address, in which social norms attached to femininity are rearticulated through the language of individual, free choice. Gill (2007) draws particular attention to the emphasis on autonomy that young women must perform in making 'choices', even and *particularly* when such choices correspond to traditional gendered conventions.

McRobbie's (2009) identification of postfeminist luminosities, or luminous domains, provides a useful framework for understanding how this individual-social tension is secured, restabilising highly gendered, social notions of value by situating them as areas in which young women may prove individual *capacity*. Re-theorising Deleuze's luminosities, McRobbie suggests the power of postfeminist subjects, or 'top girls', are delineated and prescribed through such spaces. Describing this process of illumination, McRobbie writes:

The power they seem to be collectively in possession of, is 'created by the light itself'. These luminosities are suggestive of post-feminist equality while also defining and circumscribing the conditions of such a status. They are clouds of light which give young women a shimmering presence, and in so doing they also mark out the terrain of the consummately and reassuringly feminine (2009, p. 60).

McRobbie (2009) suggests four spaces where top girls are granted visibility: the fashion-beauty complex; the space of education and employment; the space of sexuality and reproduction; and the space of globalisation where the 'global girl' appears. These entangled and overlapping luminosities constitute affective and discursive spaces where young women may be attributed with capacity, depending on their ability to articulate socially valued

versions of femininity in these domains. These luminosities, then, are also mechanisms of identity work, and as such, I use them as framing devices in this thesis for analysing the founder and follower blogs as *negotiations* of the postfeminist individual-social tension. I operationalise the first three of McRobbie's (2009) luminosities in this thesis, given feminist scholars have identified the notions of value in these domains as particularly salient in discourses relating to feminine self-production in Western media (Attwood, 2011; Banet-Weiser, 2012; Dobson, 2015; L. Harvey & Gill, 2011; Holmes & Negra, 2011; Keller, 2014; Negra, 2008; Press, 2011; Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008; Tincknell, 2011; Winch, 2013).

The first, *the fashion-beauty complex*, which I term the luminosity of appearance, correlates with Gill's (2007) discussion of how the monitoring, discipline and constant 'updating' of one's body and appearance is equated with feminine self-empowerment and self-pride. With some emphasis, McRobbie states: '[b]eauty/fashion norms through pop culture have become the source of authority and judgment for young women (2009, p. 61). Appearance becomes a measure of internal coherence and self-care. Beauty, then, constitutes a central element of postfeminist subjectification and a marketised tool by which to evaluate those who cannot successfully achieve feminine subjectivity.

The second luminosity is the space of *education and employment* in which McRobbie notes that '[w]ork and wage earning capacity come to dominate rather than be subordinate to women's self-identity' (2009, p. 61). Subsequent to the politics of 'meritocratic reward' of New Labour in the UK (2007, 2009), and in other neoliberal economies, it is young women *in particular* who become subjects of capacity through success in the educational system and in the employment market. This thesis recasts this luminosity as a broader space of ambition and productivity, in line with a neoliberal context where women are enjoined to be productive in all spheres, including personal life and social relations. I suggest that this luminosity can be usefully construed not simply as highlighting the importance of work and wages, but as recasting femininity and its performance as forms of necessary work. As such, it has a central role in framing the requirements of the other discussed luminosities as responsible feminine practices.

The third luminosity McRobbie (2009) observes is the space of *sexuality and reproduction*. This sexual visibility comes about as a compensatory measure; given that women are now expected to challenge masculine dominance in educational and paid labour sectors, McRobbie argues 'it is now all important for the Symbolic to re-secure the terms of heterosexual desire' (2009, p. 62). The almost ubiquitous presence of (hetero)sexual imagery

in advertisements, magazine covers, and music videos in the representation of women is presented as the '*freely chosen* wish of active, confident, assertive female subjects' (*my italics*) (McRobbie, 2009, p. 259). Accordingly, the language of choice and freedom works to pacify concerns about objectification and reductive representations of women (Gill, 2007). Gill observes that women are portrayed as active, desiring and choosy sexual subjects (2007, p. 89), in the move from sexual objectification to *subjectification* (2007, p. 255).

These three overlapping luminosities are present in media containing a highly individualised, postfeminist address to women. The contemporary significance of this address to women can be understood by adopting an historical understanding of the way women have been addressed by feminism and by media as both individual/resistant and mass/passive subjects. It is in this cultural space that a postfeminist sensibility re-presenting gendered and social hierarchies as individual choice and capacity has become salient.

From the mass audience to the knowing spectator: women, media and the postfeminist address

Women have been historically addressed by media as part of shifting social configurations of the mass and the individual. I track this address beginning from the mid-20th century dominance of mass broadcast media to the contemporary media containing an individualised, postfeminist address to women. I note these shifts in order to position the contemporary postfeminist address to women as part of a media culture arising in a particular historical and technological context, which positions itself in relation to and in contrast to the past. In the account I provide here, I maintain a useful slippage between the shifts I document and feminist discussion of them, given feminist concerns about the relation between women and media have been *absorbed* and re-articulated in contemporary media (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Gill, 2007; Gill & Scharff, 2011; Lazar, 2011; Negra, 2008; Tasker & Negra, 2007). The current address to the 'knowing' spectator is suggestive of a postfeminist response to feminist critique, constructing an individuality which both accepts feminist identification of media sexism, but positions the spectator as invulnerable to it (Budgeon, 2015; Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009; Negra, 2008; Winch, 2013).

Influenced by the emphasis in mass communication studies on ‘media effects’ implicit in many post-war theorisations of popular culture, much second-wave literature utilised a ‘hypodermic’ or technologically determinist view of the media and of female audiences (Gill, 2007, p. 17). As one influential example, young women were understood by Adorno and Horkheimer (1972) as the archetypal dupes of popular mass culture, uncritically absorbing the ideas purveyed in mass culture as part of a feminine ‘mass’ audience. As such, in the 1970s and 1980s, a major aim of feminist media work was to broaden the extremely narrow range of representations within which women were captured in mass, broadcast media. Much feminist scholarship focused on television representations as a result of television ownership becoming widespread in the 1970s (Downing, 1974; Lopate, 1976), with the key female audience member conceptualised as the housewife (Katzman, 1972). Research aimed to document media sexism in portrayals of women so ‘better’ representations of stronger, independent and assertive women could be substituted (Macdonald, 1995). Organisations such as NOW fought to reinstate television shows like *Cagney and Lacey* (Avedon & Corday, 1981) on the basis of its representation of female police officers as strong role models for women (National Organization for Women, 2015).

In general, Brunson (2011) notes, second-wave feminists kept a suspicious distance from the normative femininities sold to women. Feminist contestation of mediated femininity spanned popular culture ranging from literature (Millett, 1970) to broadcast media (Benet, 1978; Greer, 1971; Tuchman, 1978), with feminist scholars criticising the way media relegated women to the domestic sphere in passive and subordinate roles *en masse*. The second-wave push for media representations of more assertive and independent women reflected feminist concerns relating to the acceptance by audiences of norms of the hegemonic, ‘passive’ femininity of the time (Busby, 1975; Janus, 1977; King & Stott, 1977; Sharpe, 1976), a concern still present today. This push also reflected a sense that researchers and women audiences together could have united interests in a collective struggle (Brunson, D’Acci, & Spigel, 2008). Yet, women as part of a mass audience were arguably understood as at risk of passive internalisation of sexist ideas over which they had little control *unless* they explicitly resisted them through a form of speaking out or activist politics (Brunson, 2011). Such an understanding was buttressed by the power attributed to mass broadcasting at the time by feminist and conservative and progressive intellectuals (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Marshall, 1997).

With the growing influence of British cultural studies, feminist media scholars increasingly questioned how women, in the course of their ordinary lives, made meaning of the media products they were consuming (Ang, 1997; Press, 1991; Spigel & Mann, 1992), evincing a shift in feminist conceptions of the audience. Working to counteract the notion of women passively accepting *prima facie* regressive messages about feminine subjectivity, this later wave of feminist scholarship began interrogating how women negotiated the meanings of mass culture in their daily lives. Scholars asked how women consumed media seeking spaces of resistance from their usual domestic responsibilities. We can observe a shift to the construct of the *active audience* where women were seen to be using mass culture for their own purposes (Ang, 1997; Hermes, 1995; Morley, 1986). Ang's (1997) emblematic audience study of *Dallas* (Katzmann, 1978) suggested an active relation between women spectators and mass culture, arguing that the melodramatic excess of the plot lines enabled women to inhabit a space in which socially impossible or undesirable subject positions could be adopted. Accordingly, while still conceptualised as part of a mass audience, women were understood to be using media to intervene in and manage their daily routines. Concurrently the construction of mass culture also changes; feminist scholars began to argue for a renewed consideration of mass 'trash' media like magazines (Hermes, 1995; Winship, 1987); romance novels (Radway, 1984), and soap operas (M. E. Brown, 1994; Geraghty, 1991; Modleski, 1997) on the basis that they had been particularly devalued as 'low culture' on the basis of their consumers: women.

In the contemporary state of media metamorphosis, relations between consumption, representation and production have become increasingly complex. In this context, there are significant changes in the assumptions about women's power over their own (re)presentation (Gill, 2007), involving a discursive and affective shift in which the language of choice and autonomy now plays a constitutive part. Such a shift is theorised as part of a general postfeminist media sensibility (Gill, 2007), permeating diverse genres of media ranging from film, news media, reality television and digital media. Addressing women as knowing, savvy citizens responsible for their own life goals, postfeminist media purports to resolve feminist concerns over audience and sexist media influence by positioning women audiences as already 'free'. Indeed, feminism is positioned as oppressive of individually chosen freedoms. Negra (2008) observes that postfeminist 'retreatism' out of the public sphere is common in discourses across women-centred media such as the 'chick flick', lifestyle shows, and news discourses which pit clearly differentiated 'working women' and 'homemakers' against each

other. Such retreatism blames feminism and its purported reliance on careerism for the ailments of contemporary women, in a broader context of declining job security and working conditions. Retreatist narratives of excessive paid work and consequent unhappiness in personal life portray women finding satisfaction in conventional, luminous practices of femininity such as beautification and heterosexual security (Hollows, 2008; Negra, 2008; Tasker & Negra, 2007).

As suggested above, postfeminist media (re)presents certain luminous domains of femininity as sites of individual competency and progression. As such, traditional sites of femininity such as appearance and sexuality are detached from a notion of ‘mass’ experience and re-signified through a lens of productivity and ambition in relation to a woman’s life project. This resecuring of gendered norms through the vehicle of individual autonomy and progression has been particularly highlighted within the genres of lifestyle and reality television, viewed by feminist scholars as key sites of neoliberal identity work where participants must produce and improve upon their ‘selves’ (Hendershot, 2009; Ouellette, 2009; Roberts, 2007). McRobbie (2009) argues that makeover television updates the feminine popular culture advice of women’s magazines of the second-wave era for the deregulated post-Fordist economy, addressing women as productive neoliberal consumer-subjects who must govern themselves accordingly. Beauty, appearance, sexuality and personal life thus are thus refracted through the lens of adaptability and entrepreneurialism.

Beauty has long been something which women consumers have been enjoined to attain (Tanner et al., 2013), yet, postfeminist reality television has been argued to *expand* on this compulsoriness to be beautiful by requiring spectators to understand appearance as a reflection of disciplined, unified internal coherence (Press, 2011; Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008; Roberts, 2007; Tincknell, 2011). Makeover shows such as *What Not to Wear* ("What Not to Wear," 2001) and *Ten Years Younger* ("Ten Years Younger," 2004) ridicule women for not ‘taking care of themselves’, equating ‘self-care’ and respectability with investing in ‘appropriate’ fashion and beauty trends to make the best of one’s ‘assets’ and hide one’s liabilities (Roberts, 2007; Tincknell, 2011). Women’s personal management of family life is evaluated in the language of professionalism, as seen in ‘Dr Phil’ McGraw’s directive to women to become ‘CEO’ of their household (Ouellette & Wilson, 2011), and, as Skeggs and Wood (2013) observe, in parenting (or mothering) reality shows like *Supernanny* (K. Brown, 2004). Likewise, reality shows like *The Sex Inspectors* ("The Sex Inspectors", 2004) enjoin women to be sexual entrepreneurs through simultaneously engaging in exercises of critical

sexual self-evaluation whilst embracing such ‘self-improvement’ exercises as freely chosen (L. Harvey & Gill, 2011).

The postfeminist address here, then, offers certain techniques of subjectivity within recognised luminous domains. It additionally reconfigures the relationality of the spectator to other women through the adoption of this critical, self-monitoring subjectivity. Press (2011), Tincknell (2011), Ringrose and Walkerdine (2008) identify the textual invitation to audiences to adopt a particularly *disciplinary* subjectivity in relation to women on reality television. Thus, female reality TV participants are held personally to account for failing contradictory and impossible postfeminist standards of beauty, mothering, sexuality as well as other gendered measures of success (Skeggs, 2009; Skeggs & Wood, 2013). Such a disciplinary logic is effected through an emphasis on *individual* feminine empowerment, via a narrow set of possible enactments of femininity amenable to commercial imperatives of consumption and selling. Women spectators are invited to scrutinise how female reality participants capably perform their individual value in a media economy where intimate practices, bodies and personal lives are up for evaluation (Skeggs & Wood, 2013).

It is telling that in the contemporary media environment across reality and lifestyle television, as well advertising more generally, a *knowing* female spectator is addressed, one that understands and accepts the imperatives of self-branding. Gill (2007) suggests the postfeminist subject coincides with the psychological subject of neoliberalism; indeed, postfeminism in its emphasis on self-marketisation dovetails with the discourses of lifestyle and reality television in which one must improve upon and ‘sell oneself’ (Hearn, 2006; Holmes, 2006). Yet, this imperative to sell oneself coincides with strident calls for personal authenticity at the same time (Biressi & Nunn, 2005). Enacting authenticity in presenting one’s self-improvement as free from social influence is the work of affective and discursive positioning. Though it must be policed and managed, femininity must be performed with confidence and serenity as though to naturalise its problematic status (Negra, 2008). Gill writes:

[B]odily shape, size, muscle tone, attire, sexual practice, career, home, finances, etc. are rendered into problems that necessitate ongoing and constant monitoring and labour – which... must nevertheless be understood as ‘fun’ or ‘pampering’... Magazines offer tips to girls and young women to enable them to continue the work of femininity but still appear as entirely confident, carefree and unconcerned about their self-presentation... (2007, p. 262).

Contemporary femininity, then, is presented as an individual challenge rather than a social experience. Postfeminist luminous domains convert social valuations of femininity into problems that the individual must tackle in a rigorous, entrepreneurial way. Furthermore, these sites of femininity: appearance, ambition and productivity, and sexuality, must be understood as aspects of life that women must want to maintain and ‘upkeep’ *for themselves* rather than for others, or for men, in particular. In this thesis, then, I draw on this substantial scholarship to frame the identity work of the WSWCM public as negotiating the tension between the individual and the social in two interconnected ways: first, in negotiating the demand that the self demonstrate value within luminous domains; second, in managing the requirement that these demands be presented as freely taken on.

Shifting digital social landscapes and the relational production of identity

My above discussion has drawn substantially on scholarship of lifestyle and reality television to explain how postfeminist individualising discourses address women. As I explore next, there are significant resonances in the way that young women are enjoined to negotiate the tension between the individual and the social through digital media. As Andrejevic (2004) argues, both reality television genres and digital media facilitate the production of self within a surveillance-heavy, commoditised framework. Whilst reality television addresses its audience as postfeminist spectators, digital media both facilitates this address and offers up additional possibilities of self-surveillance and monitoring through everyday modes of self-production such as the status update, the tweet or profile modification. Scholars have identified how incitements to demonstrate individuality through postfeminist luminous domains are enacted by young women through techniques of curation, responsiveness and control enabled by different digital platforms. The following discussion, then, focuses on the way this individualising address is taken up by young women through digital structures and interfaces. Before continuing to this discussion however, it is worth making some comments on how terminology is used in this thesis to maintain a critical stance towards assumptions about individuality and instrumentality often associated with digital media in the early scholarship I describe.

A note on digital terminology

When commencing my investigation into the rapidly growing literature relating to gender, identity and digital media, I took up boyd and Ellison's 'social network sites' definition to denote Web 2.0 platforms allowing users to construct profiles within a bounded system, articulate a list of connections in that system, and view and traverse this list and similar lists made by other individuals (2007, p. 211). I now consider that this term is not capacious enough to encompass shifts in the relational contexts of diverse digital social spaces and more recent, sophisticated analyses of them. My initial reason for using the term 'social network sites' drew on boyd and Ellison's (2007) argument that the term 'social networking sites' overly emphasises the 'networking' or relationship initiation which takes place. The term 'social network sites', they suggest, better reflects their purpose: a space to organise, browse and display lists of users with whom individuals share a connection (their network).

However, on many platforms like Tumblr (Perez, 2012), Instagram (Marwick, 2015), Twitter (Marwick & boyd, 2011a), and Reddit (van der Nagel, 2013), these 'connections' might be people or accounts that users do not know well or at all, or might not otherwise interact with beyond viewing their content. Often more open platforms allow users to 'follow' other users without requiring their permission, leading to a lack of reciprocated relationships. For example, though the dynamics may have subsequently changed, in 2009 on Twitter, 68% of Twitter users were not followed by any of the accounts they followed (Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010). The word 'network' thus does not seem to fit social practices in many contemporary online spaces, appearing to better reflect the connections between the 'nodes' (Castells, 2004) of the 'data profiles' of users (Bucher, 2015; Dunes, 2013) rather than *social* interaction. Indeed, van Dijck (2013) highlights the automated interventions of platforms in calling for interrogation of cultures of 'connectivity' over 'connection'.

At the same time, as a manifestation of the way in which the Internet mutates, social plugins and 'buttons' of successful Web 2.0 social network sites (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013) have now spread to many other digital spaces, reconfiguring the web more broadly into a 'like' economy. The components which appeared to make social network sites unique such as likes, retweets, pins and so on are now widely disseminated *throughout* the web, making it more difficult to pin down their particularities. My point is not that we can no longer speak of

‘social network sites’ or social media. Indeed, the term is still useful in describing spaces like Facebook (Brandes & Levin, 2013), LinkedIn (Papacharissi, 2009) and Bebo (Ringrose & Barajas, 2011) in which the premise of interaction is that most contacts listed are mutually known. However, in light of these changes, I consider ‘platforms’ and ‘digital social spaces’ to be more open terms, capable of including early spaces of interaction in the mid-1990s, as well as newer platforms emerging in popularity.

These terms are not without problems. ‘Platforms’, as Gillespie (2010) argues, is still a politically charged term, in its connotations of neutrality, egalitarianism and empowerment. My intention in using the word ‘platform’ is not to evoke these ideas but rather, a sense of the distinct architectures underlying Tumblr, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and so on which permit certain forms of relationality with others through a particular interface organising structures of interaction. By ‘interface’, I mean both the internal and visible interfaces which ‘contain technical features as well as regulatory features which actively steer connections between users and content’ (van Dijck, 2013, p. 31). My use of terms such as digital social space and platform is intended to allow for a useful, fluid conceptualisation of relationality, in order to avoid reproducing postfeminist assumptions of freely choosing digital actors, as well as to take account of novel spaces such as the WSWCM public. This terminology is also intended to be open enough to consider how platforms, through distinct digital architectures, facilitate cultures of self-production that may align in varying degrees of compatibility with postfeminist individualising discourses.

The early internet, anonymity and authenticity

Like other media, digital media has engendered significant hopes and anxieties about its effects in shaping how gender may be enacted. As outlined in the introduction to this thesis, the emphasis on newness and freedom has dovetailed with understandings of postfeminist freedom from social structures. In particular, this purported ‘newness’ has had particular implications in understandings of the possibilities of digital media as an emancipatory tool in relation to gender, as well as catalysing fears of gendered inauthenticity. I begin with an account of early internet research into gender and identity, not only to identify continuing debates about how the internet facilitates particular gendered cultures, but also to highlight some resonances between the early internet and Tumblr as the contemporary site of my research.

Much early scholarship on gender and digital culture tended to over-emphasise the exploratory uses of the internet in relation to gender, considering it a discrete space separable from the social. As such, early social spaces on the internet were theorised, somewhat problematically, as places that could be free from gender politics. Turkle's (1995) early work is emblematic of this hope, where MUDs (Multi-User Domains) and MOOS (Multi-User Domains, Object-Oriented) were understood to be spaces of gender exploration. Gender could be tried on, experimented with, unlike 'real life'. Ideas such as these have been subsequently critiqued as overly emphasising gender as voluntary and choice-based performance. At worst, they have been argued to constitute the type of identity tourism critiqued by Nakamura (2008); or, in O'Riordan's (2007) words, an essentialist vision of gender and sexuality which can act as a 'destructive force' in potentially 'evacuat[ing] power from accounts of identity' (2007, p. 24).

Yet, it must be simultaneously recognised that Turkle, and indeed, Haraway (1991/2001) before her at this time were speaking to a particular context of interaction in spaces less mapped and networked than contemporary digital environments. MUDs and MOOs were social chatroom-type spaces that mainly operated on the basis of anonymity, in a context where the internet was mainly used by a small group of middle-class, technological elites, usually men (Nakamura, 2008). As such, these not-yet-mainstream spaces allowed for enactments of gender less 'tethered' (Turkle, 2011) to the selves of other life contexts, inviting an analysis of deliberate and playful 'performances'. This scholarship, then, may provide a contextual point of comparison with the highly networked norms of interaction on platforms in the contemporary landscape, providing a reference point for analysing shifts to more anonymous digital cultures.

It should additionally be acknowledged that scholars in this early stage of Internet studies still attempted to complicate the type of analysis I refer to above. Burkhalter (1999) and O'Brien (1999) questioned the disembodiment implicit in the idea that gender could be freely experimented with online. Indeed, they argued both racial and gender identity were situationally enacted, with Burkhalter showing how, in anonymous, text-only forums such as Usenet, belonging on the basis of race was intensely monitored and evaluated. O'Brien contended that a form of reactive gender policing took place given the very paucity of cues in the interaction in such spaces, in an attempt to order and structure what roles participants could occupy. Accordingly, what is suggested here is less a space of 'freedom' than a space where regulatory behaviours are adopted to *limit* the ambiguities of identity, an insight

relevant for analysing contemporary digital social spaces like Tumblr that are based on anonymous interaction. As I discuss below, Tumblr has been argued to constitute a place of gendered and sexual liberty based on its norms of anonymity and the ability to open multiple accounts (Cho, 2011; Fink & Miller, 2014; Tiidenberg & Gómez Cruz, 2015); yet, as Fink and Miller (2014) note, this is predicated on navigating complex, closed systems of distinction.

This early policing of anonymous sociality may be understood as the effort to pin down authentic selves, a quest which still informs contemporary discourses of digital interaction and identity (Baym, 2010; Donnelly, 2011; van Zoonen, 2013). Indeed, the importance of authenticity is reflected in scholarship asking how ‘reliable’ the social signals sent in digital interaction can be (Donath, 1999, 2007), and in research emphasising the digital affordances of young people and women being able to express themselves in ways which are more ‘true’ to themselves (Bailey & Steeves, 2013; Grisso & Weiss, 2008; Kelly, Pomerantz, & Currie, 2006; Vickery, 2010). These debates, both in scholarly and popular discourses, converge around the assumption that physical embodiment is more true or real in comparison to the ‘disembodiment’ of digital culture, imbuing online identity with the continual possibility of embellishment and artifice.

Despite substantial changes towards a ‘nonymous’ (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008) or name-based digital social landscape, feminist scholars have identified that the spectre of inauthenticity continues to impact on the gendered relationality of platforms. For young women and girls, enacting a femininity that may be read as ‘true’ is hazardous to navigate. In a postfeminist context where young women must be both independent and pleasing, attractive yet carefree, appearing to care too much about the opinions of others is prone to being called out as not being true to oneself and thus artificial (Dobson, 2012; Ringrose & Barajas, 2011). Such a tension also plays out in the attempt to navigate the impossible tension between being ‘empowered’ and its binary twin, being ‘at-risk’ (Banet-Weiser, 2014; M. Dean & Laidler, 2013). Rossie (2015), for example, points to the disciplinary discourses of commenters on YouTube which simultaneously reprimand girls for wanting the approval and attention of others (being fake) while shoring up postfeminist norms of beauty which girls must somehow take on ‘just for themselves’. In this way we observe how ideas of authenticity, beyond notions of ‘truth’, are now tied to how young women and girls may convincingly perform the disavowal of social influence, highlighting the contemporary presence of postfeminist evaluative frameworks in digital cultures.

Girls' and women's empowerment: the internet as a tool

I now turn to feminist research on digital media subsequent to the first wave of scholarship I have discussed. While valorising girls' identity work, in its focus on resistant, calculating feminine subjects, I highlight how this research tends to demonstrate parallels with the autonomous subject of postfeminist individualising discourses that unhelpfully obscures how power is implicated in digital spaces. This scholarship prioritises the possibilities of empowerment and change for girls and young women in enacting identity, but, I suggest, often without locating these identity practices within the relationality shaped by the platform. Such a focus has often led to potential slippages with postfeminist understandings of power and individuality. The dominant research question in this domain is of whether girls are able to exploit self-representative digital media for their own (beneficial) identity development, with little explicit attention to the marketised structures of platforms.

As such, this research has often characterised the internet as a discrete, neutral space; as with postfeminism, the individual is viewed in a position of potential imperviousness to the social (Gill, 2007). Scholars such as Bae (2010), Mazzarella (2008) and Kelly, Pomerantz and Currie (2006) have viewed digital spaces where girls are able to control, prune and manage identity as an important part of an empowering identity-building trajectory. Blogging is seen to offer new possibilities of self-authorship (Bakardjieva & Gaden, 2012; boyd, 2006; Punyanunt-Carter & Smith, 2010). In this scholarship and in youth studies more broadly, scholars emphasise the possibilities of online blogging and social network participation in particular, in providing empowering spaces through which young people can negotiate identity, connect and grow (boyd, 2008; Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2011; Stern, 2008; Vickery, 2010). Accordingly, characteristic questions relate to whether girls can carve out their own individual identity by going online, or how girls can claim space online to air their issues and concerns (Bailey & Steeves, 2013; Grisso & Weiss, 2008; Thiel, 2008).

In an analysis typifying this approach, Stokes (2010) examines the platform NevaEvaLand to understand how black girls negotiate hegemonic discourses of sexuality. She concludes that the girls' pages she considered, overall, were influenced by norms of beauty and sexuality in commercial hip hop culture which construct black women as

(hetero)sexual accessories. Whilst these conclusions may be sound, Stokes' inquiry is representative of the understanding that the online sphere *can* present a potentially discrete space where girls are able to control or resist 'outside' or offline negative messages regarding racial and sexual subjectivity. Indeed, Elm (2009a) responds directly to these assumptions in her study on Swedish adolescent girls' use of the platform Lunarstorm. Finding that in much of her sample, girls tended to put together displays of conventional femininity through carefully stylised photographs of themselves, Elm asks:

... if masks are never taken off, and a perfect normative femininity is always on display, how do we ever change the notions of proper femininity and what is to be included in it?... [D]espite the common view of online environments as being liberating and emancipatory because of the users' opportunities to control their presentations of self, it is precisely this opportunity to control that makes them work against a gender transformation (2009, p. 259).

We see a number of assumptions relating to the possibility that the internet presents a neutral or even liberatory space, a dominant theme in scholarship of gender and digital media. Elm problematises this assumption by arguing that the opportunity to control, as a discrete tool, works *against* feminist hopes of changes in gender transformation. Rather than situating the digital environment within a broader context of sociality where gender is always already present, the affordance of 'control' is viewed as separated and separable from normative practices of post-girl power femininity. Yet, as McRobbie (2009) points out, it is precisely this context in which girls and young women are afforded luminous top girl status on the basis of *managing* their appearance. Elm further understands this careful stylisation of self seen on Lunarstorm as a 'mask' that the girls in the sample may never take off. Implications of this constant masking are that the girls may never reveal their 'true selves'. Such a statement reflects the anxieties about authenticity to which I have alluded, circulating in earlier digital spaces. In this analysis, an assumption is operationalised that there is a 'truer', more feminist version of femininity which may be performed. Lunarstorm, then, becomes a site of feminist disappointment because it fails to provide a space which is free from gendered constraints per the narratives of digital emancipation. The overarching premise that there *can* be a neutral, discrete space or tool out there, separable from gender and power, is left intact.

Like Elm's account of the femininities on Lunarstorm, much digital research operationalises symbolic interactionist understandings of identity and power. Inspired largely by the work of Erving Goffman (1969), symbolic interactionist research is primarily

concerned with how digital participants place themselves within the rules and conditions of particular ‘interaction orders’ of social interchange (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Grasmuck, Martin, & Shanyang, 2009; Pearson, 2009). Power is understood to be sustained through relations of exchange. However, as Brickell (2012) points out, this theoretical framework is often not grounded within an understanding of power as also constitutive, regulatory and interpellative, ‘hailing’ digital participants through preset structures of platforms and flows of content. Without this multi-faceted approach, participants’ interactions are often conceptualised exclusively as masks, performances under which a truer self might be found. In these scholarly accounts (Bortree, 2005; Braga, 2011; Marshall, 2010; Papacharissi, 2009; Siibak, 2010), a type of doubling is enacted; the digital participant’s online persona, and the digital participant ‘behind’ it – the ‘user’.

Accordingly, much of this subsequent wave of literature on young women and digital media has showed a tendency to focus on the instrumentality of platforms for ‘users’ with a view to exploring their emancipatory potential, with little emphasis on the relationality structured by the platform. My chief concern with these analyses is that this ‘user’ is prone to unhelpful slippages with the autonomous, free subject at the heart of a postfeminist model of relationality. If digital spaces are conceived as neutral spaces or tools, the ‘young woman’ as subject of both feminist and postfeminist discourse shares in common a purely instrumental relation to the social. The social is positioned as something that may be straightforwardly parsed (Nakamura, 2008) and used, under the individual’s intentional terms. Paralleling the demands of an individualising postfeminist address, the young woman is conceptualised as a resistant subject on the proviso that she is able to *selectively* draw on feminist social discourses in enacting identity. Digital spaces, then, are left sparsely imagined as bare theatres of interaction. The production of digital femininities risk being analysed without unpacking the specificity of the power dynamics involved both in the relationality between digital participants and the interface involved. While providing a substantial account of the way that young women and girls have tended to produce digital selves adhering to gendered notions of social (luminous) value, these negotiations are not explicitly analysed with respect to how relational structures of platforms may be implicated within postfeminist discourses and affects.

Surveillance, control and postfeminist self-branding

This section provides an account of more contemporary gender and digital media scholarship used in this thesis, as a framework for understanding how social discourses and digital, relational structures of power shape the production of digital femininities. Current scholarship increasingly problematises the relationality facilitated through digital media and what this means for the production of youthful femininity via varied digital platforms. Producing the self in a digital context, Andrejevic (2004, 2011, 2015) argues, is enacted in a context where both social and industry-based surveillance is extended and intensified. What one does may be visible to others not only in an immediate temporal sense, but the audience of one's activity is also often indefinitely extended. Such context collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2011a) produces ambiguities and risks for participants in judging what they may put forward, producing heightened incitements to control self-presentation in an environment of uncertainty as to how such self-presentation is received.

In this setting, scholars such as Ringrose and Barajas (2011) and Dobson (2011a, 2011b, 2012) illustrate how the incitements to produce visible digital selves require girls and young women to negotiate highly fraught and subtle postfeminist tensions between 'selling out' and curating digital profiles 'for themselves'. In Ringrose and Barajas' (2011) study of British secondary school girls' use of the youth-based platform Bebo, girls' profiles manifested a high degree of 'hypersexualised' content, evincing sexual knowledge, confidence and desire. Yet, girls that were interviewed as part of the project disclosed that they in fact were extremely self-conscious of their bodies and disavowed, to some extent, the representativeness of the content on their profile. Further, though girls included sexually explicit phrases and pictures on their profiles that appeared to suggest they were desiring and available, this contrasted with norms of social interaction whereby girls were expected to wait for boys to approach them, rather than initiate interaction. In the Australian context, Dobson's (2011a, 2011b, 2012) work on young women's use of MySpace shows that young women used similar means of signifying sexual desirability within dominant heterosexual visual terms, yet combined these representations with aspirational messages of autonomy, like 'individuality is everything' and 'I'm free as a bird...I don't depend on nobody and nobody depends on me' (Dobson, 2012, pp. 366-367). I suggest the contradictions identified by these scholars demonstrate negotiations of the demands of entangled luminosities to demonstrate individuality, through conforming to certain postfeminist norms of appearance and sexual desirability. The articulations of freedom and independence in these profiles are used to cast the production of self within socially valued terms, as individually determined and chosen.

The compatibility of digital cultures with individualising postfeminist techniques of evaluating the self has been problematised by scholars such as Banet-Weiser (2012) and Nurka (2014). In constituting a means of augmented surveillance, digital media intensifies the invitation to disciplined, controlled, self-production as it requires the online participant to work on her recognisability in fitting into an existing visual and gendered economy of representation for an indefinite audience (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Similar to the labour of celebrity self-branding, scholars have observed that digital selves are produced through the investment of labour and techniques of control and curation (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Dobson, 2010; Marshall, 2010; Marwick, 2015). However, it is vital that such labour be viewed as ‘authentic’ and true of the self. To convey this truth in ways that build relationships with audiences, aspects of personal life must be discerningly evaluated, reworked and appropriately disclosed. As Marwick and boyd (2011b) illustrate via their investigation of female celebrity practice on Twitter, curating a Twitter feed to appear responsive to fans relies on the construction of authenticity, through strategically revealing hidden or intimate aspects of life to further affective connections with audiences.

Indeed, expanding from other genres and forms of media containing an individualising postfeminist address, branding has been put forward as a key relational framework for young women’s digital self-production. As Banet-Weiser’s work on female YouTube stars suggests, the postfeminist subject shows parallels with the contemporary ‘interactive subject’ (2012, p. 56), in the way that the self is positioned in a relationship marked by innovation and adaptability with unknown audiences. Postfeminist branding thus becomes a means of containing the uncertainties and social dangers of self-production in an online context. Drawing attention to the way in which self-branding on YouTube constructs a deliberate association of commercial interests and products with feelings and relationships, Banet-Weiser (2012) argues that this reflects two effects of the ‘digital revolution’. First, consumers can be said to be more in control of their own productions, but second, increasingly under surveillance by media industries. Additionally, consumers are also subject to *social* surveillance which dovetails with the marketisation of the production of digital selves. Thus, discipline and control are intensified in the online environment on platforms like YouTube where producer-consumer dynamics are encouraged, seen in the freely given ‘feedback’ in the comments section on videos (Rossie, 2015).

It is important, then, to problematise what it means to say that, young women are more in *control* of what they produce through the relationality instantiated online. While girls

and young women may be enabled to carefully construct a disciplined and controlled self-narrative through online tools, the configuration and affordances of sociality for online contacts may have the potential to disrupt it. Cover (2012) argues that the ‘friendship’ regime of Facebook, while inciting the recording of a consistent and unified self, may be destabilised through the interaction and surveillance of online friends. A friend, for example, may ‘tag’ an unflattering photo of another friend online, which then becomes available for liking and download by other friends. The disciplinary work towards achieving a smooth, curated identity is thus ongoing and never quite achieved. Further, as van Dijck (2013) points out, the discourse of user *control* may also constitute a means of assuaging fears about the limited user input into the policies regulating digital infrastructures where they are implicated. On YouTube, Twitter and on Facebook in particular, while users are addressed as subjects ‘in control’ of what they produce, overwhelmingly, the rules of interplay provide little leeway for users who often do not know the extent of capture and use of their data (van Dijck, 2013). Fundamentally, the bargain struck between platforms and their participants is an unequal one where users often cannot keep up to date with the changes in user agreements and constant modifications to interfaces (Dunes, 2013). Indeed, there is a gap between ‘expressive privacy’, the type of privacy one holds in relation to known others, and ‘corporate privacy’ or the relation between personal data, corporate ownership and rights over that data (Raynes-Goldie, 2010). It is in this context that ‘control’ over what is arguably only expressive privacy is offered to digital participants.

Beer (2014), Dunes (2013), Fuchs (2015) and others point to the way in which algorithms, in concert with users, determine much of user experience, engagement and platform relationality. On Amazon, for example, the algorithm which suggests recommended purchases works on the basis of a minute categorisation of the Amazon buyer’s previous purchases (Beer, 2014). Beer suggests algorithms should be considered as a particular form of *agency* which has material effects. In Dunes’ (2013) view, this reduces human agency. Digital participants only become as important as datasets which are algorithmically relatable to other user datasets, defining the user as ‘a “dividual” or “instance” within a larger, relational database’ (2013, p. 12). Such a view may be critiqued for over-emphasising the extent of pre-digital human agency, yet it is clear that algorithms do impact on the way in which digital participants are incited to produce themselves. Carah, Brodmerkel and Hernandez’s (2014) research shows that, though many digital participants do not understand algorithms at the level of software and code, they are still able to understand how to make

themselves algorithmically available to increase their visibility on digital platforms (see also Bucher 2012). Users strategically tune themselves in, timing use of mobile media and platforms in association with branded products and experiences (Carah, Brodmerkel & Hernandez, 2014).

As Bucher (2012) argues, the Facebook algorithm Edgerank makes visibility function as a reward. Such a regime of visibility projects the continual threat of invisibility onto users, encouraging constant interaction. In this way, everyday life is configured algorithmically. Rather than equating this with a simple reduction of human 'agency', the algorithms of platforms might be interpreted as offering changing ways to produce the self, in ways that notably benefit commercial interests. Overall, this scholarship which engages critically with digital platforms suggests that configurations of online surveillance offer particularly organisational, disciplinary and commoditised forms of identity practice in which one *customises* the self for audiences. The 'star' of the reality show or a YouTube Channel offers a disciplinary visibility, as it imbricates the participant within a neoliberal rationality. This is effected both within the 'work of being watched' (Andrejevic, 2004) through digital data mining, but also through a social relationship whereby the self becomes a brand for the evaluation of others, both as a process in the medium of self-representation and as an end in itself.

As such, digital social spaces provide a means through which young women may take up a postfeminist address in the enactment of branded relationships with others, extending the luminous space of ambition and productivity to their everyday lives. The work of scholars such as Attwood (2011) and Senft (2008) on cam girls illustrates the way young women have been the first to understand their personal lives may be commoditised through surveillance. The explosion of fashion and lifestyle 'blog shops' where native advertising is integrated into bloggers' accounts of their lives has primarily been led by young women (Abidin & Thompson, 2012; Duffy & Hund, 2015). As with celebrity culture where women, in particular, promote relationships with their audiences through making aspects of intimate life available to their audiences (Marwick & boyd, 2011b; Nunn & Biressi, 2010), personal and everyday experiences produced and captured through digital media now may be *used* to brand the self. Events where one happens to look 'really nice' become opportunities to improve and maintain one's image through the ability to take and upload pictures to platforms instantly (Brandes & Levin, 2013). Young women and girls invest time not only in managing and maintaining friendships through affordances on social networks like Facebook,

but also take up the invitation of digital platforms to enhance each other's brand value (Brandes & Levin, 2013; Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008; Winch, 2013). This may be done through public expressions of affection, in prose or through 'likes'. Brandes and Levin's (2013) research on adolescent Israeli girls' use of Facebook shows how girls will inform their friends to 'pay attention' when uploading profile picture changes so that 'likes' are maximised.

