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Performative shamelessness on young women's social network sites: Shielding the self and resisting gender melancholia

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Abstract

In this paper, I ask what the self-representations of young women on social network sites can tell us about the conditions and experience of inhabiting femininity in the digitally mediated post-feminist context. First, I outline four conditions of post-feminist girlhood that I suggest young women must navigate in the processes of subjectivity construction. I then describe some of the common kinds of performativity found on a small selection of social network site profiles owned by young Australian women. I suggest that a 'shameless' affect may be a necessary form of self-protection for these young women, operating in contexts that appear to require copious amounts, and intense forms, of self-display. The kind of 'shameless' affectations we can see on young women's social network site profiles may also be a way of resisting the dominant terms by which contemporary femininity is understood as normatively 'melancholic' or damaged.

Keywords

Femininity, social networking sites, sexualisation, post-feminism, girlhood, girl power, affect, melancholia

In this paper, I ask what the self-representations of young women on social network sites (SNSs) can tell us about the conditions and experience of inhabiting femininity in the digitally mediated post-feminist context. I examine a small

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selection of SNS profiles owned by Australian women aged 18–21. I draw from a post-structuralist feminist analytical tradition to do so and engage in particular with some of Angela McRobbie's ideas about the normalisation of signs of sadness and distress for young women ('gender melancholia') in the post-feminist era. McRobbie's writings on femininity and popular culture have been shedding light on the social and cultural conditions that shape young women's lives since the 1970s. Her recent writings on 'gender melancholia' and 'post-feminist disorders' paint a particularly bleak portrait of inhabiting young femininity today, and yet one that resonates strongly. McRobbie suggests that 'Popular culture is asking young women to get used to gender melancholia, and to recognise themselves and each other within its terms' (2009: 115). McRobbie writes that today, being "culturally intelligible" as a girl makes one ill. But by today's standards, that is almost acceptable' (2009: 97). 'Better to be an ill girl', she suggests, 'than a girl who gets up out of her sickbed and challenges the power of the heterosexual matrix' (2009: 96). McRobbie implies a connection between young women's 'shameless self-exposure' and the normalisation of gender melancholia, and it is this connection I want to further unpack and question here. In one example she gives of this phenomenon, from the website of Amy Winehouse, she points to the possibility that forms of social media may function as an avenue for young women's 'shameless self-exposure' and wider advertisement of their pain under a somewhat agentic guise (2009: 116). However, 'shameless self-exposure' online does not only come in the form of advertisement of pain for young women inhabiting femininity. In my data from MySpace profiles, self-exposure online comes in the form of more celebratory performances of shamelessness itself. In the profiles I have examined, young women often employ hetero-sexy female celebrities and icons in their decoration, and depict themselves drinking and partying in 'laddish' fashion in their photo galleries. The sexy, wild, laddish and generally 'out there' identity performances of these feminine subjects are often framed for viewers by mottos or self-descriptive texts proclaiming confidence, and dismissing the potential criticisms or judgements of viewers on the basis of autonomy and self-acceptance. A display of *shamelessness itself* also appears to be connected to inhabiting femininity in this particular online social context.

In this paper, I examine the meaning of this more celebratory kind of 'shameless self-exposure' performed in the online-mediated sphere as part of contemporary young femininity. I first outline the socio-cultural context in which we need to situate young women's online self-representations on SNSs. Next, I summarise the key findings from my data regarding common modes of feminine performativity on the SNSs viewed. In my discussion of these data, I develop the concept of 'performative shamelessness' to describe the affective tone of these young women's mediated identities. Building on McRobbie's ideas, I suggest that these data can help us better understand the conditions of inhabiting femininity in this context in two key ways. First, we can see here the ways in which young women are socially and culturally compelled towards performances of shamelessness in the post-feminist online social context. Second, performative shamelessness may, at the same time, function as a response to the terms of 'gender melancholia': drawing

on girl-powered discursive constructs of femininity may prove a useful or attractive option for self-representation in the face of a broader socio-cultural pathologisation of young femininity.

