

Laughing through the discomfort: Navigating neoliberal feeling rules in a Tumblr attention economy

Akane Kanai

Monash University, Melbourne

Abstract

The practice of femininity is a complex balancing act, with heightened expectations of resilient individuality in keeping with expectations of contemporary neoliberal citizens and workers, entangled with requirements of normative femininity. I argue that as part of the gendered expectations of individuality within digital 'attention economies' (boyd 2011; Fairchild 2007; Marwick 2015), there is a requirement on young women to manage their emotions to be amenable to others. Drawing on Hochschild's (1983) work on emotional labour, I use a set of humorous GIF reaction blogs to show how young women navigate neoliberal feeling rules to maintain visibility and accessibility for readers.

Keywords: Femininity; emotional labour; regulation; youth; attention economy; Tumblr

Introduction: playing by the rules

In early 2012, an anonymous Tumblr blog, WhatShouldWeCallMe ('WSWCM') suddenly exploded into popularity. The blog's humorous style of narration attracted up to 1.5 million views per day a few months after inception (Eckerle 2012) and also inspired a number of spin off blogs with the same format. Using incongruous GIFs (animated, looping images) and captions in its posts, the blog articulated relatable feelings and struggles of youthful, feminine everyday experience. Such posts spanned moments like 'sitting in a morning work meeting without any coffee' and 'when my best friend ditches me to hang with her boyfriend'. The blog was featured on sites like The Huffington Post and USA Today and its creators, two best friends who met in university, were interviewed by Forbes journalist Meghan Casserly in March 2012. In response to Casserly's question about their winning formula for humour, one blogger responded:

Definitely self-deprecating humour. 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. (Casserly 2012).

I begin with this remarkable, yet mundane joke about being 'wastes of lives' despite being 'in school to be attorneys' to foreground how contemporary femininity is a complex thing which young women must navigate and manage. The practice of femininity is a tricky balancing act, with heightened expectations of resilient individuality in keeping with expectations of contemporary neoliberal citizens and workers, entangled with requirements of normative femininity, online

and offline. Young women must fulfil the space of power which has been allocated to them, but importantly, whilst not transgressing gendered expectations of being pleasing to others (McRobbie 2009). Commenting on the contemporary requirement to continually be ready to adapt and re-invent the self, Negra (2008) observes the concomitant affective obligation for women to maintain a level of 'serenity' while doing so. Online, Banet-Weiser (2011; 2012) argues, this produces an ideal 'interactive subject' who adapts her brand through the architectures of gendered online feedback, producing a feminine self ideal for digital circulation.

Drawing on the work of Arlie Hochschild in relation to emotional labour, I point to the way in which neoliberalism is lived, not just as a set of life regulations, but as a set of 'feeling rules' (Hochschild 1983). One must have the right feelings for the right context (Hochschild 1983) and if one's feelings diverge from the appropriate ones, one must work on them to make them 'fit'. I argue that as *part* of the gendered expectations of a highly marketised individuality within digital 'attention economies' (boyd 2011; Fairchild 2007; Marwick 2015), there is a heightened requirement on young women to manage their emotions to be amenable and agreeable for others. Even in the face of an increasingly regulatory media environment where women's bodies are intensely monitored and appraised, and the pervasive discourse of 'healthism' (Rose 1999) governs bodily practices and consumption, young women are exhorted to be 'normal', carefree and confident (Gill 2007). They must be positive; indeed, it is ideal if young women have a good sense of humour.

This paper will examine the discursive and 'affective' (Wetherell 2012) negotiations of WSWCM and five of its spinoff blogs on Tumblr in relation to feeling rules about the body and food consumption. In the context of WSWCM and its spinoff blogs, such feeling rules regulate how young women may speak of feminine burdens of management, limiting their articulation to upbeat, punchy quips. While resistance to and transgression of norms of body regulation are articulated, I suggest that the success of these blogs is predicated on their adherence to feeling rules about how young women are to manage gendered pressures. The ability to individually bear gendered struggles with good humour produces moments of resilient, pleasing femininity, amenable to circulation within Tumblr's attention economy.

Youthful femininity, relatability and Tumblr's attention economy

Tumblr is a microblogging platform where one may 'follow' one's favourite blogs, and reblog and like others' posts. It is marketed as a 'creative' platform where one can 'follow the world's creators' (Tumblr 2015). Tumblr has been argued to be a site where youth feel they can be themselves (Renninger 2014), as well as a site of queer and trans* exchange (Cho 2011; Fink and Miller 2014). It has been estimated that women use the platform slightly more than men, and that Tumblr's demographic is more youth-based than other platforms, with 45% of its users under the age of 35 (Austin 2013). However, work on the youthful femininities which are produced through its platform is still a developing area of research.