Scholarly work on audiences suggests that young women and girls understand the potentially disciplinary nature of digital, social surveillance (Bailey, Steeves, Burkell, & Regan, 2013; M. Dean & Laidler, 2013). An analogy may be drawn with reality television, in which viewers are invited to consider the conduct of 'ordinary' people (Biressi & Nunn, 2005; Skeggs & Wood, 2013); the spectator or user is invited to take up a disciplinary position of comparison and evaluation. Shade (2008), for example, notes that while older girls in her focus group were critical of the impression given off by younger girls' digital identity practices, they wanted to act as role models for younger girls, showing an ideal form of conduct. Criticism of the younger girls' dress and seemingly raucous behaviour was a way of 'helping' younger girls to act 'appropriately' for a digital audience. This finding of a disciplinary gaze is echoed in Winch's (2013) discussion of how women-centred media operate to normalise and legitimate the monitoring and evaluation of the self. Such gendered peer evaluation can be found in one of Winch's case studies, an online forum whose members set a weight loss target in preparation for marriage with the affectionate support of other members. Such research suggests that even as digital spaces may further intimate feminine sociality, they may also heighten the reach and intensity of a postfeminist address where the individual is positioned in a branded relation of scrutiny of, and by others.

The production of digital identity for girls and young women, then, presents a number of contradictory imperatives and rewards. Young women must be popular with peers, but not in a way that appears 'fake' or attention-seeking, requiring, I suggest, considerable affective labour. Authenticity and branding become entangled objectives. Managing femininity requires the straddling of paradoxes in a way which appears seamless through 'true' individuality. As such, demonstrating individuality through the luminous space of sexuality, requires 'autonomy' and 'heterosexiness' (Dobson, 2011b, 2012), or confidence and sexual knowledge (Ringrose & Barajas, 2011) to be displayed side by side. This call to authenticity is intensified in the online environment where positive feedback is desired and incorporated into calculations of visibility in an algorithmically-assisted 'like' economy. Further, both the

architectures of digital platforms and the assumptions of participants tend to incite *unitary* rather than multiple performances of identity complicating this script of true individuality. Siles, commenting on early online diary writing and blogging argues that bloggers tended to conceive of themselves in line with liberal conceptions of subjectivity: ‘intrinsically free, stable, creative and unique’ (2012, p. 417). In the case of Facebook, identity is required to be coherent and totalising, melding offline and online activities, friends, acquaintances, interests, consumption interests into one profile. Van Zoonen (2013) has similarly observed the move of internet giants like Google+ to make identity unitary, singular and consistent for commercial gain.

My thesis draws on the insights of this scholarship into young women’s negotiations of individualising discourses through digital media, in order to take account of how the relational structures of the WSWCM public shape the identity work circulating within it. Yet, these contentions relating to identity work draw on research on identity produced through dominant contemporary platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, MySpace and Bebo, in which a relationality of branding is facilitated through either ‘knowing’ contacts in multiple contexts; an accessible, profile-based platform structure; and/or a culture of audience commentary as feedback. In focusing on the digital profile in particular, the majority of research has not yet interrogated social spaces like intimate publics that facilitate belonging through a sense of commonality amongst young women. New research indicates platforms such as Tumblr, and digital social formations like memes, may facilitate alternate configurations of relationality through which identity may be enacted, as I discuss below.

Reconfiguring digital relationality?

This research contributes to the still relatively sparse work on identity that has been carried out in relation to newer platforms with cultures of anonymous and pseudonymous forms of interaction, somewhat similar to the MUDs and MOOs of the past. Within this emerging scholarship, there is still less work which explicitly deals with girls and young women in the differing configurations of relationality on these platforms. Yet, the scholarship that does exist suggests that these platform architectures facilitate the formation of different relational cultures in which identity is produced. Van der Nagel and Frith (2015) argue that whilst anonymity has on Reddit been argued to foster generally anti-social (indeed, misogynist) behaviours, it also engenders particular freedoms that should not be taken for

granted in what is often a largely ‘anonymous’ web (Zhao et al., 2008). Similarly, scholarship on Tumblr suggests anonymity may positively contribute to changes in how users might affectively relate to each other (Renninger, 2015; Tiidenberg & Gómez Cruz, 2015).

Cho (2011) argues that Tumblr’s norms of anonymity are key in fostering queer connections and affirmations. As such, Tumblr presents possibilities of decentring the luminous postfeminist emphasis on controlled heterosexuality, as a central means of demonstrating feminine capacity. Fink and Miller (2014) likewise suggest that Tumblr’s anonymity coupled with its highly customisable design allows the flexibility, accessibility and obscurity required to foster queer and trans exchange. Further, as a primarily youth-based platform, it has also been argued that Tumblr’s norms of anonymity and emotional expression allow youth to form intimate connections in discussing feelings they would not express elsewhere (Hart, 2015; Hart & Third, 2013), a contrast to the branded relationality identified in other platforms. Like any other platform, Tumblr may evidently host a diverse and contradictory range of views, feelings and social formations. However, my point here, discussed in more detail in Chapter Five, is to illustrate that Tumblr’s architectures may shape the relationality of interaction for its participants in ways distinct to the relationality of existing networked platforms.

Finally, it is worth highlighting the small but emerging body of work on memes demonstrating different configurations of relationality and identity work where participants adapt and change a ‘unit of culture’ to position where they fit in a social distribution (Shifman, 2014). Shifman (2014) argues that memes show the way in which people demonstrate both uniqueness and connectivity, and insider and outsider status. Milner (2012) and Nakamura (2014) have pointed to ways in which identity enacted through memes may also be inscribed within longstanding raced and gendered hierarchies of insiders and outsiders. Indeed, Nakamura argues that scholars should prioritise, as an ethically pressing question, the conditions of production of memes in the attention economy of social media, where ‘racial abjection is both a product and a *process* of production’ (2014, p. 260, my italics). Relatedly, there is little concerted scholarly examination of the ways in which memes produce certain forms of gendered identity production while devaluing others, a question pursued in this thesis. Given the highly individualising and identifiable nature of identity enacted on anonymous, profile-based platforms that I discussed in the previous section, these emerging forms of digital culture that suggest divergent forms of relationality require much more immediate scholarly engagement.

Conclusion: situating the thesis

In the contemporary media context, where the relations between the audience, the media artefact, and the media producer have become increasingly entangled and complex, there are significant changes in the assumptions about women's power over their own (re)presentation (Gill, 2007), catalysed by significant shifts in the media and social landscape. The active audience member of the cultural studies imagination now arguably no longer simply negotiates the meaning of media representations, but now manages her own media spotlight in talk shows, reality television and updates to her online profile (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Dobson, 2011a; Kearney, 2006; Pozner, 2010) under narrow terms of postfeminist visibility that require the performance of autonomy in enacting luminous, socially valued femininities (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). In this setting, postfeminist individualising discourses become more mobile and *mainstream*, aligning with both the regulatory, surveillance-heavy cultures of digital media, and digital media discourses that present participation as partaking in freedom, flexibility and control (Andrejevic, 2004; Banet-Weiser, 2012; J. Dean, 2010; van Dijck, 2013).

In scholarship of gender and digital media, it has been argued that this alignment between postfeminism and digital culture is demonstrated in the practices of young women and girls who invest time and labour into managing profiles to demonstrate gendered value. Yet, current scholarship points to a diversification of platform relational structures in the digital landscape, opening up possibilities of participation in anonymous, collective social formations that may provide other ways of doing femininity. It is in this contested intersection in which Tumblr, as a site for anonymous, youth-driven participation, is located. My research investigates an exemplar of these changing formations, an intimate public situated on Tumblr, to interrogate the possible re-alignment and re-making of the postfeminist tension between the individual and the social in the identity work it circulates. I now turn to the research methods I have employed to answer this question in relation to the WSWCM public.

3 Research methods: understanding interpretations of postfeminist affects and discourses through texts

I have outlined how postfeminism has been identified by scholars as a dominant sensibility in the contemporary media landscape. Featured across diverse genres of contemporary media, its luminous spaces of appearance, ambition and productivity, and sexuality (McRobbie, 2009) highlight key domains of social, postfeminist value which young women are enjoined to individually translate through identity work. These luminosities, then, are both social and individual domains of negotiation and struggle, constituting the self-social tension I have mentioned in previous chapters. I noted in the previous chapter that this negotiation also comprises a highly *emotional* dimension, required to straddle the postfeminist call to enact both a freely choosing subjectivity, as well as take on the incessant disciplinary work of self-monitoring and surveillance. Gill's (2007), Negra's (2008), Dobson's (2012) and Ringrose and Barajas' (2011) research makes it clear that postfeminist regulation depends on young women's affective labour. Young women, whilst being 'heterosexy', must also display strong signs of autonomy (Dobson, 2012) and knowing confidence (Ringrose & Barajas, 2011). Negra (2008) adds that though women are always portrayed at risk of failing, they must also be serene. This untroubled and cheery demeanour works to naturalise the significant labour that is undertaken as part of the postfeminist project of self-improvement (Gill, 2007). Girls and women as gendered labourers are exhorted to be carefree, confident and positive, even though femininity as refracted through postfeminist luminosities is always set up as a *problem* to be managed.

In the postfeminist address to young women demanding authentic individuality, a number of questions arise about how this contradictory set of ideas is managed and the attendant emotional work required to secure such individuality. In conducting a detailed analysis of an intimate public (Berlant, 2008) based on the WSWCM meme, I seek to interrogate how an individualising postfeminist address, as translated through postfeminist luminosities, is understood and re-circulated. As noted in the introduction, this interrogation is split into two research questions: what type of relational identity work is being done in the WSWCM public, and how does this work re-interpret the postfeminism tension between the individual and the social?

My research methods combine the feminist cultural studies tradition of analysing texts and audiences (Couldry, 2000; Hermes, 1995; Press, 1991; van Zoonen, 1994), Foucauldian understandings of subjectivity (1988, 2008) and McRobbie's (2009) articulation of postfeminist luminosities as an analytical framework, to understand how postfeminism operates and is remade through the WSWCM public as a set of discourses and affects prescribing feminine individuality. I conceptualise my study as an audience study, with the texts of the WSWCM meme constituting audience re-articulation and engagement with luminous postfeminist discourses and affects. Drawing on the understanding of media texts as not simply reflecting but constructing forms of reality and subjectivity (Hall, 1997; van Zoonen, 1994), I have employed an affective-discursive analysis to identify how these audience texts articulate young women's reinterpretation of individualising discourses and affects, reflected within postfeminist luminosities. I outline the process of selecting my sample of audience texts from the meme, as a rich social context for interrogating how the individualising affects and discourses highlighted in postfeminist luminosities are relationally re-articulated. I then explain how this affective-discursive analysis is employed to understand postfeminist discursive and emotional dimensions and how they are interpreted in the WSWCM public.

Process of selecting data sample

I noted in the introduction that I initially became interested in WSWCM given its spontaneous spread as a meme. Memes as intertextual artefacts pass from person to person, but express, 'shape and reflect general social mindsets' (Shifman, 2014, p. 4). Thus, they can be considered to be audience texts re-articulating attitudes towards or understandings of dominant social ideas. Furthermore, they may be considered to be texts which 'speak' to each other as digital content units created with an awareness of group belonging, demonstrating both key commonalities and strategic differentiations, in content, form and stance (Shifman, 2014). Of key relevance for my investigation, then, is the way the founder WSWCM blog has incited the creation of self-representative texts with a *knowing* relation to each other. The founder blog is not simply a 'viral' blog under Shifman's (2014) definition, attaining popularity as a single unit. WSWCM now constitutes a *collection* of texts, demonstrating that others have felt sufficient connection to the content to create spinoff blogs showing their individual relatedness to the founder. In its spread through memetic adaptation, it appears that

WSWCM's everyday feminine narration through affective, bite-sized moments is significant, not simply for its popularity, but in the way it addresses its audiences as both *similar* and yet different. This acknowledged connectedness and difference, shown through the differentiated follower blogs, demonstrates a rich, paradigmatic space to explore the negotiation of an individualising postfeminist address.

Though it appeared to awaken the 'popular collective subconscious of young women' (Casserly, 2012), WSWCM did not simply spread as a 'feminine' meme. When I conducted a search of related follower blogs using the hashtag #wswcm and #whatshouldwecallme on Tumblr, and through the website Know Your Meme ("Know Your Meme," 2013), I found variations ranging from 'WhatShouldWeCallCats' to 'WhatShouldWeCallDisney' and 'WhatShouldWeCallCustomerService'. Given my interest in the personal interpretation of postfeminist discourses and affects, many follower blogs such as the above examples were considered ineligible for inclusion in my sample. I reviewed the follower blogs for suitability on the basis of demonstrating a self-representative adaptation of the founder blog, following and engaging with the founder's format of relating everyday, feminine experience. Accordingly, though blogs like 'WhatShouldWeCallCustomerService' were written from what appeared to be a young woman's perspective, this was not suitable for my research question as it dealt primarily with collective experiences relating to a professional or interest-based discipline. Given postfeminist discourses and affects in media regulate the performance of femininity in many different ways, the blogs needed to address the personal and social as well as work-based aspects of life.

Out of the original 60 or so follower blogs I reviewed, I found 18 corresponded to the criterion of personal, self-representative blogs that engaged with the type of experience expressed in the founder. All of the follower blogs I reviewed were anonymous. I obtained approval through the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (project approval CF13/3717 - 2013001914F) to contact the creators of these blogs for permission to analyse their blogs, under conditions of anonymity. I applied for ethics approval for this project given notions of privacy, as discussed by Elm (2009b), are context-based and may turn on moving identifying information from one context to another. As such, given that through my research, these anonymous, personal, self-representative follower blogs would be identified as part of the well-known WSWCM meme, I considered it necessary to obtain approval before proceeding. After obtaining ethics approval, the creators of six of the blogs I

approached granted me permission to analyse their blogs. These were comprised of the founder blog, as well as the five follower blogs below:

- 2ndhandembarrassment;
- WhatShouldWeCollegeMe;
- Pitchin' Hissy Fits;
- WhatShouldBetchesCallMe; and
- TwoDumbGirls.

All of these bloggers disclosed they were based in the United States. They agreed to allow me to use the name of their blogs, analyse their blogs and reproduce their posts in my research. In line with Tumblr norms, the bloggers remain anonymous. I set up a private blog to update the participants on my research in order to maintain a level of accountability as a feminist researcher to them (Ardevol, 2012), though I ended up emailing them directly given meaningful research updates were often of necessity few and far between – the opposite of what one would expect of a 'blog'.

This research conceptualised these meme-based blogs as a collection of audience texts. The WSWCM public, made up of the circulation of these texts, is understood as a rich space to explore the personal re-articulation of the postfeminist individual-social tension in a context of group belonging. Thus, it is worth emphasising these texts have constituted the main data sample for my analysis. However, interviews also comprised a small portion of my data. Whilst they were of secondary importance to the analysis of the blog posts which I outline in the next section, the interview data was useful in providing some contextual detail in relation to the blogs and how they were put together and constructed. I interviewed one of the follower bloggers via Skype about her blogging practices, which enabled me to gain an understanding of the context of production of her blog, and to some extent, the other blogs. This was a loose, semi-structured interview of approximately an hour and a half's duration. The other bloggers declined interviews, though two of them provided me with more information about their blogging practices through email. I also drew on interviews in the popular press with the founder blog and another follower blogger as part of my data. Though I do not know the specific reasons for which the bloggers as a whole did not wish to participate in interviews, I understand this to be a legitimate reflection of how the bloggers viewed their privacy, time and labour. As scholars like Elm (2009b) and Markham and

Buchanan (2012) of the Association of Internet Researchers Ethics Working Committee point out, digital privacy is highly contextual, and the fact that people might share particular aspects of their lives online does not necessarily mean that they are open to disclosing those details in differing contexts.

While my research questions required that blogs in my data sample provide self-representative adaptations of feminine experience articulated in the founder blog, the question of this experience being reflected in ‘real life’ was not operationalised. It was relevant that in reading the popular press accounts of the founder blog, it seemed to be widely agreed that the blog was read as ‘feminine’ (Casserly, 2012; Duncan, 2012; Eckerle, 2012; O’Neill, 2012). However, given that I take up the understanding of postfeminist authenticity and femininity as a form of *work* and reinvention (Banet-Weiser 2012; Gill, 2007, Roberts, 2007; Tincknell, 2011), the question of proving the ‘backstage’ demographic identifying material was ancillary to analysing how femininity was actually enacted through the blogs. Whilst it was clear to the participants from my online ethics statement that I was researching identity work by young women, my research questions did not require the blogs’ creators to attest to whether or not their blogs reflected their ‘actual’ practices or ‘real’ life gendered identities. What was more important for my research was the question of how these texts articulating feminine experience could be *read*, speak to others, and in this process, articulate interpretations of postfeminist discourses and affects.

The question of authenticity is of particular relevance in the study of digital media, given that it has been observed to be a site of intensified surveillance due to continual suspicions of the artifice which it is understood to invite. As I argued in the previous chapter, such suspicion has had consequences in the way that gender online has been conceptualised as something which needs to be *proven* and fixed, whether in the digital social spaces of the 1990s or the unitary architectures of platforms like Facebook now. This binary of truth and artifice has also had limitations in how power has been conceptualised in the scholarship of gender and digital media, as I have illustrated in relation to symbolic interactionist work applying the idea of ‘front’ and ‘back stage’ identity straightforwardly to online and offline life, respectively. Such a binary notion reproduces overly rigid assumptions of intentional and autonomous identity. I aim to avoid replicating this online/offline binary, by focusing my analysis on reading the blogs as significant material negotiations of postfeminist luminosities in and of themselves, rather than representations of such negotiations in ‘real life’.

Affective-discursive analysis as a research method

I have employed an affective-discursive analysis in seeking to understand the discursive and emotional dimensions of the negotiations of postfeminist individuality by young women. The notion of ‘affective practice’ (Wetherell, 2012) in concert with a Foucauldian understanding of discourse allows the analysis of how postfeminism’s emotional dimension is taken up, in a public organised through the circulation of texts. The utility of Foucault’s work on subjectivity and governmentality in particular has been clearly outlined by many scholars working in media and consumer culture (Andrejevic, 2004; J. Dean, 2010; Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2008; Skeggs & Wood, 2013; Tanner et al., 2013). Accordingly, I have drawn substantially on this work in my textual analysis in order to theorise how identity work is done relationally through the taking up of particular subject positions, focusing on how discourse creates knowledge/power formations through which subjects become intelligible. I have also drawn on Foucault’s notion of surveillance as productive of subjectivity, and as such, have been attentive to how conditions of production and readership, as structures of viewing, shape identity work in the WSWCM public.

It is worth outlining here in some detail how the concept of affective practice is operationalised within this analysis, given the meaning of affect is subject to multiple contestations in scholarship. Some scholarly approaches emphasise affect as a bodily, non-representational response, or as libidinal flows of energy (Massumi, 2002; Thrift, 2008); others as a form of ‘actant’, or material agency (Bennett, 2010). My choice of research questions and media artefacts relating to negotiations of postfeminist luminosities in identity work, however, has led me to operationalise affect to focus on emotion. I draw on Wetherell’s (2012) approach based on the notion of ‘affective practice’ in analysing the blogs and the interview data. Affective practice, in her words:

focuses on the emotional as it appears in social life and tries to follow what participants do. It finds shifting, flexible and often over-determined figurations rather than simple lines of causation, character types and neat emotion categories (2012, p. 4).

Affect under this definition, then, is not quite the same as ‘emotion’, but refers to a looser, socially-inflected understanding of what the emotional is, as opposed to feelings as purely individually experienced things. This understanding of affect also correlates with the work of sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1983/2003), whose work on gendered emotional labour

I use in the following chapter to analyse the affective relational framework of the WSWCM public. More recent work on digital social spaces by scholars such as Miller (2008), Dean (2010) and Papacharissi (2014), also suggests that affect as a form of emotion or sentiment constitutes a key component of digital spaces. Affect in this way is understood as both bound up in discursive practices as well as exceeding them, but not something that is intrinsically *separable* from discourse.

Affective practice, and the concordant affective-discursive approach advocated by Wetherell (2012) is an appropriate tool for my research for three key reasons. First, conceptualising affect as inextricably but not straightforwardly enmeshed within emotional and discursive meaning allows a pragmatic approach to analysing the blogs, which can be seen as relational *negotiations* of postfeminist discourse and affects that are intended to be relatable to others. Wetherell (2012) makes the point that understanding affect as a non-representational, bodily response ignores much of the insights of feminist work into socially produced emotion such as Hochschild's (1983/2003) and Berlant's (2008). Leys (2011) similarly critiques Massumi's work in relation to the key argument that 'affect' is distinct from emotion, based on a perceived gap between affect and cognition. Leys suggests that the mind/body binary is reproduced here again, despite efforts to avoid crude conceptualisations of reason and rationality. As Wetherell argues, emotion should not be subject to a simplistic understanding of intentionality. While something that is often felt at the level of the 'gut' (2012, p. 12), affect is both subject to contingent emotional regimes *and* is something that people attempt to gain mastery over. Following Wetherell, viewing affect as part of emotional meaning allows scholars to approach it in a systematic way.

Arguably, from the perspective of the young women who have constructed these blogs on Tumblr, affect must be understood to be *accessible* from the point of view of other Tumblr users, otherwise, it would be unlikely that they would be authored for potential distribution on the site and beyond. The founder blog notably uses social media buttons so that non-Tumblr visitors can share a blog post on Twitter, Pinterest and Facebook. Indeed, as noted in the introduction, the first time I encountered the founder blog was when a friend reposted one of the blog posts on another friend's Facebook page. The post was shared in order to make this friend laugh – and I did, too. I recognise this humour as not simply a bodily response, but a response to particular social knowledges and *cues* in the post.

Second and related to this, the blogs I consider can be understood to be social texts which also circulate affect and thus are implicated within discourse, as demonstrated by

scholarship on pseudonymous or anonymous social digital spaces online where such visual texts are often swapped (Meese, 2014; Milner, 2012; Miltner, 2014; Nakamura, 2014; Shifman, 2014; van der Nagel, 2013). Miller (2008) points to the prevalence of ‘phatic’ cultures online, where communication does not necessarily ‘exchange’ information but is designed to communicate presence, recognition and sociability. Such presence is still communicated through words, images and movement which function as signifiers. What is evident in the blogs I examine is a social system of meaning underpinning the affect circulating through these artefacts, and this is not divorced from the words and images in them. The GIF posts are circulated precisely because they communicate affective meaning presumed to be readily ‘decodable’. The deceptively simple blog post combining an image with sparse text requires active sense-making on the part of the reader, to ‘read’ the puzzle of an incongruous image and situational heading. The affective posts in the WSWCM public form part of a broader web ‘vernacular’ (Burgess, 2007) in which digital ‘netizens’ are now expected to be literate (Shifman, 2014).

Third, conceptualising affect as a practice captures the way in which it both mobilises but also is mobilised *by* subjects. My research questions proceed from the understanding that, while the subject of the ‘young woman’ is a ‘power-effect’ (Tanner et al., 2013), young women also *participate* in their modes of subjectification in negotiating contradictions of the subjectivities available to them. Indeed, the *labour* materialised in these blogs that I have tried to make salient throughout this thesis shows an attempt to instrumentalise affect. Accordingly, viewing affect through the lens of practice assists in understanding how identity is *work*, drawing attention to the labour involved in individually articulating luminous, postfeminist domains of value.

Conducting the analysis

Drawing on the cultural studies tradition as I have stated above, my research methods broadly position the identity work of the WSWCM public as an audience study of individualising postfeminist affects and discourses and how they are interpreted. As discussed in the introduction, in positioning the identity work both as the reception and re-articulation of such discourses and affects, I have been careful to theoretically locate this work within the relationality of the public based around readership and authorship of common texts (the blog

posts). Through locating this identity work within this relational context, I have sought to explore the ‘audience response’ both through the authorial textual content of the posts, but also through how those posts are invited to be read, in order to effect a sense of commonality and belonging.

In conducting my affective-discursive analysis, I sampled an even temporal spread of posts across the blogs, dating from the earliest days of the blogs, through to the most recent blog posts, on approximately a daily basis over a period of five months in the first half of 2014, and the latter part of 2014, until achieving data saturation (Bryman, 2012). Overall, I sampled approximately 800 posts across the six blogs. I viewed the posts online, sometimes through their ‘web-facing’ format, which I accessed through using the URL of the blog. At other times I accessed the blogs through being logged into Tumblr and viewing them in my ‘dashboard’ where the most recent posts from the blogs would appear.

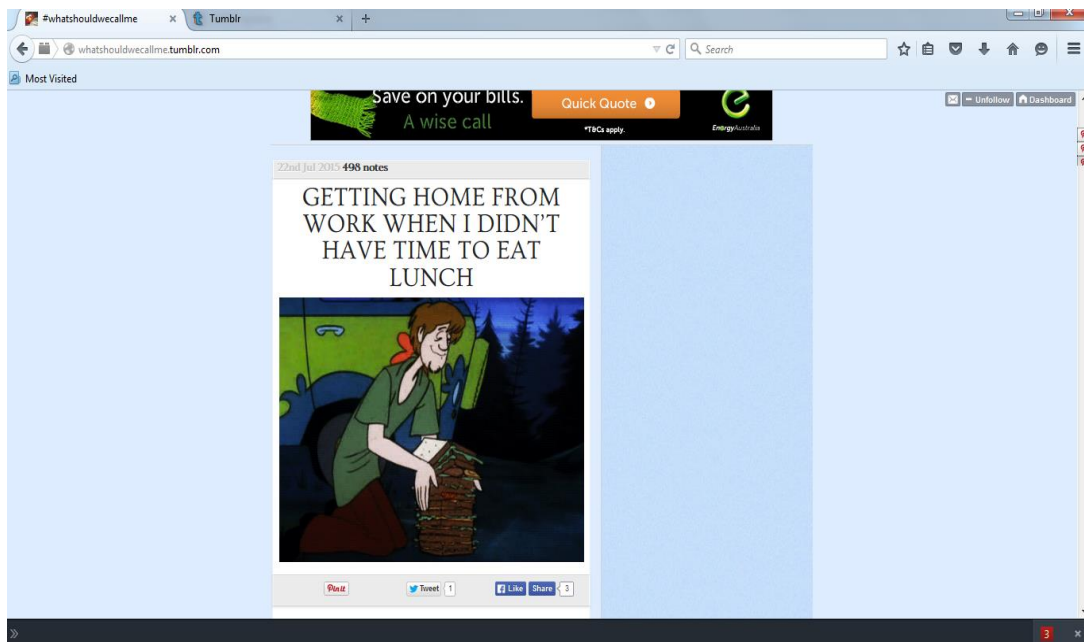


Figure 2. Web-facing format: viewing blog post from the web.

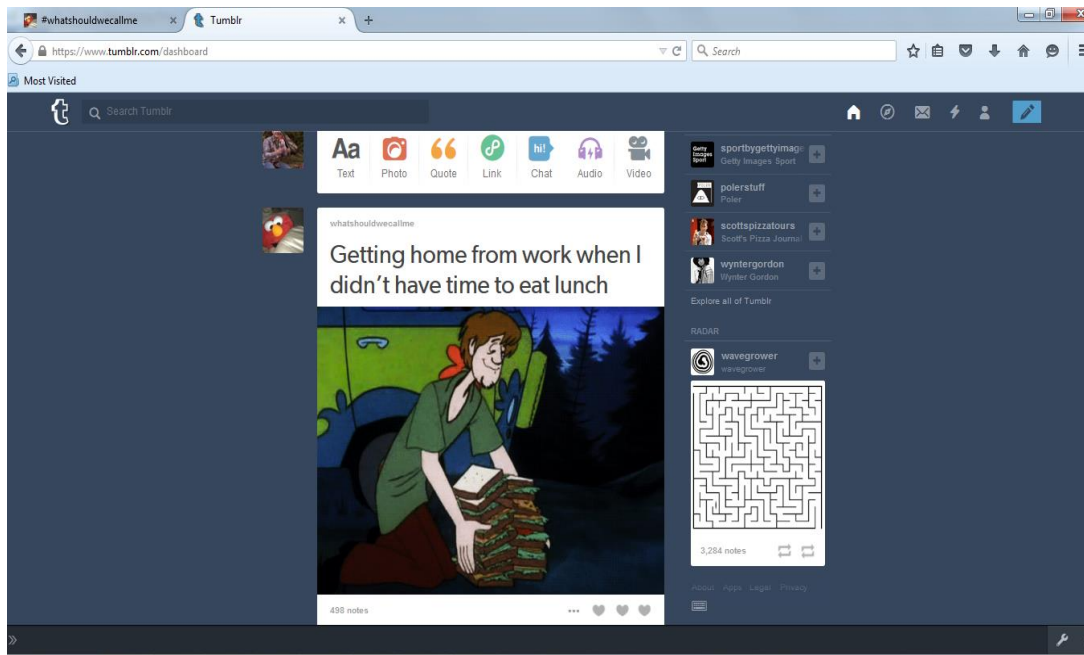


Figure 3. Dashboard format: viewing blog post through Tumblr interface.

This alternate viewing was to ensure that I had some understanding of the context of production, or authorship, of the blogs, and could appropriately grapple with the mechanics of the blogging practices.

My analysis of these posts began by documenting the self-representative ‘moments’ described in the blog posts, together with a short summary of the affective and discursive themes evident in each post, using McRobbie’s (2009) luminous framework that I have noted in the previous chapters to code the content. I noted the heading of the post, what was occurring in the GIF, the GIF’s possible origins (as a TV show, film or internet video), the caption of the GIF, the date and the number of ‘notes’ (interactions) with the post. The date was particularly important to understanding the rhythm of posting as a form of social practice. I also described how the GIF articulated the heading of the post. The documentation of the visual contents of the GIF in distinction to the overall themes of the blog posts as a whole was essential in order to deconstruct and denaturalise the process of reading and the work of the reader of the blogs, discussed further in Chapter Five. This level of detail was necessary in order to theorise how *reading* the posts enacted a form of sociality shaping the relational context in which the identity work was being carried out.

Throughout the process of sampling the blog posts and reflecting upon this data, I used McRobbie’s (2009) postfeminist luminosities to conceptually organise my analysis. The luminosities, as noted above, were used to initially code the negotiations going on in the

content of the post before returning to posts that, upon reaching saturation, were deemed to be representative of the themes in negotiation. Adopting the luminosities as an overarching framework from the start assisted in grappling with the large amount of data I was sampling, organising it according to established themes of negotiation identified in feminist media scholarship. However, my use of the luminosities in this way meant that a number of posts were initially not properly accounted for. As my analysis was ‘abductive’ (Blaikie, 2000), conducted in cycles of data immersion and reflection, as my research went on, it became clear that another theme in the negotiated identity work of the posts was emerging from the data that had not yet been identified. In addition to the luminosities, this theme was of feminine sociality or ‘girlfriendship’ (Winch, 2013). This required me to return to data that I had already reviewed as an additional sensitising theme for understanding the relational negotiations going on across the blogs.

As part of this abductive cycle of analysis, I also continually compared the blogs in terms of how these affective-discursive themes were mobilised and used. As Gill (2007) and Negra (2008) have pointed out, postfeminist discourses rely on the idea of imperviousness to social influence. Accordingly, I compared the blogs, not only to understand their interpretation of femininity, but also their articulation of it in relation to the other blogs. This comparison thus positioned the connections and differentiations across the meme as part of the negotiation of the individualising discourses and affects of postfeminism. This comparison of the identity work in the blogs was also relevant to theorising how the relational context of the meme-based intimate public shaped the production of identity within it.

I also conducted an affective-discursive analysis of the interview data described above as part of my data sample. Again, I operationalised McRobbie’s (2009) framework of luminosities to examine and organise the negotiations of postfeminist discourses of individuality here. As these interviews were related to the context of production of the blogs, rather than the content, my analysis of this data was mainly interpreted through attention to negotiation of the luminosity of ambition and productivity. As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, given I draw on Foucauldian notions of subjectivity, I was particularly attentive to ideas of surveillance in the affective-discursive themes of the interview data.

The challenge in conducting this research has been to employ a method which appropriately grapples with both the key affective-discursive dimensions of postfeminist luminosities while being attentive to the material practices and particularities of the blogs I

examine. My affective-discursive approach refuses clear cut distinctions between the material and the textual, production and consumption, the affective and the discursive. The heterogeneity of the tools I have brought to my data aims to capture the way in which identity is enacted both discursively and affectively, and ultimately *relationally*. The following chapter begins to introduce the results of this analysis in exploring how affective-discursive labour builds the relational framework of the WSWCM public within which its participants operate.

4 Showing others how one manages: affectively navigating a postfeminist relational framework

That's where [blogger 2] and I really get going. Neither one of us takes the other or ourselves seriously and we're constantly talking about what wastes of lives we are. I mean, we're kidding obviously, we're in school to be attorneys, but that's the funniest part of the site to me.

Interview with WhatShouldWeCallMe founder bloggers (Casserly, 2012).

Introducing the rules

I begin with this remarkable, yet mundane instance of referring to oneself as a 'waste of a life' with the concurrent refutation that one is 'in school to be an attorney' to highlight how contemporary femininity is a complex thing which young women must navigate in relating the self to others. Young women must occupy the space of postfeminist power that has been allocated to them, but importantly, must do so without transgressing gendered expectations of being socially pleasing (McRobbie, 2009). Self-government, or the 'conduct of conduct' (Foucault, 1988) is a central concern in contemporary femininity, particularly for young middle-class women as idealised postfeminist subjects. The importance attributed to self-government within postfeminist discourses is implicated within highly individualistic understandings of subjectivity (Budgeon, 2011; Gill, 2007; Gill & Scharff, 2011; Harris & Dobson, 2015; McRobbie, 2009). Such individuality seeks to render invisible the discursive sources that shape how young women's self-production may be effected, whilst insisting upon conforming to socially legitimated gendered practices.

Here, the self-description of the founder bloggers as simultaneous 'wastes of lives' and future lawyers provides a further indication of the way postfeminist regulatory norms become part of 'common sense' understandings of normative life paths and methods of self-assessment. The first comic yet surprisingly callous self-definition as a 'waste of life', rationalised by being 'in school to be an attorney', indicates an implicit acceptance of the 'normative cruelties' (Winch, 2013) of luminous postfeminist discourses of ambition and productivity. Yet, in exploring how self-government is undertaken in the WSWCM public, it

would be too simplistic to say that the sentiment expressed by the founder bloggers demonstrates a straightforward reproduction of postfeminist norms of self-government and standards of success. Through the affective-discursive analysis I conduct, I suggest a relational framework is constructed through the widespread understanding of postfeminist rules, evident in the conversion of authorial selves into posts that are relatable for readers and amenable to circulation in the WSWCM public.

McRobbie (2009) observes that successful postfeminist subjectivity is offered through compulsory, ongoing management of the self in key luminous domains. Unsurprisingly, then, in the WSWCM public, the luminosities of appearance, sexuality, and ambition and productivity (McRobbie, 2009) are constituted consistently as sites where management must occur. However, in this chapter I contend that postfeminism offers not just a set of luminous domains with which young women must engage, but also a set of attitudes and feelings which structure a set of relations with others. Control over these luminous domains, as central problems in the management of femininity, is understood to be the ultimate harbinger of success. However, due to the way in which postfeminism also offers forms of affective regulation, I suggest that there are particular ways that engagement with these domains can be articulated in the WSWCM public.

I argue that postfeminism is interpreted as a set of ‘feeling rules’ (Hochschild, 1983/2003) that stipulate how young women ought to feel in order to conduct themselves appropriately and be recognisable within its terms of normativity. Beyond the injunction to self-regulate in accordance with the strictures of postfeminist luminosities, the postfeminist subject must also have the ‘right feelings’ in her self-management (Hochschild, 1983/2003) and if her feelings diverge from the appropriate ones, she must work on them to make them ‘fit’. Such feeling rules regulate how young women may speak of postfeminist burdens of management in ways that are recognisable as part of the WSWCM public, largely limiting their articulation to upbeat, punchy quips. Drawing on Riviere’s notion of womanliness as mask, McRobbie (2009) suggests the postfeminist sexual contract requires a light-hearted hyper-femininity in order to counterbalance any sense of threat to a gendered status quo. Similarly, commenting on the postfeminist requirement to continually be ready to monitor and adapt the self, Negra (2008) observes the concomitant affective duty to maintain a level of ‘serenity’ while doing so. Bitterness or rage is made abject; such unsightly feelings are unintelligible in postfeminist girlfriend culture except when channelled against the self (disciplining the self as a ‘waste of a life’) or against other women (Winch, 2013).

Hochschild (1983/2003) contends that the management of emotions has, for some time now, been expected as part of service culture, the conditions of consideration for employment and, more generally, a form of labour that is particularly asked of women. Women's emotional labour has formed not only the basis for conserving the power dynamics of gendered relations but also productively underpins relations of commercial exchange and the creation of economic value (Hochschild, 1983/2003). It has been established that in postfeminist cultures, young women are required to have the right 'attitude': they must be enterprising, resilient and ever vigilant in relation to potential wrong turns or failures (Harris, 2004). Such attitudinal obligations are required of the youthful postfeminist consumer-citizen as she seamlessly progresses in neoliberal flows of capital and labour, privileging self-government through self-control (Deleuze, 1992) and discipline (Foucault, 1995; Rose, 1999). Indeed, the insistence on the pleasure experienced by young women in taking control over their lives as an avenue to 'empowerment' is a central theme that characterises postfeminist scripts of subjectivity (Budgeon, 2011, 2015; Gill, 2012; Riordan, 2001).

Yet in the WSWCM public, it appears that the confession of (often failed) *attempts* at control, and the attendant recognition of this struggle, is often more affirming than a vaunted postfeminist feeling of control in and of itself. The feeling of control over luminous domains of one's life is acknowledged as something that is desirable. However, the ubiquity of incidents where life does not go to plan suggests that there are social dynamics at work here which shape how self-government may be articulated. Drawing on Winch's (2013) work on girlfriendship, I suggest that an admission of difficulty or of individual struggle is a key element in enabling recognition, commonality and belonging. As such, while this chapter will discuss practices of self-government, I will more consistently employ the term 'manage' to evoke the sense of making do suggested in the posts. I also use the term 'author' and 'reader' here to draw attention to the way this affective, relational commonality is constructed through discourse and texts. I explore how authoring a self that *manages* through engagement with postfeminist luminosities and attendant feeling rules is central to the relational structure of the public. Berlant observes the 'tremendous pleasure' (2008, p. 2) in intimate publics afforded by recording how other women manage, in minute and repetitive detail, providing a forum for stories which would otherwise be dismissed and ignored. Mundane problems are worked through in endless but similar forms of variation. Managing, then, is a form of sociality, a way that feelings of struggle may be used and extracted to gain value through the circulation of blog posts in the public.

In this chapter, I examine how sites of personal government that are intensely surveyed under postfeminist terms of normativity –ambition and productivity, and appearance – are distilled through emotional labour into social moments that circulate in the WSWCM public. Feeling rules are acknowledged, navigated and sometimes flouted, in order to narrate self-management in recognisable moments for the reader. Being seen to engage, even in an inadequate way with these luminous domains (McRobbie, 2009) invites a sense of camaraderie in the public, one premised on the highly regulatory aspects of youthful femininity. I begin with the engagement in the blogs with the luminosity of appearance, specifically in relation to food consumption.