Four conditions of post-feminist girlhood

We might summarise the socio-cultural context I want to highlight as one in which four conditions appear to be prominent. Young women must navigate their way around or through these cultural conditions in the process of constructing a legible feminine subjectivity. These are: (1) protectionist/moralist discourses about girls and young women and their so-called 'sexualisation' within contemporary Western culture; (2) the continuation of heavy female body objectification and commodification in post-feminist Western visual culture; (3) the convergence of girl-power discourses with neo-liberalist ideals of girls as the ultimate late-modern capitalist success stories; and (4) the institutionalisation of 'gender melancholia' and the psycho-pathologisation of femininity McRobbie (2009) describes.

First, we can observe in recent news media, online commentary, and other public debates panicked protectionist/moralist discourses over cultural 'sexualisation' and its effects on girls and young women. This follows several highly publicised reports on this matter (for example, APA, 2010; Rush and La Nauze, 2006). In Australia, for example, a 2008 Senate Inquiry into the 'Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media' saw parent groups writing in to express their concern to the government that girls' magazines feature 'sexually promiscuous' stories which may 'awaken' the sexuality of girls 'before they are mentally able to be responsible for their actions or have a morally formed conscience only to be deeply hurt leading to an increase in teenage pregnancy, sexual diseases and mental breakdown' (Australian Parliament Senate Standing Committee, 2008: 52). More recently in Australia, a NSW mother gained over 50,000 'likes' and national media coverage for her comments on the Facebook page of budget retailer Target, where she claimed that Target's clothes make girls look like 'tramps' (Dobson, 2012a). Protectionist/moralist discourses have invoked fear about the damaging effects of cultural 'sexualisation' on girls in particular and have tended to associate any forms of so-called 'self-sexualisation' with pathology and 'low self-esteem' for girls. An assumption underlies such public discourses that we can clearly differentiate somehow between a 'normal' child and a child who has been artificially 'sexualised' through their contact with media and marketing culture (Egan and Hawkes, 2008). Through differentiation between damaged and undamaged children, and also between 'tramps' and 'good girls', a moral framework is attached to certain styles of dress, self-presentation and also to desire, for girls. Such discourses around girlhood, sex and self-esteem are often extended to, or frame understandings of, older teens' and young women's self-presentation and sexuality. This is evident in recent debates about young women's 'provocative selfies' (photos of their own faces taken with a camera held at arms' length) posted on SNSs (Nelson, 2013). The prominence that has been given in media to the issue of girl children's 'sexualisation' means that in the process of negotiating a

legible feminine subjectivity, young women must now somehow actively position themselves in relation to these protectionist/moralist discourses; discourses that, at the same time, position them within pre-established and dichotomous frameworks of legibility.

A growing body of ethnographic work with girls and young women, as well as theoretical and historical work, complicates protectionist/moralist discourses around girls and young women and 'sexualisation'. Girlhood and childhood scholars have made important contributions to this debate, complicating the notion that so-called 'sexualisation' affects girls in clear and direct ways. Research by Jackson et al. (2013), in which the authors asked 11-to-13-year-olds girls to make video diaries about the cultural objects in their bedrooms, goes a way towards demonstrating that sexualised culture is not necessarily as monolithic in the lives of girls as some of the media and academic panic suggests. They suggest that girls appear to regulate themselves and one another carefully in terms of their sexual identities. Duits and Van Zoonan (2011) suggest that the sexualisation discourse ignores decades of audience reception scholarship unpacking the ways in which individuals negotiate media and culture differently based on a range of factors, such as social and familial context, class, race and personal history. Their research with teenage girls suggests the ways in which girls from different family backgrounds appear to negotiate 'sexualised' notions of femininity differently. Egan and Hawkes (2008, 2012) have pointed to the classed assumptions contained within sexualisation discourses about childhood 'innocence' and girls. As they point out, the sexualisation panic tends to ignore the sexuality of children and divide girl children in particular into the classed binaries of 'innocent' and 'corrupted', 'good girl' and 'sexualised' child. Kehily (2012) well supports the claims of these scholars by illustrating through some specific case studies of girls' life stories the way in which the 'innocent' versus 'sexualised' binary disregards the material conditions of girls lives.