In contrast to social platforms like Facebook and Twitter which have been argued to produce norms of self-branding and the drive to increase visibility (Brandes and Levin 2014; Bucher 2012; Marwick and boyd 2011), Tumblr operates on norms of public anonymity (Cho 2011) whereby most of the content uploaded by its users is publicly available, but under pseudonymous accounts. On Tumblr, the number of followers on one's blog is not shown automatically, unless the blogger decides to publish this statistic themselves. Yet, it may still be argued that Tumblr provides an architecture whereby attention is quantified and measured. Posts on Tumblr indicate the number of interactions or 'notes' at the top of the post, showing how many users have liked or reblogged the post.



Figure 1 Sitting in a morning work meeting without any coffee. WSWCM, 23 July 2015.

Reblogging is an enormous contributor to the production of content on Tumblr. In 2013, it was estimated that 95% of all content on Tumblr at any given point is reblogged (Strle 2013). Reblogging as a function suggests that a Tumblr user must not only *like* the blog post, but it must also speak to that Tumblr user on a personal level since reblogging a post makes it a visible part of their own blog, like a 'pin' on Pinterest. In contrast to a platform like Facebook which is predicated on maintaining existing networks of one's contacts, on Tumblr,

blog posts are addressed to unknown groups defined by their imagined commonality with the individual blogger. The attention economy of Tumblr, with its norms of public, pseudonymous expression operates on how social knowledges and experiences may be boiled down into imagined commonalities for people that one may not personally know.

I suggest that posts that express a personal experience, as the WSWCM blog posts do, are more likely to be reblogged in Tumblr's attention economy if they are deemed to be recognisable, relatable and reflect the thoughts or experiences of others in a pleasing, or at least, non-compromising way. In relation to WSWCM and its spinoff blogs, it is clear from their popularity that the quotidian struggles and setbacks that they narrate are highly *relatable*. The minute management of femininity is an easily recognisable set of problems. These blogs document a highly relatable bundle of issues to do with gendered regulation, but articulate them in a way that is *funny*. The regulation of young women is posited as a complex thing which young women navigate, individually, but are able to laugh about. The blogs' self-deprecating humour works in a double sense: first, articulating personal negotiations of neoliberal regulation; and second, improving circulation of the blog posts through connecting to common anxieties in a pleasurable, non-compromising way for both authors and readers.

Making fun of food and body regulation

I examine the affective and discursive tactics of WSWCM and related blogs through one key site of feminine regulation: the body and food consumption. Food intake and its relation to the female body has been argued to be a highly relatable problem which women collectively recognise, reflected in media ranging from self-help literature to women's magazines (Winch 2013). In making my point about the way in which the *burden* of body and food regulation is widely recognisable, I argue that at the same time, feeling rules regarding the articulation of this burden are often closely adhered to so that its recognition does not cause discomfort. I underline how food, even positioned as it is as one of the central struggles of managing femininity, is discussed in such a way that it cannot be explicitly called out as a *problem*. While a blogger might voice some discontentment, she cannot show that the regulatory matrix governing food consumption bothers her too much.

I draw attention to the way in which the feeling rules surrounding one's articulation of self-regulation require *humour*. The self-deprecating humour of the posts allows the blogger to make light of unattractive feelings, presenting herself for the humorous pleasure of the reader. The use of humour creates value from unpalatable feelings which can then be circulated in the digital attention economy, and is key to defusing the perception that one is overly impacted by the feelings of frustration, shame, or resentment unbecoming a strong, neoliberal subject.

As an example, I turn to the post of one of the spinoff blogs relating to the situation ‘when there’s too many hot guys by where I’m laying out and I instantly regret eating this week’. The scenario suggests that the body of the blogger is stretched out for potential viewing and evaluation by the ‘hot guys’, resulting in the self-policing by the blogger. The reaction to this scenario is produced through a dramatic GIF of young actress Jennifer Lawrence enacting terror, shaking, her hands clutching her head with the caption ‘MY BODY ISN’T READY’.

The above post references potential surveillance by ‘hot guys’, but the frustration and terror of one’s body being seen is borne as an individual burden, rather than taken out on the potential ‘hot guy’ spectators.

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. But the way that the undesirability of one’s body after eating is expressed through the idea of ‘readiness’ is



Figure 2 My Body isn't Ready. WhatShouldBetchesCallMe, 26 April 2012.

telling of the way that bodily appearance is deeply entangled within neoliberal understandings of the self. Rather than using more basic and direct physical descriptions such as ‘ugly’ or ‘fat’, the horror of a non-normative body is expressed through the more sophisticated psychic expression of (a lack of) ‘readiness’.

Expression in terms of ‘readiness’ eschews the neat and obvious labelling of the ‘right’ weight or body shape; rather, it orients attention to how one feels, as an individual. Ringrose and Walkerdine (2008) and Tincknell (2012) 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 non-normative body as a site of abjection. Further, by suturing the transformation of one’s 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 ‘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 good humour, showing that the blogger is managing this burden *herself*. This performance of managing individualises gendered concerns into an amenable unit of distribution: the blog post which can be disseminated.