Confessing guilty pleasures: food and postfeminist body management

Food, in postfeminist terms, constitutes an intensive site of regulation by which the body/self can be measured in terms of success. It is accordingly unsurprising that food consumption is one of the key preoccupations managed and worked through in the blogs. As reflected in the plethora of reality television and lifestyle programmes linking food consumption and the body, how and what is consumed must be rationalised with regard to the managing the body/self (Winch, 2013). Winch argues that such management is understood as a key area of *girlfriend* expertise. A typical example is offered by Winch in the form of UK magazine *Heat*, which positions the weight gain of Josie Gibson and Colleen Rooney, two British female celebrities in high profile romantic relationships, as something that its women readers can understand: ‘We’ve all been there. You’ve got a new boyfriend, and suddenly the gym doesn’t seem as inviting as the sofa’ (2013, p. 16). The voice offers an ostensible empathy, coupled with an intense scrutiny of the (undesirable) changes in these celebrities’ bodies. It is the voice of a fellow conspirator: the girlfriend, who holds a depth of insider knowledge about managing the body. The subject matter, food and the body, is something to which ‘we’ all as parenthetical women can relate, and should immediately recognise and understand.

I will utilise the term ‘spectatorial girlfriendship’ as a term to capture premise of affective-discursive participation I posit here, drawing on the work of Amy Dobson and Alison Winch. Spectatorial premise refers to the set of assumptions underlying practices of

looking and interpretation within a particular medium (Dobson, 2010); girlfriendship (Winch, 2013) is an affective social relation which is saturated within larger cultural narratives about feminine commonality and normativity. Here, I wish to foreground the way in which girlfriendship operates to invite others to see, or to share an understanding of subjectivity based on presumptions of feminine commonality, which may indeed often rely on disciplinary, classed (Skeggs, 2004, 2005; Skeggs & Wood, 2013) and raced postfeminist regulatory norms (Banet-Weiser, 2007; Keller, 2014; Nakamura, 2008). Through this girlfriend lens, then, how a woman consumes food and what she consumes is both a legitimate topic of (female) public discussion and a practice that shapes the self and its relational disposition to others.

In the WSWCM public, the consumption and enjoyment of food remains a contested and significant practice, where the desire to assert confident individuality and stand against discourses of body regulation, meets anxieties about transgression. I suggest that this may be an effect of the understanding that food stands in for and is entangled with other metrics of postfeminist success. While the size and shape of one's body is one key metric related to food consumption, the way food (and particular types of food) is consumed more generally constitutes a form of prudent self-regulation and monitoring. As Winch (2013) observes, eating copious amounts of food, particularly junk food, is almost always readily connoted as slovenly, lax and lacking in *control*. Accordingly, regardless of one's body size, such practices are still read as a violation of normative, middle class feminine codes of self-restraint and moderation.

Food/ job/ boyfriend: the entanglement of food with other measures of self-evaluation

One key meaning attached to food in the imaginary of the WSWCM public is one of managing an acknowledged *lack*: an insufficient replacement for something else that is required as an upwardly mobile postfeminist subject, such as a job, or a boyfriend. Food is sometimes constructed as a replacement for the boyfriend that a young woman must not lack, a figure I further explore in Chapter Six. I refer to the post 'When all of my friends have really great boyfriends' excerpted below, which uses a GIF of a woman saying 'Juice makes

me happy. Yes'. The post suggests, in fact, the inadequacy of juice, signifying that it is an appropriate food to consume, but it is not *filling*, or satisfying.



Figure 4. Juice makes me happy. WSWCM

The woman's words, excerpted as they are in conjunction with her dejected face, invite the reader through her spectatorial girlfriendship to interpret them as hollow; the echo of someone who is trying to repeat a 'healthy living' mantra with gusto but cannot.

A similar post links romantic aloneness with the consumption of pizza.



Figure 5. In love with pizza. WSWCM

However, the affect channelled by the post is complicated. Food is embraced, but not as something which is sufficient in and of itself. Here, there is a confession about *needing* the sensual solace of food, particularly, the comfort and moreishness of junk food. Such a need is viewed as soft and weak, unbefitting of the strong, 'top girl' (McRobbie, 2007, 2009) who eats healthily to nourish her body as active machine. The post discloses that its author is not abiding by the feeling rules of relentless aspiration by consuming 'good' food; she wants to enjoy some unhealthy delicious food for the enjoyment of the moment.

A love of food is declared in the post, but awareness of the postfeminist feeling rule of moderation and constraint regarding food consumption requires this disclosure to be made somewhat defensively. The cliché of the lying lover, the distinction between 'everyone' in relationships and the subject who is in love with her pizza, positions the defiance as a means of *coping* with an otherwise untenable situation in which romantic love is lacking. There would otherwise be little coherent link between the act of food and the statement that others are in relationships; loving food cannot be declared outright without some sort of self-deprecation. What is also notable is that the post does not articulate a concrete event which has taken place at a particular time; rather, the event is created through the construction of a dichotomy between 'just sitting over here in love with my pizza' *whilst* everyone else is in romantic relationships. It is a confessional event, in and of itself. The act of loving this

unhealthy food is performed whilst inactive and alone, instead of moving upward as a metric of postfeminist achievement.

A post from TwoDumbGirls entitled ‘when people ask me about myself’ also demonstrates the understanding of the entanglement of food, heterosexual attachment and feminine success. The reaction is made up of the text, ‘I should really just be like’ followed by a GIF from *The Mindy Project* (Kaling, 2012), where the eponymous protagonist, Mindy, states ‘I like ice cream. I need a boyfriend.’



Figure 6. I like ice cream, I need a boyfriend. TwoDumbGirls

Traces of melancholy are visible on Mindy’s face while she says this. The lack of (or wrong) partner is one of the key themes running through the show, where Mindy chaotically charts the ups and downs of romantic ‘love’ as an otherwise successful doctor. However, her professional achievements are not enough for her self-satisfaction. In this post, both food and the lack of boyfriend rather than academic or career pursuits are understood to tell a significant story about the feminine self. In the vulnerable manner in which it is confessed, ‘liking ice cream’ becomes a shorthand for a feminine weakness, the sort a young woman faces when she is alone.

Another post, ‘when my parents suggest I get off the couch and do something with my life’, demonstrates a similar despondency that ties food to failure. In the words of a young woman who appears to be a reality television participant: ‘give me a pillow, give me some snacks, because I’m not going anywhere.’ The couch, the pillow, snacks and idleness are conflated to express a mixture of pessimism, uselessness and hopelessness in relation to the pressures regarding her upward trajectory in life. Consumption of food is viewed as a crutch: something sad, demonstrating weakness. It breaks the feeling rule of general invulnerability and strength. It expresses a double lack: the inadequacy of the person in obtaining the boyfriend or the job, and the inadequacy of the food in replacing the key items which make one a (postfeminist) subject.

In some instances however, food, and junk food in particular, become a transgressive means through which to define the self, denoting a subject who is proudly able to resist the pressures of society to regulate her intake of food. This resistance is sometimes articulated by exaggeratedly lauding the qualities of a type of food and the author’s love of it, decoupling consumption from the affect of loneliness and suturing it into a narrative of confidence and individuality. For example, on *2ndhandembarrassment*, ‘literally every time I have people over at my apartment’, is articulated through a moment extracted from the 2014 Oscars awards ceremony, where comedian and host Ellen DeGeneres asks the crowd of acting luminaries: ‘Who will have pizza if I... Jennifer? Yes. Marty. Harrison. Okay. Two large?’ The humour of DeGeneres’ stunt relies on bringing an incongruous situation, the ordering of pizza, a casual, domestic activity, into the glamorous, red carpet event of the Oscars. On *2ndhandembarrassment*, the joke is not that the pizza is incongruous, but the opposite; the ordering of pizza occurs ‘literally every time’ guests are received at the author’s home, constructing a sense of warmth, indulgence and generous hospitality. Yet, the feeling rules about food consumption haunt the post in the background. The emphatic description of ‘literally every time’ suggests a need to convincingly take a stance against these rules which may otherwise be taken for granted.

Resisting the practices of Other girls

The consumption of junk food and food in general can also be a means of self-definition in opposition to the disciplining and monitoring gaze of girlfriends. Returning to

Winch's (2013) example of *Heat* magazine declaring 'We've all been there', the consumption of food and its relation to body shape is understood to be something which is always within the purview of feminine surveillance. In the example Winch draws from *Heat*, the conspiratorial tone offers a sense of pleasure to the female reader who is constructed as a legitimate part of the collective body of feminine surveillance, since she has also 'been there'. Frustrations that women experience in relation to the requirements of dietary constraint and bodily perfection are taken out on the bodies of other women. In the WSWCM public, such antagonistic feelings find their release in the practices of other people, or as I term them, Other girls, similar to Dobson's (2011b) discussion of the feminine 'other'. I explore their significance further in Chapter Six in relation to how they are used as 'constitutive limits' (Skeggs, 2004) of the self, but here, I confine my discussion to how they are used to distance the self from feminine practices of self-management in relation to food.

Sometimes, a stern mode of address is used to discipline the Other girl who monitors her food intake and talks about it in social contexts. The Other girl who documents her healthy eating habits for others to see is featured in a derisory post on TwoDumbGirls: 'when people insta-brag about all their healthy, organic, gluten-free juice/salad/quinoa/clean eating nonsense.' This post refers to the practice on photo stream platform Instagram whereby users post photos of food they are about to consume. The GIF used to flesh out this reaction to these self-documenting posts appears to be extracted from a reality television show, with a woman firmly stating her opinion directly to the camera, in front a brightly coloured background.

WHEN PEOPLE INSTA-BRAG
ABOUT ALL THEIR HEALTHY,
ORGANIC, GLUTEN-FREE,
SALAD/JUICE/QUINOA/CLEAN
EATING NONSENSE



hashtag no one cares

Figure 7. Clean Eating Nonsense. TwoDumbGirls

When viewing the post online, it is apparent that the woman is mouthing the phrase ‘shut up’ while dismissively moving her hands. However, the words ‘People don’t want to hear about your diet. Just shut up, eat your lettuce and be sad’ are excerpted at the bottom of the GIF as her actual quote.

Whilst the blog itself features posts about affective relations to food (‘I like ice cream’), the self-documenting food practices of Other girls are actively belittled and resisted. More broadly, the post here, somewhat bluntly, dismantles the championing of healthy food. A racialised independence or ‘sassiness’ (Baker, 2005; Stokes, 2010) is instrumentalised and distilled here so that the author of the post may be positioned as resistant. The postfeminist ‘top girl’ (McRobbie, 2009), in accordance with the feeling rule premise that she is a ‘free’ subject, must present the choice of consumption of healthy food as actively embraced rather than a choice which is imposed. The ‘eat your lettuce and be sad’ punctures the upbeat feeling rule associated with the regulatory monitoring of food intake. There is some aggression articulated here, reflected in the further addition underneath the GIF emphasising the nothingness of the Other girl to the author: ‘hashtag no one cares’. The hashtag, amongst other uses, is a means of categorising, defining or providing detail for a post or status update (V. Miller, 2008). If used to categorise food, for example as #organic, it becomes searchable

as part of a stream of photos which have been tagged with the same word. ‘Hashtag #no one cares’ however, can be understood as a fairly blunt way of communicating distaste for this form of post, as well rebranding the practice as a category of things which attracts no interest.

The choice to exercise and monitor one’s diet prior to the American college ritual of ‘Spring Break’ is similarly derided in 2ndhandembarrassment, as a superficial practice of the Other girl who is positioned as a follower of the mainstream. Accordingly, the lack of concern with others’ food practices is used to perform an ‘alternative’ femininity. The author distinguishes herself as unconcerned with this annual ritualisation of the licensed surveying and assessment of women’s bodies. In the post, entitled ‘Pre Spring Break Fitness’, she documents the dominant attitude as: ‘I better start eating green shit, and jogging’. The GIF used to articulate this sentiment features Brandi Glanville, a long-running participant in the *Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* (Basker, French, & Ross, 2010), displaying Glanville’s long, sweeping blonde hair and her form-fitting pink dress in the setting of a showy living room. By contrast, the author’s pronounced attitude: ‘Jogging is the worst! I know it keeps you healthy – but *at what cost?*’ is articulated by Rashida Jones in her role as nurse Anne Perkins in the offbeat mockumentary-style comedy, *Parks and Recreation* (Daniels & Schur, 2009). The two are forcefully contrasted to produce a feeling of resistance, with the GIF representing ‘Me’/Anne Perkins, sitting just below the first GIF showcasing the predominant Spring Break attitude.



Figure 8. Jogging is the worst! 2ndhandembarrassment

Even without knowledge of the specific pop cultural context in which they are situated, arguably the juxtaposition of the two women operates through existing visual regimes of recognition which code them as contrasting forms of femininity. Through the simple architecture of the post in dividing ‘other people’ and ‘me’, the first woman’s embeddedness in representational regimes of conventional feminine bloneness/whiteness and the recognisability of the reality television format, positions her body and her fitness discourse to speak to a mainstream and superficial femininity. By contrast, the moment captured from *Parks and Recreation*, visually recognisable as part of a mockumentary television style, presents Anne Perkins as offering an ‘alternative’ voice. The daughter of musician Quincy Jones and actress Peggy Lipton, Rashida Jones, who plays Anne Perkins, is often the subject of heated debates relating to passing, blackness and whiteness (see, e.g. G. Miller, 2007). Here, she is coded as an ‘alternative’ femininity, in not corresponding to the

exaggeratedly feminine, elaborately made-up bloneness of the first speaker in the set of GIFs. This ‘alternativeness’ is appropriated to articulate a self which defies regulation.

This defiance of body regulation can still, however, be contradicted by the expression of body shame in the posts, suggesting a difficulty in escaping the postfeminist rules of body control. On *WhatShouldBetchesCallMe*, for example, a GIF of actor Ryan Reynolds nonchalantly stuffing his face with potato chips while saying, ‘I don’t really try’ is used to articulate the response to ‘when someone asks how I have such a great body’. Plugging in this GIF of junk food consumption to the caption constructing an enviable feminine body combines to produce a smug insouciance about how food is consumed. Other posts confessing body shame, however, undercut this smugness. A few months following the Ryan Reynolds post, the situation of ‘When there’s too many hot guys by where I’m laying out and I instantly regret eating this week’ is documented. The scenario suggests that the body of the author is stretched out for potential viewing and evaluation by the ‘hot guys’, resulting in the self-policing here. The reaction to this scenario is produced through a dramatic GIF of Jennifer Lawrence enacting terror, shaking, her hands clutching her head with the caption ‘MY BODY ISN’T READY’.



Figure 9. My body isn't ready. WSBCM

The above post references potential surveillance by ‘hot guys’, but the frustration and terror of the visible, scrutinised body is borne by its author as an individual burden, rather than taken out on the male viewers. Further, whilst this burden is taken out on the self, here, it is notable that most of the frustration evinced across the blogs in relation to these food/ body regulations is taken out on Other girls who, whether purely imagined or not, appear to participate in negotiating the same sets of rules. As Winch (2013) notes, in postfeminist girlfriend culture, dissatisfaction and rage in relation to feminine powerlessness are routinely channelled towards one’s own feminine body and those of other women.

Rage, however, is an unpalatable emotion. Accordingly, in the WSWCM public, humour is a way in which prickly and messy affects are converted into useful, (girl)friendly feelings. Rashida Jones’ statement ‘Jogging is the *worst*’ comically inverts the sanctimonious discourses of ‘healthism’ (Rose, 1999) by asking ‘at what cost’ one must undertake the loathed activity of jogging. The assertion of not being like Other girls is thus softened and made more amenable to distribution in the WSWCM public. Positivity, as van Dijck (2013) notes, is an affect which facilitates ‘sharing’ of posts in platforms where sociality, expressed through such circulation, is programmed to generate economic value. This evaluation of the economic value of affect and its spread demonstrates the reason, van Dijck suggests, Facebook employs a ‘like’ rather than ‘disgust’ button. Humour, then, is a technique employed in the blogs to render disgruntlement with the terms of feminine bodily normativity a lighter, distributable burden, amenable to further circulation.

In the above post documenting fears of being watched by ‘too many hot guys’, I suggest that the humour is partly derived from the sheer exaggeration of the sentiment of unreadiness. Lawrence’s expression of emotion surpasses what one would be expected to feel in a situation where there are ‘too many hot guys’. But Lawrence’s wild movements and contorted facial expression articulate a horror which is perhaps too difficult to efface by the intended humour of the post. Overall, a clear link is foregrounded in this post, between food and body shape. If food consumption is left unregulated, there might be ‘horrific’ results inscribed into the body. The way that the undesirability of one’s body after eating is expressed through the idea of ‘readiness’ is telling of the way that bodily appearance is deeply entangled within postfeminist understandings of the self. Rather than using physical descriptions such as ‘fat’ or ‘ugly’, the horror of a non-normative body is expressed through the psychic expression of (a lack of) ‘readiness’, positioning the body as a preparatory site of work.

Expression in terms of ‘readiness’ eschews the neat labelling of the ‘right’ weight or body shape, too easily critiqued; rather, it orients attention to individual *feelings*. Ringrose and Walkerdine (2008) and Tincknell (2011) suggest makeover discourses produce emotional redemption through the transformation of the body into a slimmer, more youthful looking ‘version’ of itself. The effect of these discourses is to produce the body, without supervision and ‘care’, as an always potentially abject site. Further, by suturing the transformation of the body into discourses of self-care (Negra, 2008), this burden of abjection is borne by the individual. As Negra (2008) emphasises, much of the rhetoric of postfeminist body perfectionism carefully reassures women of their own agency and competency of self-management. Women, then, only have themselves to blame for these feelings of horror if they do not ‘choose’ to take care of themselves, and to be ‘ready’ when the time requires it. Thus, the scream ‘my body isn’t ready’ thus takes on the burden of male surveillance, bearing it with humour, showing that the author *manages*. This performance of managing individualises gendered concerns into an amenable unit of distribution: the blog post which can be disseminated in the WSWCM public.

Sometimes, explicit resistance to governmental directives to monitor one’s food consumption is performed through actively avowing a love of food, as shown in the post ‘Literally every time that I have people at my apartment’ featuring Ellen DeGeneres ordering pizza. However, this is rarely done without some form of defensiveness. When ‘my level of excitement for every single meal I eat’ is documented on the founder blog through a large-bodied young man peeling cling-film off a hot bowl of food whose face speaks volumes of excitement, hands rubbing together in glee, this can be seen as a method of connecting with others and sharing a joy of anticipating eating. Yet, there is also a sense of self-deprecation in the scenario constructed through the caption and the GIF that relies on multiple layers of failed normativity. The question arises of *why* it is humorous that it be one’s reaction to *every* meal. I suggest this lies in the understanding that it is anomalous that a woman would look forward to consuming food *all the time*; essentially, it is a joke about gluttony and the way it detracts from conventions of feminine elegance and restraint.



Figure 10. Every Single Meal. WSWCM

The female glutton is also suggestive of non-normative bodily practices and features associated with the female ‘grotesque’ (Rowe, 1995; Winch, 2013), a figure that has an ambivalent, but sometimes transgressive history of being played for laughs. Yet, the rules of discipline in relation to food are acknowledged in the post through a reconstruction of the body as unruly and excessive. The post mobilises assumptions around the chubbiness of the young man, as a way of demonstrating an unbridled, feminine delight in food consumption. Further, the Asian male body in Western culture has a history of being constructed as effeminate and soft (Eng, 2001), reinforced by the shape of this young man whose body fails to conform to angular masculine standards. In the way this body is used to articulate a *feminine* lack of restraint, there is a sense that this body doubly fails at achieving raced, gendered normativity, in terms of masculinity and in terms of femininity, being soft, massive and ‘off-white’ (see also Negra, 2001). The femininity that this body is used to articulate is ‘off’. It is transgressive in its desires to consume food and the non-virtuous pleasures it enjoys through this consumption.

The admission of gluttony speaks to a recurring genre in the way the love of food comes across: the confessional. The author either draws attention to food deemed unhealthy, or to the *volume* of the food consumed, in citation of the norms of healthism discussed by Rose (1999). Healthism, as Rose observes, is a form of *normativity* which renders bodies

governable according to these standards. Such governmentality has particular resonance in feminine middle class intersections, where ‘health’ becomes a catch-all justification for food and body regulation. In her analysis of girlfriend-styled self-help literature, particularly in books on successful dieting, Winch (2013) argues that food is rationalised in function of whether or not one’s body matches a body shape coded as ‘healthy’. However, for women, this body shape is usually very slim. While it might be resented, the taken-for-granted nature of ‘healthiness’, and its associated postfeminist justifications for food regulation, is acknowledged as dominant mode of interpreting one’s consumption of food.

Food, then, is almost always politicised in the blogs. What I suggest is evident in the posts, is both the acknowledgement of the legitimacy of standards of postfeminist regulation coupled with a certain determination to express the individual ability to bear the burden of managing them. The postfeminist rationalisation of food hovers, spectre-like, in the way that resistance and celebration of food is articulated through the blogs. Accordingly, a complex entanglement of affects and discourses about food consumption emerges, as synecdoche for the self. Food must be rationalised in postfeminist terms relating to its potential effect on body shape. Even holding up excessive eating as a form of proud transgression can be seen as the visible effect of the compulsion to take a stance in relation to food, when postfeminist rules requires its constant justification. The way in which food consumption is repetitively documented in terms of *volume* suggests that the distinction between flouting the rules, and the self-governing practice of documenting and counting food, is liminal and prone to slippage.

Such liminality is arguably manifested in the post, ‘when a really skinny person is talking about how much junk food they eat’. The GIF, a close-up of the face of drag queen Bianca del Rio of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (Murray, 2009), captures a slow, unimpressed, blinking accentuated by the stupendous length of the false eyelashes.

WHEN A REALLY SKINNY
PERSON IS TALKING
ABOUT HOW MUCH JUNK
FOOD THEY EAT



Figure 11. Really skinny person. WSWCM

Though the posts on the founder blog also produce a joyous and copious consumption of junk food, as I have shown above, the bored distaste shown on the face of the drag queen here suggests the postfeminist rule governing the rationalisation of food is the dominant frame of meaning here. Despite the fact that the founder blog over and above the other blogs tends to repeatedly discuss the amount of junk food eaten, the skinny girl, another version of the Other girl, is not permitted to do so. Her slim body expresses the fact that her food issues are already resolved. The disaffection with the words of the skinny girl demonstrates the centrality of the overarching postfeminist significance and signification of food. The way in which food is talked about is only received with interest in the WSWCM public if one confesses some sort of struggle with managing food, that is, where food consumption is deemed to contribute to a body exceeding the slim contours of the postfeminist norm. Talking about food is received in the interests of *commonality*; but the skinny girl is too 'other' for commonality to exist. In an intimate public informed by values of girlfriendship where quotidian struggles are recorded so that women can see other women *manage* similar problems, the skinny Other girl does not have a 'struggle' to document.

Laughing through the discomfort

The *burden* of body and food regulation is widely invoked. Yet the feeling rules relating to the way this burden is spoken are observed so that the recognition of this burden does not cause the reader discomfort and so that these feelings are amenable to distribution. I underline how food, while positioned as one of the central struggles of managing femininity, is discussed in such a way in the WSWCM public that it cannot be explicitly called out as a *problem*. While the author might voice some discontentment, she cannot show that she takes the issues surrounding food too seriously. I draw attention to the way in which the feeling rules surrounding articulation of self-regulation require *humour*. As I suggest above in relation to the way in which humour creates value from unpalatable feelings, humour can be understood as key to defusing the perception that one is overly impacted by the feelings of frustration, shame, or resentment channelled towards Other girls or the very feeling rule regulating food consumption. The self-deprecating humour in the textual transaction of the post allows the author to both make light of and make *use* of unattractive feelings, presenting the self for the humorous pleasure of the reader.

According to the relational framework governing circulation in the WSWCM public, self-branded foibles must be made funny, for consumption by others. Ultimately, whilst acknowledging the power and legitimacy of postfeminist rationalisation of food, young women must not admit the extent of its power over their own wellbeing. They can have it both ways if they navigate *between* what are constructed as extremes. The author is accordingly approachable but individual; knowing but not overly resistant. As with the post criticising the ‘insta-bragging’ of Other girls relating to their healthy food consumption, it is inappropriate to inundate readers with too much information. The author shows that she loves food but has the same fears as others in the WSWCM space. In this intimate public, young women can show they belong without ‘detaching from a disappointing and dangerous world’ (Berlant, 2008, p. 3) of body shame and discipline.

Being able to present reactions to food consumption as an object of humour provides some distance from the self: a distance that an author can use to present herself as *knowing*. As Gill (2007) points out, knowingness is also a key instrument through which one can be inoculated against gendered injustice. If the author ‘knows’ that an image or ideal might be sexist, and can cite its sexism knowingly and humorously, she is somehow deemed, in a

circular motion, to be immune to the sexism. Similarly, if a young woman can cite the feeling of body shame with humour, she is deemed to be inoculated against that feeling. With this circular movement, the author is made to comply with the feeling rules corresponding with the luminosity of appearance, shoring up the resilience the postfeminist subject must show. Though she may not feel happy about her body, she must be able to communicate this dissatisfaction in a comical fashion, at once shoring up the importance of the regulatory standard but importantly, bearing it with good humour. Above all, the postfeminist subject is not a burden to others; she cheerfully manages her own burden. As with the well known example of the Delta flight attendants of Hochschild's (1983/2003) study into gendered emotional labour, the work of femininity requires the performance of emotional availability and the ability to take and transform unpleasant feelings into comfortable ones, for others.

In their conversion of the difficulties and dangerous pleasures of food consumption into shareable, humorous moments for distribution, we can observe the understood importance of *recognisability* for the reader. Sharing one's troubles in a feminine world through a humorous format enabling uncomfortable feelings to circulate, provides a form of connection with many, indefinite others in the WSWCM public. Humour becomes a form of fun, easy connection in a relationship that is mainly effected through the text rather than sustained through other means. The mutual recognition in the *joke* invites further connection in the consumption of more upbeat moments, based on shared struggles. It presumes a form of invulnerability on behalf of both reader and author, flattering both sides of the branded relationship. The reader and author participate in a shared imaginary where they are able to *manage*. The reader can thus continue to consume experiences of resilient femininity, participating in an intimate public where the discomforts of contemporary femininity are acknowledged, but where all manage to go on.

The affect that settles in the public is one of self-deprecation and dissatisfaction with one's body, but is always light-heartedly phrased as though to disavow the seriousness of this dissatisfaction. Hence, in response to the FAQ 'what do you look like', published on the founder blog, the response is the picture of a fish which resembles an unstructured, blobby human face.



Figure 12. What do you look like? WSWCM

The response of the blobby fish to the question is both funny and knowingly self-deprecating. Whilst it is most likely an absurd contention that the young women would resemble this anthropomorphised fish, such a statement fits with the humour of the blog in which the founder bloggers consistently avow failure to meet beauty norms. Yet, there is a contradiction in this comical response on the FAQ page and the bloggers' depictions in the cartoonish header of the blog. As I show in Chapter Seven, the header features two girlish caricatures of the friends, both with large eyes, long hair and tiny bodies. I suggest constructing the self as both blobby and cartoonishly girlish may be understood as responding to the imperatives of being normatively recognisable and *sociable* in the WSWCM public. The image of the bloggers in the header is instantly recognisable as 'feminine'; but sociality in this intimate public is predicated upon participating in the shared struggles over body shape. Accordingly, regardless of looks, documenting issues with body maintenance is a way of enacting commonality. Being carefree about one's appearance does not have much purchase in an intimate public where showing how one *manages* requires grappling with some trouble, complexity or hurdle.

The FAQ that precedes the question about appearance on the founder blog: 'Do you do anything other than eat?' reveals a further negotiation of feminine regulation. It is not clear whether or not this question may have been created for laughs by the founder bloggers,

but the response ‘we drink and occasionally do some work’, knowingly plays with the norms of industriousness and food (and alcohol) consumption. By knowing the norms, the author can try to have it both ways: she can perform minor transgression, but still be recognised in relation to the norm. Humour is used by the author in the WSWCM public to show she is not *really* a ‘victim’ of the rules she cites, which the expression of anger or the expression of a distinctly unfunny dejection might reveal. The repetitive documenting of the transgression of the food rules must not be too anxious, or too sad.

Such navigation between extremes, between acknowledging the ‘feeling rule’ and the discomfort it produces, but not being *too* unhappy about it, is a way of managing the self. This makes sense, given that the author in this public does the work of distilling the messiness of her feelings and shame into something that is lighter, more controllable and useable. This form of careful navigation speaks directly to fostering relations with others. Self-government, and being seen to self-govern, then, can be argued to underpin the feminine relationality of the public. Accordingly, whilst the bloggers might, ‘in reality’, govern themselves under the terms they describe, this cannot be ascribed simply to the ‘internalisation’ of postfeminist feeling rules. The terms of self-government are not simply the bloggers’ own, nor abstract postfeminist laws, but the *terms of author-reader relationality* in the public. Being seen to be like others in managing key sites of femininity in an intimate public offers a form of recognition for both authors and readers.

Flouting the feeling rules: having the wrong attitude at work and university

Feeling rules, then, play a central role in self-management and the way that young women are relationally disposed to others. Such acknowledgement plays out in the distinct sense of ‘moderation’ with which management is achieved. The author can critique, more generally, the expectations of body regulation, however, the author is understood to be inoculated against those same expectations through her ability to navigate between extremes. The author navigates the ‘excess’ of Other girls who are viewed as overly obsessed with dieting, but demonstrably still cares about norms of food consumption. The discerning choice is to pursue the path ‘in the middle’, though this path is still governed by the understanding that one may only eat in function of one’s body shape.

I now explore how this form of navigation operates through the luminous domain of ambition and productivity in which the young postfeminist woman is ostensibly set out as the new, meritocratic figure of achievement (Dobson & Harris, 2015). Here, contradictory postfeminist imperatives are evident: the obligation to fit in with an institutionalised mass-mode of compulsory progression and professional development, and the injunction to perform a strong ‘individuation’ which makes a young woman stand out. Accordingly, my affective-discursive analysis finds articulations of resistance against expectations of being constituted as professional, *attitudinally* adept workers. An overt antagonism can be found across the blogs towards the compulsoriness of achievement in relation to university and paid work. This defiance additionally takes as its object the emotional zeal for work which feeling rules require. Yet, as I explore further in this section, this defiance may also be partly explained by the need to differentiate oneself from Other girls, or other students in general, and the need to facilitate the sense of girlfriend commonality and relatability present in the WSWCM public.

I first examine the rebelliousness evident in the post: ‘when I decide to leave class early, but have to walk in front of the professor to get to the door.’ Put together with this caption is a GIF from the film *The Devil Wears Prada* (Brosh McKenna, 2006) featuring actress Meryl Streep as the powerful and tyrannical boss of a fashion magazine. The GIF features Streep, who has just stepped into an elevator, garbed in an elegant long black coat and black gloves. She theatrically dons a pair of sunglasses to signal her inaccessibility and aloofness, and at this same moment, the all upper case caption ‘DEAL WITH IT’ appears in the GIF, infusing a bold indifference to the imagined reaction of the obstructed professor.



Figure 13. Deal with it. WSWCM

The image of Streep here channels a certain ‘devil-may-care’ insouciance and a stylish disregard for the authority figure of the university professor. Streep, in colloquial terms, is a ‘boss’, not only in her role within the cited filmic text, but in this GIF which remakes the text. A ‘boss’ in contemporary slang is a person who exudes an affect of toughness, coolness, and power. The ‘boss’ might in fact hold a position of power; more importantly, their demeanour confirms it. If a professor is frustrated with this ‘boss’, they simply have to ‘DEAL WITH IT’. Here, the curtness in Streep’s movements, together with the sophistication suggested by her attire, combines to position this rebelliousness as legitimate, merited and ‘cool’. The post both acknowledges the institutional standing of the professor in the words ‘when I have to walk in front of the professor’, presumably in front of the class, at the same time it enacts a defiance of that very authority. A similar lack of investment in attending class is notable in another post, simply entitled ‘In class’. In the post, the author is juxtaposed to ‘everyone else’ who is conveyed by a cartoon figure of a boy madly typing at a computer, tongue sticking out with effort, labouring feverishly away at recording the words of the professor. ‘Me’, by way of contrast, is performed by the GIF of a young man reclining, snoring, in a lecture theatre amidst rows of empty seats.

The productive labour which is channelled by the ideal ambitious neoliberal top girl that smashes through obstacles is notably discursively eschewed here. Across the blogs, industriousness and effort are never matched with achieving goals; study usually occurs when hopelessly behind set schedules of learning or production for examination. ‘Writing papers after midnight’, on 2ndhandembarrassment, is summed up by incompetent office manager Michael Scott from the American version of comedy series *The Office* (Daniels, Gervais, & Merchant, 2005). He says blithely, ‘Sometimes I’ll start a sentence and I don’t even know where it’s going. I just hope I find it along the way.’ On another blog, Michael Scott is used again to perform a slowness and stupidity that is used for collective humour. ‘When I sit front row engineering’, the situation is illustrated through one of Michael Scott’s catchphrases. He begins saying, in a slow measured way, ‘I... understand...’. The camera then rapidly zooms into his face, accentuating the blankness of his gaze. He finishes his phrase: ‘Nothing.’

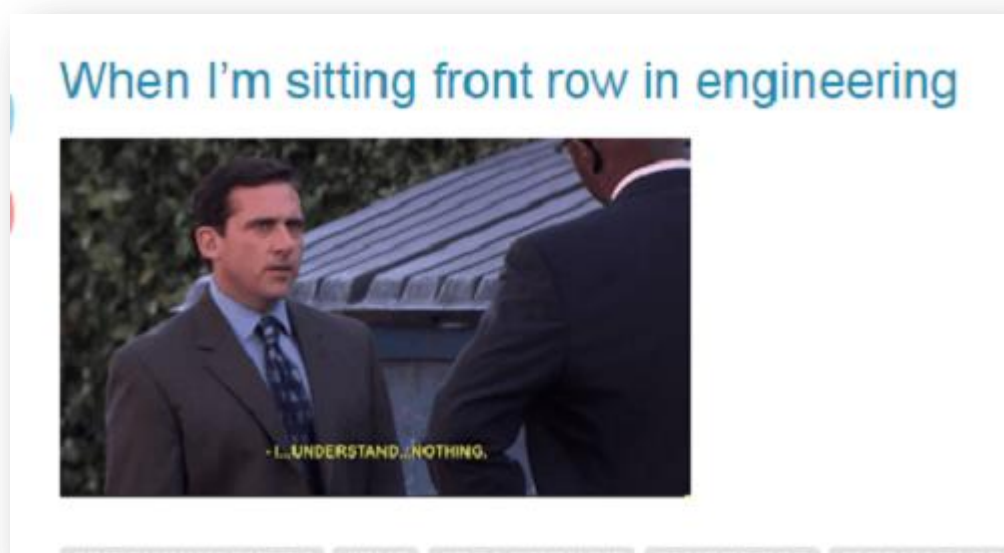


Figure 14. When I'm sitting front row in engineering. Pitchin' Hissy Fits

The repudiation of work and achievement that is done here may only be speakable in the context of having *already* demonstrated middle class value through acceptance into university. The citation of university experience that is *expected* to be recognisable and understandable indicates an imbrication of the blogs within middle class culture. The declared unwillingness or inability to make diligent efforts, then, may be situated within normative predeterminations that university life is an expected, compulsory form of life progression. As such, these moments of idleness and passivity, rather than activity, constitute the small outlets through which rebellion may be articulated. Further, given that it is the

aspirational middle class subject (Skeggs, 2004, 2009; Skeggs & Loveday, 2012) that best exemplifies the feeling rules associated with the luminosity of ambition and productivity, articulating discontentment through being uninterested, or ‘stupid’, may be the most viable affective means of managing the compulsoriness of university achievement.

Further, the need to maintain a sense of commonality according to the relational framework of the public also plays into the way in which these feelings of difficulty are articulated. Though postfeminist feeling rules ostensibly mandate that the author demonstrate ambitiousness, positivity and a can-do attitude, cultivating a sense of connection in an intimate public requires that the author show she manages or makes do. As Berlant (2008, p. 2) argues, an intimate public fosters affective proximity through shared articulations of ‘disappointment, but not disenchantment.’ *Managing* in the university context requires the author to relate experiences of wasted labour, toil and struggle, without articulating a complete sense of alienation from the university. The university, though a place of disappointment, still preserves its place as a site of normative life progression. Relating these problems as part of an ongoing bid to manage one’s university experience may be useful in building girlfriend commonality, extracting relational value from these struggles to further the circulation of posts. Such struggles still adhere to the rules of moderation which I have discussed in relation to food; indeed, the incidents of failing to meet standards are relatively minor, and are still *funny*. Dropping out of university, failing a subject or critiquing the over-supply of graduates are topics which are not to be found in the circulation of posts. The character Michael Scott from *The Office* is used to signal pure incompetency, but in a knowing and playful way. Using Meryl Streep to signify the carefree dismissal of class attendance also hams up the transgression it articulates. In the GIFs, these acts of defiance and incomprehension are performed as *excessive* to signal knowledge of the appropriate navigation of undergraduate experience.

Paid work is featured as another problem to manage across the blogs, though not in all, as some focus uniquely on managing the undergraduate experience. This site of management is treated similarly to university. On TwoDumbGirls, reluctance to do paid work is played up. ‘When my boss asks me to work a double,’ this request to engage in more labour is met with the reaction of kooky Phoebe Buffay from the sitcom *Friends* (Crane & Kauffman, 1994). Phoebe says, ‘Oh, I wish I could, but I don’t want to’ in a comedically lacklustre attempt to provide an excuse for not working. The humour lies in playing with understood norms of industriousness, in a way befitting the vagueness associated with ‘Two

Dumb Girls’. Constructing work as ‘boring’ is also a way of playfully enacting a type of ‘blonde’ girliness uninterested in serious work, consistent with the tone struck in the blog overall. In this vein, another emblematic post of the blog registers the offence felt ‘when my sister says I’m looking less blonde’. However, the expected attitude of industriousness is implicitly acknowledged, given that the bald statement of indifference to work is delivered as a *punchline*. The punchline is humorous, because it is incongruous with the expected response to one’s boss.

‘When I start racking up the mental health days (sick days) at work’ is a similar post featured on WhatShouldBitchesCallMe that mobilises the comical lack of social awareness of Jessa, a character from the acclaimed HBO television show *Girls* (Dunham, 2012). The show centres on the lives of four young socially privileged women struggling to achieve the professional milestones expected of them after college. These difficulties often coincide with a discomfiting lack of awareness on the part of the Girls for the feelings of their friends, and social norms.



Figure 15. Racking up the mental health days. WSBCM

In the GIF, Jessa, who particularly prides herself on living an independent, bohemian lifestyle, muses to her cousin, Shoshanna: ‘You know what the weirdest part about having a job is? You have to be there, even on days you don’t feel like it’. The quote knowingly enacts

Jessa's privileged status as someone who has never had to do paid work, and pokes fun at the fact that Jessa finds the basic contractual underpinning of employment, 'weird'.

The post may also signal the toll that being part of the paid workforce takes. It has been suggested by Leonard (2007) that articulating boredom with work is a means of resisting the capitalist construction of the contemporary 'working woman' as progressive and a form of freedom. However, the alpha female branding of WhatShouldBetchesCallMe, which I discuss further in Chapter Seven, suggests that this post must also be read as a humorous way of articulating self-prioritisation, and a classed lack of concern for work altogether. In both the *Friends* post and the *Girls* post, this resistance is articulated through techniques of branding, attaching the reluctance to do work to branded feminine types: the 'betch' and the 'blonde'. It is worth making the point that these funny, workshy femininities may be more prominent in the youthful, undergraduate bias of the public: a public predicated on belonging to the world of full time work may yield different techniques of sociality and self-management (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011).