But, second, as panicked protectionist and moralist discourses around girls and 'sexualisation' continue to flourish, so too does a visual culture in which a very narrow image of the female body continues to hold immense cultural currency. I side with scholars like Egan and Hawkes in contending that the kind of discursive panic about 'sexualisation' discussed above is frequently sexist in its implications about the sexuality of girls, and also perhaps somewhat overblown. However, this contention is tempered by the acknowledgement that there is continued and overwhelming sexual objectification/commodification of women's bodies in the popular media landscape (Gill, 2011, 2012; Hatton and Trautner, 2011). Acknowledging this, perhaps, lets us see the 'sexualisation' panic as somewhat misdirected in its focus rather than completely unfounded. In sexualisation discourses, the commodification and objectification of women's bodies often seems to go unnamed directly as such, and is instead re-framed within a moralising language whereby sexual explicitness itself and the protection of children from such becomes the central objective. Scholars such as Barker and Duschinsky (2012) have begun to point more clearly towards the *sexism* and gender stereotyping that is often at work in the cultural examples that elicit panic among parents and other groups regarding

their 'sexualising' qualities. As Gill (2012) points out, the call is often made in this context for more media literacy programmes as a way of 'inoculating' children against the damaging effects of popular media. But, as Gill pointedly asks, 'When did engaging with sexist media seem to call out for an ever more sophisticated and literate media user, rather than a campaign to stamp out sexism?' (2012: 741). Through the work of scholars like these who are repositioning this issue as one about sexism rather than dismissing it as unfounded, we see the possibility of a productive space of dialogue opening up. Lumby and Funnell (2011) suggest that such potential openings may be one of the values of media panics.

Continuing and blatant sexual objectification of women in media is not an issue just for children or girls but for boys, women and men too. But the kind of overwhelming commodification of female bodies we see in visual culture would suggest an amount of cultural pressure on girls and young women to conform with narrow standards of bodily representation, even if we acknowledge and take into consideration the fact that individual girls and women negotiate such pressures differently. Some may be relatively equipped to deal with such pressures while others may be relatively vulnerable based on their class, race, social background, sexuality or individual life experiences. But there are few feminists who would disagree that appearance-based pressures exist for girls and women in relation to dominant cultural norms and to some extent shape the subjectivities of the girls and women who must negotiate their way around, through, out of, or into the terrain of feminine subjectivity.

Third, Anita Harris (2004) has described how neo-liberal and girl-power discourses dovetail in their requirements of achievement, self-betterment and success for young women. Young women, she suggests, are under particular pressure to conform with yet another ideal: that of girls as girl-powered, neo-liberal success stories, subjects of 'capacity' (McRobbie, 2007) who are able to navigate their way through the late-modern social landscape with ease, despite the pressures outlined above. Harris has argued that public self-disclosure for young women is seen as key in the process of their self-actualisation and achievement. White middle class girls in particular are encouraged through educational and political discourses, as well as girl-powered media discourses, to 'voice themselves' towards this end (Harris, 2004); that is, to express themselves in loud, confident tones and demonstrate not only educational and economic capacity but also self-acceptance, esteem, confidence and so on. As McRobbie suggests, girls and young women are invited to view themselves as the winners in late-modern neo-liberal capitalist economies (2007). They are produced in public discourses as the beneficiaries of feminist activism to empower women and open up career possibilities for them; as well as the beneficiaries of neo-liberal shifts towards ideals of individualisation and meritocracy; and also shifts towards 'flexible' (unstable), service-based economies.

We can see then that, as Renold and Ringrose (2011) and Jackson et al. (2013) suggest, girls and young women must negotiate complex 'pushes and pulls' within this socio-cultural terrain. In brief, a narrow version of sexiness still appears to hold an immense amount of social currency, but at the same time 'sexiness' for girls is equated with victimhood and/or deviancy in public debates and regulatory

discourses (Ringrose et al., 2013). In this context, feminist scholars acknowledge the confusing contradictions girls face to present themselves as 'sexy', but not 'slutty' or overly 'sexualised' and hence 'damaged goods'. At the same time, young women are perhaps under particular pressure to present their identities in line with girl-powered ideals of girls as confident and strong, and to present their life narratives in terms of personal and professional 'success' and 'capacity' (Harris, 2004; McRobbie, 2007).