Sometimes, there is explicit resistance to governmental directives to monitor one’s food consumption, performed through actively avowing a love of food. However, I observe this is rarely done without some form of defensiveness. When ‘my reaction to every single meal’ is documented on WSWCM through a chubby young man 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, I suggest *why* it is humorous lies in mocking the idea that one 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 parsimony. The female glutton is suggestive of non-normative bodily traits associated with the female ‘grotesque’ (Winch 2013), which has a history of being played for laughs. Indeed, the post mobilises assumptions around

the chubbiness of the young man, as a way of demonstrating one's unbridled, unfeminine delight in food consumption.

The admission of gluttony speaks to a recurring genre in the way the love of food comes across in these blogs: the confessional. One 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 its standards. Such governmentality has particular resonance in middle class cultures, where 'health' becomes a catch-all justification for food and body regulation. However, health becomes equated with *thinness* for women in particular. For example, I point to the post articulating the feeling 'when a really skinny person is talking about how much junk food they eat'. The GIF, a closeup of the face of drag queen Bianca del Rio, captures pursed lips combined with a slow, unimpressed, blinking accentuated by the stupendous length of her false eyelashes.

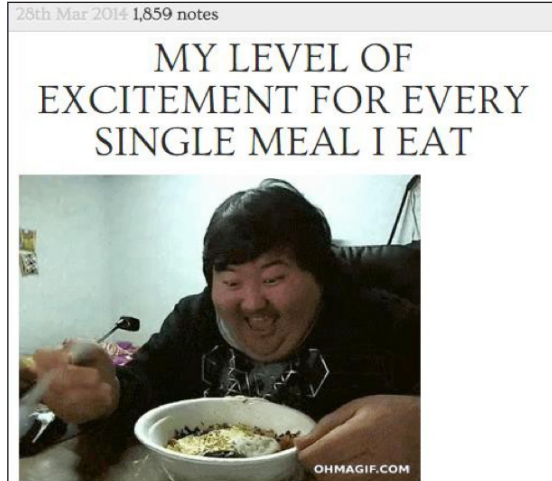


Figure 3 Every Single Meal. WSWCM, 28 March 2014.

Though other posts articulate a joyous and copious consumption of junk food, the bored distaste shown on the face of del Rio here, suggests the skinny person, or rather, the skinny girl is not permitted to do so. The skinny girl's body is held to express the idea that her food issues are resolved by her slim body. If talking about food is received in the interests of relatable body concerns, the skinny girl is not permitted to be part of this shared feminine anxiety. Her body speaks for itself; she does not have a 'struggle' to document.

Food, then, is almost always politicised in this meme set. What I suggest is made visible here, through the posts, is both the acknowledgement of the legitimacy of standards of body regulation, coupled with the ability to articulate one's individual management of these standards in an ultimately benign way. Accordingly, a complex entanglement of affects and narratives about food consumption emerges. Even holding up excessive



Figure 4 Really Skinny Person Talking About Junk Food. WSWCM, 5 April 2014.

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. The way in which food consumption is repetitively documented in terms of *volume* suggests that the distinction between 'not caring', and the self-governing practice of documenting and counting food, is liminal and prone to rupture.

Concluding thoughts: regulation and resilience

By knowing the feeling rules, young women can try to have it both ways: they can perform minor transgressions, but still be recognised as individuals who are able to manage. Humour is used in the blogs to show that one is not *really* a 'victim' of those rules regarding body regulation, which the expression of anger or a distinctly unfunny dejection might reveal. The repetitive documenting of the transgression of the food rules must not be deemed too anxious, or too sad.

In the WSWCM blogs, humour is a way in which prickly and messy affects are converted into value. Positivity, as van Dijck (2013) notes, is an affect which enables further circulation in social networks where sociality, expressed through circulation, is programmed to generate economic value. Such an evaluation of the economic value of affect and its circulation underpins the reason, van Dijck (2013) 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 burden which is amenable to further circulation. According to the norms of circulation of these blogs, self-branded foibles must be made funny for consumption by others. Though a young woman may not feel happy about her body, she is encouraged to communicate this dissatisfaction in a comical fashion, at once shoring up the importance of the body regulatory standard but importantly, bearing it with good humour. Above all, the neoliberal subject is not a burden to others; she cheerfully manages her own burden.

In their conversion of the difficulties and dangerous pleasures of food consumption into shareable, humorous moments, we can observe the understood importance of relatability. Sharing one's troubles in a feminine world where these troubles are likely to be recognised provides a form of legitimation. On Tumblr, the humour of the moment in the post becomes even more important to sustain a fairly abstract relationship between bloggers and reader, in a context where they usually do not know each other. Humour becomes a form of fun, easy connection in a relation which is mainly *imagined* through the textual transaction 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 also presumes a form of invulnerability on behalf of both bloggers and readers which flatters both sides of the branded relationship. Both, as Tumblr users, can participate in a shared imaginary where one is able to *manage*. The reader can thus continue to consume and co-create experiences of resilient femininity, participating in a digital public where the discomforts of contemporary femininity are acknowledged, but where all manage to go on.

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