Relief from the imperative to engage in paid work is hammed up in the post 'Friday at 5pm after it's been a stressful week'. This decompression is channelled through a GIF presumably excerpted from a WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) fight scene. A very large man in a T-shirt, arms bulging with muscles, smashes two beer cans together and pours both rapidly and simultaneously down his throat. The T-shirt reads 'Been There, Destroyed That.' The sheer excessiveness of the GIF in the massiveness of the man and the explosion of the beer is key to the humour of the post.

FRIDAY AT 5PM AFTER IT'S BEEN A STRESSFUL WEEK



Figure 16. Friday at 5pm. WSWCM

This excessiveness constructs and foregrounds a humorous incongruity with the established femininity of the bloggers. As a woman, one is not to celebrate the end of work in such a flamboyant and messy way. The humour lies in exaggerating transgression in this over the top, masculine figure, while at the same time, the rules of moderation are implicitly acknowledged.

Being situated within postfeminist matrices of work and value is not easy. Despite the resistance articulated towards work discussed above, the importance of professional progression is not easily dismissed particularly given the entrenchment of the WSWCM public within middle class cultures of value. Posts about school articulate stress, cynicism and an inability to properly manage one's workload. Pleasure in doing well in an exam is only shared on the odd occasion. Yet, it must be understood that the way these moments are humorously articulated extract girlfriendship value from otherwise unpalatable emotions, showing commonality in engagement with postfeminist luminous domains. The articulation of disappointment and struggle becomes a way of citing understood norms and demonstrating management of them.

One post in the founder blog exemplifies this point, where a car in traffic on a highway is used to demonstrate 'every time I start to catch up on my reading', discussed further in Chapter Five. The car in the GIF starts to speed up – but then crashes into a barrier on the side of the road (Figure 22). Evidently the author's positive start to managing her

reading results in spectacular failure. However, the author is still attempting to catch up on her reading; she is still imbricated within the assumptions and motivations of the world of work. A similar post documents ‘how I feel when brainstorming thesis topics’, articulated by Adam Levine, a singer and judge on reality talent show *The Voice* ("The Voice," 2011). Levine states, deadpan: ‘I’m a stupid person with bad ideas’. Yet, the commitment to writing a thesis and brainstorming ideas surely counteracts Levine’s harsh words to some extent. This mixture of responsabilisation and inadequacy can be located within the intersections of youthful, middle class (white) femininity in this public, in which academic achievement is both normative and taken for granted.

I additionally observe a certain humorous cynicism and weariness in describing the transition to the workforce. On the feeling when ‘graduating college and entering the real world’, the founder blog uses the GIF of a baby using a mobile walker, with wheels, who suddenly falls – epitomising the sudden shock of a relatively inexperienced person entering the race for employment. As noted on TwoDumbGirls, once having fulfilled the accepted pathway of finishing university, the young person is immediately subject to exacting, disciplinary pressures to engage in economically ‘productive’ activity. Exclusion from this system can be demoralising. ‘Life as an unemployed college graduate’, according to TwoDumbGirls, is expressed through the deadpan response of middle-aged father Bob Pinciotti, from television comedy *That ‘70s Show* (Brazill, Turner, & Turner, 1998): ‘I got a lot of free time. I mainly use it to nap and cry.’

LIFE AS AN UNEMPLOYED COLLEGE GRADUATE

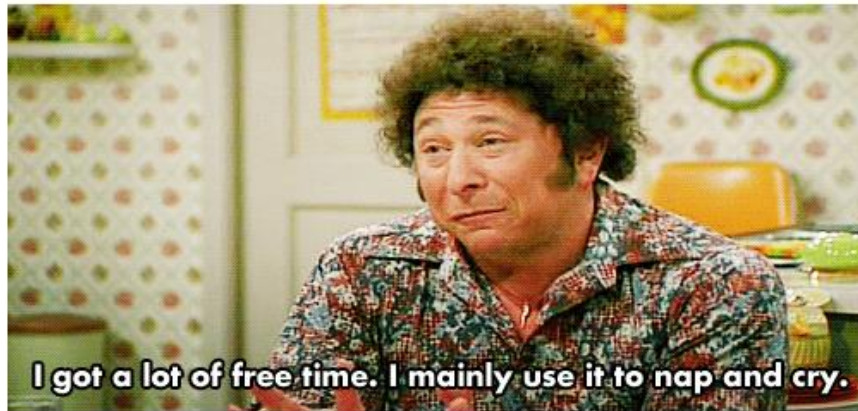


Figure 17. Life as an unemployed college graduate. TwoDumbGirls

I also return to the post on the same blog,' when my parents tell me to get off the couch and do something with my life'. The post, as I have outlined, features a young woman stating directly to the camera, 'give me a pillow, give me some snacks because I'm not going anywhere', illustrating the feeling accompanying increasingly barren job searches. This dejection more broadly speaks to the difficulties of being a young person in need of work in neoliberal cultural and economic systems. In the face of fewer opportunities to find stable, permanent work, young people are increasingly told to embrace this risk (Harris, 2004), 'take responsibility' (Ouellette, 2009) and 'self-brand' to do this (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Hearn, 2006).

What is palpable in the blogs is the sense that, while paid work might be unrewarding, failure in obtaining employment speaks more profoundly to a failure of the (neoliberal) self. Yet, the dejection related to these difficulties is narrated in such a way that it does not overpower the good-humoured mix of affective moments circulated. The author extracts what value she can from perceived failures by articulating them humorously. Humour provides the distance required to minimise the disappointment, resentment or disaffection articulated in posts, rendering them amenable to further circulation. Though such expressions of downbeat inadequacy might rub against the feeling rule associated with the enterprising and ambitious subject, I suggest that they maintain the normative affective framework within which the self may be viewed as valuable and relatable. Expressing these feelings of failure, but comically,

preserves the status of luminosities as affective regulations which ought to be observed, while attempting to demonstrate a pleasing commonality in the *struggle* to adhere to them.

Celebrating and undercutting idleness

I now explore how idleness and apathy, beyond the system of university and work, are constructed as a celebrated theme in the blogs through which the postfeminist luminosity of ambition and productivity is negotiated. The theme is enacted in expressions of delight in leisure, such as the exaggerated drinking of beer like a WWE wrestler featured in the above post on ‘Friday at 5pm after it’s been a stressful week’. This may also be performed as a stubborn desire to be left alone: on WhatShouldWeCollegeMe, the will to take time to relax is channelled in the post ‘When someone tells me to stop watching so much TV over break’. The GIF features three adolescent boys lying on their stomachs watching television in a lounge room, sending accusatory looks to an authority figure off camera, interrupting their leisure time. Such time is precious and treasured. A similar post on the founder blog uses a GIF of two baby ferrets rolling around on a wooden floor to perform ‘Me and my roommate on Sundays’. The affect of glorious indulgence in rest, by being horizontal, on the floor and moving only to suit oneself, is circulated in the movements of these small animal bodies.



Figure 18. Me and my roommate on Sundays. WSWCM

However, this idleness, when it is celebrated, is often produced in a socially sanctioned form. For example, it is often referred to as something that occurs on Sunday, a

recognisable Anglo-American shorthand for the permissible day of rest, the weekend day where one sleeps more, eats breakfast later, and so on. On 2ndhandEmbarrassment, a post constructs what happens on ‘Sundays. Also any other day.’ The situation is articulated by the young actress, Jennifer Lawrence, laughing charmingly in what appears to be an interview. She says, ‘if I don’t have anything to do all day, I might not even put my pants on.’ The purported afterthought of ‘also any other day’ both reconstructs the status of Sunday as normative day for leisure and the rebelliousness of the author in adopting a less than productive attitude. ‘Any other day’, extends the days that idleness may be celebrated and indulged in, on the proviso that the author doesn’t ‘have anything to do’. This rebellion is performed through a feminine conspiratorial whisper, both acknowledging awareness of the affective-discursive rules governing feminine self-monitoring, appearance and industriousness, while playing with them.



Figure 19. Sunday, also any other day. 2ndhandembarrassment

It could be argued that the choice of Jennifer Lawrence as a vehicle for this rebellion is fitting, as a figure that is able to flout conventional rules of femininity relating to elegance, moderation and control. Her well-documented trips on the red carpet, and excited and voluble reactions are often made into GIFs and circulated on sites such as Tumblr. However, arguably, she is able to flout these rules, ultimately, *through* a charming girliness, practised through a body which is coded as girled, white and heterosexually attractive (Kanai, 2015; Petersen, 2014). The post simultaneously invites judgment through the confession of

weakness but undercuts any possible disciplinary viewing in *virtue* of its humorous avowal. In being self-deprecating, the author beats others to the pronouncement of judgment.

Consequently, this rebellion against norms of postfeminist demeanour and attire might also be part of this girlish play: the offering up to readers of what might be otherwise deemed as a fault, but not a serious one, as it is redeemed through feminine, self-deprecating humour. After all, one might ask, why is it worthy of posting whether or not a young woman decides to get dressed in her own leisure time? Why is it *funny* that she does not get dressed? The post cites a broader awareness of the publicness of highly personal feminine practices. As with *Heat* magazine's collective, conspiratorial address to a female audience in the discussion of female celebrities' weight gain (Winch, 2013), women's practices around their bodies are understood as open for discussion.

Winch (2013) observes how women who occupy positions of authority within girlfriendship popular culture employ a mixture of affects to enact intimate discipline, veering between cruelty, humour, irony and warmth. This mixture of sisterly intimacy and normative judgment shows how postfeminist regulatory frameworks incorporate and permeate forms of feminine relationality. There is the sense that the author should not be too comfortable with her idleness; she responsibly reports (and makes use of) her laziness by confessing it in girlfriend-friendly terms for a broader readership. In this way, the author is able to access the recognition of the girlfriend reader as a *not too unruly* subject. The author provides an account of her foibles, errors and moderately embarrassing mistakes, which are then available for circulation on the basis that these slight transgressions offer a sense of warmth and connection. Yet, these accounts of minor transgression also serve to shore up the centrality of the regulatory framework of postfeminist luminous domains, here, becoming part of how young women may relate to and find commonality with each other.

As others have argued in relation to the postfeminist imperatives of body 'maintenance' and perfection reflected in lifestyle and reality television (Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008; Roberts, 2007; Tincknell, 2011; Winch, 2013), the expectation that women look put together at all times does not become less compulsory now that women must articulate this body maintenance as 'for themselves'. Positioning the celebration of idleness within this regulatory context, the confession of apathy can be seen as a response to luminous postfeminist standards and expectations of productive work. These posts are only available to be read as humorous within the interpretive girlfriend premise that this type of work is

expected. This attention to one's idleness, then, could also potentially be understood as the product of a feminine anxiety related to the requirements of productivity, defused/diffused through humour. Even while antagonism to the governmental pressures of university, work and bodily maintenance might be felt, such feelings in the WSWCM public can only be articulated in humorous, bite-sized moments. As the founder bloggers avow to their *Forbes* interviewer: 'neither one of us takes the other or ourselves seriously' (Cassery, 2012).

As I have suggested throughout this chapter, a sense of *moderation* is used to carve out a space of recognition for the author in this intimate public, but this moderation requires that discomfort be downplayed and extremity be enacted by Other girls. We see, then, how minor transgressions that are confessed in a consumable, entertaining form for others, while ostensibly rebelling from these feeling rules, require these very rules for their recognisability. This imbrication within the world made possible by these feeling rules suggests that postfeminist luminosities are very deeply and intimately entwined within not only self-management but cultures of sociality built around them. What becomes evident through the affective-discursive analysis I have undertaken is a contemporary femininity which articulates a contestation of postfeminist standards of productivity and 'togetherness' in relation to work, demeanour and appearance, but in an ultimately benign way. This inoffensive resistance is shown in the way practices of idleness and enjoyment of 'doing nothing' still constitute an item worthy of (humorous) confession, or 'performative shamelessness' (Dobson, 2014), similarly to how the generous consumption of food is something considered worthy of note. As with a young woman's relation to food, idleness in her own home is described through a curiously *upbeat*, theatrical disaffection with postfeminist affective compulsion. Humour, again, is a way to manage the standards of zealousness and industriousness bound up in self-monitoring and measuring. Accordingly, in relation to the most 'private' practices of the self, like getting dressed in one's home, this resistance can only be articulated with a metaphorical smile.

Playing by/with the postfeminist feeling rules?

The author in the WSWCM public operationalises her feminine knowledge of luminous postfeminist affective-discursive regulation, using them as a springboard for producing herself as a branded text, showing her awareness of norms even as she humorously

manages and downplays their impact. The scaffolding of postfeminist regulation provide structures against which to position and produce the self, inviting girlfriend scrutiny of one's 'conduct of conduct' in easy to digest, regular, bite-sized fragments. Even while defiance of postfeminist norms of moderation, measurement and rationalisation might be articulated, the ongoing attachment to these norms shows that postfeminist feeling rules regulating how the self may be related to others are deeply embedded within youthful feminine 'common sense'. To say that the feeling rules now form part of 'common sense', however, does not mean that they are interpreted and enacted uniformly. As I have sought to demonstrate, there is a palpable mixture of affects in the negotiations of postfeminist regulation taking place in the blogs. Overall, postfeminist regulation is recognised as a framework through which the self may be related to others, whether or not self-management under these terms is wholeheartedly adopted by the author. As such, though postfeminist feeling rules are almost always implicitly acknowledged, the range of feelings, including *ambivalence* towards these rules, must be noted.

In the affective-discursive material that circulates in the WSWCM public, I contend that postfeminist feeling rules are constructed as overly restrictive. In their citation, instrumentalisation and the small rebellions from them, there lies an understanding that they are not workable, in and of themselves. Nevertheless, young women are showing *how they manage them*. Showing how one relates to the rule is a way of seeking recognisability. Being seen to manage the rules, succeed by them, or fail at them, become common girlfriendship reference points. Accordingly, the consistent referencing of feeling rules by the blogs suggest that postfeminism is not only deeply implicated in, but productive of forms of feminine sociality. Even as it is resisted by young women, it is also used by them to further abstract relationships with readers. Postfeminism, then, provides a shorthand way for young women to account for themselves to other young women, within its terms of value. The relational framework of the public requires authors to produce sunny feelings of commonality in depicting their struggles, though no explicit 'support' is necessarily forthcoming from readers.

My contention is that the bloggers demonstrate a way of managing postfeminist feeling rules to build a relationality with unknown others, without necessarily celebrating the deep, inhering individuality celebrated in postfeminist media discourses. In humorously confessing or curating a collection of moments where the author shows how she manages, there is an invitation to commonality that exceeds the disciplinary and strategic girlfriendship

which Winch (2013) describes. Girlfriendship here is not about the mutual exercise of discipline of author and reader. Whilst the invitation is extended within the understanding of a branded relationship, it lacks the instrumentality of the forms of girlfriendship Winch discusses. The relationality here provides a vague sense of connection to those participating in the textual transaction, the weak ties of feeling part of a shared imaginary in an intimate public.

Such nebulous feelings of commonality may, indeed, not be sufficient to mobilise a sense of *solidarity* or political resistance. In Berlant's (2008) view, they may in fact reaffirm one's attachment to terms of living that are unjust and self-defeating. Their very vagueness works to obscure the terms upon which commonality is felt. But the question of organised resistance is not the subject of inquiry of this thesis; my more modest question centres on how postfeminism is *lived* as relational identity practice as shown in its reinterpretations by young women. Showing how one manages its terms, through an upbeat, knowing and playful disposition, effects a girlfriend commonality between author and reader, a strategy for 'surviving, thriving and transcending' (Berlant, 2008, p. 2) the individualism of neoliberal social contexts. As I go on to discuss, such girlfriendship, through the rich social imaginary it invokes, provides an important means through which belonging may be enacted in the WSWCM public.

5 The work of the reader in the WSWCM public

Introducing the social imaginary of the WSWCM public

In the previous chapter, I outlined how the WSWCM public operates on an affective relationality that I term spectatorial girlfriendship, tied to the presumption of shared understandings and engagement with postfeminist luminous regulation. I now further explore how the social imaginary of this intimate public is constructed through spectatorial girlfriendship and examine the way Tumblr's rhythms and mechanisms of circulation, and the material features of the texts circulated, shape how readers may belong in it. To explain what I mean by social imaginary, I begin with an anecdote of the founder bloggers from an interview in the early days of success of their blog. The anecdote concerns the eye-catching structure of posts on their blog, which contributed to making what was initially a set of 'inside jokes' between friends, extremely popular with Tumblr and other web audiences. The posts produce humorous meaning by matching a caption describing an everyday circumstance with an ostensibly unrelated GIF image as the punchline. The feminine discourses put forward in these posts capture moments: reactions, bite-sized pieces of lives that are understood to be intelligible within the few seconds it takes for the GIF to unfold.

When an interviewer from *Forbes* magazine asks the founder bloggers, 'why are GIFs so funny?' one of the bloggers explains by reference to one of their favourites, a GIF of a herd of sheep rapidly circling a slowly moving car. I extract a screen grab of the blog post in which this GIF features below, 'when you're the only sober person walking through a crowded bar'.



Figure 20. Only Sober Person. WSWCM

The blogger elaborates:

I think part of it is that you're taking a picture of something that totally doesn't apply to what you're talking about in the broader sense, but once you put a caption on it, a light bulb just goes off and it makes sense.... I mean, that picture is funny by itself, but then you add the caption "How you feel when you're the only sober person in a bar," and it somehow just makes sense.

Because everything around you is just too much, and you're moving slowly through the crowd and nobody cares about you because they're all just drunk and having a good time. You're the car... They're always totally random situations in gifs, and once you put that caption on it and it's just like, Bingo (Casserly, 2012).

The point that I wish to make through extracting this anecdote is that the meaning of the post is not simply 'there', waiting to be uncovered. Even if an individual can read the words above the GIF, 'when you're the only sober person walking through a crowded bar', the post as a whole might not make sense. The circulating sheep and the car might retain an undissolvable autonomy from the caption; the reader might not be able to make the leap to understanding that the collation of image and text together seeks to articulate the metaphorical feeling associated with the situation. Additionally, being able to view the animation of the GIF in its online context, rather than a static image, assists in equating the

rapid movement of the sheep and the overwhelmed feeling of navigating the unpredictable traffic of a crowded bar.

Accordingly, being able to ‘read’ the post does not rely on the direct de-coding of the words and the car and the sheep. Rather, it shows how reading this post draws on and recreates an imaginative re-living of a social moment. The reader understands that what is articulated is a feeling experienced by someone else, whilst also *recognising* that same feeling on a personal level. The reader draws out and identifies a specific link between two different situations based on a conceptual repertoire of experience, a form of social literacy that the reader brings to the text to make the joke ‘work’. The work of reading thus bridges both the personal and the social, using the reader’s literacy to imagine a shared feminine world.

In this chapter, I suggest that reading can be understood as an affective practice which produces a (real) social imaginary and configures relations with others. As a material practice, then, reading is key in the formation of the WSWCM public. I seek to use this concept of reading, together with the idea of spectatorial girlfriendship, as the foundation for understanding the relationality of the WSWCM public through its social imaginary. Drawing on the work of Warner (2002), my starting point is underlining that the WSWCM public at its most basic level is made up of the circulation of digital texts which create a space for discourse. I discuss how this discourse is made up by readers and a social imaginary that is structured through readers’ encounter with WSWCM texts.

By readers, I mean not simply the engaged Tumblr users who ‘follow’ the blogs, and who interact with WSWCM texts through reblogging and liking their posts. This public also more broadly encompasses those who are addressed by it and are able to decipher and recognise the archival moments of quotidian femininity delivered through the temporality and medium of the meme. Using Rosenblatt’s (1978) idea of reading as a literary transaction, I suggest that reading is a social and creative act in which readers *make* texts through the act of the reading. The interaction between the reader and the text is a ‘poetic’ transaction, in which the reader and text commingle. The reader mobilises a form of organisational synthesis based on the text’s cues but also her own experience, to bring the text, otherwise symbols on paper or a screen, to life. WSWCM texts, then, materialise readers’ social imaginaries as part of a common imaginary.

I discuss how Tumblr plays a key part in enabling connective circulations of texts and the forms of readership which constitute the WSWCM public. Through its connective features and norms of ‘remix’ (Lessig, 2008), Tumblr is a hybrid space in which strong distinctions between authorship and readership, affect and discourse, are collapsed. Thus, in its remix cultures in particular, it facilitates a relationality between authors and readers where shared social location and conceptual knowledge is privileged over the question of who actually engages in textual ‘production’ or ‘consumption’. Further, in its norms of anonymity and frequent temporal connection, it creates conditions for stranger sociability (Warner, 2002). Tumblr provides a context where relationality is enacted through the reader’s experience of a blog post’s *content*, matching reader interests rather than mapping existing relationships. Tumblr accordingly builds a form of intimacy with unknown others where, despite their ‘strangeness’, they become intelligible to the reader based on their ability to share in common conceptual worlds – such as that of a postfeminist-inflected feminine popular culture shaping the WSWCM public. Thus, though the WSWCM public spills beyond the parameters of Tumblr itself, I suggest that Tumblr provides a grounding space in which imagined commonalities and shared *literacy* determine the relationality of the WSWCM public.

Here, I draw attention to the way spectatorial girlfriendship functions as an affective-discursive social literacy that both requires and extends beyond a narrow idea of reader ‘competency’. Whilst comprising direct understanding of Tumblr navigation and the skill of ‘reading’ the elements of WSWCM texts, this literacy also encompasses depths of cultural knowledge and know-how assumed to be ‘common’, based on the reader’s immersion in particular cultural intersections of gender, age, race, class and geography. The girlfriendship required for participation in the WSWCM public draws on both a familiarity with existing Western social discourses and classifications of youthful femininity, and the digital modes of narration that the WSWCM texts cite. The WSWCM texts are only intelligible when recognising that two *prima facie* unconnected elements, when assembled together, can form a new meaning. Thus, the above post pairs an anecdote about being in a bar with an image of sheep surrounding a car: arguably two artefacts with little obvious pre-existing link. The humour in the WSWCM text lies in the way it uses incongruity: combining a ‘random’, ostensibly mis-matched image with a caption. Without possession of a highly developed digital ‘classificatory imagination’ (Beer, 2014) paired with a social familiarity with youthful,

postfeminist culture, constructing the cues from these two ordinarily disparate elements of WSWCM texts becomes very difficult.

The WSWCM text in and of itself serves a gatekeeping function: without the spectatorial girlfriendship I have discussed, the reader may not cross the threshold of the social imaginary of the public. However, as I outline later in this chapter, such spectatorial girlfriendship does not necessarily mean readers are uniformly addressed by the text. The rules governing the reading of WSWCM texts may in themselves rely on logics of postfeminist mobility regarding how meaning can be appropriated and re-classified. For the reader who is embedded in classed and raced intersections that are usually made invisible by postfeminist discourses of subjectivity, these rules of reading demonstrate how spectatorial girlfriendship may lend a reader membership of the WSWCM public, but engender the recognition that she may not necessarily be the intended subject of address. The WSWCM public, then, as I go on to explore, constructs central and marginal readers, though all are bound through practices of social readership.

Imagining the self amongst others: poetic reading and the imaginary of the WSWCM public

As mentioned in Chapter 1, I understand the constellation of WSWCM texts, comprising the founder and follower blogs, and their circulation through liking, reblogging, adaptation and their *readership* to constitute the affective-discursive space forming an intimate public (Berlant, 2008). This understanding is underpinned by Warner's (2002) conceptualisation of publics as spaces that are self-organised through discourse. Warner speaks not of 'concrete' publics, such as the live audience at a sporting event, nor of 'the public' in general, but of multiple, even infinite publics 'that come... into being only in relation to texts and their circulation' (2002, p. 50). The WSWCM public is a space of circulation of feminine discourse which comes to life through its readers being addressed through its texts, comprising both individual blog posts, and the blogs themselves. The blog post, the basic unit of address, carries its address through a call to what Warner terms 'indefinite others', or as the *Forbes* interviewer terms it in her interview with the founder bloggers, 'the collective popular subconscious of young women' (Casserly, 2012). These indefinite others may be found in passing on Tumblr, or through another platform like

Twitter, or on the web more generally. However, the public is made up not simply of its physical readers, but the affective-discursive social imaginary they bring to the texts. In this way, publics are both ‘notional’ and ‘empirical’ (Warner, 2002). The social imaginary readers bring to the texts constructs a shared world through the texts, and at a second level, conceives a place for the strangers, the ‘other readers’, who also inhabit this world.

Publics, Warner argues, require strangers as they are a key feature in imagining abstract forms of belonging. In Warner’s words, ‘a nation, market, or public in which everyone could be known personally would be no nation, market or public at all (2002, p. 57). One can also say, then, that a public is a form of organising stranger relationality through some kind of address to common identity. If I invoke the idea of an ‘Australian women’s public space’, I rely on the presence of people I am yet (most likely, never) to know. This is at once abstract and intimate, personal and impersonal. Though the address to strangers must mean that the discourse in itself is also impersonal, public formation must require that these strangers, you, or I, recognise ourselves in some way in that address. Warner, referring to Althusser’s policeman who shouts ‘Hey, you!’, notes that public address always exceeds this personal call. Though multiple persons may feel addressed, the policeman seeks to identify one only. The discourse of public address, however, is a call into being addressed to multiple, indefinite persons who recognise themselves *amongst* a group of like others.

The WSWCM founder bloggers have noted in their FAQs that the initial blog was a means of exchanging funny GIFs, just between ‘friends’; they state that they ‘never intended others to see it’. As such, the WSWCM public appears to have arisen through readers’ engagement with a series of texts that were not intended for them. The publishing of these inside jokes on Tumblr’s relatively open platform had a key role in this public formation, facilitating the readership of these posts and the ability to easily reblog them. As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, within a week, their blog had approximately 500 followers, which ballooned to 50,000 within the first month (Casserly, 2012). However, more than Tumblr’s role in forming this public, I suggest that the discourse these friends were utilising in terms of their anonymous, situational in-jokes was, in a way, a form of open, indefinite address. This is not to say that the friends *meant* to address unknown others. Rather, the form of existing anecdotal feminine discourse which they drew on, combined with the publicly accessible platform, engendered a situation where multiple unknown others felt able to recognise themselves in the address of the discourse, at once open and intimate. These others *read* their way into this feminine ‘in-joke’.

I now want to further develop how recognition of the self in the WSWCM post depends on reading as a social, personal and productive act. In the WSWCM public, reading might be seen as the final act, the receiving end of the public address of discourse. However, I use ‘reading’ and ‘the reader’ as a way of thinking through the *connection* between the circulation of WSWCM texts and the formation of the WSWCM public. The act of reading is not simply that of ‘receiving’ but also actively constructing affective-discursive meaning. Reading, then, underpins the formation of the social imaginary of the WSWCM public, where the reader imagines herself in relation to others in a shared feminine world. This also underpins the form of authorship in the WSWCM public. In making this argument, I synthesise Warner’s conceptualisation of public formation with Rosenblatt’s theory of the readerly transaction, in which reader and text must be understood to merge, for the text to be ‘read’. Drawing on Rosenblatt (1978), what I aim to elaborate here is how the act of reading is simultaneously a mode of social membership and thus an active part of public-making, rather than an activity which constructs readers, authors and texts as separate things.

Louise Rosenblatt sets out a ‘transactional’ theory of reading, which, somewhat misleadingly, has little to do with exchange and more to do with a commingling of both reader and text in the production of meaning. Whilst cultural studies as a scholarly movement highlighted the importance of active audiences from the 1970s onwards (van Zoonen, 1994), Rosenblatt advocated as early as 1938 for the consideration of an ‘active’ reader in the study of literature, in which most scholarship heralded the author over the reader in considering the text (Rosenblatt, 1978). Developed through her time as an educator, Rosenblatt’s transactional theory of reader response remains significant in its impact on scholarship of pedagogy, literature and education (Karolides, 1991; Pantaleo, 2013) as well as in creating intersections with the study of New Literacies (Hammer, 2007; Sanders, 2012), an area of research which explores the contingent and social nature of literacy (J. Collins & Blot, 2003; Gee, 1996; Street, 1984).

Rosenblatt observes that the reader’s relationship to a text is summed up in the common phrasing: ‘the reader finds meaning in the text’ (1978, p. 13). However, she contends that this suggests an overly linear relation. Reading, rather, is a ‘situation, an event at a particular time and place in which each element conditions the other’ (1978, p. 16) comprising what Rosenblatt calls the ‘transaction’. It is the reader’s organisation and animation of the text, otherwise symbols and lines on a page, which constitute the act of reading, an act of simultaneous creation and fusion. The reader, in response to a set of cues,

marshals their repertoire of knowledge and experience in constructing the text. The text itself is thus not separable from the reader as Rosenblatt illustrates through extracting the following poem by Wallace Stevens:

The house was quiet and the world was calm.

The reader became the book; and summer night

Was like the conscious being of the book.

The house was quiet and the world was calm.

The words were spoken as if there was no book,

Except that the reader leaned above the page.

The reader, thus fully absorbed, evoking the world of the book, enters into a ‘coming-together, a co-penetration, of a reader and a text’ (1978, p. 12).

Not each transaction requires this intense absorption, evidently. Though the reader must always call upon their imaginary in order for the reading to occur, the experience may be quite different depending on the form of transaction. Rosenblatt proposes two ends of a spectrum on which an act of reading might be located. The first is a non-aesthetic or ‘efferent’ reading, which focuses on the ‘residue’ that remains after reading. Thus, efferent reading focuses on the information to recall from the reading and the actions to be carried out. This is the form of transaction in which ‘summarising’ the text is possible. One summarises, in order to be able to instrumentalise the text. The residue of the text becomes more important than the experience of reading itself. However, on the other end of the transactional spectrum, in what Rosenblatt terms aesthetic reading, what happens *during* the reading event is privileged: the ‘associations, feelings, attitudes and ideas that these words and referents arouse’ (1978, p. 25). Rosenblatt calls this form of transaction the ‘poem’, regardless of the literary categorisation of the text: poem, short story, prose and so on.

My contention is that the WSWCM public is built on this poetic, transactional work of readers, in myriad moments in which text and reader become productively entangled. Posts emerge as a collage of disparate images to which the eyes flit, or as ephemeral images on the dashboard, refreshed every few minutes in a stream of visual stimulus, rather than traditional, narrative-based blogs with a clear author (Keller, 2011; Siles, 2012; van Doorn, van Zoonen, & Wyatt, 2007). This entanglement may also happen when scrolling through one of the

WSWCM blogs, post by post, through accessing the ‘web-facing’ Tumblr blog, as discussed in Chapter Three. These are all moments in which the social imaginary of the WSWCM public comes into being through reader engagement. This imaginary as a shared social space is enacted through the circulation of posts through reading, liking and reblogging, which build a sense of sociability in disseminating experiences that are expected to be ‘common’. Texts combine a sense of authorial self-representation with a textual openness which invites the reader to reflect upon the commonality of their moments with her own experience. Given that the premise of the WSWCM text is self-representational, such as ‘when I’m thirdwheeling with my roommate and her boyfriend’, or ‘when I get home from work’, an active self-referentiality on the part of the reader is also invited. Rosenblatt’s transactional reader must always marshal her own conceptual knowledge and organisational synthesis in reading a text; here, I suggest that this is vital in bringing the reader *into* the WSWCM public.

Reading Rosenblatt’s idea of the transactional ‘poem’ together with Warner’s idea of ‘poetic worldmaking’ produces a sense of the complex work that goes into constructing meaning. Aesthetic reading, which focuses on the experience of reading rather than using the reading for a purpose, encapsulates the form of social reading which grounds the WSWCM public. WSWCM texts invite aesthetic reading as they invite the reader to immerse herself in the GIF’s movement, to ‘waste’ time, to spend time consuming a humorous, generic moment that invites the sense of belonging *in that moment*. The reader is playfully invited to fill in the gaps of the ‘mesh’ (Rosenblatt, 1978) of the text by squaring the incongruous, bright, moving GIF and the situational-but-generic caption, and is rewarded with ‘getting the joke’ and a consequent sense of belonging. Further, aesthetic reading requires *personal* involvement. In an interview with one of the follower bloggers, Amelia, I discussed the pleasures of reading the GIF reaction posts of the WSWCM format, but the difficulty in explaining them to others. Amelia concurred with me. She said: ‘you *cannot* explain posts to people, you just have to show them the post’. As Rosenblatt states, one cannot summarise the reading of a poem. In the WSWCM public, the reader must engage in the visual transactional moment herself; it is ineffectively explained or paraphrased by someone else.

Despite this personal premise, the texts that circulate also contain an *open* address to ‘indefinite others’ (Warner, 2002), a necessary condition for the formation of a public. This openness is clearly visible in the way in which each post evokes authorial experience, yet in a generic way so that unknown others may also recognise themselves in it. Importantly, at the same time, this reader understands this recognition is an act of ‘stranger sociability’ (Warner,

2002); one recognises/deciphers the post while understanding many, indefinite others who are part of this public also participate in this mode of recognition. While each post in a WSWCM text describes a moment which its author *prima facie* experiences, its sparse, open and generic description invites the unknown reader to fill herself into a *common, feminine situation*. I take for example, the post below: ‘When someone I hardly know gives me unsolicited advice on my love life’. Though the experience of the post is ostensibly the author’s own, it has been pared down, removing details which might otherwise overly personalise the experience. Its indefinite, generic articulation of the feminine experience of routinely monitoring the boundaries of one’s intimate life is a call to stranger relationality.



Figure 21. Unsolicited advice on my love life. WSWCM

It is worth clarifying that this indefinite address does not necessarily equate to an *inclusive* public, available for entry to all. The apparent openness of the call to the WSWCM text, found as it is online and ‘publicly available’ without any privacy restrictions, obscures the way in the WSWCM text itself enacts a gatekeeping function. The juxtaposition of the

GIF, appropriated from a pop culture context, with its simple, situational caption is not a reading that is necessarily self-evident. The reader must interpret the caption *with* the movement in the GIF. The reader must then understand how the GIF ‘fills out’ the context of the heading, providing its substance like a punch line. In the ‘unsolicited advice on my love life’ post, she must appropriately construct what the woman on the horse is doing with the words ‘your opinion’. The reader must understand that this woman is appropriated to demonstrate the intention of the author (and reader): she is *discarding* rather than dropping the words, through reading the expression of her face and the movement of her arm.

Indeed, there are a number of codes which must be understood before a reader might be able to participate in the transaction, requiring a simultaneous digital competency along with personal, feminine social and cultural knowledge. I suggest it is not vitally necessary to recognise this pop cultural figure, Daenerys Targaryen, from the show *Game of Thrones* (Benioff & Weiss, 2011). However, this supplementary knowledge in addition to knowledge of other cultural cues may provide for a particularly rich construction of the social imaginary which one is invited to ‘try’ on’ in reading the post. For example, Daenerys’ position as a conqueror can be read through her position on a horse, associated with nobility; further, she is leading a group of men, the non-white men placed noticeably further in the background of the image. Her whiteness and solitariness, together with the change from her habitual garb of leather armour to a blue cloak, and her moniker as ‘*Mother of Dragons*’ draw on a selective hodgepodge of ideas and visual cues signifying the Virgin Mary, feminine power, and purity in her colonial civilising mission. This blend of cues lends an air of haughtiness and superiority to the author’s discarding of opinion enacted in the GIF. At the same time, the reader is invited to recognise herself in this haughty position, and enjoy this recognition.

The imaginary of the WSWCM public projects a social world and, in a double movement, asks the reader to project herself in it amongst similar, indefinite others through the address of the text. This ‘poetic-worldmaking’ is why, according to Warner (2002), publics should not be understood as simply based on ‘rational-critical’ discourse where entry is ‘transparent’ and the terms of entry are equally available. Rather, the possibility of entering into and making possible the social imaginary of a public must depend on both the textual invitation and what is imaginable from the reader’s social location. The public, despite its open address, is thus never simply ‘out there’ waiting for any participant to gain entry; it is a product of working with and recreating existing social worlds. Thus, accessing the WSWCM

public is not as simple as clicking a link or finding a post on Tumblr; it is a matter of understanding the social imaginary that the WSWCM public invokes through its texts.

Accordingly, reading can be understood as a practice that draws on the reader's social location and attendant knowledges. The WSWCM public is built on multiple, momentary acts of readership that imagine a shared social world and belonging with unknown others in it. I now move to how Tumblr produces certain forms of reading which further strengthen the sense of intimate, personal belonging within the WSWCM public.

Introducing Tumblr as a readerly space of public formation

Founded in 2007 and purchased by Yahoo in May 2013, Tumblr is a popular and fast-growing blogging platform, hosting 260 million blogs as of October 2015 (Tumblr, 2015) and boasting at least 325 million unique visitors each month (Strle, 2013). Tumblr's marketing catchcry, 'Follow the world's creators' gives some idea of the vision of the digital platform, as a space for the enjoyment of the creative production of others. Tumblr provides allowances to 'follow' and 'like' one's favourite blogs and blog posts, producing reading as an affective, connective practice. However, this also doubles as a form of reader customisation. The Tumblr user is enabled to curate their own aesthetic reading experience, with posts from blogs they choose to follow appearing in a constantly updating, chronological cascade in their 'dashboard'. Here I adopt the term 'user' nominally to signal the range of ways people may interact with Tumblr, rather than signalling an agentic user of digital discourse that has been the subject of scholarly critique (van Dijck, 2009).

The Tumblr user can also publish their own posts. Tumblr operates on the basis that users own the content they upload, but provide a licence to other users to share or adapt their content (Tumblr, 2014). The visual 'sharing' ethic of Tumblr thus supports a culture of circulating and adapting the content of other bloggers, under pseudonymous or anonymous conditions, which creates a certain mobility of circulation of posts, images and ideas (Cho, 2011; Fink & Miller, 2014). One common option for blogging is to 'reblog' one's favourite posts produced by others, similar to the 'share' function on Facebook. Tumblr's reblogging function allows the user to reproduce their favourite posts from the material appearing in their dashboard, or when exploring Tumblr more generally; this 'reblog' means that others' (attributed) production also becomes published to a user's blog, like a scrapbook. Reblogging

signifies a shift from the traditional norms of solitary blog authorship to norms of merged authorship and readership, and to reproduction as production. Effectively, this is a move to view others' work and the user's own work as on a plane of equivalence (though I note, not necessarily the *same*).

On a practical level, Tumblr also allows for more forms of connection than simply liking or reblogging – a user can 'ask' questions of a blogger, and message them personally, after following their blog for a period of time. Tumblr operates on norms of anonymity with public accessibility (Cho, 2011). Most content on Tumblr is public, meaning that it is both viewable from the web without a Tumblr account, and that a Tumblr user can 'follow' a blog without requiring a further level of permission granted by the blogger. The importance of this public yet anonymous framework based around the circulation of posts rather than existing social ties, lies in its fostering of shared imagined worlds. Unlike platforms based on 'knowing' contacts like LinkedIn or Facebook, Tumblr's 'networking' is principally based on an affective response to the *content* of the blog a user follows rather than working on existing social ties. In this way the social imaginary of publics on Tumblr, I suggest, is more shaped by 'stranger sociability' (Warner, 2002) than other publics formed through existing friendship connections. In Cho's (2011) study of queer networked counterpublics on Tumblr, he found that few other categorising details were provided by users, allowing a certain freedom in the NSFW (not safe for work) material that they were able to circulate. A similar sense of intimacy with strangers facilitated by anonymity is corroborated by Hart (2015) and Tiidenberg and Gómez-Cruz (2015) in their work on use of Tumblr for romantic relationships and NSFW selfies respectively.