Last, McRobbie (2009) has recently described a broad 'pathologisation' of femininity itself. 'Popular culture', McRobbie suggests, 'is asking young women to get used to gender melancholia, and to recognise themselves and each other within its terms' (2009: 115). In explaining this point, McRobbie uses fashion photography as an example. We might add to this the spate of recent successful films featuring rather melancholic young women such as the *Twilight* series, *The Hunger Games* and Lars von Trier's aptly named *Melancholia*, in which the lead young female character, despite being newly married, from a wealthy family, and 'tracking well' in her career, is portrayed as so alienated and depressed that she is the only one who is able to face somewhat rationally and bravely the impending end of the world. In this elucidation of the present situation for girls and young women, McRobbie is suggesting that melancholia is constructed in public discourses and popular culture as arising from the pressures involved in 'being a girl' today, which are acknowledged as immense, but which are also constructed as personal and psychological grievances to be managed by the affected individual (2009: 117). The relationship of female melancholia to the economic conditions of neo-liberalism and to a sexist cultural landscape that continues to equate feminine currency with narrow ideals of beauty and sexiness is obscured. Public and political discourses suggest that young women's melancholia or rage has no social or structural basis, as young women are asked to consider themselves the winners in a neo-liberal economy and post-feminist social context.

McRobbie refers to a broad range of 'gender disorders' that are on the rise such as eating disorders, self-harm and drinking, and suggests that these can be framed in terms of 'illegible rage'. That is, rage that may be of social/political origin but can only be currently understood as individualised/psycho-pathologised. She includes public 'shameless' displays of drunkenness and public confessions of low self-esteem within the sphere of illegible rage and 'gender disorders'. 'Shameless self-exposure' through online media may be part of this broad phenomenon of normalising melancholia for young women, she suggests. In the age of social media, as McRobbie notes, it is hard to differentiate between 'female agency in the many opportunities for self-advertisement of pain, anxiety and self-loathing, and those mechanisms which are pre-emptively deployed across the commercial media which produce the framing for the institutionalisation of melancholia' (2009: 116).

It is young women's 'shameless self-exposure' online that I want to examine below. Following the work of post-structuralist feminist scholars in the field of girlhood and cultural studies (Gill, 2012; Jackson et al., 2013; McRobbie, 2009; Ringrose, 2012), I am interested in what young women's public self-presentations

online can tell us about the requirements of contemporary femininity and about how young women themselves negotiate such conditions. How does one present one's self to an audience of peers and a potentially wider public in a context of the complex pushes and pulls, pressures and contradictions outlined by these feminist scholars in relation to contemporary media culture, desire and legible feminine subjectivity?

Methodological considerations

My dataset consists of 45 MySpace profiles selected out of over 300 profiles that I viewed between September 2007 and February 2008. Criteria in these searches limited the search results to public profiles marked as owned by Australian women aged between 18 and 21. Profiles were included in the study based on the richness of expressive data they contained, and also, because of the way the young women performed their identities within current conventional models of heterosexual femininity in Western popular culture. One of the aims of this research was to examine the meanings of young women's own engagements with, and appropriations of, 'mainstream' and currently popular models of mediated feminine performativity, to see how young women themselves 'produce' femininity online within and using the limited terms of currently popular and prevalent visual representations of it. As such, profiles were included in this study based on visual and aesthetic indicators of engagement with 'femininity'; for example, through use of pink and purple colours, feminised graphics and wallpapers such as hearts, stars, glittered logos or images of currently popular feminine celebrities. Profiles with overtly subcultural or alternative themes, or profiles that did not obviously engage with feminised aesthetics or visual culture, were not included in the study. Approximately, one-third of the 300 profiles viewed fit within the visual criteria of 'mainstream femininity' I developed for this study. The 45 selected for further detailed analysis were those most rich in expressive data directed towards a public audience – for example, detailed sections of self-descriptive text, multiple blog posts directed to a general audience, multiple photo albums publicly viewable and so on. My findings then, cannot be generalised to 'young women' more broadly, but perhaps do tell us something about those seeking to engage with, or make themselves legible as, youthful feminine subjects, and how this is accomplished and negotiated in the SNS context.

I conducted a textual and semiotic analysis looking at the performance of femininity on SNSs through common signs and symbols, photos, self-descriptive text, publicly circulated blogs posts and lists of 'likes' and 'dislikes'. In this research, I was not looking at interpersonal communication practices or interviewing young women about their *use* of SNSs. All profile owners were contacted via their profiles and informed about the purpose of the study. The profile owners were asked to voice any objections to inclusion of their publicly posted data in the study in a de-identified form and were informed that if no objections were received, their public content would be analysed for research purposes. No objections were received, and six profile owners replied to voice their best wishes for the project.

The pseudonyms used here reflect the nature of the profile owner's MySpace screen-name without revealing it in any way. I now discuss some of the key themes of self-representation identified across the sample: 'hetero-sexy' profile decoration; wild, 'laddish' performativity; closeness and intimacy with female friends and textual mottos of self-esteem/acceptance. I focus here mainly on the textual mottos and how to interpret them, as I see the textual mottos as of particular significance in communicating a sense of 'shamelessness' regarding one's overall identity performance on SNSs.

Sexy icons and decorations

Profile decorations that are 'sexy' in terms of bodily aesthetics and visual themes are quite prevalent in this selection of profiles. Elsewhere I have suggested that such profile decorations align with a 'hetero-sexy' aesthetic, and I have analysed these kinds of profile decorations in depth (Dobson, 2011a). Here, I only briefly describe the kinds of 'hetero-sexy' aesthetics encountered in this sample. The profile owners often decorate their main pages with graphics and icons that reference pornography culture in some way, or present the female body in a hetero-sexy fashion, as an object that provides visual interest on the page. For example, glittering Playboy Bunny logos are quite commonly employed here. So too are cartoon figures posed in sexually suggestive positions, such as Bratz Doll or Betty Boop figures. More generic digitally animated depictions of hetero-sexy female bodies can also be found, such as images of tall, thin, female figures clad in bikinis and draped around poles or over chairs. Stylised icons of specific sexualised female body parts are also used as profile decoration. For example, images of lips and mouths shown close-up and slightly open in a sexually suggestive manner, or pouted as if ready for a kiss, are a recurrent visual theme on the profiles. Profile owners also display pictures of models and celebrities, for example, Paris Hilton or MySpace celebrity Christine Dolce, posed in hetero-sexy positions and wearing minimal clothing. A few of the profile owners display images of heterosexual couples engaged in kissing or other foreplay activities. Less often, young women pose in a sexually suggestive manner by revealing their flesh or imitating soft-porn imagery and bodily poses. More commonly, these young women include in their photo galleries self-taken camera shots of just their faces, with their mouths positioned in a pout and the camera angled above them, emulating the kind of 'sexy', 'come-on' looks that can be readily seen in many advertising images of women (Thornham, 2007). In these profiles, it appears that presenting legible and peer-accepted femininity involves displaying sexiness visually somehow, but more often through symbolic iconography than through self-imagery, as Ringrose (2010) also found. Ringrose noted that the requirement to be visually 'sexy' online contradicts the requirement for girls to keep their sexual behaviour in check offline (Ringrose, 2010) so as not to be labelled a 'slut'. Ringrose's findings perhaps explain why there appears to be a discrepancy between hetero-sexy profile *decorations* and the more 'laddish' kind of *self-imaging* present in young women's photo galleries, as I now discuss.

Wildness and 'laddish' performativity

LOVE ALL MY DANCING GIRLS! and give me a D floor, my gals, some tunes . . . the occasional drink and im set for the long night/morning ahead! ohh and throw in an early chunder [vomit] and im definately set!! ;- (Lexxi, accessed 3 September 2007)

I LOVE GOING OUT AND DANCING WITH MY GIRLS!!!