Renninger (2015) suggests that Tumblr is an ideal space for the formation of (counter)publics due to the way it enables the anonymous circulation of discourse through likes, reblogs and streams of hashtags for particular topics which one is able to follow easily. The temporal regularity of publishing on Tumblr, as well as the *content* of what is blogged facilitates the stranger-connection required for the formation of publics. Indeed, Warner suggests stranger relationality can be built around co-membership with indefinite persons *in a context of routine action*' (my italics, 2002, p. 57). The frequent and regular uploading of posts becomes a publishing ideal on Tumblr, facilitated by the ability to queue posts so that they are published at a designated, regular time. Peak publishing times on Tumblr regularly fall in the evening, whether on weekdays or weekends, with some analytics consultants recommending blogging at this time in order to generate maximum circulation (Gillet, 2015;

B. Williams, 2012). Here, the routine of quotidian circulation assists in forming intimate connections with strangers; a practice which also underpins the author-reader relationality of the WSWCM public.

Given its norms of anonymity and emphasis on visuality and ‘creativity’, I suggest that Tumblr facilitates the aesthetic reading fundamental to the sense of belonging invited by WSWCM texts. The longer average time spent on Tumblr per session in comparison to other social media platforms (Strle, 2013) suggests that users go to enjoy the look and feel of blog posts by anonymous others, rather than briefly ‘checking in’. This aesthetic experience may contrast with efferent or instrumental reading practices on platforms where the user is compelled to create a favourable impression for *known* others. However, in 2012, Tumblr introduced a ‘LookUp’ function to allow users to search for Facebook friends, and Twitter and Gmail contacts on Tumblr, though the Twitter lookup was subsequently removed. This move made Tumblr users connectable to their activity on other platforms in the social media ecosystem, emblematic of the broader digital drive to map, fix and make identity singular and coherent (van Zoonen, 2013). This was met with some consternation from users at the time (see, e.g. Perez, 2012). However, Tumblr still appears to be a relatively insular space (Rifkin, 2013), with users less *identifiably* networked and mapped compared to other sites. Three of the follower bloggers disclosed to me that they did not know any of their followers, suggesting that publishing in the Tumblr space still feels relatively anonymous for them. Tumblr also encourages multiplicity through its interface, with the ability to easily create multiple blogs and access them all through the one dashboard, rather than having to log in several times for different accounts.

The decoupling of reading practices from existing networks of connection is also supported through other features of the Tumblr interface. The Tumblr dashboard is set up to track the movement of *content*, so that users see new posts or reblogs by the blogs that they are following, rather than the social activity of those blogs such as ‘likes’ or ‘follows’. Additionally, it appears that Tumblr does not use a customising algorithm like Edgerank to determine what is viewable in a user’s dashboard (Butzbatch, 2014; Quartey, 2015; Tornoe, 2013). Edgerank is an algorithm used by Facebook determining what posts are shown based on the temporality of the post as well as the ‘affinity’ or history of interaction between users (Bucher, 2012). This facilitates the recursive customisation of the newsfeed or dashboard, where what a user sees is increasingly determined by existing relationships and by what a user has already ‘liked’ or viewed. The Tumblr user is thus encouraged to find content

through individual exploration of content, rather than existing networks. This dashboard setup supports scholarly insights that Tumblr, more so than platforms predicated on existing ‘friendship’, gives rise to publics in which sociability with strangers is normative (Cho, 2011; Fink & Miller, 2014; Renninger, 2015).

Dissolving boundaries between readerly and authorly practice: reblogging and remix

Tumblr is a space of overlap: it blurs distinctions between blogging and traditional social network practices; affect and discourse; text and image. The collapse of these distinctions reconfigures the relationality between authors and readers on Tumblr, making authorship and readership much more proximate. What I suggest here is that above all, participation in shared imaginaries and the identification of perceived commonalities becomes more important than the traditional categories of production and consumption. As van Doorn, van Zoonen and Wyatt (2007) have commented, blogging has traditionally been theorised as an authorial practice, quite separate to readership, whereby one ‘writes oneself’ into being (Sundén, 2003). What is assumed in this account of blogging is a more or less solitary writer, who publishes in the general space of the Internet for an audience which sometimes responds via comments on particular posts. Tumblr reconfigures this, expanding upon what Rheingold (2012) terms ‘first wave blogging’. Rather than a traditional authoring of experience, Fink and Miller (2014) suggest Tumblr recentres the importance of a common ‘structure of feeling’ (R. Williams, 1961) which allows the user to curate and collate their connections to others’ ideas. Another difference to first wave blogging is that on Tumblr, the importance of reader commentary of first wave blogs is de-emphasised. Out of the six blogs examined here, only the founder has enabled comments. Commenting is only available as a function when reblogging a post, or in limited circumstances where comments have been enabled by a primary blog (the initial blog set up on a user’s account) in relation to other blogs that the primary blog follows, or where there is a mutual following relationship. Founder David Karp argues that this generally minimises ‘flame wars’, given that ‘if you’re going to be a jerk, you’re looking like a jerk in your own space’ (Walker, 2012).

Fink and Miller (2014) suggest that the term ‘blog’ is a misnomer often used by ‘outsiders’ to delineate the social production and connection that occurs on Tumblr. They note that in the media coverage leading up to Yahoo’s acquisition of Tumblr, journalists

canvassed blogging platforms like WordPress and Twitter as alternatives to Tumblr. Fink and Miller argue that this demonstrates the unsustainable broadness of the term ‘blog’, as they see WordPress and Twitter as different digital animals on the basis of offering different structures of feeling – and thus, I hazard, of relationality for users. They argue Yahoo CEO Melissa Mayer’s characterisation of Tumblr as an ‘inbox for the blogs you follow’ (Lunden, 2013) constitutes an ‘emblematic misconstrual (2014, p. 614) of Tumblr’s relationality. Tumblr’s structures of feeling produce a relationality where authorship and readership, rather than a linear relationship of consumption and production, become similar modes of inhabiting a shared social space where ‘phatic’ rather than ‘dialogic’ material (V. Miller, 2008) is circulated. Miller describes ‘phatic’ communication as communication that is designed to retain sociability rather than directly exchange instrumental information. Far from meaningless, phatic communication fosters the type of recognition, intimacy and sociability required for community building (V. Miller, 2008).

One key factor in bridging the distance between blogging authorship and blogging readership on Tumblr is the reblogging function. Whilst reblogging might be considered a ‘reproductive’ practice on a platform like Tumblr that has been marketed as ‘creative’, consider that about 95% of the content on Tumblr at any given time is reblogged material (Strle, 2013). Drawing on Fink and Miller’s (2014) work, I suggest that reblogging a post, which both further circulates that post as well as making it part of one’s own blog, can be understood as the demonstration of a form of connection to a particular idea, topic, or social moment. It might also be seen as a response to the ‘openness’ of the indefinite address of discourse on Tumblr; it is a mode of signalling participation in the publics whose formation Tumblr facilitates.

In a space of mixed commercial and civic value, as Burgess and Green (2009) put it, Tumblr’s reblogging function underscores political questions of what is seen as ‘creative’ and what is seen as ‘reproductive’. Speaking at a digital industry event, Tumblr community and content manager Danielle Strle (2013) splits Tumblr’s relationality into a form of binary creation/reproduction in order to brand Tumblr as a space of commercial possibility at a digital industry event. Strle contends that companies have the opportunity to ‘partner’ with the creatives on Tumblr to produce interesting posts, or ‘ad units’ for their brands, while other Tumblr users are ‘super happy to share’ these posts through reblogs. In this paradigm, the highest value of creativity resides in the original post, with reproduction via reblogging serving to increase the value of the initial creation. Strle, out of contextual necessity, boils

down the possibilities of users into instrumentalities: ‘creation’ and ‘spread’. One might observe that this idea of value through creation and spread echoes commercial imperatives to hone in on the ‘fecundity’ of memes (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007): in other words, ‘if it doesn’t spread, it’s dead’ (Jenkins, Li, Domb Krauskopf, & Green, 2008). Indeed, social media captures value through metrics of user-input; user ‘likes’ or ‘reblogs’ thus become measures of value of the original liked or reblogged unit (van Dijck, 2013). However, from the point of understanding the social systems of value that users themselves work within, I suggest that the act of reblogging must be understood as more than simply reproduction. Reblogging others’ posts to form part of one’s own blog suggests the prevailing importance of belonging to a shared public of ideas, rather than claiming an idea’s unique authorship.

Another factor that complicates the traditional divide between blogging author and blogging reader is that Tumblr is an image-based, rather than text-based site, and a well known site for remix, allowing users to ‘effortlessly share anything’ – images such as GIFs, text and video included (Cho, 2011). Remix can be understood as a form of ‘mash-up’ where an original ‘sample’ of culture, might be altered, adapted and combined with other samples of culture. Though Tumblr norms dictate that it is important for users to attribute authorship (Cho, 2011), remix is a form of ‘free’ culture which enables participants in it to articulate, in some way, their version of understanding of a unit of culture, or adapt it to change its meaning in reference to the participant (Lessig, 2008; Shifman, 2014). In contrast to reblogging, remix is understood as a key part of Tumblr’s ‘creative’ circulation; Strle (2013) refers to its remix culture as Tumblr’s ‘magic river of awesome’. However, I want to foreground its relational, affective nature: on Tumblr, remix signals a form of relation between users built on their ability to cite and use existing discourses to demonstrate social connection.

This is not to say that ‘remix’ is *not* clever, or creative. In the WSWCM texts, remixed images generate new and surprising affects from familiar units of culture. Take the above remixed image, from the post ‘When someone gives me unsolicited advice on my love life’ (Figure 21). In this significant moment from *Game of Thrones* (Benioff & Weiss, 2011), Daenerys Targaryen frees the slaves in a city she has conquered. The sceptre she has taken from its ruler is explained in the episode as a means of wielding power over the slaves. In this dramatic scene that concludes the episode, Daenerys appraises the sceptre and discards it, signifying that she considers it unnecessary and beneath her to use it. In the GIF, the words ‘your opinion’ replace the sceptre; the climax of the episode is thus transformed into a sassy,

humorous statement that ‘your opinion’ regarding someone else’s love life is disposable. Visual remix thus has the potential to defuse drama, change the affective-discursive significance of a particular moment, and communicate the position of the author to the reader.

Yet, a clue to the fundamentally *readerly* aspect of this remix authoring process is provided by one of the follower bloggers, Amelia. She begins with a stock of interesting GIFs first, then generates meaning from them:

more often or not, I scroll through the GIFs and I think, what could I use this for? What could I apply this to? And if I don't come up with something, I move on until I get a couple of posts put together just from looking at the images so... I would say probably 85% of the time that's the way I do it, I just go through the images thinking, how can I use it, what context can I put it in, that will be relatable to people, and then only 25% of the time I'll think, this is an incident [that has happened to me] which somehow needs to be a post.

This reflects how authorship builds on creative readership, assembling posts out of possible meanings attributable to the GIF. Much scholarship on ‘participatory cultures’ (Jenkins, 2006; Rheingold, 2012) understand producing remix to be a higher form of participation (authorship/creativity) than consumption (reading) of them (Burgess, 2011; Burgess & Green, 2009). Indeed, Lessig’s (2008) imagining of remix as a reading/writing practice, versus ‘read only’ consumption practices, might also replicate understandings of authorship as an ‘improved’ democratic form of cultural participation. Whilst not denying the creativity and participatory quality of remix, the proximity of readership and authorship as practices that connect participants in a world of shared meaning must be emphasised.

The liminality of Tumblr’s dashboard

I finally turn to the way Tumblr’s dashboard interface contributes to the proximity of authorship and readership in the WSWCM public. Blogs traditionally invited comments on individual posts, and viewing of blogs traditionally took place *on* a blog itself, in the author’s space. However, on Tumblr, connection now mainly occurs in the reader’s dashboard. Drawing on Fink and Miller’s (2014) critique, I suggest that the dashboard is not so much an inbox, which can be characterised as the reader’s own space, but a *liminal* space on Tumblr, the reader’s space of curation in which others’ posts appear. The dashboard narrows the social space between author and reader. By following a particular blog, a user curates the

blog posts which appear in a ‘waterfall’ formation in the dashboard, rather than entering onto the space of the author’s blog. A user might also reblog others’ posts, which then form part of their own blog. Rather than a form of *deliberative* back-and-forth, this interaction with minimal commentary demonstrates the way in which readership is also a form of self-curation and identification with other readers.

The reader’s dashboard, thus, becomes akin to the reader’s blog. They may both be formed through following and reblogging; they are both forms of demonstrating connection and understanding to a range of affective-discursive content. Like scrapbooking (Good, 2013), the acts of reading and authorship converge. This self-curation is assisted by the fact that most entries on Tumblr are short, and appear chronologically in the dashboard in a self-customised ‘context collapse’ (Marwick & boyd, 2011a). The streaming of individual blog posts as images to the dashboard, allow for a consumption that allows the reader to pick and choose appealing moments or snapshots, which in aggregate, demonstrate a hand-picked portrayal of the reader. Thus, readership on Tumblr must above all not be construed as ‘passive’; the interface of Tumblr channels readership as a *form* of authorship.

The curatorial, aesthetic reading that Tumblr invites requires a discerning reader who can pick, sort and choose the stream of interests they receive in their dashboard and repost to their blog. As such, this privileges a form of digital literacy which simultaneously allows access and creates boundaries across public formations on Tumblr. Whilst Fink and Miller place emphasis on Tumblr as a space of free expression, they do observe that gaining credibility, particularly in its subcultures, depends on navigating ‘particularly intense systems of distinction’ (2014, p. 615). Tumblr’s structures of openness and resistance to the mapping, networking norms of other platforms require readers to adopt active practices of content collation in order to access it and use it. Such refinement is particularly necessary given that Tumblr is relatively difficult to search; its search function is ‘notoriously weak’ (Rifkin, 2013). While one might find a blog that produces appealing content, blogs on Tumblr generally do not list other blogs they follow (Cho, 2011). Thus, the reader must invest more work in collating their dashboard content, mobilising their ability to synthesise and organise.

What Tumblr’s space signifies, then, is not simply a ‘creative’ space, but one in which visual texts mobilise social attitudes, feelings, and responses that reference a shared social imaginary *and how one fits in it*. The shift from the authorial voice of traditional blogging, to one in which readership practices also become a form of production, catalyses a shift in focus to shared reader/author literacy. Underlining the proximity of readership and authorship as

affective-discursive practices re-orient inquiry to the way in which Tumblr forms a space for social belonging, rather than innovation and creation, though these other aspects form part of this space. This proximity also leads to consideration of the social imaginaries that underpin a felt *commonality* between authors and readers, in a space where connection is mainly anonymous.

If the circulation of texts together with their encounter with readers should be understood as a fundamental part of constructing the potential shared social imaginary of a public, the question then arises of what social competencies and social location are required so that a reader may participate and belong. For the WSWCM public, the reader mobilises a spectatorial girlfriendship that combines understandings of the classifications and norms of youthful feminine culture as well as digital modes of narration.

WSWCM literacy: spectatorial girlfriendship and the ‘classificatory imagination’

I now move from Tumblr as a context for the connective, poetic reading required for public formation, to the more specific question of what literacies enable participation and belonging in the WSWCM public. Beyond the ability to navigate Tumblr’s dashboard centred practices of selection and curation, its reblogging features and so on, constituting part of the social imaginary of the WSWCM public requires a set of socially valued knowledges. In much of the research on literacy and digital media, there is an emphasis on technical skills, proficiency and instrumentality (Gui & Argentin, 2011; Johnson, 2015; Koltay, 2011; Potter, 2010; Warnick, 2012). Preference is given to understanding media, or digital media literacy, in terms of a capacity to work within neoliberal conditions of individual self-management and indirect and limited state intervention (Livingstone, 2008). I aim to widen this view of literacy in my discussion here, to understand it as a socially determined competency predicated on certain knowledges. Following Burgess and Green (2009), I foreground an ‘ideological’ understanding of literacy advocated by New Literacy Studies scholars, whereby literacy is embedded within social and cultural contexts where power and authority regulate meanings (J. Collins & Blot, 2003; Gee, 1996; Street, 1984). As Gee (1996) argues, literacies operate through taken-for-granted ‘theories’ of legitimate and correct ways to think and feel, constructing ideal and ‘normal’ subjects.

I suggested in the previous chapter that spectatorial girlfriendship, the premise of participation in the WSWCM public, requires knowledge of and engagement with postfeminist luminosities, in order to recognise the moments circulating in the public as *common* experience. Here, I argue that spectatorial girlfriendship, as a set of assumed affective-discursive knowledges, also functions as a literacy enabling the reader to ‘get’ the jokes of WSWCM texts and be construed as a ‘normal’ subject of the public’s social imaginary. As with the post using Daenerys Targaryen above, this readership does not necessarily mean a strict pop cultural literacy. Though the process of deciphering the meaning of the GIF may be more immediate through recognition of the pop cultural material excerpted within it, readership may still take place without such specific knowledge. Given the ‘digital context collapse’ (Marwick & boyd, 2011a) in which readers may encounter WSWCM texts, spectatorial girlfriendship becomes the meaningful context through which readers construct sense of the texts.

Not only must readers be able to adopt this girlfriendship lens to access entry to the WSWCM public, they must also be able to understand the way in the author may parcel and divide herself into textual moments of life experience for circulation through GIF and caption. This requires, I suggest, a ‘classificatory imagination’ (Beer, 2014), organising the way girlfriend knowledges may be mobilised to read texts. Beer argues that scholars need to ‘develop a stronger sense of the classificatory imagination in culture’ (2014, p. 41), which presents itself in everyday archival work in digital media. Drawing on Foucault, he suggests that the ‘archive’, once a state-located apparatus of productive, disciplinary power, has now become more diffuse and decentralised, with individuals now taking on the work of documenting and monitoring as a social practice online. Individuals, it may be suggested, now classify themselves and others with the assistance of digital infrastructures and algorithms. Evidently, such classificatory features of platforms are a significant concern for scholars investigating commercial practices ‘walling off’ the internet and mining users as data (Andrejevic et al., 2015; Fuchs, 2015; van Dijck, 2013, 2015). My focus here, however, is of how classification engenders a form of sociality predicated on girlfriend knowledges. In relation to WSWCM texts, this classificatory imagination is required for the spectatorial girlfriend to read the significance and signification of bodies, facial movements, expressions and speech in blog posts, and ‘get’ the isolated, archived moment that is conveyed. What I wish to highlight is not simply that classification occurs, but that it becomes a *lens* with which to view and produce activity for participants in the WSWCM public.

This classificatory imagination is seen in the work of minor *differentiation* enacted by the follower blogs. The presence of follower blog such as ‘WhatShouldWhiteGirlsCallMe’, ‘WhatShouldPlusSizeCallMe’, and ‘WhatShouldPostgradCallMe’ show different forms of classificatory self-production. As Shifman (2014) contends, memes reflect dominant social understandings of culture; thus, adaptation and variation often reflect existing categories of classification. The degrees of adaptation in a meme thus demonstrate how a cultural unit has been *read with a view to classification*; the adaptation shows *how* the reader understands there to be a difference between the adapted text and the founder meme text. In this way we begin to see how classificatory processes are a productive form of gendered, relational identity work.

More generally, the moments in the WSWCM texts are organised and produced through the activities of documenting, recording and distinguishing, resulting in the production of social categories. Rather than narrating an episode of time in one’s life, the ‘when’ that usually prefaces the situational caption of the post indicates the generalising work of classification: ‘*when* my boyfriend forgets to DVR *the Voice*’; ‘*when* I see some chick getting all flirty with my crush’; ‘*when* someone gives unsolicited comments on my love life’. The moment is not simply one that may or may not have happened, but one that is meant to indicate a form of gendered typology. As discussed further in the following chapter, together with the way in which the people mentioned in the posts are all ‘types’: boyfriends, ‘some chick’ and so on, the WSWCM public produces forms of subjectivity through the production of its classificatory texts. The reader must bring knowledge from her location as spectatorial girlfriend into the classificatory moment offered by the WSWCM text. This is to enter into a form of ‘database logic’ (Manovich, 2001) which organises data through the formation of collections, rather than (but not excluding) narrative.

The blog in the WSWCM public organises the self according to recognisable *categories* of shareable feminine moments, asking the reader how she fits in its *collection*. The WSWCM texts, then, are not designed to constitute an archival record of the self for the sake of documentation, but are produced in these forms of classification as a means of feminine sociability. WSWCM texts are intended to be read by like readers who recognise and construct the self and the world in similar categories: ‘when my friends see how much weight I’ve gained this winter’; ‘when I hear my frenemy got dumped by her boyfriend’; ‘when I try to talk to someone attractive’. The ability to divide one’s lived experience into

these specific categories is a form of textual but *social* production that connects readers and authors in the WSWCM public.

Applying spectatorial girlfriendship in order to get the joke

In this section, I show how spectatorial girlfriendship is vital in reading the juxtaposition in WSWCM texts central to the joke in each post, and thus, determines participation in the feminine social imaginary of the WSWCM public. It is required to ‘fill in’ the meaning of the blog post, to imagine the connections between an ostensibly incongruous GIF and the situational caption. As Billig (2005) notes, incongruity and its use in humour has always been subject to historical meanings attached to the incongruous things brought together in a joke. Here, readers are required to actively draw on existing classifications derived from the personal feminine knowledge that constitutes spectatorial girlfriendship, to bring a text to life and to project themselves in it. However, in projecting the self in the situation of the text, this does not signify that the reader must necessarily feel the *same* as the subject projected by the authorial voice. Rather, the literacy derived through pre-existing affective-discursive experience and knowledge is the starting point for entry into the WSWCM public.

Reading a WSWCM text, whilst an *active* practice, must be transacted according to a fairly closed rather than open process. Since the meaning of the post is often obscured by the incongruity of the GIF in relation to the caption, the classificatory significations of both these elements of the post must be clear and discrete so that the joke can be understood immediately, in the few seconds it takes for the GIF’s movement to complete. Spectatorial girlfriendship is required to determine how bodies in the GIFs, already classified through gendered, raced and classed affects and discourses, might be instrumentalised to make new or reproduce existing meanings. Meaning, in WSWCM texts, is made through playing with and facilitating new associations between existing classifications. These associations may be viewed as more or less workable by different readers depending on their social and political location, and the entrenchment of the meanings of the bodies and objects in the GIF in broader social matrices. The feminine body, for example, has a history of meanings attributed to its circulation in patriarchal visual culture which are often difficult to dislodge. Accordingly, meanings may not necessarily be changed, ‘interacted’ (Nakamura, 2008) and remade without difficulty.

A typical example of a post that produces a scenario from a GIF capturing something which prima facie has little, if anything, to do with the content of the situational caption, can be found in the following post: ‘every time I start to catch up on my reading’, also featured in Chapter Four.



Figure 22. Catch up on reading. WSWCM

The GIF features a car stuck in traffic on a highway that upon speeding up, crashes into a barrier. The car is the vehicle through which the author articulates this failure to properly capitalise on her progress. The car’s movement is used to convey both the momentum and the speeding up of reading, while its abrupt crash becomes the author’s crash - the inability to pull through. On the face of it, this is quite a creative and singular reconstruction of what the car crash means: in Internet speak, the ‘fail’. By plugging in this moving image of the car into the caption ‘every time I start to catch up with my reading’, a new association and thus meaning is created, written into the movement of the car. The humour lies in the ability to connect disparate bodies, and link the car’s movements with the broader movements of the study cycle of a university student.

In other instances, making meaning relies on the pinning of the bodies within the GIF to broader, conventional classifications of the significance of those bodies, requiring the reader to recognise the bodies as heuristic citations of entrenched figures within the social imagination. This act of recognition and meaning making on the part of the reader acts to make femininity stick to particular bodies. A typical form of post which does this work contrasts the ‘ideal’ or ‘the expectation’ with ‘reality’. I take the post on WhatShouldBetchesCallMe: ‘When I have to wear a bathing suit for the first time tomorrow’.

Like the first image in the WSWCM post, the first image here, ‘expectation’, is occupied by the body of a slim, white, busty young woman; she preens, playing with a captain’s sailing cap on her head, wearing a stripy bikini. The ‘reality’ GIF which is contrasted features a young, bare chested, white, chubby man from the film *Easy A* (Royal, 2010). Sitting on a row of bleachers, he says, wincing: ‘I’m just a fat piece of shit.’ This blunt, hyperbolic expression of self-loathing instrumentalises bodies that cite entrenched notions of appropriate and idealised femininity. The man’s body is used to signal disgust with a patent lack of fit within a feminine bodily ideal.



Figure 23. Wearing bathing suit for the first time. WSWCM

Similarly, in a post featuring pop group Destiny’s Child – ‘when I’m walking and listening to my iPod’ – the reader understands that what she is assumed to aspire to is the

sexual attractiveness and confidence the group embodies when strutting down the street. ‘What I think I look like’ is articulated through a GIF positioned as the ‘ideal’: to swagger with the exaggeratedly determined hip movement of Destiny’s Child, whilst also being embodied similarly to the group: toned, slim and beautiful, in the associated setting of a post-racial world. The confident, stylised, feminine movement and the star quality of Destiny’s Child is extracted in a glance, in the first GIF. However, ‘what I actually look like’ is channelled through the movements in the GIF below of a large, loping, awkward dog. The dog lumbers around a house, wearing socks, unable to properly move. This, evidently, is a somewhat overblown comparison, like the ‘fat piece of shit’ above. However, in both, what is mobilised is a shorthand for ‘what doesn’t fit’. The bodies that are used are pulled together to reassemble dominant binary classifications of what doing gender entails. This practice of assembling ideal femininity through slim, (usually) white, heterosexy youthful femininity and contrasting the author’s non-ideal femininity channelled through ill-fitting bodies such as those of older women, men, or animals is a recurring theme throughout the meme. The blogs thus pin bodies to existing dominant gender classifications to make meaning.

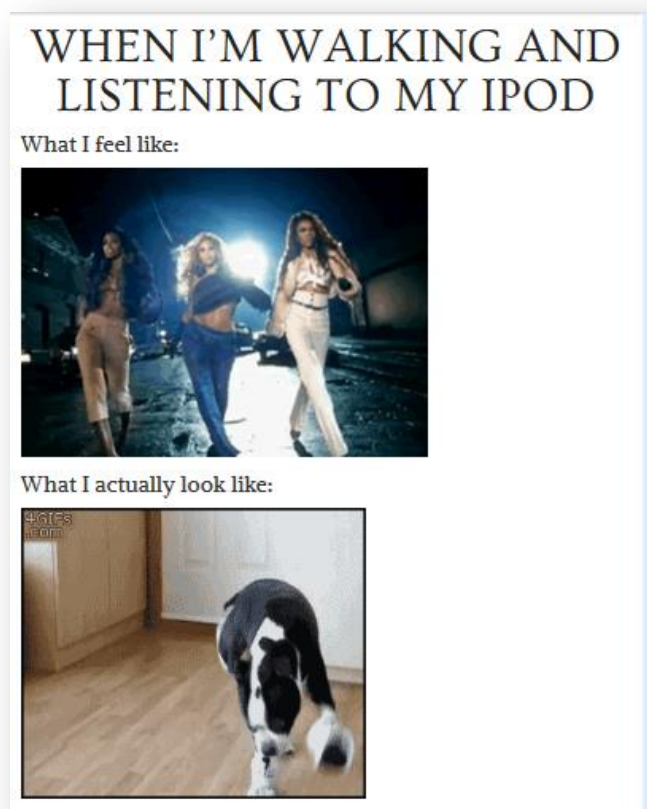


Figure 24. Walking and listening to iPod. WSWCM

However, the reader must sometimes be able to strategically *forget* existing classifications of bodies. In these types of posts, bodies are taken and used as though they are not situated in strata of prior classificatory meaning. When this is done, I argue these bodies are wrenched from prior meanings not in spite of, but precisely through a contemporary neoliberal postfeminist and post-racial sensibility (Nakamura, 2008, 2015). Both the settled meanings of bodies and their purported freedom from the historical, political and social are mobilised for meaning making. Here, blogging practices operate through a presumption that any body/anybody is free to be used to express a particular sentiment or situation. I take the example on TwoDumbGirls describing the indignant reaction ‘When the tennis coach says I’m too old for the team.’ The GIF features the face of a young Asian man. The grittiness of the image suggests a YouTube or amateur video. He faces the camera front on, and when he shouts, the caption appears: “That’s waisis!” (that’s racist).

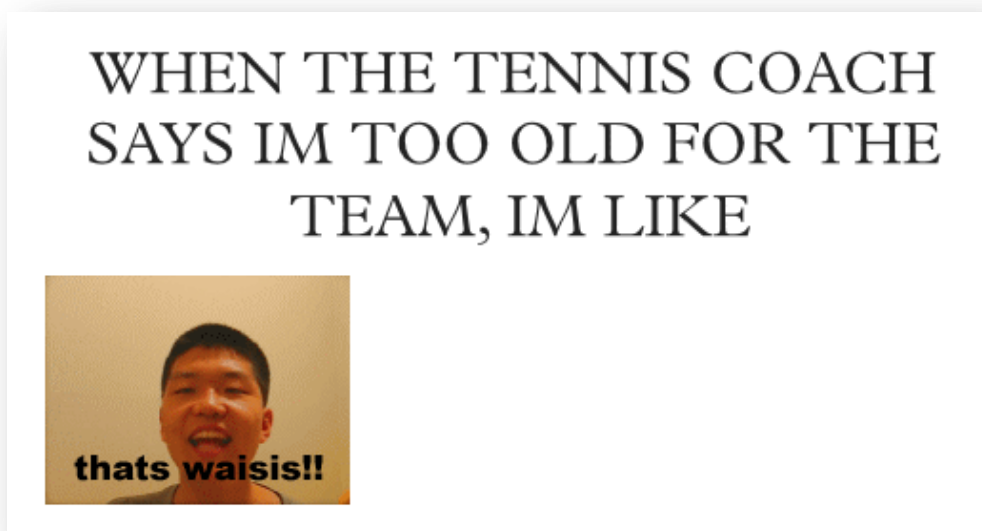


Figure 25. Waisis. TwoDumbGirls

Here, this non-white body is taken from his own self-production and appears to have been appropriated at least twice; first, to strip his own words of protest from him and replace them with a mockery of his non-Western accent; second, by the blogging practice on TwoDumbGirls which then uses this image to denote a theatrical feeling of discrimination. On TwoDumbGirls, this discrimination is playfully instrumentalised to demonstrate a sort of poutiness at the ‘ageism’ of being refused membership of the tennis team. ‘Waisis’ may be a way to suggest a girlish baby-talk, which is a knowingly ridiculous response to being deemed

‘too old’, when the reader operates on the presumption that the author speaks on the basis of being youthful, as an undergraduate college student.

The post speaks to an authorial power in being able to use whatever body in whatever GIF to suit one’s disposition. It seeks to enact a post-racial, postfeminist power of both being outside of previous meanings, and using bodies as homogenous resources available for self-production. Relations between bodies are flattened and simplified through their compression and transformation into GIFs, transforming into free ‘stock’ that an author or reader may rework and, through her labour, make her own. In this flat database logic (Manovich, 2001), one is ostensibly free to draw connections between bodies in their new forms as data, divorced from their original mediated contexts. In becoming this stock of meanings that can be selectively drawn on, everybody/every body purportedly becomes equal in being able to use/be used in a relationship of exchange, circulation and value.

I draw on two similar exemplars demonstrating the way in which bodies are used in ways that require the strategic suppression or forgetting of historical meaning and difference. On Pitchin’ Hissy Fits, the situation ‘when my roommate flatout ignores me’, is illustrated by the explosive reaction of actor Nicholas Cage in the horror film *The Wicker Man* (Labute, 2006). In what looks like a log cabin, he advances menacingly towards a woman, whose back and long blonde hair we see, and with a blow to her face, knocks her to the ground. The filmic context is dramatic; the two seconds capturing his slow, deliberate movement before his blow lands on the woman invites the feeling of dread.



Figure 26. When my roommate ignores me. Pitchin' Hissy Fits

The movie, which involves Cage's character consistently killing evil neo-pagan women, has been interpreted as an unintentional comedy in much internet commentary (see, e.g. Rifftrax, 2012). Yet, when isolated from this context of distanced, ironic spectatorship, the brief visual sequence in the GIF cannot unambiguously erase the gendered violence within it, though it may be clumsily enacted by Cage. The post attempts to appropriate this scene to make this violence here enacted by a masculine body on a feminine body a humorous exaggeration of the violence enacted by the author on her frustrating roommate.

A similar post on WhatShouldBetchesCallMe performs the reaction 'when all my friends are crushing on a guy that is so overrated it makes my head hurt', 'crushing' meaning to have romantic desire for someone. This time the GIF is sourced from what looks like an ostensibly humorous YouTube clip. The GIF features a young man, who first states, appraisingly, 'Yeah... I'd hit that...', 'hit that' signifying in colloquial terms to 'hook up with' or to have sex with. The young man goes on to say, delivering the punchline with emphasis: 'With my car'.

WHEN ALL MY FRIENDS ARE
CRUSHING ON A GUY THAT IS
SO OVERRATED IT MAKES MY
HEAD HURT



Figure 27. I'd hit that. WSBCM

The humour, used both in *WhatShouldBetchesCallMe* and presumably in the borrowed YouTube clip as well, plays on the double meaning of 'hit'. In the context of *WhatShouldBetchesCallMe*, this produces a new meaning where 'crushing' on a guy is translated, in postfeminist speak, to something more worldly: a willingness to 'hit that', producing the 'guy' as a sexual object. The author is shown to be above feeling the fatuous desires of her girlfriends for an 'overrated' guy; her postfeminist heterosexual taste is discerning and rational. Yet I suggest that this meaning still carries a residue of masculine violence in the casual colloquialism which constructs the (feminine) body, first, as an object of sexual desire, and then, as the object of one's motor vehicle. This is also evident in Google searches for the phrase which finds numerous results in 'men's humour' lists. My analysis evidently presumes a heterosexual context for the clip, which I acknowledge may not be correct. But the key element I wish to foreground here is that a masculine body, casually

objectifying another body as a source of humour, is viewed as an available position to inhabit for the feminine author and reader here, as long as she feels able to apply the meaning from the post to her own context.

It is worth observing that the use of this Asian body in this GIF contrasts with the way in which the other young, Asian man is used in the TwoDumbGirls post I consider above. The attempts to control and appropriate the words and meanings of these bodies, however, are similar in the way they ask the spectatorial girlfriend to selectively suppress difference. The WhatShouldBetchesCallMe post requires the reader to discard the relevance of the race of the young man as his masculinity is foregrounded; however, the reader must also selectively forget the way in which the words re-enact masculine violence so the feminine author/reader may appropriate them. The TwoDumbGirls post requires the spectatorial girlfriend to simultaneously see and not see the race of the first young man, so the way in which his words are written over and are not acknowledged can be forgotten in order to achieve the 'that's waisis' punchline.

As a reader, these posts show how meaning is unwieldy. Existing classifications and associations may be written or read over with difficulty in this selective remixing and matching, requiring the reader to resolve the disjunctures I have foregrounded here. The anchoring of masculine bodies within meanings that enable and normalise the practice of violence by these bodies, particularly in the posts which feature Nicholas Cage and the 'I'd hit that' GIFs, mean that the reader may struggle to effect the requisite meaning. Nevertheless, these miscellaneous bodies, like those of the crashing car, Daenerys Targaryen, or Destiny's Child, are felt to be available for appropriation and use. This suggests that the literacy of girlfriendship is informed by a postfeminist relationality between the self and the social, where the social becomes distilled into resources to be used regardless of historical meaning. Bodies as floating signifiers are used and instrumentalised according to a postfeminist currency of exchange, in which the bodies that are reworked and reclassified by the author gain value in wider digital circulation.

A public built on postfeminist literacy?

Here, the reader, drawing on dominant modes of intelligibility made available in postfeminist culture, is required to suppress difference and to forget traces of meaning that

anchor and essentialise bodies, in order to ‘get the joke’. The premise of girlfriendship requires the acceptance of a selective classificatory homogenisation and differentiation of bodies, based on their utility for meaning making. The sedimented layers of meaning attached to certain bodies must be ignored so that those bodies may be mobilised in posts for circulation. This practice of using any body that is available, I argue, positions author and reader as the rational, instrumental user, freed from context.

I contend that the documenting, monitoring, classificatory impulse of postfeminism observed by scholars such as Gill (2007), McRobbie (2009), Banet-Weiser (2012) and Winch (2013) forms part of the fabric of relationality here. Spectatorial girlfriendship relies on the ability to mobilise essentialised traits of bodies in order to make meaning, constructing a relation between the self and the social premised on resourcefulness, useability and the strategic use or forgetting of social classifications. Both author and reader must do this in the public. Returning to Gee’s (1996) insight that literacies construct normative literate subjects, the ideal reader in the WSWCM public may be identified as one whose social experience and location correlates most closely with the subject of postfeminism more generally: the middle class, youthful, white feminine subject who *feels* free to use the meanings of bodies as a selective tool. But this may mean that there is a certain disconnect between the sense of commonality invited of the spectatorial girlfriend, and the actual reader herself. Even if the reader is able to arrive at the ‘correct’ reading of the post through drawing on her skills of spectatorial girlfriendship, a mismatch may be felt between the rules of meaning construction set up by the text, which invites a humorous response, and the reader’s own lived experience in the world.

In a space like Tumblr where authorship and readership are proximate practices, literacy in social and cultural discourses becomes a more important mark of participation than the production of a text, in and of itself. It appears that a postfeminist, post-racial sensibility becomes a type of referential glue which ties these affective-discursive practices together. These discourses operate not simply as ‘ideas’ but as mechanisms by which authorship, readership and commonality can be conveyed in a social space where texts contain few other contextual clues to significance and signification. This does not mean that the practices of authorship and readership in WSWCM exclusively adhere to a postfeminist and post-racial literacy. Indeed, the ability to use a classificatory imagination through which absurd associations can be made can describe much of the literacy to ‘get’ the humour that circulates on the Internet, which may indeed be seen as a response to the algorithmic sorting practices

of digital culture. However, Warner's (2002) point that publics are not simply transparent, out there and available to access, remains salient. Entry to the WSWCM public and its attendant sense of recognising oneself amongst indefinite, unknown others hinges on the reader's spectatorial girlfriendship: the ability to transact meaning from a set of gendered and raced digital competencies and knowledges that coincide with postfeminist modes of classification. In the following chapter, I further examine how the sociality of the public is built on and cites such classificatory knowledges to engender forms of connection.

6 Negotiating postfeminist luminosities through relational figures: the best friend, the boyfriend, hot guys, creeps and Other girls

When my boyfriend has to take me home because I've had one too many. WSWCM, 27 March 2014.

When your best friend wins an award. WSWCM, 8 February 2012.

When a girl you hate can magically make any guy fall in love with her within .3 seconds of eye contact. WhatShouldBetchesCallMe, 26 April 2012.

When I get assigned a cute lab partner. WhatShouldWeCollegeMe, 28 April 2012.

Introducing the relational figures of the WSWCM public

In this chapter, I discuss how relational figures are used as shorthand to articulate the self through frameworks of postfeminist luminous value. As discussed in my theoretical framework outlined in Chapter Two, McRobbie (2009) outlines spaces of postfeminist subjectivity that I have suggested are inextricably entangled: appearance, sexuality, and ambition and productivity. In particular, ambition and productivity, distilled in the personal qualities of independence and resilience, becomes a lens through which other luminous aspects of femininity are performed. I show how these luminosities are rearticulated in the WSWCM public through a set of essentialised figures: the best friend (best girlfriend), the Other girl, the hot guy, the creep and the boyfriend. For the spectatorial girlfriend reader, these figures are rich in intertextual significance from discourses about femininity, individuality, friendship and heterosexuality that create normative and othered subjects. These figures are best thought of as the distillation of relationships into essentialised forms for circulation in the public, remade from knowledges derived from lived experience and immersion in postfeminist popular cultures. They are useful because they tell a story about the author, rather than about the figures themselves. Through their affective significance in the author's life, they heuristically signal negotiations of postfeminist demands and the authorial conversion of personal experience and relationships with others into recognisable value.

I use the term ‘figures’ here to draw on Tyler’s (2008, p. 18) articulation of the figure as a means of ‘describ[ing] the ways in which at different historical and cultural moments specific “social types” become over determined and are publicly imagined (are figured) in excessive, distorted, and caricatured ways’. As Tyler argues, a focus on tracking a figure through text is not simply a means of understanding representation, but exploring a constitutive and generative process whereby the figure’s accreted ‘affective value’ (2008, p. 19) has material effects. In this context, demonstrating postfeminist luminous value requires others to be designated, classified and used (Skeggs, 2004, 2005) through affective-discursive techniques strategically positioning the author in relations of connection, ambivalence or rejection with them. Such classifications through which the best friend, Other girl, boyfriends, hot guys and creeps materialise, require spectatorial girlfriendship as an already-present, accessible means of understanding the ways in which youthful, feminine subjectivity is made in a Western context. This is particularly so given that the post must be immediately recognisable to the reader in order to be ‘in’ on the joke. Through their brief citation in the posts, it is evident that the supporting cast of figures of the young middle-class Western woman is already to some extent assumed or taken for granted.

Such a feeling of familiarity and sense of shared imaginary is important, as it sets up the girlfriend reader as already knowing. Knowing means the reader is in on the joke, invited to adopt a mirrored position to the author in evaluating her individuality via shared classifications of relationships. As such, direct knowledge of details or ‘reality’ of the author and her cited relationships is de-emphasised in favour of a feeling of shared position in this intimate public, centring and reinstating the recognisable ‘truths’ of relating to others via postfeminist frameworks of value. Readers and authors inhabit a position of affective commonality based on these figures, as recognisable reference points through which the self can be made and circulated. I begin with describing the central figure of the best friend and how her affective-discursive positioning engages with the postfeminist imperative to enact a pleasing independence and freedom.

The best friend

The figure of the female best friend features across the blogs, sometimes named as the ‘roommate’ or ‘bestie’. However, the best friend features most centrally in the moments of

the founder blog as an almost-romantic, cherished figure. This relationship acts as a clear additional textual means of triggering the insider knowledges of spectatorial girlfriendship. Indeed, as noted in the introduction to this thesis, the founder blog was initially envisaged as a dialogue between two ‘best friends’, two young women, both in law school in the United States. This context in part explains the context of production and the personal voice which comes through the posts – one in which a high level of interpersonal knowledge is assumed for the deciphering and immediate recognition of posts, and one in which the decoding process in itself is a form of pleasurable play.

Alison Winch (2013) provides a compelling analysis of how the best girlfriend finds a recurring and privileged presence in feminine popular culture. The girlfriend features across reality television, sitcoms, movies, and advertising, addressing the reader as belonging to a shared, feminine world. Given this shared experience, the girlfriend speaks with an intimate knowing voice in relation to the trials of feminine life, as reflected in authoritative ‘best friend’ accounts on how to live as a woman in self-help and lifestyle genres of media. Winch notes the girlfriend’s ability to understand deeply feminine problems corresponds with the ‘girlfriend gaze’: a form of intimate, intensified surveillance which assists in perfecting the self as a brand-able postfeminist subject. The best girlfriend has an important function as a useful, emotional, and surveilling accessory to a young woman’s entrepreneurial life project; as such, I suggest, she synthesises postfeminist luminous demands on the self in a way that is fun, caring and intimate. Often, the (best) girlfriend’s importance for a young woman’s wellbeing through her ability to understand uniquely feminine issues is emphasised over and above the companionship of men. While ‘[g]irlfriend culture does not rely on the hope generated through a heterosexual “happy ever after”’ (Winch, 2013, p. 4), the emphasis on the special position of the girlfriends occurs precisely through the depiction of girlfriendship as resolutely heterosexual. Girlfriends in postfeminist media culture thus offer a sense of freedom, but on terms that support gendered, heterosexual and neoliberal normativity.

The way in which best girlfriendship is taken up in the blogs unevenly reflects the normative postfeminist emphasis that Winch identifies in popular culture. While the best friend does not appear to be centrally implicated in the disciplinary gaze that Winch discusses, moments enjoyed with the best friend tend to involve activities through which conventional femininity can be performed. The follower blogs usually cite the best friend through normatively feminine ‘fun’ experiences, joining the author in shopping excursions to clothing store J-Crew (TwoDumbGirls) or in celebratory cocktails (2ndhandembarrassment).

As such, she is often cursorily invoked in situations that sometimes appear indistinguishable from broader *Sex and the City* (Star, 1998) type narratives where girlfriendship is interchangeable with feminine consumption. In the founder blog, however, the best friend is afforded a much more substantial position. A distinctive warmth and affectionate humour emerges from situations narrated here, ranging from unbridled excitement ‘when my best friend wins an award’, to the anticipation of settling in for the night ‘when my best friend and I decide we’re not going out’. In contrast to Winch’s identification of the intimate discipline of girlfriendship, enacted through the girlfriend gaze, the emphasis on ‘letting go’ with the best friend is highly foregrounded in the founder blog. One such example is an acknowledged, shared love of junk food. Though eating is a highly regulated practice in the blogs overall, in the founder blog, I suggest that the figure of the best friend provides a space of indulgence and safety in respect of eating practices. The reaction to ‘when my best friend tells me she ate the last Reese’s cup’ (a type of chocolate peanut butter confection) is portrayed through the teary, overcome, elaborately made up face of a person who appears to be in a singing contest, holding a microphone.



Figure 28. The last Reeses cup. WSWCM

The absurdity of the campy drama of the GIF in reaction to the confession of a relatively minor transgression speaks to a bond in which each other’s weaknesses are acknowledged but also indulged, the weakness in question being a fondness for an unhealthy sweet.

In the founder blog, the best friend also enables silliness and fun. A mutual enjoyment of each other's absurdity is enacted in the situation 'when my best friend and I are DGAF (don't give a fuck) in public'. This situation is told through the bodies of two middle-aged individuals dancing in a silly, dorky way, pointing fingers, bending knees, in the street. DGAF expresses the will to flout social norms. Here, this rebellion is expressed joyously, through a silly dance which is done, not alone, but with a friend. The shared rebellion strengthens the affective insouciance of 'DGAF'; when done together, odd actions 'in public' augment expressions of solidarity which might otherwise work to alienate an individual on her own.



Figure 29. DGAF in public. WSWCM

The best friend in the founder blog accordingly fulfils the function of an exalted audience member, an audience member to whom one can communicate through a cryptic code, engendering the affect of a connective, exclusive mutuality. This privileged space that the WSWCM best friend inhabits is extended to the spectatorial girlfriend who digitally reproduces and re-performs the acuity of the best friend. The best friend 'gets' the joke; she can read a signal which is lost to the masses. Thus, her ability to decipher a deliberately obscure or absurd reference creates a privileged sense of belonging, a community of two. In a related sense, the best friend is the mirror by which the author constructs the self. On the

founder blog, this mirror appears to open a number of pathways for practising the self, through a heterogeneous production of moments which strengthen this connection with the best friend. Whilst the existence of the best friend assists in the creation of WSWCM as a consistent, consumable product, the best friends here do exceed this branded and instrumental function. The best friend elicits a production of the self to facilitate closeness, connection and play. In WSWCM, the best friend provides a safe zone, the zone within which practices that exceed the bounds of ideal femininity like those of eating, watching television and so on, are permissible.

The figure of the best friend across the follower blogs does not necessarily produce the same intensity of affect and variety of moments. Perhaps, as discussed in the following chapter, this is due to the way that the founder blog has set up its girlfriendship as a brand, preventing others from claiming and promoting this same closeness as a representative form of femininity. While two of the follower blogs are branded as authored by ‘two friends’, it is difficult to find the same feeling of this expansive closeness. The best friend is sometimes the subject of lavish affection, articulated through phrases like ‘I don’t know what I’m gonna do when I don’t have her in my life every day’ (2ndhandembarrassment). However, these moments are less frequent and appear disparate, almost summoned to authenticate the best friend’s existence. Whilst the close female friend may appear, she is often predominantly used as a means of speaking about the self to make apparent qualities of exclusivity and fun. WhatShouldBetchesCallMe (‘WSBCM’) exemplifies the use of the best friend as per Winch’s (2013) description of the female heterosexual companion. The best friend in this context is an asset, someone who assists the feminine self in attaining successful postfeminist subjectivity. In the post, ‘When my bestie and I congratulate each other on being the most attractive betches in the room’, a sense of power, pleasure, and exclusivity is palpable as the bestie and the author as a girlfriend team mutually shore up their own ‘erotic capital’ (Winch, 2013). This relationship, however, is not free from rivalry. Whilst the best friend must be similarly attractive, when she is too much so, feelings of resentment surface, such as in the post ‘When your bestie is cuter than you’.

WHEN YOUR BESTIE IS CUTER THAN YOU



Figure 30. When your bestie is cuter than you. WSBCM

The words, excerpted from the buddy film *The 40 Year Old Virgin* (Carell, 2005), juxtapose a purportedly loving description of the ex-girlfriend of a central character, David, with a caustic, misogynistic punchline. In the WSBCM context, regardless of whether or not casual insults are used affectionately in the best friend relationship that is cited here, the post mobilises a cocktail of girlfriend affects including warmth, resentment and envy. The mixed feelings about a best friend being ‘cuter’ refer to a tacit best friend bargain as described by Winch (2013): the agreement to mutually shore up each other’s erotic capital, whilst not detracting from each other’s spotlight.

The figure of the best friend thus has multiple forms of citation in the public. Some, as I have discussed, demonstrate recognition of the best female friend through forms of feminine consumption easily recognisable in popular culture. WSBCM reflects a savvy and entrepreneurial approach to best friendship, recruiting the best friend as ally in attaining

attractive ‘top girl’ status. All, I suggest, reflect a broader understanding of the best friend as an essential figure, required to reflect normative youthful femininity. Sometimes shallow, sometimes deeper, the best friend is still accorded a particular and privileged status, especially in comparison to the Other girl, who I come to next.

The Other girl as constitutive limit of the self

The best friend can be seen in different incarnations across the blogs. However, her centrality and importance as a female figure that expands one’s possibilities of being is often minimised by the dominance of disciplinary affects relating to female others, who may sometimes be frustrating ‘friends’ or simply, ‘girls’. As discussed in Chapter Four, I term this figure the Other girl. In that chapter, I suggested the Other girl is a vehicle through which frustration with the postfeminist rules of bodily discipline may be articulated; figured as a subject of critique, she is the girl who is either too skinny or too obsessed with healthy food and dieting fads. I expand here on how the Other girl more broadly is used as a figure against which the self is defined across luminous domains of appearance, and sexuality. Oscillating between an overzealous adherence or inadequate attention to postfeminist luminous rules of conduct in relation to sexuality and appearance, these feminine figures perform disciplinary work on the author, or alternatively are the subjects of discipline themselves. These characteristics are used to render the Other girl the ‘constitutive limit’ of the self (Skeggs, 2004, 2005): she is always already ‘other’. Here, we clearly see Winch’s articulation of the disciplinary nature of girlfriendship: a powerful affective vehicle by which the self is produced through monitoring, and surveillance. By using the Other girl as a key point of distinction, the author carves out a space of individuality for herself, a practice which sometimes explicitly rebels against postfeminist norms but also incorporates them.

The following post of the founder blog, assembled in two GIFs, articulate how this discipline by Other girls is enacted. The scenario is when ‘I look like a scrub at law school,’ a scrub here indicating someone that is shabbily attired. It then proceeds with two contrasting images. The first GIF features Christina Hendricks in her role as Joan in the popular television series *Mad Men* (Weiner, 2007). The accompanying text is ‘Other girls look at me like:’, accompanied by a GIF of Hendricks with her arms folded, shoulders back, lips pursed, blinking slowly. The movement conveys that she is critical and unimpressed.

I LOOK LIKE A SCRUB EVERY DAY AT LAW SCHOOL

Other girls look at me like:



And I'm just like:

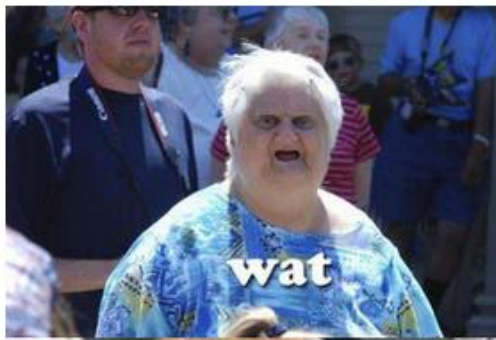


Figure 31. Scrub at law school. WSWCM

Mobilising the affective literacies of spectatorial girlfriendship, I suggest, allows the reader to interpret Hendricks' body as expressing a languorous, elegant mode of feminine disapproval. The reader observes that Christina Hendricks' hair, makeup and outfit are perfectly put together, accentuating her feminine beauty, in order to recognise the next image as a (somewhat) defiant contrast. The text to the second image states 'And I'm just like:' with the image of a woman who is elderly, overweight, wearing a large, brightly coloured T-shirt, with short, white and untidy hair. Her mouth is open and her brows are furrowed, while she looks directly at the camera. The image, set up as a clear contrast, and is captioned 'WAT', which I suggest is a deliberately informal spelling of 'what' to emphasise its orality.

The reader, in order to get the joke, must first recognise the second woman as heteronormatively unattractive, graceless and abrasive, and second, understand that it is an

exaggeratedly *self-deprecating* joke so the sting of contrasting the two in terms of appearance is neutralised. The reader may not need to know that the image of Christina Hendricks is drawn from her role in *Mad Men* (Weiner, 2007), but it is necessary to recognise that she is conventionally beautiful in physical appearance and demeanour. Though her actions are disciplinary, her looks correspond perfectly to the requirements of a heterosexist system of exchange. The reader, then, makes meaning of the post through reference to contemporary, hegemonic standards of feminine beauty. What then follows is that it is normal, even ‘funny’, according to these standards of beauty, to make fun of one’s inadequacy. Accordingly, there is a complex mixture of defiance and self-deprecation in this post. Whilst the post, in some ways, mobilises a sexist understanding of standards of appearance, this second woman, in her direct gaze, can be read as refusing to adhere to dominant gendered photographic conventions. The blogger may be relishing the uncouth ‘WAT’ that emanates from the second image as a direct challenge to the perfect Other girl, even as her ‘perfectness’ is reconstituted through this unkempt defiance.

The Other girl is also used as a way to demonstrate loyalty to the significant figures in the author’s life. For example, in the founder blog post ‘When my best friend asks what I think about the new girl her ex is dating’, Queen Bee Regina George from the movie *Mean Girls* (Fey, 2004) is summoned to vehemently respond, ‘fat whore’. Evidently, this is a deeply sexist insult. Regina George, as a pop culture figure who has a complicated relationship with her own girlfriends, is constituted nonetheless as a figure who privileges her girlfriends above Other girls as matter of course, regardless of the innocuous actions of the Other girl.

WHEN MY BEST FRIEND ASKS WHAT I THINK ABOUT THE NEW GIRL HER EX IS DATING



Figure 32. New girl ex is dating. WSWCM

The sheer arbitrariness and excessiveness of the response may also be understood as a means by which to poke fun at the absurdity of the required standards of girlfriend loyalty. However, other instances in which the Other girl appears indicates that she is almost always already subject to an entrenched wariness. In relation to one's boyfriend, the Other girl more straightforwardly appears as a threat. 'When a girl at the bar gets up from her seat to talk to my boyfriend', the ensuing affective response is one of discipline and hostility through a remixed *Star Wars* GIF. The author channels Liam Neeson, striding past a young Luke Skywalker who pops up from behind a parked flying vehicle, and admonishes him (the Other girl), 'You sit the fuck down'.

The Other girl, then, not only disciplines, but provides an outlet for discipline from the author herself. These disciplinary affects tied up with the Other girl are strongly and consistently carried across the blogs. Sometimes, as with the Other girl who speaks to the author's boyfriend, this hostility occurs due to feminine rivalry stemming from jealousy or possessiveness. For example, TwoDumbGirls feature a post about 'when I see some chick getting all flirty with my crush', with the reaction articulated through reality television star Kim Kardashian shooting a rifle. However, this hostility appears to circulate almost as a result of simply being a girl with whom the author is not familiar; it often precedes the girl's actions, intentions, and characteristics. 'When I find myself in the middle of group of sorority girls' is met with suspicion and alarm in Pitchin' Hissy Fits, the Tumblr blog of a '20-

something city girl workin', livin' and goin' to school in small-town Texas'. Being part of a sorority, in and of itself, incites an othering, before words are even spoken. Across the blogs, the disciplinary distance enacted between the author and the Other girl is clear in the way the girl's faults are punitively highlighted. Even on 2ndhandembarrassment, a blog in which a feminist blogging identity is also made apparent through resistance to sexist remarks, the language with which Other girls are disciplined is sometimes wounding. When girls do not meet the author's standards, the reaction is comical but cutting. For example, in wearing a 'velour tracksuit', a young boy from the film *School of Rock* (White, 2003) is used to articulate the classed sentiment: 'you're tacky and I hate you'.



Figure 33. Velour tracksuit. 2ndhandembarrassment

On WSBCM, we see a number of disciplinary observations of Other girls relating to the ways they fail to meet postfeminist standards relating to appearance. These remarks produce 'Total Betch', the author of the WSBCM blog, as highly individual, even masculine in her postfeminist power, in contrast to the failing femininities she observes. One such post, 'when girls refuse to man up and wear real heels', reveals an interesting set of assumptions about the ways in which successful postfeminist femininity is conceptualised. Wearing 'real', which appears to signify 'very high' heels, is equated as a sign of feminine power achieved through pain – which may be why 'man up' as a term meaning to 'toughen up' and do the 'difficult' thing is used.

WHEN GIRLS REFUSE TO MAN UP AND WEAR REAL HEELS



Figure 34. Girls refuse to wear heels. WSBCM

As with many postfeminist discourses, particularly those used in advertising, a desire to 'have it both ways' (Lazar, 2011) is manifested. The sexist term 'man up' is used for its connotations with power and strength, while it is simultaneously divorced from its gendered origins, so 'manning up' by wearing heels is possible. The undifferentiated Other girl should accordingly be seen as *productive*; she is an affective-discursive accessory to be used as one's foil, the constitutive limit (Skeggs, 2004, 2005) producing the self as a postfeminist individual. It is not clear who or what the defining characteristics of the Other girl may be, apart from an 'outside' produced through a moving surface-boundary of hostility, condescension and anxiety about femininity more generally. The spectatorial girlfriend reader can thus never be the Other girl, being textually invited to share in collective gripes about her. The Other girl is mythic, mobile and adaptable, produced as always already outside the surfaces constructed through the affective inclusion of the best friend and spectatorial girlfriend.

Like the catchphrase 'Look like a girl, act like a lady, think like a man, work like a boss' circulating around social media over 2012 – 2013, and made infamous by pen manufacturer Bic in 2015 (see, e.g. Eleftheriou-Smith, 2015), the 'man up' post reflects the understanding that whilst normative feminine standards of appearance are to be exacted ever more strenuously, a young woman must distinguish herself from other women in terms of masculine individuality. The author Total Betch is positioned as inhabiting this 'masculine'

subjectivity, doing the tough work of wearing ‘real’ heels because, as reality star Lauren Conrad explains in the GIF chosen for the post, ‘the only person who looks good in kitten heels is Suri Cruise’ (the young daughter of film stars Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes). Evidently Suri Cruise, as a young girl, is permitted to wear the girlish, insufficient ‘kitten heel’ as she is not yet an adult woman. However, other young women are posited as failing postfeminist ‘grown up’ standards. The uncritical use of the term ‘man up’ to mean ‘toughness’, even when wearing aesthetically feminine heels, demonstrates the way in which a ‘soft’ femininity is reviled, perhaps from the standpoint of a harder ‘post-girl power’ (Dobson & Harris, 2015) femininity.

In the way that her ‘otherness’ almost *precedes* her description, the Other girl becomes everyone and no one. In her descriptive brevity and status as a constitutive limit, the Other girl becomes a stand-in for an overgeneralised femininity, rather than an individual in one’s life story. Overall in the blogs, Other girls, or simply ‘girls’ are conceptualised as a feminine ‘mass’, the limit of strong, individual selfhood. Individuality accordingly, might be seen as adopting a default masculine standard. Yet, even as a postfeminist female form of masculinity is taken as a default standard of individuality, actual ‘guys’ are often theatrically treated with ostensibly little respect.

Hot guys and creeps as affective-discursive resources

‘Guys’ are figures that feature particularly heavily in the earlier days of the blogs, perhaps corresponding with the beginning of the bloggers’ undergraduate careers. They are almost always invoked through the lens of an active heterosexual desire, corresponding to the postfeminist luminosity of sexuality. Though guys occasionally moonlight as ‘guy friends’, they predominantly appear as either a potential love interest or hook up: the hot guy, creep, ex or boyfriend, though I deal with the boyfriend separately as a figure who serves a slightly different function. This heterosexual zoning can be understood as speaking within an established genre of postfeminist femininity, where an emphasis on ‘active’ and discerning heterosexuality is used a way to establish a young woman’s independence or individuality. The ‘hotness’ of men serves the double purpose of proving an active heterosexuality and a young woman’s individual desirability, in the demonstration of attractiveness to friends when socialising with hot guys, and through the retelling of hook ups. Accordingly, desire is

usually signalled by referring to the guy as ‘hot’, and by ‘hot’, it is clear that this equates as a physical attractiveness which acts as a visual cue to desire. Desire is conveyed as an immediate affect that flows directly from hotness. A typical example can be found in the WSBCM post, ‘when the hot bartender asks what I would like’.



Figure 35. Hot bartender,. WSBCM

The chosen GIF extracts a scene from the film *Just Go With It* (Loeb & Dowling, 2011), featuring Jennifer Aniston and Adam Sandler sitting in a restaurant. Aniston appears to be looking at someone off camera, who we understand to be a waiter presumably taking her order. The statement, ‘I would like a tall glass of you, if that’s possible’ constitutes the punchline and articulation of desire for the ‘hot bartender’ in the post. This somewhat exaggerated affect of heterosexual desire is blogged in a similar post by WhatShouldWeCollegeMe about ‘sitting next to someone attractive during class.’ The GIF features two young, college-age students in a lecture theatre. Here, the young man, played by actor Dave Franco, conveys the author’s desire for the attractive person who is beside her, when he says to the young woman beside him, ‘after class you wanna go somewhere and get weird with each other?’

Here, desire is figured as an affect which is abundant and always ready to be activated, something that almost *precedes* the ‘hotness’ of the ‘guy’ in question. Pitchin’ Hissy Fits relates the situation when a friend instructs the author to ‘discretely check out a hot guy’ behind her. Through a moment extracted from the popular sitcom, *How I Met Your Mother* (Bays & Thomas, 2005), the author’s anticipatory desire to check out the hot guy is

articulated through the exaggerated body movements of character Barney Stinson, an all-round sexist 'rogue'. Sitting with his friend Ted at a table with banquettes, Barney's body whips around theatrically to articulate lecherous desire, while Ted, positioned as the friend who has advocated for discretion, rolls his eyes in resignation.



Figure 36. Discretely check out the hot guy. Pitchin' Hissy Fits

Heterosexual desire is evidently articulated as a form of hyperbole, enacted here through a television sitcom script. I suggest that the reader is meant to understand that, often, the actual words or exaggerated movements that are put forward ('I'd like a tall glass of you') are chosen to convey a normative attitude that circulates in response to a guy's 'hotness', rather than the content of the blogger's reaction in the 'real life' situation. The words and movements signify a particular emotion that is made intelligible through an understanding of broader narratives of conventional postfeminist responses to 'hot men'.

However, this desire is complicated by what is often depicted as a normative, classed feminine inability to capitalise on that desire. Apart from Total Betch of WSBCM who is clearly branded as a powerful, Queen Bee type of 'mean girl', a certain awkwardness or *cheesiness* is recurrently highlighted in the depicted flirtatious reactions. This is conveyed through ridiculous or exaggerated winking, eyelash fluttering, or, as in the *How I Met Your Mother* GIF above, over-eagerness in response. Such awkwardness is set up as an object of humour. These flirtatious techniques are often conveyed to be bumbling and inappropriate by using GIFS of animals or men aping femininity for laughs. For example, TwoDumbGirls features American comedian Conan O'Brien fluttering an obvious pair of false eyelashes

vigorously, but with difficulty; WSWCM uses a GIF of a very overweight Puss in Boots from *Shrek the Third* (Adamson, 2007) sliding down a cat scratch pole, and writhing around on his cat bed in a parody of feminine seduction.

This lack of feminine elegance in articulating desire could be read as speaking against disciplinary social expectations of feminine allure. The author is generally positioned as not ‘feminine’ enough to inhabit a deliberate, flirtatious feminine subjectivity with ease. This discomfort might also be read also as a means of enacting a middle class femininity in which pride in one’s sexual pursuits must be disavowed, or at least qualified (Skeggs, 2005; Tyler, 2008). In WSWCM’s post, ‘during my internship, when one of the hot lawyers would walk into my office’, the chosen GIF depicts a complicated contradictory mixture of desire, inadequacy and a strategic disavowal of that desire. While the post simultaneously summons desire when the ‘hot lawyer’ walks into one’s space, the way in which that desire is performed appears to perform the inadequacy of the desiring author, through the comical sultry look of a young, nerdy white man, swivelling on a chair,.



Figure 37. Hot lawyer in my office. WSWCM

However, the law firm is arguably also a space where heterosexualised interaction is viewed as inappropriate; here, sexuality must defer to career and thus, the emphasised awkwardness of the flirtation inoculates against the danger of unfettered feminine sexuality.

This depiction of awkwardness fits with the heightened awareness of social expectations cited in these posts, with humour often directed towards the self as failing subject in not meeting or refusing the exacting standards of postfeminist governmental discourses.

The desire which is produced in anticipation of, or pursuant to the appearance of physical ‘hotness’ does not often follow with any description of desire that is linked with the expression of physical, sexual pleasure. With a few notable exceptions in relation to seeing one’s boyfriend with his shirt off (Pitchin’ Hissy Fits) or coming out of the shower (WSWCM), this circulating desire that may be read as abundant and active in its frequent citation, mostly stops short: desire is not linked with sex as an *activity*. This is not to say that sex is never talked about. However, the type of desire that is articulated above and the discourses of sex that circulate have an ambiguous and complex relation. This (hetero)sexual physical activity is related, I suggest, with a keen eye to classed, social systems of value. The enactment of licensed transgression (McRobbie, 2007, 2009) is present here in how only certain forms of heterosexual activity become speakable. Particularly given that the youthful femininities of the WSWCM public cite (undergraduate) university experience, much of the ‘making out’ (usually meaning heavy kissing) is narrated as happening at parties, in drunken contexts. Accordingly, humour about this ‘hooking up’ is often situated within this culture, potentially as a means of enacting a certain type of youthful, licensed college-appropriate rebellion.

To ‘hook up’, according to Ronen (2010) and Kalish and Kimmel (2011), means to engage in any type of sexual activity ranging from kissing to sex with someone, without being in a steady relationship with that person. Hooking up, Kalish and Kimmel argue, is particularly entrenched within the ritually enacted ‘spontaneity’ of parties where alcohol is consumed in large amounts, allowing the making of party-related ‘mistakes’. Posts abound about stopping friends or being stopped by friends from hooking up with ‘ugly’ guys or guys who a young woman would not ordinarily have chosen if not under the influence of alcohol. WhatShouldWeCollegeMe relates the experience of ‘when my friend tries to pull me away from the guy I’m hooking up with’ using a GIF of Rachel McAdams from the romantic film epic *The Notebook* (Leven, 2004). McAdams’ face is teary and she sobs, ‘You’re not gonna tell me who I’m gonna love’. In the context in which this moment is now mobilised, McAdams’ teariness is used to invoke a drunk, over-emotional reaction as a humorous recognition of situations when intoxicated friends are determined to pursue courses of action that hapless but well-meaning friends are unable to prevent.

WHEN MY FRIEND TRIES TO
PULL ME AWAY FROM THE
GUY THAT IM HOOKING UP
WITH



Figure 38. Friend pulls me away. WhatShouldWeCollegeMe

Hooking up, then, as a means of enacting desire, is squarely posited as a phenomenon of drunken party culture – as part of practising social belonging without appearing to ‘try too hard’ (Kalish & Kimmel, 2011). Another post speaks to the way in which hooking up is presupposed as a participatory element of parties in which alcohol consumption is requisite, in ‘when I’m not drunk enough to hook up with someone’, with the GIF excerpted from the YouTube video series ‘7 Minutes in Heaven’ (M. O’Brien, 2011). 7 Minutes in Heaven features celebrity interviews conducted by awkward interview host Mike O’Brien within a walk-in wardrobe, which, like the adolescent party game, ends by planting a kiss on the celebrity interviewee – in this instance, the interviewee being comedian Kristen Wiig. Here, the author is embodied by the grimacing Wiig, who squirms and moves slowly around the closet away from O’Brien, who has his eyes closed and lips pursed in pursuit. While this moment in its YouTube form depicts a relatively benign act of celebrity-entertainer repartee, and Wiig smiles as she is ‘in on the joke’, the funniness of the moment to which the author refers is ambiguous. Whilst clumsy, drunken advances might be a source of humour to the author and her friends, it echoes a deeper ambivalence as to the desirability of hooking up. Heterosexual activity is thus an intensely social activity, a means of participating in and belonging to a culturally sanctioned heterosexual hook up culture.

Heterosexual hook ups, then, are drawn on as a social resource. Though they are described in a clinical way, they work as a source of humour through which the desirability of the author and her fit within youthful party cultures may be demonstrated. WSBCM author Total Betch records her dejection when she hasn't had any hook ups on the weekend, using the famous figure of Bridget Jones, played by Renée Zellweger in *Bridget Jones' Diary* (Curtis, Davies, & Fielding, 2001). However, when hook ups occur, they are narrated as though they are 'hilarious', with the guys doing embarrassing or noteworthy things that are worthy of social media attention. Pleasure in the (hetero)sexual encounter itself, rather than in its humorous description for the spectatorial girlfriend reader, is generally not present in the blogs. In and of itself, a hook up might be fun, but there is a notable silence as to the pleasure experienced in the actual encounter with the hot guy. The pleasure in the hook up is translated into 'clocking' the experience, listing the experience as part of a social currency to draw on. Accordingly, the line between engaging in heterosexual pursuit as a desiring individual, and participating in collective social rituals of enacting desire as a means of demonstrating postfeminist normativity, is blurred.



Figure 39. No hook ups all weekend. WSBCM

Returning to the example of checking out hot guys, the espying of 'hotness' may be accordingly understood as a social, feminine, bonding activity. It is also an activity through which self-worth and comparison to others is carved out. Pitchin' Hissy Fits conveys a despondency when the author relates the situation when her friends 'are all talking to hot guys at the bar and I have no one'. The GIF itself is humorous: it depicts Prince William,

Kate Middleton and Prince Harry sitting in a row at what appears to be the tennis tournament, Wimbledon. Prince Harry conveys the surliness of the author; while William and Kate are both engaged in enthusiastic conversation with others, he sits on his own, with arms crossed. A certain grumpiness is predictable in this situation; the post articulates the feeling of being left out and undesired. This post also reflects that being desired by ‘hot guys’ has value in a feminine social group in terms of building one’s erotic capital (Winch, 2013). Hotness is key, as it can doubly demonstrate one’s active heterosexual desire, while drawing a line against those who are not worthy of that desire: the ugly guy, or the creep.

The creep should be considered the abject double of the hot guy in his function as an affective-discursive resource. The distinction between the hot guy and the creep is not fleshed out, requiring the reader to do the girlfriend work of recognising the significance and signification of the creep as a repulsive figure within the postfeminist subject’s life lexicon, who desires her, but who must be rejected. Here, the creep, like the hot guy, is constituted through the process of being named, rather than through the recounting of his actions. The parameters of what constitutes ‘creep-like’ activity are difficult to determine, with rejection appearing to be the sole consistent, defining characteristic. Like the Other girl, rejection precedes him. Whilst the odd cheesy pick up line might be invoked as a reason to reject the creep, and in WSBCM, the attempt of a guy ‘multiple inches shorter... tries to ask [her] out’ is ridiculed, generally the creep is characterised through his negation from the outset. Whilst the Other girl acts as the author’s constitutive limit more generally, the creep acts as the author’s *sexual* boundary, the limit that produces a discerning, sexually empowered postfeminist subject.

There is a distinct lack of description as to why the creep is creepy, which could be due to a range of common practices such as encroaching upon personal space, or engaging in other types of unwanted harassment. This absence suggests two dominant explanations. It may be that the author relies on the reader’s girlfriend-based knowledge of what a creep is: the guy at the bar who relentlessly stares, takes up one’s space and or is uncomfortably persistent in his advances. However, I suggest that this lack of description also indicates the difficulty within a postfeminist lexicon of articulating feminine victimisation. Of course, sexual harassment or assault is not funny, and this public operates on a humorous affective relationality. Yet, curiously, in a university context where much recent discussion highlights the endemic proportions of sexual assault on American campuses (see, e.g. Kimmel, 2015), there is a notable absence of the sense of being personally wronged when creeps are cited. In

a postfeminist vocabulary of individualised sexual empowerment, I suggest that the creep is only speakable as the ugly twin of the hot guy: he exists for the important purpose of showing discerning sexual taste and the postfeminist power of sexual rejection of inferior men. Thus, parallel to the way in which 'hotness' signals an immediate viability, the creep and the hot guy signal the capability of the feminine subject to reject as well as welcome heterosexual advances.

It must be noted that though guys overall feature commonly in the posts, even the hot ones are not necessarily positioned in a flattering way. They are figured as incomplete, inadequate and superficial and are effectively made accessories for the postfeminist self. For example, once on an actual date with a guy, the guy is often described to be uncouth, boring or embarrassing. TwoDumbGirls documents being initially attracted to a hot guy, but then, wanting to shout 'shut up' during dinner when the aesthetically pleasing male begins engaging in conversation, using a GIF of the flamboyant *America's Next Top Model* ("America's Next Top Model," 2003) judge Tyra Banks to express this campy outrage.

WHEN MY HOT DATE ARRIVES AT MY DOORSTEP

at first, it's like



But as soon he starts talking, it's just like



Figure 40. Be quiet Tiffany. TwoDumbGirls

Similarly, when 'someone I hooked up with tries to hang out with me the next day' (WhatShouldWeCollegeMe), presumably after a drunken hook up, this circumstance is met with an exaggerated declaration of regret, extracted from the television comedy *Arrested Development* (Hurwitz, 2003), where actor Will Arnett states, garbed in a hospital gown and staring blankly into space, 'I've made a huge mistake'. Though the blogs avow an inability to interact with the hot guy in a smooth, elegant or alluring way per social expectations, he is positioned as ultimately inadequate, a plaything that loses its allure. Nonchalance and indifference create a distance from the hot guy, enabling the author to extract value from this figure within postfeminist luminous terms of sexuality, demonstrating her active, discerning sexual desire, and at the same time, his lack of power over her.

Such a position may resonate with the ‘revenge’ postfeminist themes that Gill (2007) notes, in which men are made objects, and discarded by powerful females. However, the gendered wrongs of university hook up culture (Kalish & Kimmel, 2011) that might incite this affect of revenge or coolness are generally absent. Wrongs enacted by guys are generally cited as occurring to ‘Other girlfriends’ – they are one step removed. The author is positioned as rational and cool; though she may resent singledom, she is usually not the crying, upset female friend after a breakup or disappointment. This positioning becomes clear in posts such as ‘when my friend is obsessing over a jerk’ on 2ndhandembarrassment, evincing distance from the irrational, illogical attachment to unworthy men. In the GIF of this post, a cartoon figure slaps another around the face with a wad of paper; the author is trying to ‘knock some sense’ into her friend. Speaking as a feminine ‘victim’ is evidently uncomfortable – even unspeakable - in this space of humorous, snappy GIF posts. These affective-discursive silences construct a means by which the self can be aligned with the subjectivity of the strong, indifferent, sexually capable postfeminist woman, casting as other a femininity deemed to be soft and helpless.

Boyfriends: the must-have accessory

Compare these heterosexual figures, however, with the figure of the boyfriend, who plays a different accessorial role in the blogs’ interpretation of the postfeminist luminosity of sexuality. The boyfriend is one of the most central and recurring figures in the posts, either in his current or longed for future presence. The boyfriend is a reassuring stalwart who appears to deserve the affection of the author, or at least, much more so than the other men who populate the life script here. The founder blog draws attention to feeling comfortable in front of the cited boyfriend, discussing the consumption of copious amount of foods in front of him, and by otherwise feeling free to act in an unfeminine manner with him. The boyfriend, when mentioned, is someone that indulges the author when she wants attention or affection. Accordingly, a warm humour often frames this relation. When the boyfriend oversteps the line, these are generally minor transgressions: ‘when my boyfriend forgets to DVR *the Voice*’, a reality singing competition show ("The Voice," 2011), this is met with consternation, but a humorous resignation. Sexual desire in relation to the boyfriend is recounted more descriptively in the anticipation of the boyfriend stepping out of the shower, or the feeling when seeing the boyfriend unclothed. Such posts may be understood as the

enactment of licensed transgression (McRobbie, 2009, 2007). Sexual desire for the boyfriend, as the masculine counterpart who helps to uphold the author's feminine desirability, is more 'speakable'. Whilst 'hot guys' may exist on the desiring periphery as objects that work to circulate desire, sexual activity with the boyfriend accords with sanctioned postfeminist practices of sexuality.

However, the substance of the boyfriend, while more fleshed out than the generic hot guy, tends to be fairly thin – again, suggesting a convention through which to make oneself intelligible as a feminine author in this public. The boyfriend is treated affectionately but talk of substantial emotional dependence on him is eschewed. Like the other figures, the boyfriend is a device to talk about the self: a means of demonstrating the author's preferences, playfulness, and desires. The exception to this is in Pitchin' Hissy Fits, where the author includes details of their developing romance, posting at times which appear to correspond to when she sees him. This blog, in general, appears to draw more deeply on personal experiences which are less humorously relatable, and according to the blogger, is quite private, with only a few Tumblr followers. With the other blogs, which appear to have larger audiences, anecdotes about the boyfriend do not appear in a linear timeline; rather, the boyfriend is drawn on as a humorous resource, about whom a stock of amusing observations are available to be posted.