There's nothing i wouldn't do for my friends, (even if they've pushed me past my limits, no matter what, IM STILL THERE FOR THEM!!!) I love my girlies, without them im nothing!! (Bitch Cunt/Janine, accessed 6 November 2007)

Female friendship display, as a broad theme, is the most common aspect of display across the profiles examined. This is perhaps unsurprising given the documentation of this as such an important aspect of teen girls lives (Hey, 1997). Young women perform and document their friendships and sociality online largely in terms of wildness, raucousness and fun. Often these feminine identities appear to be constructed in line with the kind of 'ladette' subjectivity that is prevalent in much girl-powered popular media depictions, and also in panicked news media commentary on girls, where the fear seems to be that girls are becoming 'too much like boys' in their sociality (Day et al., 2004; Dobson, 2012b; Jackson and Tinkler, 2007). A kind of 'ladette' performativity can be perceived in the texts and images young women display on their profiles, which mostly portray social relationships and social time spent with other young women. In these texts and photo galleries, carefree, fun time together with one's close friends is plentiful, and young women's time spent together is portrayed as not just 'fun' but wild, crazy and 'random': that is, as exciting, as inclusive of risky behaviour, and as potentially full of unexpected events and surprises. References to alcohol consumption are central to such constructions.

Photos depicting drinking with female friends augment the sense of wildness I suggest these young women foster in their online representations of self and sociality. Several of the profile owners in this sample feature albums full of photos displaying young women socialising and consuming alcohol together. As I have discussed in more detail elsewhere (Dobson, 2013), they photograph and display each other and themselves posed holding up beer bottles, drinking wine from cask bags, doubled-over or sometimes apparently passed out. Wide open mouths and protruding tongues are a particularly common motif in these images. Young women commonly stick out their tongues for the camera. Some young women display themselves appearing to yell and shout at the camera or at each other. Several young women feature photos of themselves or friends posed with their legs squatted – a more traditionally masculine than feminine pose. Some captured in a leg-squat appear to be dancing wildly, while others appear to be miming the act of rear-entry penetration with their female friends. In many photos depicting young women's social gatherings their limbs appear akimbo or flailing in an antithesis of feminine grace and modesty. As I have noted, other aspects of the SNS profile representations are more

traditionally 'hetero-sexy'. However, the photo galleries reveal a much less traditionally feminine mode of embodiment and sociality. Laddishness, I would suggest, is the dominant mode of photographic self-portrayal for these young female profile owners. Some examples of the kind of textual mottos young women employ for self-descriptive and decorative purposes on their profiles follow, which accompany and supplement the kind of wild, laddish sociality I am describing seen in photos. These mottos are displayed on the profile pages often in large, brightly coloured fonts such as hot pink and purple, and often next to decorative images that also reference drinking. For example, She's Infamous's motto below appears next to an image that looks to be from *Sex and The City*, of three women on bar stools, dressed in short black cocktail dresses and high heels, chinking cocktail glasses.

You can call me an alcoholic but I call it a damn good time (She's Infamous, accessed 6 August 2008).

Yeah, we laugh way too hard, act too immature, but I wouldn't have it any other way (Georgie, accessed 3 October 2007).

I'll always live for the nights I can't remember and the friends I'll never forget (Fee, accessed 29 October 2007).

You're only as strong as the tables you dance on the drinks you mix & the friends you roll with (Anna, accessed 20 February 2008).

Everyone has a wild side but me and my friends just prefer to make ours public (Micki, accessed 17 September 2007).

Closeness and intimacy with female friends

Second, as well as presenting themselves as wild and out-there and totally up for anything with their girlfriends, these young women also display their relationships as very close and intense. Long textual dedications are written to friends. Young women often dedicate long blog posts or sections of their main profile pages to detailing their relationships with, and love for, particular (almost always female) friends, as I have discussed elsewhere (Dobson, 2011b). Some examples of this kind of public display of closeness and intimacy follow.

.... bRianNa

what can i say about this chick? iabsoutely u her with all my heart! you have been there for me through thick and thin, you have sat there and listened to me when i have cried my eyes out when you could have said i told u so as that was probly the only thing to say in some cases!! you are the best! the 14 years i have known u have been the best, we have grown up together and icouldnt ask for anything better!!! love you with

all my heart xoxoxoxoxox STAY BEAUTIFUL ** LICK** haha you know what im talking about hahahahaha!!!!