The boyfriend may accordingly also be seen as an instrumentalised, accessorial figure – but he is an accessory a young woman must have. Similar to Diane Negra's (2008) insight into how marriage becomes an item to tick off for the successful postfeminist woman, a boyfriend also becomes an accessory to some degree in these texts. This becomes clear in the acerbic post on WSBCM, 'when my boyfriend starts to let himself go'. The reaction to this state of affairs is spoken in the GIF through a man who appears to be a television host of a daytime talk show. The man says, with a look of regret on his face, 'Time to upgrade'. This is the harshest articulation of the accessorial nature of the boyfriend found across the blogs, which matches the self-branding by its author, 'Total Betch', as a successful, sassy, knowingly obnoxious 'mean girl'. However, the boyfriend, while sometimes undermined in personal value, does not lose his overall ontological importance in relation to the author.

The boyfriend is in demand – and when absent, this lack is spoken about as a reflection on, or failing of the feminine author, though the impact of this failure is disavowed by its humorous articulation. Not having a boyfriend is clearly understood as a personal disadvantage. Sometimes, such an absence is seen as leading to a future without a husband. In

TwoDumbGirls, being alone in the future is understood as pathetic. Two contrasting GIFs are used, one of a happy, 'just married' couple in their wedding attire bouncing on a bed which is captioned 'Expectation', which is juxtaposed with a GIF captioned 'Reality' of reality star Lauren Conrad playing with a cat, an allusion to being a single 'cat lady'.

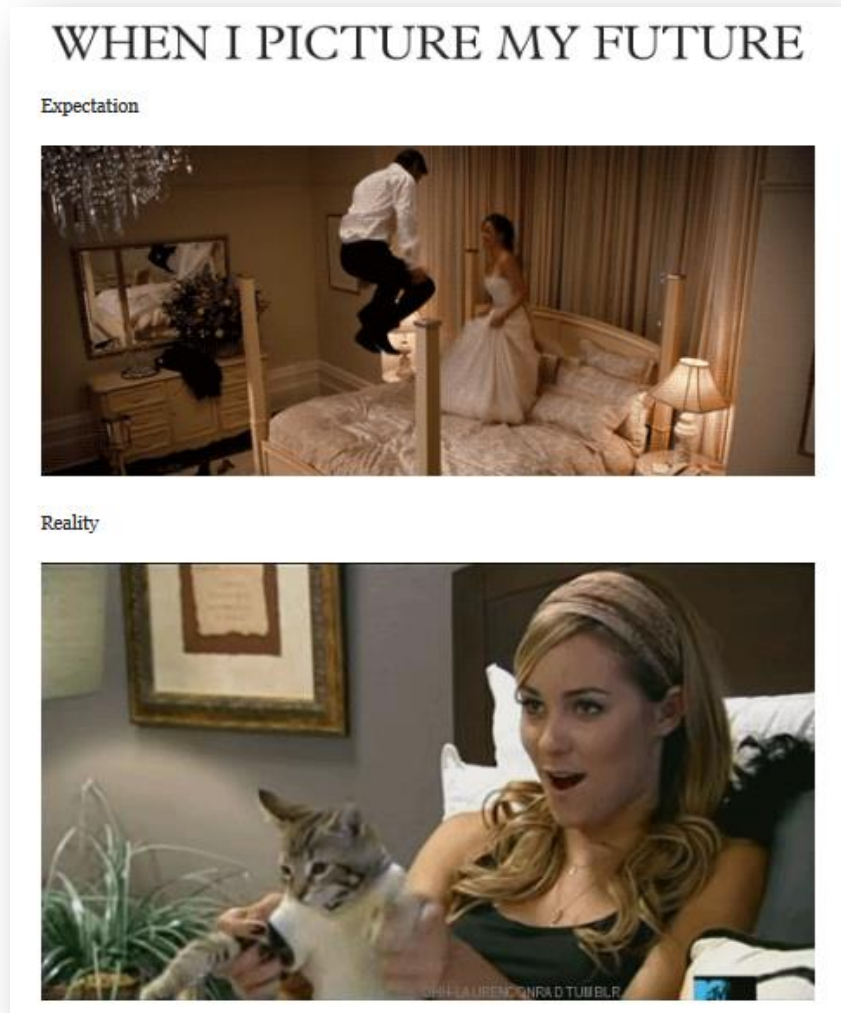


Figure 41. When I picture my future. TwoDumbGirls

In the blog 2ndhandembarrassment where heterosexual sociality is less of a dominant theme, a future lone self is nonetheless viewed as abject. In the GIF of the post 'When I've drunk too much', Zooey Deschanel, with a drink in hand at a bar, articulates the author's feeling: 'I'm gonna end up alone'. Sipping her drink, she continues, 'I'm gonna be a single old lady, flashing people on the subway.' Evident here are entrenched clichés of lonely people at the margins – the cat lady, the old 'flasher' – which are used to generate laughs as a way of making light of the situation. The visual and scripted content of the GIFs in their

deployment of social stereotypes tempers an underlying current of despondency. The silliness of Conrad playing with the paws of the cat in the first GIF, and the ludicrous notion of an ‘old lady flasher’ both exaggerates the cliché, making the reaction legible for a wider readership, as well as purporting to undercut the sexist trope with humour. Here, personal, deeper vulnerabilities to sexist discourses are acknowledged and managed through exaggeration and play, though the sting of the sexism remains.

The absence of a boyfriend is also often felt to produce social exclusion on the basis of ‘everyone else’ (one’s girlfriends) having one. Being the only single person at a party, or at a group dinner party, is a central, frequent theme which is articulated with frustration, annoyance and often sadness. Interestingly, this lack is often signalled through recourse to food as a crutch. As discussed in Chapter Four, food consumption is often viewed as *sad*, inadequate, a poor substitute for possession of a boyfriend. Alcohol in this context is similarly positioned as a crutch, to be consumed to numb the sensation of being excluded as a single person. In articulating the sense of exclusion when going out with a group of only couples, Total Betch uses a television GIF of a young woman smiling, saying, ‘So, I’m the only single one?’ The young woman pauses, stops smiling, then says, ‘That’s fine’, taking a gulp of a very full glass of wine.



Figure 42. Only single one. WSBCM

The resort to food or alcohol adds further significance to the author who lacks the key figure of the boyfriend. First, it suggests that this lack is understood to reflect poorly on the

feminine author who, in a postfeminist social landscape, fails in some way to properly regulate and control her life through her body as well as through her inability to embody independent, acquisitive (hetero)sexuality. She has failed to acquire the key figure demonstrating her desirability, even as she might be enjoying the company of ‘hot guys’.

I further argue that such despondency speaks to a sense of loss, as friends drift from old (girl)friend loyalties and gain new ones in respect of their romantic partners. Such girlfriend loss is supported by the way in which the lack of a boyfriend is bemoaned in *comparison* to others’ boyfriends, and in the intense resentment that is articulated in relation to boyfriends taking time away from friends. Accordingly, far from voicing a simple dependency on a heterosexual partner, it speaks to being left out of dominant social rituals, and out of previous, intimate homosocial spaces, while being required to affect a type of nonchalance in relation to men and boys. On the founder blog for example, one post documents the author’s reaction as grumpy Salem the Cat from TV show *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (Scovell, 1996), shouting ‘I will not be ignored’ and pushing a vase off a table, when her best friend ‘ditches’ her for a night in with her (the best friend’s) boyfriend. Here, friends who then successfully acquire boyfriends threaten homosocial attachments – the loss of ‘girlfriends’. Thus, the boyfriend can be understood as a rather more complicated figure than the peripheral hot guy, crush or creep. He is also a figure that complicates relations with friends and girlfriends. The boyfriend is simultaneously a figure that is desired and needed for social status and power, as an object of ‘achievement’, but a figure that cannot be seen as having an excessive impact on individual feminine subjectivity. The boyfriend of the author is accordingly cast as benign – and banal, whilst critique of boyfriends in general can only be levelled at other girlfriends’ partners.

(Recon)figuring the self through postfeminist frameworks of value

In this public, feminine heterosexual desire is all around yet thwarted, and the generic hot guy as a recurring figure in the life play that is narrated here is treated as ultimately disappointing. The boyfriend is essential; but perhaps because everyone else has one. The best girlfriend is a source of strength, but woe betide the girl who is not able to claim exclusive friendship with the author. I suggest that this demonstrates the complications in

negotiating contemporary, youthful femininity, as a mode of being which is constantly scrutinised, judged and overdetermined through the plethora of discourses which abound about living it. The blogs emerge in a media environment that is already saturated with such discourses of femininity; the author here does the work of reduction and distillation. The author entrepreneurially extracts value from personal situations and feelings relating to these figures, used to position the self through postfeminist understandings of feminine normativity. Through the citation of select, recognisable relationships, the author increases her exchange value in negotiating the tensions of feminine autonomy and belonging (Skeggs, 2004, 2005).

This chapter shows how relational figures materialise the struggle to demonstrate value within the terms of postfeminist luminosities, in particular, in exhibiting independence, resilience and discernment across domains of feminine life. My affective-discursive analysis shows a clear instrumentalisation of key ‘others’ in the life of the author. Relations with social figures become essentialised and distilled so they are able to circulate and be recognised in this brief GIF format, understood through the lens of girlfriendship. When talking about one’s relationships with others, certain key themes travel. Whilst the ‘best friendship’ that is present in the founder blog can be seen as expanding possibilities of self-making in the sheer range of instances which can be posted, girlfriendship more generally is constituted as a disciplining and disciplinary relation to (any) Other girls. The boyfriend, hot guys and creeps are also accessorialised in this drive to establish the self: hot guys and creeps to demonstrate an active but discerning heterosexuality; the boyfriend as the strategic and licensed outlet for sexual desire and proven desirability. Relations with others are invoked in a spare, snappy way in order to position and constitute the author as invulnerable, particularly in relation to men. In contrast to constantly excessive or inadequate Other girls, the author inhabits a position of postfeminist ‘moderation’, exhibiting rationality and masculinity at the same time as sporting an active, desiring heterosexuality. Young women, apart from the best friend, consistently emerge as rivals in these otherwise varied and heterogeneous blogs, replicating broader patterns in girlfriend popular culture (Winch, 2013). It is worthwhile noting that while it is young women in particular that attract the frustration and judgment of the author, young men, whilst treated with little respect, seem to incite less hostility.

It is important to underline here that the blogs do not necessarily demonstrate a straightforward ‘internalisation’ or reproduction of postfeminist discourses, but rather, reveal a knowing instrumentalisation and distillation of situations and feelings according to

postfeminist luminous frameworks of value, for social purposes. Postfeminist affects and discourses are reconfigured in a collective social game of decipherment. Demonstrating independence, fun, individuality, and sometimes struggle, through these essentialised figures becomes a way of fostering an abstract connection with readers. Their sparse description makes the shared knowledge of the spectatorial girlfriend more vital, engendering a sense of mutual recognition in this intimate public which is predicated, not necessarily on accurate accounts of life, but on moments that are recognisable through common knowledge of postfeminist culture. The theatrical exaggeration and generalisation of feelings in the moments related here suggest that they are not necessarily intended to be read at face value, but serve the purpose of articulating known social tropes relating to living femininity.

The invocation of these figures, then, is suggestive of a more strategic, entrepreneurial attitude towards their citation. Rather than constituting significant relations for the author in and of themselves, these essentialised figures, I contend, constitute an important means of anchoring and framing the miscellaneity of the blogs in an easily recognisable way. Matching Shifman's (2014) observations on the whimsical nature of memes, the blogs generate many other humorous moments on banal, varied situations, ranging from experiencing 'the first snow', or 'when the waiter starts telling you about the specials on the menu, but you already know what you want' or 'when WIFI isn't working and I want to watch Netflix'. However, these posts about everything and nothing are sandwiched by these accessorised relational figures that recurringly feature in the blogs. As such, these figures organise the blog into a predictable, structured and recognisable flow for the spectatorial girlfriend.

Importantly, then, it should be emphasised that the posts using the key figures of the boyfriend, girlfriend and so on as well as the more miscellaneous posts I have discussed do the work of feminine connection. These figures that make sense through immersion in postfeminist affects and discourses, are used to generate a sense of commonality and girlfriend sociality. The GIFs show neither a 'real' reaction, nor even an accurate representation of one's facial expression or movements through which an emotion is expressed; hence the importance of the feeling of a collective spectatorial girlfriendship which is brought to bear on the texts. The pleasure offered to the reader by the co-assemblage of the caption and GIF lies in the ability to make meaning based on personal knowledge that is social knowledge at the same time. As blogger Amelia remarks on the feminine competency in deciphering self-representative images:

You know, I honestly think, as much as we're sort of talking about the fact that images are sort of a widespread way, on social media, of interacting, I think it's most popular amongst girls. Um, Snapchat¹ is used by girls. Selfies- so much more associated with girls. Um – and all of those fashion blogs, on Tumblr, thin-pro blogs, they're all run by girls. And I just think that more so than with boys, I think, we have come to associate a certain power with images. And to sort of communicate through images and associate them with emotions.

Using clichés of postfeminist popular culture is an easier pathway to take in the context of authoring posts that generate a sense of commonality. The centrality of postfeminist understandings of subjectivity works to reinstate these figures as reference points through which the self may be made intelligible to others. The relational figures of the best friend, Other girl, hot guy, creep and boyfriend signal that postfeminist affects and discourses about individuality, sexuality and attractiveness are distilled, but in order to achieve some sort of connection through recognition by unknown others in the WSWCM public. These relations do not necessarily signify that these authorial subjectivities are simply 'captured' within the terms of postfeminist media culture, but that some important relational struggles for value are taking place in a context where postfeminist normativity saturates understandings of youthful femininity. In the following and final data chapter, I further explore how these struggles are enacted through the branded reworking of the self in order to facilitate recognition in the WSWCM public.

¹ Snapchat, an application for smartphone use which allows users to send pictures that are customisable with captions and a drawing feature. Pictures are only viewable by the receiver for a number of seconds before self-destructing.

7 A relation of branded recognition

The WSWCM public: intimate public and niche market

In the last chapter, I discussed how relational figures are used to position the self within girlfriend frameworks of shared understanding, materialising the struggle to be seen as of value within postfeminist luminous domains. I now further examine how skill, knowledge, and labour are mobilised to rework the self as a brand, in order to foster recognition in the WSWCM public. As an intimate public, the WSWCM public provides a context for self-production based on the presumption of homogeneity and togetherness circulated through texts. Yet, at the same time, it may be observed that there are also some strategic differentiations in the selves that are produced across the blogs. I suggest that Banet-Weiser's (2012) account of niche markets assists in understanding the significance of the movements of commonality and differentiation in the WSWCM public. In this intimate public and niche market, bound through spectatorial girlfriendship, I explore how a space is negotiated for the self in its culture of circulation.

Banet-Weiser (2012) explains how ideas of authenticity, personal worth and market visibility become commingled in the move from 'mass' to 'niche' consumption in the 20th century. In the mid-20th century, coinciding with conditions of mass production in the West, Banet-Weiser suggests that consumers were invited to recognise themselves in the over-generalised, (white) homogenous subject of the advertisement. Accordingly, advertisers in this period of mass production sold the idea of aspirational conformity to people marginalised by this hegemonic figure. Consumers as market subjects were invited to become part of a particular vision of the *mass*, under conditions of blending into the understood 'norm'. With significant transformations in structures of production and consumption in the West a few decades later, Banet-Weiser observes a concomitant shift to the 'niche market era', with the development of intensified links between consumerism and citizenship and between commercial and political culture. In this mixed space, identities become open to parcelling into markets. The claim that 'you deserve your own [insert artefact – channel, magazine, shop – here]' (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 29), has come to signal the niche marketisation of previously marginalised identities and the concomitant understanding that identity could be linked to market categories.

Belonging to a niche market opens up a language of value linked to the tailoring of one's consumption. For a consumer, being able to differentiate their individual consumption from the mass becomes an expression of identity mixed in with ideas of truth, freedom and authenticity. This chapter draws on the key intersections of these marketised ideas of value and belonging with Berlant's (2008) insights into the affective 'juxtapolitical' pleasures of an intimate public that offer a sense of individuated recognition within the imagined commonality circulated through texts. Juxtapolitical spaces offer the feeling of proximity to politics, and at the same time, a sense of relief from them, through the affective claim that its participants are recognised as 'normative, generic-but-*unique*' (Berlant, 2008, p. 6, my italics). Being proximate to the political, then, is translated into the feeling of being valued, as an individual, but through traits that make the self part of a 'general' femininity.

In the WSWCM public, attaining such value depends on formulating the self within the confines of its culture of circulation. As such, in the overlapping space of a niche market and an intimate public, I suggest that there is little clear distinction between the relationality of 'belonging' and that of 'branding' in the public. Personal mundane experiences, feelings, and dealings with other people, are extracted through the authorial classificatory imagination (Beer, 2014), worked on, and used to produce a self recognisable within the girlfriendship of the public. Further, these authorial accounts of experience demonstrate to others how the author fits within the social imaginary of the public, whether these accounts are produced by the founder or the follower blogs. In response to the open, indefinite invitation of the discourse that circulates in WSWCM texts, the follower blog is a way of saying 'me too' under the qualification that this 'me' be recognised as distinct yet related to others. Yet, this 'me' involves significant work in order to be recognised as valuable, involving branded practices to produce a plausible and doable self. My point is not that the relationality of the WSWCM public is purely commercial; rather, the WSWCM public must be understood in the wider context of the branded marketisation of relationality, and the way in which intimate forms of relationality are now a part of branding practices. As Banet-Weiser (2012) argues, the struggle for individual identity in the contemporary moment must be understood as the inextricable *enmeshment* of cultural value and brand culture in creating a relational foundation between self and others in Western culture. As such, branded practices form part of the strategies used by young women to manage the postfeminist self-social tension.

The author-reader relationality in the WSWCM public, then, involves tactics to obtain recognition at two levels of branded practice. The first level involves maintaining sociality

through a discerning mixture of the personal and the generic in the creation of posts, and a disciplined responsiveness in relation to unknown readers. The second requires a simplification of the self, though this consistency and simplification is enacted variably by the blogs. This simplification attaches the self to essentialised femininities circulating in broader postfeminist popular culture; this final data chapter discusses the ‘best friend’ and the ‘betch’. In this context, juxtapolitical pleasures become obtainable only when the author is suitably made recognisable, distilled and pitched for a girlfriend audience. The presence of these strategies suggests that recognition is not a thing that is easily obtained, though it is sensed to be highly important.

Mechanisms of recognition I: the branded practices of connection

The WSWCM public offers the feeling of a youthful feminine commonality that is facilitated through the labour and skill of the bloggers. Here, I identify a set of skills and practices aimed to foster connection with an indefinite readership, enacted across the founder and follower blogs. These encompass, first, the ability to *classify* experience in a way that is both personal and generic, and second, a disciplined responsiveness in generating such moments of experience.

The personal and the generic

In the WSWCM public, producing the self as an individually recognisable brand involves the sorting and distilling of a wide range of personal, affective and social knowledges in order to offer a form of commonality that is amusing or funny under the rubric of spectatorial girlfriendship. Whilst a post must appeal to a broad range of readers in its circulation, its appeal must be delivered through a personal, individual register. The author in the WSWCM public must harness the classificatory imagination of spectatorial girlfriendship in ‘parsing’ (Nakamura, 2008) her experience into moments that are not overly idiosyncratic or personalised, but may be recognisable as common. Further, as I explore here, the moments put forward must also carry sufficient *specificity* to reinforce the sense of individual reader

recognition. However, the production of an appropriate balance in personal and generic experience is not necessarily straightforward.

I take the example of the changes in Amelia’s follower blog. The skill of producing something both personal-sounding, yet common, is something that she has learned over time. In a moment of self reflection, she states that her blog has become ‘less personal’ over the time she has been running it and that it has, indeed, ‘become a lot more... abstracted in an attempt to appeal to more followers’. This contrasts with the early days of beginning her blog, when Amelia would use the blog to vent, that is, to express an emotion she had personally felt. One example might constitute the following post:

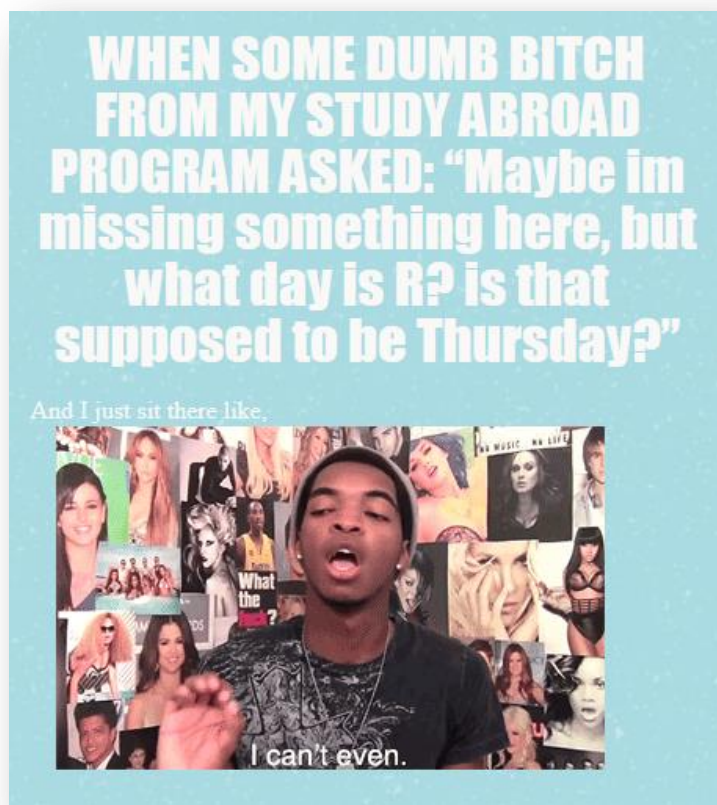


Figure 43. What day is R? 2ndhandembarrassment

Here, the post articulates frustration through a young man shaking his head. He sits, reclining, opening his palms in a gesture of defeat. He says, ‘I can’t even.’ The truncated sentence performs the declarative inability to grapple with the enormity of the ‘airheadedness’ depicted here. But what is interesting is that the post is not immediately *recognisable*. It might relate to the discussion of a formula or equation in an educational context, but the situation does not feel shared because it feels too particular, as though it pertains only to

Amelia's actual experience. It arguably does not attain the sense of commonality that marks WSWCM texts, reflecting only the experience of the blogger, rather than the author who articulates a shared experience.

Contrast this with the later post, about a year and a half later:



Figure 44. No wrong way to consume alcohol. 2ndhandembarrassment

The setting of the post is fairly particular – the doubt expressed by someone presumably in a context where others are drinking wine from the bottle, rather out of wine glasses – but it is a less *singular* experience, in that drinking ‘inappropriately’ is sensed to be a common experience for young women in Anglophone undergraduate culture. The subject of the post shifts from the ‘dumb bitch in my study abroad programme’ whose question is retold through a quote, to ‘someone’ who questions a mode of alcohol consumption in a generic drinking or party context. The newer post combines the citation of specific, ostensibly shared youthful experience (drinking wine from the bottle) with a socially recognisable, abstracted subject of the post (‘someone’). Overall, it is more indefinite and broadly applicable, as well as more light-hearted.

Amelia candidly acknowledges that she produces posts about ‘going to the bar’ and drinking because they are funny. The fact that they are socially humorous is more important

than the fact she might have been ‘in bed watching *Game of Thrones*’ while the excessive drinking and partying is purported to have taken place. Her ‘real’ actions, she emphasises, are irrelevant. I suggest, then, that the GIF in the above post is chosen as it coincides with a dominant sense in youth culture that playing with norms of appropriate alcohol consumption and associated practices is *fun* (Kalish & Kimmel, 2011; Ronen, 2010). The paternalistic quote of Ron Swanson, a character from the comedy *Parks and Recreation* (Daniels & Schur, 2009): ‘Son, there is no wrong way to consume alcohol’, provides a comically straight dismissal of known norms of moderation and decorum. What this choice of post might indicate, more broadly, is that the importance of its content lies in reflecting to readers a humorous maxim or truth under the guise of a personal experience. The personal experience of the blogger in and of itself is secondary to producing the sense of recognition for the reader.

As I noted in Chapter Five, Amelia explains that most of the time, she crafts her posts from a stock of GIFs she finds amusing as a starting point. It is much easier, she says, than doing the labour of mentally siphoning through funny experiences, reactions or emotions for her audience. Similar practices were noted in an interview with the founder bloggers. Whilst one blogger stated she created posts by starting off with an experience that she had shared with her friend, the other noted that she would start from the picture and then think of the applicable situation (Casserly, 2012). This form of authorship suggests that these moments are the product of a defined social acumen, the author distinguishing her brand by being able to accurately cite or match situations with feelings that might be recognisable. The founder bloggers note that readers will regularly send material in the form of funny GIFs, as requests for particular posts (Casserly, 2012). Another blogger with a large following, Maria, notes that she often receives requests for particular themes in her posts without solicitation. The question of ‘true’ or ‘untrue’ feeling is secondary to producing a situation whose indefinite *applicability* produces a sense of recognisability for a number of readers on a personal level.

While the founder bloggers in particular are careful to confirm that it is only they who craft the posts, this reader interaction suggests that the premise of readership is not that the posts must strictly derive from personal experience. Readers understand in their textual transaction that the post is not necessarily *literal*; it is not a form of introspective diary-keeping. Rather, the requests of readers reflect that the discerning and creative labour invested by the blogger orients the self *towards* the social. The request of the reader that Maria and the founder bloggers receive may be compared to a request for a particular song,

something that a singer can pick out of their repertoire and perform in their particular style. The reader has recognised the *skill* of the blogger behind the brand in picking out moments of intimate commonality. I acknowledge that my data does not confirm the specific process of production by all bloggers in the meme. Yet these reader requests speak to an expectation on the blogger to understand that the recognisability of their authorial account stems from the appropriate mixture of the personally felt, and the generically known.

A relation of consistent connection: discipline, timeliness and promotion

Producing the self as a brand in an intimate public and developing the associated close relation with its readers requires discipline. Brand relationality is understood to be improved *when* disciplined, together with enhancing the experience of the textual transaction as something regular and predictable. This means that bloggers' affective-discursive powers of distillation, sorting and synthesis are put to work according to deadlines, with posts delivered to the reader via her customised Tumblr newsfeed. The frequency of posts about failing at life and the accounting for the regulation of one's body or lack thereof are open to being read as the conversion of otherwise wasted or inefficient emotions into a useful form. As discussed in Chapter Four, this may be seen as a response to the 'feeling rules' (Hochschild, 1983/2003) of middle class youthful femininity, stipulating how young women ought to govern themselves. Here, I map how self-branding frames the practices of responsiveness and discipline in the blogs, as part of producing connection with readers.

Timeliness is one of the key manifestations of the responsiveness of the blogs. As I write this chapter, the blogs that are still 'live' (that is, that continue to blog) are quite prolific, posting a minimum of once a day. While this has varied over the course of writing this thesis, WhatShouldBetchesCallMe ('WSBCM') publishes approximately two to ten posts per day, and the founder blog between one and seven posts per day. The follower blog 2ndhandembarrassment posts regularly once a day. Its author, Amelia, schedules the daily post at 12pm each day, but usually prepares the posts beforehand:

Amelia: Yeah, I've ended up setting up a queue, I think, after I came back from study abroad because I realised it was a lot easier on me, to not post sporadically and then feel like I wasn't posting for like two weeks at a time. So I'll usually go in one day and put a bunch of posts in a queue, and set it to post once a day. I think it posts at noon every day.

Akane: Well, that's good, I guess then you have to think less about it.

Amelia: Yeah, there's less of a rush if you feel like you have to put something out and it's been a couple of days or a week or whatever. And it makes a lot easier to feel that I'm putting out something consistently and I'm sort of holding up my end of the bargain, whilst still trying to put out something that is quality, and funny and original.

Amelia refers to the relation between readers and herself as a form of contractual obligation; frequency, quality and interestingly, originality are required in return for the loyalty of followers. Keeping up this obligation requires discipline, planning and labour.

At the time of interviewing Amelia, she acknowledged that she had been very busy with university assessment and so had little time for the preparation of posts. However, she was keenly aware of the importance of appearing responsive to her 3,000 or so followers, and the dangers of losing followers if her blog appeared 'dead', so she would reblog earlier posts so that her readers would still feel a sense of connection with the blog. As of August 2015, Amelia is continuing to reblog selected earlier posts to maintain this branded relationship for her readers. I observe that not knowing one's readers does not necessarily translate into less concern for this branded relationship. At the time of interviewing Amelia, she didn't know any of her followers; neither did Maria, the author of WhatShouldWeCollegeMe. Judging from the large number of followers on Twitter of the founder blog and WSBCM, and the norms of anonymity on Tumblr, it is unlikely that these bloggers would personally know the majority of followers. Yet, there is arguably a feeling of obligation to an indefinite multitude of readers. The follower blog Pitchin' Hissy Fits, which is no longer a 'live' blog, did not seem to fit this pattern, as its creator said that her blog was 'personal', with few followers. What this suggests is that accruing a large following, made possible through the reblog and liking mechanisms on Tumblr, engenders the adoption of timely production as a connective and 'responsible' practice. In the WSWCM public, regular production is required in return for continued attention.

The work of promotion is also sometimes necessary to sustain and build connection with unknown readers. TwoDumbGirls, WSBCM and the founder blog all use or have used Twitter as a cross-promotional platform to broadcast when a new post is uploaded, as Twitter provides a platform for visible, networked circulation (Beer & Burrows, 2013). One advantage of using Twitter for cross-promotional branding for the bloggers stems from the visibility of followers on Twitter. On Tumblr, the number of a blog's followers is not

knowable, unless divulged by the blogger herself. Followers might be gleaned by multiplying the notes (interactions) on a post by an exponential number, but this would only be a possibly wildly inaccurate estimate. On Twitter, by contrast, the number of one's followers is visible next to the user's Twitter handle as a matter of course. Twitter, then, may be considered a more useful tool for self-branding and promotion on the basis that the user can immediately show their popularity.

As of September 2015, the founder blog had a Twitter account with 50,500 followers, about 6,000 less than September 2014. This may be a smaller following compared to the Tumblr following, the original platform for the WSWCM brand. The Twitter account associated with WSBCM has roughly 68,000 followers, down from 70,000 in September 2014, and has been noted to be one of the 'celebrity Twitter accounts' of US university Boston College by college gossip site, 'HerCampus' (Charles, 2011). In an interview with HerCampus, the author of WSBCM, 'Total Betch' divulges that she includes the number of her Twitter followers on her CV:

Actually, it's the first question that Citibank asked me when I interviewed with them. It's something that is unique and really sticks out on a resume. And I definitely think it represents something entrepreneurial (Charles, 2011).

Such an observation is supported by Marwick's (2015) findings relating to the entrepreneurial acclaim the accrual of followers attracts. The Twitter account not only signals individual popularity and promotes when Tumblr posts have been published, as with the WSWCM Twitter account, but provides a diversified outlet by which Total Betch is able to polish her persona. These include insights such as 'I have this weird self-esteem issue where I hate myself, yet still think that I'm better than everyone else' (March 14, 2015) and 'I'm getting concerned that I've already met my Prince Charming but told him to fuck off' (March 16, 2015).

I suggest that it is this abstract relation of obligation, rather than direct feedback, which has an impact upon the feminine moments that are put forward. Amelia notes that she once observed that posts using the sitcom *New Girl* (Meriwether, 2011) were attracting more interactions, so she attempted to use more *New Girl* content. However, she observes in general that she cannot predict the popularity of posts simply based on the feedback she gets from Tumblr. Her most popular post, for example, related to playing the college card game

Cards Against Humanity,² garnering approximately 600 interactions compared to her average of 30 interactions per post. However, this was a ‘random’ event; though she guessed this may have been related to the post being reblogged by a Tumblr user with a large following, Amelia has not been able to replicate such success. This may be attributed to the mechanisms for feedback on Tumblr which are less explicit compared to platforms like YouTube where direct and public commenting is often enabled on participants’ video productions (Banet-Weiser, 2012). As I mentioned in Chapter Two, commenting, in the form of feedback or dialogue, is not a common practice within the WSWCM public (Novak, 2014). Further, while it is still possible to articulate feedback on Tumblr through personal messaging, this may not necessarily constitute the norm given Tumblr’s default setup favours reblogging and liking. I am unable to hypothesise the level of interaction through private messaging over the blogs overall, however, Maria and Amelia both note that generally they receive little reader contact through private messaging.

Rather than being based primarily on feedback mechanisms such as reblogs, notes and messages, I suggest the content more broadly reflects how value is imagined within spectatorial girlfriendship. The question of producing the self for readers might require some responsiveness to audience signals of worth, but such attention to readers must be balanced against the idea that the authorial self is recognised ‘as is’, without changing ‘too much’. The WSWCM public operates on largely abstract notions of audience, mitigating the sense that the author is operating for others and not for herself. Thus, what appears in the substantive forms of femininity that are put forward in the blogs may reflect audience feedback, but more importantly, are built on an operationalisation of the classifications of spectatorial girlfriendship which speak to a more abstract conceptualisation of the blogs’ imagined audience. What emerges is a relationality built on authorial concern for continued reader connection, enabled by the very indefiniteness of the WSWCM public and played out in branded practices of planning, timeliness and promotion. Accordingly, the blogs materialise Banet-Weiser’s (2012) observation that self-branding is a *social* relationship; the author is made responsive, responsible and amenable to indefinite others.

² For a rundown of the game, see, e.g. Greenring (2014).

Mechanisms of recognition II: the simplification and essentialisation of femininities

According to Berlant (2008), one of the central fantasies of an intimate public revolves around the desire to reduce one's complexity into a vaguer and simpler version of self for recognition and affirmation. Such dynamics play out in niche markets, Banet-Weiser (2012) suggests, where the reification of one's identity traits into a market category is offered as a form of consumer-citizen affirmation. So far, this thesis has shown that in the WSWCM public, this simplification to attain recognition plays out through multiple dimensions in the use of the relational figures and the way that lived femininity is distilled in repetitive continuing themes across the blog engaging with postfeminist luminosities. My concern here is to explore the simplification of selves that are attached to existing feminine 'types' in popular culture which bring with them attendant niches in a feminine identity market.

Whilst the follower and founder blogs all simplify lived femininity to some extent, the capacity to make such simplification *distinctive* and reflective of a discrete market category is variable. This section explores the branding of the self as a feminine 'type' by the founder blog and the follower blog WSBCM, which also appear to constitute the most successful blogs in terms of follower numbers, judging from reports online (Cassery, 2012; Charles, 2011). I argue that the founder blog instrumentalises a 'girlfriendship' femininity which relies on strategic essentialisation of the friendship behind the blog whereby both friends are positioned in a mirrored complementarity to each other. WSBCM, in contrast, articulates a high degree of individualism and awareness of her erotic and social capital through inhabiting the persona of the 'betch'. Here, the line between artefact, self and brand become blurry.

The founder blog: pure and simple girlfriendship

The founder and WSBCM blogs are notable in claiming niche recognition in the WSWCM public, because they additionally draw on essentialised femininities that circulate in broader popular culture to which they attach these distillations of lived experience. I begin with the move to stake out the branded niche of girlfriendship by the founder bloggers. This move is exemplified in the use of a striking differentiated visual header which was likely adopted in response to the explosion of follower bloggers taking up the founder blog's

original visual theme. The founder blog at inception had originally used the Tumblr ‘Minimalist’ theme that displayed the heading of the blog in a simple black and white format. This theme can still be seen in the formats of some of the follower blogs, as I show below. The adoption of the Minimalist theme was presumably an easy way for follower blogs to align with the founder blog through visual replication, evident not only in the set of follower blogs under formal consideration in this thesis, but in many others that I noted prior to collecting data.



Figure 45. Minimalist theme. TwoDumbGirls



Figure 46. Minimalist theme. WhatShouldWeCollegeMe

However, in early 2014, the founder bloggers changed the look of their blog to include a colourful header, clearly distinguishing their blog from other Minimalist themed blogs and explicitly invoking a girlfriendship of feminine sameness.



Figure 47. WhatShouldWeCallMe Girlfriend Header

This header stylises the relationship between the bloggers, suggesting their relationship is the foundation for the blog. It alludes to the fact the bloggers are separated, in different places, but visually links them by depicting them as virtually identical. Somewhat similar to ‘Bratz’ dolls where racially ambiguous bodies are presented as variations on a (white) theme (Hains, 2012), the friends are represented with similarly oversized heads, tiny bodies, long hair, and large eyes. I suggest that what is striking about this cartoonish image is the way it fits into a commercial genre of ‘girlfriend’ representation. Girlfriends, even in their naming as *girlfriends*, are emphasised as young, highlighted by the tininess of the bodies in relation to the size of the eyes and head in this image. Further, girlfriends’ differences are often positioned as complementary to strengthen a united co-brand (Winch, 2013); thus, differences are subsumed or counterbalanced to present a doubling of femininity. The girlfriends in this header exhibit minimal variations on youthful feminine whiteness – the difference in hair, eye and skin colour hint at ‘tantalising differences within a normative paradigm’ (Winch, 2013, p. 46).

We see permutations of the importance of branded girlfriends in other digital cultures. Dobson discusses the theatrical nature of messages left by female friends on each other’s MySpace walls, combined with strong messages of individuality, such as ‘You’re only as strong as The [sic] tables you dance on. The drinks you mix & the friends you roll with’ (2011b, p. 134), and ‘we’re not annoying — we’re just cooler than you; we’re not bitches — we just don’t like you; and we’re not obsessed — we’re just best friends (2011b, p. 141). Girlfriendship is something to be performed for others to see, a sort of public account of young women’s individuality narrated through defiance and flamboyance. Evidently, the tenor of the address in the context that Dobson discusses, MySpace, is different to that of the

founder blog. In both cases, however, the WSWCM founder blog and these MySpace comments reference a type of youthful femininity which has value because of its associations with a relation of girlfriendship that is intimate, and seemingly unambiguous. There are no ‘mixed signals’; girlfriendship is cast as simple and mutual (Winch, 2013) in the affections held by friends in relation to each other.

Here, the heterogeneity of posts produced by the founder blog is made coherent through the idea that they all constitute ‘inside jokes’ between best friends. The founding importance of this girlfriendship to the brand is reinforced through the following response in the FAQs on the founder blog:

We are two best friends who met in college and now live on opposite coasts. We used to send each other funny .gifs as a way of staying in touch, and decided to start a Tumblr that both of us could check during the day. We thought we were just posting inside jokes, but are thrilled that other people find them as funny as we do. We never really intended for anyone else to see it.

Whilst, now with potentially hundreds of thousands of followers, it is difficult to maintain that the blog is maintained solely as a means of keeping in contact, this long-distance girlfriendship is articulated as the driving force for the maintenance of the blog. Whilst ads are hosted on the founder blog, it is explained that these are almost ancillary—‘to pay the bills’ of purchasing material to create the GIFs, pay for the site design, web-hosting fees, and other costs. The claim of a close, pre-existing friendship reinstates the blog as the *original* ‘unit of imitation’ (Shifman, 2014) in the meme.

This essentialised girlfriendship is an important claim to niche recognition for the founder bloggers, bound up in girlfriendship’s prominent status and value in (postfeminist) youthful cultures. The girlfriend is recognisable, featuring across reality television, sitcoms, movies, and advertising, addressing the reader as belonging to a shared, feminine experience (Winch, 2013). As Winch (2013) points out, girlfriendship in postfeminist culture is *useful* because it is a normative relation that can bring together feelings of intimacy, with the continued expression of heterosexual individuality. This relates particularly to the girlfriend as *singular* best friend and the girlfriend’s position as platonic ‘soul mate’, suggestive of autonomy from male sexualisation and capture.

In early 2014, the founder blog launched its own line of clothing, based on the theme of long distance girlfriendship. Two of the designs are tank tops with either an outline of the East or West Coasts of the United States, with an illuminated dot referring to the locations of

the separated best friends (the ‘cross country’ top). Another features an alphabet with the ‘u’ (you) missing. The affect of lack and longing for the best friend who is positioned as a unique, platonic soul mate, is clearly signalled through these simple graphic designs. One post features a photograph of Lane Moore, a comedian and writer, wearing the East Coast ‘cross country’ top. In the same post, Moore provides an endorsement for the line:

I loved this tank top because not only do I love WSWCM, but some of my closest friends live in LA and I live in NYC and we send each other GIFs from the site all the time. It's super cool knowing that the Tumblr was started between two long distance friends and is now being equally obsessed over by other long distance friends.

This girlfriendship is positioned as a type of mutual mirroring; the ‘u’ missing from the ‘me’; one coast for another coast. As with the header, girlfriendship presumes a sameness between two women. It is left deliberately unclear as to *which* best friend is posting, as posts tend to not follow a clear temporality, and are not easily distinguishable in terms of ‘personality’.

This idea of girlfriend sameness is also taken up in the branding in two of the follower blogs. TwoDumbGirls, for example, notes under their header ‘*we’re just two dumb girls who think we’re pretty funny (because we are)*’. Similarly, another follower blog brands itself as the product of ‘*just a couple of college girls trying to entertain the masses*’ though its author, Amelia, admits that she has been the only one responsible for the blog from the start and continues to be the only one responsible. However, there is something attractive in the intimate, simplified nature of the girlfriendship that is offered. As the best friends of the founder blog mirror each other, the blog also mirrors and reflects the reader’s experience, building the reader-author branded relationship. Amelia notes perceptively on the attractiveness of postulating two girlfriend authors:

I think it's a way to simplify things for the internet that condenses people into one person... and that's easy to be related to, relationships between two people and it also creates the illusion of knowing the person that's running the blog, you know and understand their friendship... it creates an illusion of closeness that maybe doesn't really exist, but I think it's a useful one in terms of interacting... between bloggers and followers.

Indeed, Amelia suggests that even when the best friend is cited within blogs, this may not even refer to the singular best friend, but a number of friends – however, the reduction and distillation into the exclusive *best* friend (out of many) is more *recognisable* and relatable. Such a simplification also relates to the social, readerly basis of the WSWCM

public; the generic best friendship is more indefinitely applicable, inviting a more expanded sense of belonging for readers.

The doubling of femininity in the founder provides a sense that an essentialised, pure friendship constitutes the brand, rather than two idiosyncratic individuals. The ambiguity as to the identity of the author of each individual post strengthens the feeling of mutuality of the blog, documented in feelings of being ‘rescued’, saved or strengthened by the friend’s presence or vice versa. This ready support is expressed in the following post, ‘When my best friend needs me.’ The GIF of this post features a sugar glider possum in a living room, taking off from a high vantage point and floating in a way similar to a caped superhero. The author expresses her willingness and readiness to come to the rescue.



Figure 48. When my best friend needs me. WSWCM

A similar post documents the feeling when alone at a party before the best friend arrives. In a GIF showing the cartoon transformation of a meek, sole deer in a snowy landscape into a fiery snorting lion, the best friend connotes strength, power and laughter. The best friendship is manifested as a perfect equation: take one girlfriend, add another, and fun ensues. Subtract the best friend and there may be dire consequences. In another typical

example, in face of the threatening situation where one best friend is ‘thinking of getting back with her ex’, the response of the other best friend is an exaggerated mutual suicide; the death of one friend being the death of another. Using the words of an eccentric feminist character from satirical comedy *Portlandia* (Armisen, Brownstein, & Krisel, 2011), the ‘rational’ best friend promises to ‘hold your hand, go out into the street. And make us both get hit by a car’.

Overall, the caring for the other half of the friendship is pure and unadulterated by contingency or circumstance, as demonstrated in the following post, ‘When my best friend says she’s on her way over’.

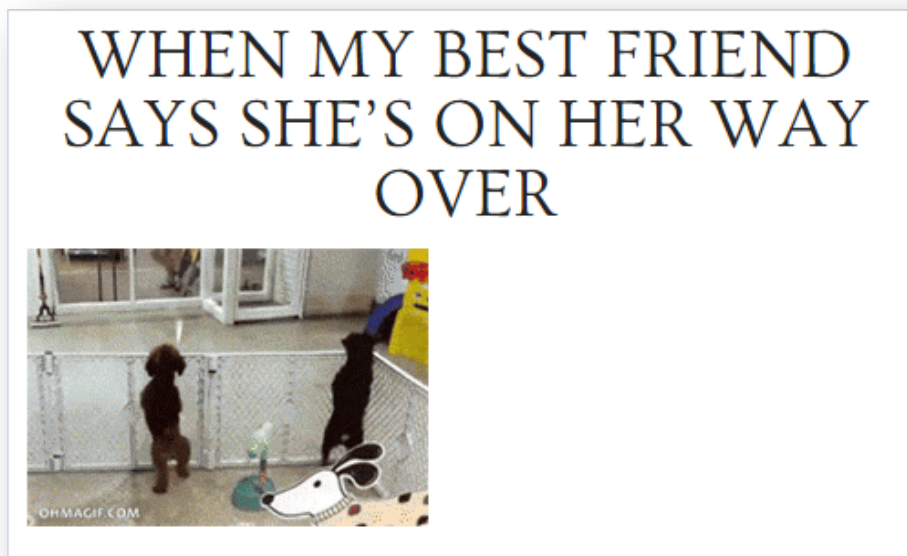


Figure 49. Best friend on her way over. WSWCM

Here, the GIF captures the movement of a small poodle comically moving like a small human, jumping up and down and moving its legs in an excited salsa. The author absolutely cannot wait to see her best friend: she is bopping with anticipation. As discussed in the previous chapter, with the best friend there is no need to monitor and restrain enthusiasm; the relationship is cast as easy, simple and reciprocal.

The betchiness of WSBCM

I now turn to WSBCM, where its author, Total Betch, produces betchiness as a strategy for market recognition. The Twitter account for Total Betch dates from March 2011, preceding the creation of the founder blog in 2012. Presumably then, the creator of WSBCM

saw an opening in the development of the WSWCM meme for an opportunity to diversify into Tumblr and cross-promote her Twitter account. In early 2012, Total Betch ran a competition to win a free ‘All the b*tches love me’ tank top for potential Tumblr readers for following her account on Twitter. The tanks, like the ‘cross country’ tank tops of the founder blog, distil the femininity offered by the blog as something that may be consumed and (physically) inhabited by the reader.



Figure 50. Betch tank tops. WSBM

In contrast to the soft feminine sameness and double-ness of the founder blog, Total Betch uses an intensively foregrounded individualism to promote a consistently and explicitly branded blog in authorial tone and choice of themes. As shown with the tank tops above, the blog often engages in knowing play with the meaning of ‘bitch’, of which the word ‘betch’ is a re-appropriation. This similarity of ‘bitch’ and ‘betch’ is the subject of many posts in the

blog, where indignation is voiced at being called a 'bitch', though at the same time, a certain overlap between betchy/bitchy qualities is effected to confer a branded distinction of the blog. The constant spectral invocation yet dismissal of being a 'bitch' can be seen in the frequency with which the 'betch' is defined. A clear example is articulated in the post 'when you're a betch', accompanied by an explicit but knowing statement of superiority: 'the reason I act superior to everybody else is because I am'.



Figure 51. When you're a betch. WSBCM

Articulated in other posts such as 'Mirror Mirror on the wall, who is the hottest betch of all' and 'when someone calls me a betch', the betch is repeatedly named and invoked.

The betch conveys a knowing but, I suggest, not *quite* ironic elitism based on popularity, savviness, looks, and occasional meanness. The betch is attractive, ambitious and calculating; she has exacting personal standards and thus is prone to look down on others. She epitomises a caricature of a successful neoliberal woman, the type circulated as the evil, 'deadly' counterpart of the soft, feminine romantic heroine (Negra, 2008) or, indeed, the supportive best friend. Indeed, the betch brand is recognisable through reader knowledge of postfeminist popular culture. The sassy mean girl is a form of femininity seen in reality shows such as *What Not to Wear* ("What Not to Wear," 2001), through to comedies such as

Mean Girls (Waters, 2004) and on digital spaces like MySpace where a confrontational individuality is articulated in relation to Other girls (Dobson 2011b; 2012).

While Total Betch adheres to affective-discursive themes similar to the founder blog, a focus on self-promotion is much more explicit. Total Betch acknowledges the *use* of girlfriendship. One such example of this, as suggested in the previous chapter, is the documented feeling of triumph ‘when my bestie and I congratulate each other on being the most attractive betches in the room’.

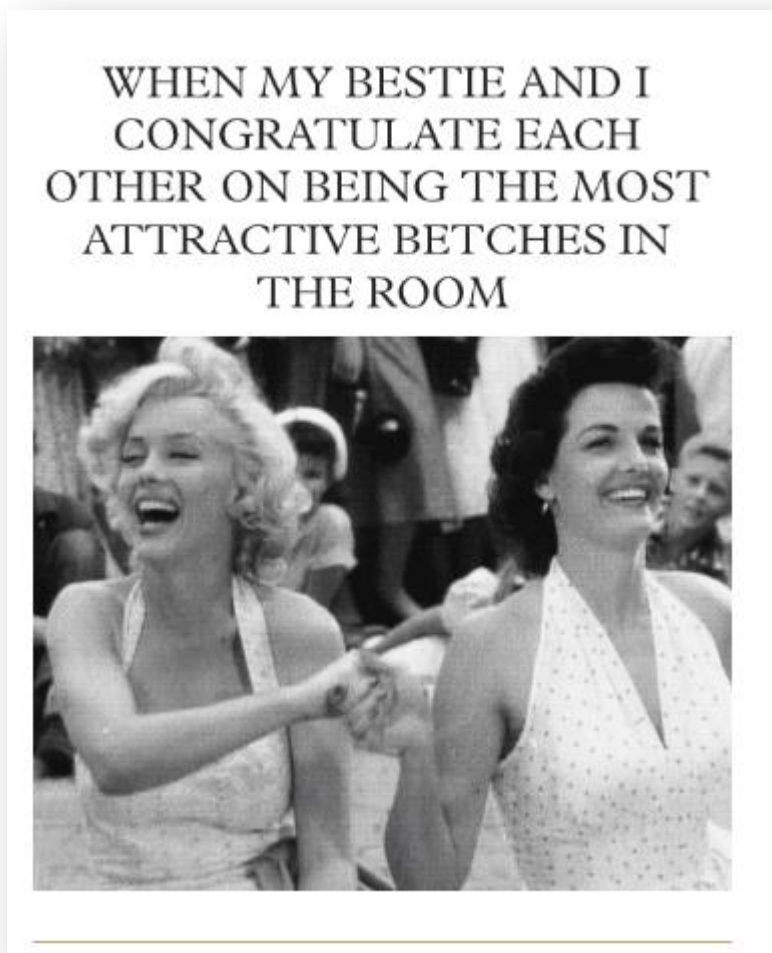


Figure 52. The most attractive betches. WSBCM

Girlfriendship becomes useful: the attractiveness of a pair of girlfriends mutually assures the *heterosexual* erotic capital of both, individually (Winch, 2013). Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell, famous in their partnership as singer-showgirls in the movie *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Lederer, 1953), are captured in the GIF firmly and joyfully shaking hands with each other. This moment is transmuted into the triumphant and knowing feeling of power as the author’s value in desirability is increased through her alignment with an appropriately

attractive female companion. But, as suggested by the post featured in the previous chapter documenting the feeling ‘when your bestie is cuter than you’, the attractiveness of a best friend is unwelcome when it serves to detract from the author’s own erotic capital.

This awareness of erotic capital comes through in the evaluation of what the author ought to be able to expect in terms of the luminous domain of sexuality, in the following post, ‘When a cute guy I meet doesn’t fall instantly head over heels for me’.



Figure 53. When a cute guy doesn’t instantly love me. WSBCM

This GIF articulates the feeling that the hot guy lacks in judgment; a betch doesn’t *need* his love but expects it given her status. The tone here is upbeat and playful, the use of the word ‘instantly’ signalling an exaggeration of the expectation of the guy’s desire for the author. However, classification is often enacted disapprovingly in WSBCM; both girlfriends, self, and heterosexual interests are often cuttingly critiqued in posts. Men, if they do not meet Total Betch’s standards of desirability are dismissed as ludicrous in vying for her attention in posts like ‘When a guy multiple inches shorter than me tries to ask me out’. In this post, a

young, blonde woman smiles and snorts a single word, 'No', dismissing the proposition as ridiculous.

This is not to say the author is exempted from these physical standards in WSBCM, as evidenced by posts bemoaning weight gain after winter, or more simply, after eating. However, there is a clear sense that classification based on forms of capital such as erotic capital, as well as the social capital of betchy popularity, are mobilised. One post demonstrating such social capital is 'when I'm at a party and there are approximately 0 people I like'.



Figure 54. Party with 0 people I like. WSBCM

The GIF is extracted from the reality show *Rich Kids of Beverly Hills* ("Rich Kids of Beverly Hills," 2014) and features attractive, blonde Morgan Stewart, a key character of the show, moving with difficulty through a crowd at what looks like a party. She murmurs, 'Thank god I had a lot to drink.' The discourse underpinning this situation and the choice of GIF correlates with the persona of the top betch. The betch is popular, and accordingly attends parties, but without feeling any affective attachment to fellow party-goers. WSBCM thus invites a branded relationality with the reader where the reader is invited to feel superior and knowingly so. The reader is offered a space of individualised affective security, where she is

assured that she is wanted by others, without necessarily returning those feelings. WSBCM provides a slightly differentiated imaginary for the reader compared to the founder blog, in which girlfriendship offers a safe, mirroring backdrop for enacting the self.

WSBCM's affective superiority is also used to offer an explicit engagement with girlfriend consumer culture, promoting products through the betch brand. The blog's playful sense of elitism is used to portray feminine beauty and consumption practices as self-gratifying, in ways that echo power-girlfriend television (Winch, 2013) such as *Sex and the City* (Star, 1998), *Cashmere Mafia* (Wade, 2008) and *Lipstick Jungle* (Heline & Heisler, 2008). Consider the following post, in which Total Betch promotes a guest post on 'betch-approved makeup must haves' on a beauty, fashion and lifestyle blog, Velvetviolets.com.



Figure 55. Betch must-haves. WSBCM

Another notable example of utilising the branded links between the betch and girlfriend consumer culture is a similar post on WSBCM on the joys of desiring and buying shoes, titled 'Anatomy of Shoe Shopping'. Narrated in a *Buzzfeed* style format whereby miscellaneous GIFs are compiled in a 'listicle' (Eppink, 2014), Total Betch documents the love of shoes for 'One Clique Shoes', a shoe retailer. Through the compilation of seven GIFs, emotions of shoe shopping are articulated, ranging from the feeling of deep desire to panic

when a trusted credit card doesn't work, culminating in the feeling of ultimate satisfaction when one has bought the perfect pair of shoes. The similarity to the normative femininity made salient in girlfriend television like *Sex and the City* is striking. Here, the persona of the betch strategically aligns with a fashion-conscious, power-hungry form of normative femininity expressed through choosy and desirous forms of consumption.

I have shown here how the founder blog and WSBCM articulate consistent, simplified selves through attachment to the feminine types of the best friend and the betch. In both of these examples, to have one's own 'representative' artefact or one's own blog is a way of staking out a small individual space, a niche where the reader and author can fit without being erased, providing different affective pleasures. We see that in the WSWCM public, worth and legitimacy is signalled through specifying, classifying and distilling identity in market terms. These branded practices claim recognition in a possessive, entrepreneurial way, making it more difficult for others to lay claim to these essentialised, branded traits. Such attempts to lay claim to a simplified forms of identity can also be seen in other follower blogs that did not form part of the dataset of this thesis: *WhatShouldWeCallPrinceton*, *WhatshouldWeCallWeCallFashion* or *WhatShouldWeCallPoets* and so on. These blogs claim an essentialised and simplified voice of experience in relation to these miscellaneous topics, subjects and institutions, in similar attempts to construct and capture niche audiences. The founder blog's and WSBCM's ability to draw on and inhabit niche femininities from broader popular culture show an understanding of how distinctive simplification enables easier and more sustained recognition as a brand. Reified commercial understandings of girlfriendship and mean girlness are capitalised upon to show authorial fit and carve out a space to belong within the culture of circulation of the WSWCM public.

Feeling juxtapolitical: the affective pleasures of postfeminist branding

In the WSWCM public, the feeling of commonality is premised on recognition by other 'insiders' who already belong. The affirmation of such insider recognition corresponds with the characteristics of what Berlant (2008) calls the 'juxtapolitical'. In the juxtapolitical, recognition operates as an almost-political practice, offering the sense of being connected to something larger than one's life in a way that feels 'ethical' (Berlant, 2008, p. 6) for what Berlant calls 'nondominant' people such as women. In the juxtapolitical space of women's

culture, Berlant notes that there is an understanding that being in the world as a woman means suffering and disappointment on the basis of ‘bad ideologies’ (2008, p. 1), individual bad men and other forms of inequity. In alleviation of this experience, the intimate public provides a space of recognition of a woman’s life through its very attachment to these disappointing norms. In this space, the very *recognition* of one’s troubles as similar to others’ concerns is viewed as a salve for these problems; the problems themselves do not need direct address. Accordingly, the sense of personal recognition, even in a distilled or reified form of branded femininity, becomes a means of self-determination without the risk of detaching from conventional valuations of femininity. Indeed, Berlant (2008) suggests that intimate publics centred around the common trials and small triumphs of lived femininity feel like ethical places based on the feelings of ‘emotional continuity’ they circulate, in offering a sense of normalcy and affective recognition.

Feeling juxtapolitical, then, dovetails with postfeminist luminous incitements to visibility and value (McRobbie, 2009). Self-branding and attendant recognition in the mixed space of an intimate public and niche market, then, can be understood as something that is of value that ought to be pursued. Branding, Banet-Weiser (2012) argues, offers a way of conceptualising a particular *relationship* between self and others where the self may accrue exchange value. As other scholars such as Dobson (2015) and Keller (2014) have noted, postfeminism in a digital context provides a useful framework for this relationship centred around self-branding. This branding is based on the idea of a resolute individuality where scrutiny is turned towards the self. Postfeminist techniques of selfhood coincide with conceiving of the self as an individual-brand, with accompanying obligations to self-monitor, document, and work to ‘get ahead’. Indeed, similar to the commercial instrumentalism Hochschild (1983/2003) observes in the emergence of women’s self-help books borrowing from the vocabulary of feminism, I suggest that much postfeminist discourse that addresses young women as subjects requires that they operate in a similarly calculating way to ensure that they are valued. The underlying premise is that the social world can primarily be understood as a market. Through such a framework, certain practices or traits of femininity are given value over others. At the same time, however, constructing the subject of postfeminism as an individual is key to the characterisation of this market. Though young women are implicitly given a social understanding of the value of particular femininities, they are simultaneously incited to implement and control their ‘own’ individual brand of femininity for themselves and not for others.

The link between market visibility and affirmation has strong resonances with the promotion of ‘luminous’ (McRobbie, 2009) choice-driven market participation as a mode of personal citizenship in postfeminist, neoliberal culture. Here there are broad parallels with the generalised postfeminist emphasis on consumption and the commodification of feminine difference as highly integral for the valuation of individual feminine identity (Gill, 2007). In postfeminist techniques of selfhood, consumption, investment and promotion are vital. The right consumption choices become a way of producing and demonstrating normative femininity, which the ‘top girl’ must then capitalise on, ‘investing’ in her body, her appearance and the right career trajectory (Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008; Roberts, 2007). Lazar (2011) offers a salient example of the intersection between consumption, self-definition and citizenship in the use of language of political emancipation, the ‘right’ to be beautiful, to sell beauty products and practices. Such forms of validation however noticeably coincide with the reduction of the self into a narrow category of normative traits. As with advertising that asks the consumer ‘which [insert product] are you’, Banet-Weiser (2007) identifies a set of postfeminist pleasures: the transformation of a woman’s features and traits into a recognisable, marketised ‘type’. Here, I suggest that the narrowing of identity into a consumer or brand niche also reflects a postfeminist entrepreneurial attitude towards forms of difference, expressed in feminine media as knowing one’s type or style. Such identity work can be understood as the expression of desire to be defined, but without attendant experiences of subjugation, in a logic where being a market niche, like being part of a ‘hipster micro-population’ (Maly & Varis, 2015) means being a luminous *somebody*, rather than the *nobody* of mass belonging. And intimate publics offer places, or in the WSWCM public, *niches*, where people may feel legitimated for being ‘*somebody* in a world where the default is being nobody, or worse, being presumptively *all wrong*’ (Berlant, 2008, p. 3).

It is worthwhile emphasising that as an author, being *somebody*, and belonging in this public, is predicated on a strategically vague connection with readers. Though the reader is invited into the text and implicitly acknowledged in the formation of a shared imaginary through the timely, personal-generic parcelling of feminine moments, I argue the reader cannot be fully recognised as a contributor to the author-reader relationship. Indeed, the reader does the job of recognising *herself* in what the text offers. The location of the WSWCM public on Tumblr facilitates putting the self out there as a brand in conditions of imaginative, shared anonymity. Such anonymity allows the author to imagine an audience without overly restrictively defined features, allowing the self to be put forward and defined

as brand, for the author and *coincidentally* for others at the same time. Branding thus provides the possibility of connection to many through the distribution of the self, rather than a two-way relationship. As the self becomes more generic, evoking feelings of commonality with indefinite others, the self becomes available to be circulated in the public and in other Tumblr and web spaces.

Individual recognition within an intimate public like the WSWCM public thus turns on voicing some kind of separation to the mass, but this does not make the intimate public an oppositional or reformist space. Renninger identifies such a feeling of distinction from the mass in Tumblr's counterpublics, in which participants 'map their own ideologies, thoughts and subjectivities among people, mostly strangers, that share awareness of similar counter cultural referents' (2015, p. 1526). Renninger's notion of counterpublics is not intended to extend to publics like the WSWCM public, but I note it in order to draw attention to the dissonance of the feeling of difference from the mass in the WSWCM public with the politics of a counterpublic. The overlap of insider recognition in the WSWCM public with the pleasures of recognition as a market category highlights how feeling part of a narrow identity group is not necessarily tied to minority or subcultural politics. Here, it more straightforwardly aligns with postfeminist pleasures of feeling individual, amongst an unknown group of likeminded young women.

Branded relationality and the accrual of value

Banet-Weiser argues that 'branding is different from commercialisation or marketing: it is deeply, profoundly cultural' (2012, p. 14). Drawing on this insight with respect to the relationality of the WSWCM public, branding can be understood as *not simply* commercialisation or marketing but a complex way of conceptualising the relation between the self and the social. The author produces herself in a timely and consistent way according to the identity strategy that works best for her, or that she can *make* work for her, based on her fit within the known femininities of spectatorial girlfriendship. In this chapter, I explored two feminine types that are reworked to fit within the social imaginary of the public: the supportive, loving, fun best friend and the discerning, savvy bitch. In the public, the social becomes boiled down into a market of simplified identity categories or niches that carry different forms of affective-discursive recognition for the reader.

The sense of intimacy fostered by the WSWCM public is premised on being part of a public with spectatorial girlfriend barriers to entry. Insidership is understood as given. But making the self visible in this environment requires, as I have demonstrated, considerable knowledge, skill and labour in order for the author to be purportedly recognised as she already is. Acquiring recognition, it seems, is predicated on expertly blending a relatable yet normative version of the personal and the generic. To illustrate the value of recognition discussed in this chapter, I excerpt a recent post from the founder blog that speaks to the way in which recognition is understood to be a limited resource that not all may access and to which not all are understood to have an equal claim.



Figure 56. Copycat blogs. WSWCM

In this post extracting a moment from the long running satirical sitcom *The Simpsons* (Brooks, Groening, & Simon, 1989), Bart Simpson and a boy that looks very much like him, Lester, come within viewing distance of each other. Lester wears similar clothes to Bart, and is riding a skateboard, a ‘trademark’ way that Bart gets around. They face off when Lester passes by Bart’s window, and Lester’s eyes narrow, signalling a relation of distrust. The post signals the understanding that recognition stems from the investment of labour and skill; it must be earned, not simply ‘given’. The ‘copycat’ blog therefore does not necessarily

‘deserve’ recognition. There is a sense that there is not enough space for all to be recognised in a niche market. There is a possessive affect in relation to the author’s self-production: making and sustaining a niche equates to claiming a space of one’s own.

Yet though some, like the founder bloggers, may be possessive of the recognition they obtain, in the public, it is important to refrain from actively demonstrating a desire for it. I refer to a discussion with Amelia relating to practices of obtaining followers on Tumblr such as ‘follow forever’ lists that enumerate the blogs that the Tumblr user in question will commit to follower forever. Amelia observes, somewhat scathingly:

It’s interesting because it kind of smacks of desperation to me, you just want a number of followers, and you want to get there as fast as you can, and you don’t care if they actually like your content or not. Um - and I was never all that desperate for followers I guess? It was one of those things where it was like, if you like my stuff and you want to follow me, that’s super cool, and I’ll be excited about it, but I’m not gonna go to all this trouble to get all these people to follow me just because they want a follow back, you know, and they’re trying to get to 3000 followers in a month, you know, whatever. I mean, it’s kind of sad, actually. I mean, it’s the same thing when people post selfies, so, ‘I’m going to reblog my own selfie in the hope I’ll get more notes’.

In Amelia’s understanding, a Tumblr blogger should not show that she desires recognition from *just anybody*, fitting in with the requirement to narrow identity in order to obtain recognition from a niche of discerning insiders. If a blogger openly betrays this desire, this is interpreted as ‘desperate’. A blogger should be recognised for her content. In the context of a self-representative blog, she should be recognised for being *herself*. Following in order to build connections with others is ‘sad’. In the WSWCM public, the author demonstrates the right to belong on the basis of *already* possessing the traits required to show insidership and without overtly showing the desire for social recognition.

I suggest the personalised, branded relationality of the WSWCM public evidences shifts in the deployment of gendered emotional labour, where young women must now espy the exchange value of everyday situations and contexts of sociality. Some thirty years ago, Hochschild (1983/2003) pointed to the commercialised practice of estranging affective elements of the self for others by women working as flight attendants, where the emotional labour in managing, suppressing and producing emotion was ‘part of the job’. In the WSWCM public, the author strategically disassembles life into usable parts and feelings which are understandable and distributable, made meaningful through their location within

postfeminist culture. However, while the women in Hochschild's research mobilised emotion *for* their employer in immediate contact with passengers, the WSWCM author seeks to use her own knowledge to rework affective-discursive life material for unknown, indefinite readers.

The emotional labour asked of the employee in generating economic value can now be understood as incorporated more generally into an understanding of the *self* as brand. Quotidian emotions, relations and experiences beyond the scope of employment are now understood as of potential value. What is important is not that these affective moments have been lived, but that they are made recognisable as experiences which *may* have been lived through the author's skilled spectatorial girlfriendship. Through the author and reader, moments of relational value are classified and constructed using cultural knowledge and personal experience. Thus, the labour in the authorial practices here relies first, on the ability to individually articulate commonality with readers and second, the ability to re-work authorial affective-discursive material into a recognisable brand.

The individual articulation of a qualified commonality expresses the way in which individual recognition by a greater social body is negotiated. As the WSWCM public also functions as a niche market, while the reader is offered a sense of commonality, she is also encouraged to make herself individually recognisable for her ability to produce such feelings of commonality through self-branding. The considerable work that goes into attaining recognition through sorting, distilling, and generalising personal experience, suggests that recognition is highly valued, and is not easy to obtain. The author accordingly labours to produce a self amenable to circulation within postfeminist frameworks of value, but this is enacted under the guise of accruing brand value. The reader and author alike in the WSWCM public are accordingly assured of belonging, the reader through her ability to recognise herself in the moments that are produced; and the author through making the self more distinctively general, in mobilising categories of valued femininities circulating in postfeminist culture.

8 Conclusion

One of the central contributions of this thesis has been to confirm the increasingly central entanglement of personal, affective and branded notions of the self in the estimation of valued feminine subjectivity. As the blogs show, there is a vanishing line between sociality and work. But here, in comparison to women's work historically, the audience for this work is potentially indefinitely expanded and contextually flexible in digital environments like Tumblr. In the WSWCM public, there is a keenly entrepreneurial use of personal experience that may travel across multiple digital contexts and indefinite readers. Discipline and consistency together with girlfriend knowledges are combined in order to enable the self to be distributed. Branded skill and savviness is required in this work. Coming back to Amelia's process of putting together posts by 'reading' the possible meanings of GIFs, the set of questions inspiring production goes roughly as follows: *how can I use this, what context can I put it in, how will this be relatable to people?* The author is economical and calculating: she is able to view feelings and personal situations as things which may potentially accrue greater value when disseminated in different contexts.

Belonging in the WSWCM public is predicated on being 'in the know'. The author is knowledgeable but importantly, mobilises knowledge in such a way that it gains social value via classification and circulation. In the escalating data saturation of everyday life, the ability to synthesise, boil down and reduce information, people and objects into relevant, useable categories becomes a prized technique. Whilst women have long been emotional labourers, postfeminist normativity requires the perfection of an affective self-brand, demanding *strategic* use of feelings and personal experience. The femininities which circulate in the public evidence the requirement for resourcefulness. Both authors and readers in this public must be able to see where value can be made: funny GIFs; feelings, relations with others; an annoying fight with a friend; everyday experience in general. Entrepreneurialism becomes normative, a lens through which to add value to the feminine knowledges of everyday life.

Through this affective-discursive analysis of an intimate public on Tumblr, I have sought to develop and interrogate existing work on postfeminism that has identified presumptions of an unimpeded individuality insulated from social influence in women-centred reality and lifestyle television, advertising and film. I have also further developed digital media scholarship that has identified the negotiation of individuality in profile-based identity work of young women and girls. Beyond this isolated form of subjectivity, it seems

postfeminism prescribes a self-social relationship: a means of relating to others under terms of enterprise and discernment, involving the reconfiguration of personal experience into stock that may accrue social exchange value through circulation. This thesis, then, highlights that postfeminism as a scholarly concept requires some reconsideration. In view of my investigation into how the postfeminist tension between the individual and the social is relationally negotiated in an intimate public on Tumblr, postfeminism should not be understood simply as an economic or mediated sensibility, but additionally, as a highly personal and social one. I outline the contours of this self-social relationship first in this conclusion. I then discuss how postfeminism demands that the self be understood as individual in order to belong, but requires the deployment of knowledge, labour and skill to effect a feminine *homogeneity* under its normative terms. Overall, then, the negotiation between the self and the social, as translated through the WSWCM public, demonstrates that postfeminist luminosities are recentred as normative, taken-for-granted frameworks, through which feminine commonality and value may be established.

The postfeminist self-social relationship

Postfeminism, as I have analysed it in the digital context of the WSWCM public, operates on several intersecting levels orienting the self in a particular way to the social, creating cultures of sociality around its luminous domains. First, it operates as a set of feeling rules that construct a relational disposition towards others favouring entrepreneurial, pleasing, emotionally resilient femininities. The self is required to be relatable, but without betraying an over-eager desire for connection. Much of this ‘relatability’, in the context of the WSWCM public, requires some form of engagement with postfeminist luminous domains of appearance, ambition and productivity, and sexuality. As such, these luminosities, their attendant rules and the figures they evoke such as the Other girl, the hot guy, and so on, are reinstated, but as a means of enacting feminine *commonality*. Personal engagement with the rules and figures of these luminous domains becomes an affective-discursive resource, a means of generating textual recognition by other unknown young women. Postfeminism thus furnishes certain ‘common knowledges’ to be drawn on in making the self recognisable. Further, it informs the way in which these common knowledges may be operationalised. The affective-discursive analysis I have undertaken shows that a significant level of discipline is

required to abstract the self into generic, consistent, funny moments that may be circulated in the WSWCM public.

Humour plays a key role in managing the postfeminist self-social tension. The humour of the WSWCM public reframes what are understood as social, common experiences as personal experience, but implicitly disavows the social shaping of their individual articulation. Being funny is taken up as a powerful disarming technique compatible with postfeminist feeling rules through which the self can be made palatable for consumption, inviting interaction without appearing *to have to ask for it*. Young women's self-production through digital media has often been punitively termed 'narcissistic' and attention-seeking (Tanner et al., 2013), even as postfeminist calls to individual visibility are intensified through digital media (Dobson, 2015). Humour provides a way of managing the risks of being called out in this way, whilst still investing in the work of making the self visible. The self-deprecating humour of the blogs, moreover, generates an affective commonality in relation to the understood shared luminous predicaments young women face. The author in the WSWCM public articulates disappointment but not disenchantment, to adapt Berlant's (2008) words, with the understood postfeminist terms of femininity. In the overall optimism conveyed by the blogs' self-directed humour, the blogs demonstrate a continuing attachment to postfeminist normativity. Minor transgressions, disappointments and failures may be confessed, but resilience and adaptability must be demonstrated in the managing of the larger life project. Above all, the relationality of the WSWCM public suggests that, while enjoying a minimal amount of leeway in 'failing' luminous expectations, young women must show to others that they are *managing* overall and that they are of recognisable value in the expert production of selves available for digital circulation.

Belonging in the public: recognition, sameness and exclusivity

Intimate publics are spaces in which feelings of togetherness circulate based on the premise of shared worlds and imaginaries (Berlant, 2008). Yet, whilst intimate publics temptingly offer the pleasure of recognition based on commonality, this sanctuary of recognition in the WSWCM public is predicated on young women's competency in reworking their complexity into simpler and more consumable versions of the self. Emotional, personal and feminine cultural knowledges are used to form the self in concert

with classificatory understandings of what is broadly recognisable and relatable. It becomes clear, then, that the self-analysis, self-reflexivity and self-monitoring of postfeminist subjectivity is put to use. But it seems that for all this work, the recognition provided translates to connection under significantly curtailed terms, recentring attachment to postfeminist luminosities as key to feminine commonality. As Eng (2010) observes, recognition in the (neo)liberal tradition tends to register difference as a form of culture which is consumable. Recognition here takes place under branded requirements of consistency. In catering to what is considered most relatable and palatable, certain forms of experience are privileged. As with media products which purport to represent normalcy or generality, what is portrayed as generic shows that recognition takes place under unequal terms. Middle class, youthful (white) femininity, as both a centrally addressed form of identity and part of postfeminist consumer culture, can be seen here as the main speakable form of experience, though as the spread of the meme into miscellaneous interest blogs shows, this is not necessarily a given. At the same time young women are incited to come forward in conditions of individual visibility, the value of this individuality depends on the skilful rearticulation of luminous social domains.

The pleasure of recognition translated through the WSWCM blog post is premised on reader and author *sameness*. On the face of it, WSWCM texts appear to be solely about the self, featuring light-hearted moments in the life of the author, with little voice given to the relational figures that are given a guest starring role. Yet, I suggest this deflects attention from the way they are actually structured to hold an agreeable mirror to the reader. The *reader* is meant to recognise herself within the post. In performing generic but customised selves that may be read as ‘common’, the feminine self-brands of the public produce selves that are oriented and intended to reflect abstract, imagined others, enacting a feminine homogeneity. The pleasures of recognition are additionally shaped by the sense of exclusivity and niche-ness of the WSWCM public, constructing outsiders and recognisable insiders. Indeed, this sense of exclusivity is vital for providing pleasures of recognition in a public where recognisability is structured around postfeminist forms of commonality. Pleasures of niche-ness can be linked to those offered in broader publics of everyday life based on forms of consumer-citizenship, in which the consumer is assured of their above-average knowingness and thus of their enhanced value (Maly & Varis, 2015). Rather than being the ‘nobody’ of mass market belonging, niches like the WSWCM public offer a sense of having one’s ‘own space’ through narrowing down membership of a group based on insider

knowledges. Recognition of belonging within a niche promises a security that appears more authentic and viable within the broader context of neoliberal culture because it is open to fewer people. The affective commonality demonstrated in this intimate public, then, is predicated on continuing exclusionary hierarchies of postfeminist knowledge and capacity in which not all may find a place.

Through my research, I too have been part of these textual transactions making up the space of encounter that is the WSWCM public. Finding the blogs smart and engaging, relatable and funny, as my research went on I became subject to a sinking feeling that I was mobilising postfeminist social literacies myself in engaging with these blogs. Though I realised there were barriers to entry to this public, I was consistently able to ‘get the joke’. As I have argued in this thesis drawing on the work of Louise Rosenblatt (1978), reading is a social, constructive act through which readers *make* texts. In the act of reading, a reader projects herself amongst others into the common social imaginary of the WSWCM public. As such, I wondered and continue to wonder about my own implication in postfeminist structures of insidership and outsidership, and the attendant enjoyment I gained and gain from such participation. Such a predicament made clear to me the complexity of navigating femininity even as a young woman who has felt knowing and critical herself of postfeminist discourses and affects. This ambivalence, for me, highlighted the way in which postfeminism cannot be neatly exteriorised, but offers ways of engaging with texts, others, and ideas of the social.

Concluding thoughts: transformations and continuities

This thesis has advanced a number of themes in thinking through how postfeminist luminosities are re-interpreted in the production of feminine selves, in the context of an intimate public on Tumblr. Yet, it has also situated this work within a history of gendered exchange and production. The domain of digital culture, as I have argued, has often been characterised as something that is ‘new’. Given that memes are still not well trodden ground in media scholarship, some developments have been charted here that may be characterised as quite novel. Memes do provide different forms of texts through which the social may be understood, but, as I have emphasised, they intervene and are shaped through existing social and identity politics. Accordingly, this thesis has also looked back and across. Tying concepts

of the digital user and participatory culture to the idea of the reader and text has highlighted significant continuities with past and contemporary feminist cultural studies understandings of the act of interpretation and imagination. Further, in utilising Berlant's (2008) and Warner's (2002) work on publics which have primarily focused on *continuing* historical and social imaginaries, the digital has been situated within continually transforming social formations, rather than something that is a neat 'break' with the past. In this way, I have sought to situate the digital, like print and other mass technologies, as yet another form of social configuration that has reshaped the nature of gendered exchange and production.

The interpretation of the postfeminist tension between the individual and the social in the WSWCM public must be situated within the entangled histories of feminism, postfeminism and media, and how this entanglement has addressed women as social subjects. The affective-discursive analysis I have undertaken of this intimate public on Tumblr suggests that in this context, young women have taken up a postfeminist address in multiple, complex ways in making feminine selves that are socially recognisable. The WSWCM public, then, cannot be categorised as simply reproducing or subverting postfeminist discourses and affects as discrete objects, but must be seen as remaking its significance and its utility in relational contexts of self-production. For those who are addressed by it as its capable subjects, it informs modes of selfhood in ways that are at once personal, intimate and social. Coinciding with overlapping neoliberal movements where race and sexuality are translated into *useable*, individual properties, feminine value is required to be continually extracted from the self and through relations with others. This sensibility orients the self to the social in ways which further responsabilise young women for their life projects. Calling for disciplined, entrepreneurial individuality in extracting value from personal experience, postfeminist luminous mechanisms of recognisability are reinstated as normative social frameworks through which young women establish their value to others.

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