(Danirocks, accessed 29 November 2007)

bewtifulbobsi. . . What can i say about the girl who means the world to me?? She has been by my side, even when everyone else gave up. . . She is my saviour, my angel, my bestfriend!! No other has ever put up with my bullshit, my tantrums and my whinging. . . She saved me. . . No words can express what this girl means to me, she is my little bobsi and i love her for eternity xoxo

(Bitch Cunt/Janine, accessed 6 November 2007)

Karen

you are my life i love you with everything i have your my best friend and my sister you have always been there for me I would do anything for you your motherfucking RAD FUCK SHIT CUNT WHORE (Amanda/Fuckhead, accessed 3 October 2007)

As we can see, strong emotion is conveyed in such texts, to a level usually reserved for describing romantic partners. However, these relationships are all contextualised as friendships by these profile owners. The convention of writing public dedications to friends in this manner requires quite a high level of self-disclosure from young women. Some young women also post intimate photo shoots of themselves with one other female, and these shots often involve kissing, hugging and sometimes homoerotic display with the other person who is identified by the profile owners not as a romantic interest but a 'best friend'. Such 'sexy', 'laddish' and intimate performativity is, as I now suggest, contextualised and defended by young women through the use of textual mottos and statements of self-esteem and worth.

Mottos/statement of self-esteem and acceptance: Declarations of shamelessness?

My name is Lorena. I play the guitar, piano, and I sing. [...] I am a usually outgoing and happy. I am the person that is loud when I drink, dramatic when I am sad, and jumping up and down when I am happy! THat is who I am and NOTHING or NO ONE will EVER change that! (Lorena, accessed 6 December 2007)

I am who I am and sweetie your approval isn't needed no matter how much you think it is (Violet, accessed 6 December 2007)

I AM
Crazy

Loud
 Lovable
 Stubborn
 Oppionated
 Spontaneous
 Giggly
 FRIED
 ANNOYING

& ifukin love it!!! (Anna/Bitch Cunt, accessed 3 March 2008)

I'm not a perfect girl. My hair doesn't always stay in place & I spill things a lot. I'm pretty clumsy & sometimes I have a broken heart. My friends and I sometimes fight & maybe some days nothing goes right. But when I think about it and take a step back I remember how amazing life truly is & that maybe. Just maybe. I like being unperfect... (BitchenDiva, accessed 3 March 2008)

**I'm not here to impress anyone. I try to be as REAL as I can be. && I don't make excuses for myself && the mistakes I constantly make. >>>...//I'm just me... a simple girl living her life the way one should.' (Catiaaah, accessed 6 December 2007)

Judge me and I'll prove you wrong. Tell me what to do and I'll tell you off. Say I'm not worth it and watch where I end up. Call me a bitch and I'll show you one. Fuck me over and I'll do it to you twice as bad. Call me *crazy* but you really have no idea. (Mickey, accessed 17 September 2007)

Mottos and statements of self-esteem and acceptance such as those quoted above often appear on the main profile pages in prominent places. I argue here that these texts function as disclaimers: that the profile owner does not care what others think of her; that she is being true to her sense of self on her profile; and thus, that she is, somewhat confusingly in the context of *social networking* and heavy sociality display for friends, 'autonomous'. These mottos function for the profiles owners as contextualisations and defences of their online self-representations, I suggest, because inhabiting femininity online and participating in the conventions of SNS culture means being 'out there' in multiple and multi-layered ways. Post-feminist online girl culture for this group of young women involves literal self-exposure in terms of the information presented about one's self, the amount of digital communication required to maintain social circles and friendships, and also in terms of the amount of photographs posted of the self and of one's social life. A high level of self-revelation appears to be normalised here in terms of describing intimate friendship bonds and relationships, and also cultural preferences, tastes and aversions, as other researchers have discussed (Liu, 2007). But more than literal self-revelation, 'out-there-ness' can also be seen as a key trait of hetero-sexy femininity for young women, as several feminist scholars have discussed (Aapola et al., 2005; Gill, 2003, 2007; Harris, 2005). Performing a legible mainstream femininity online in the post-feminist era thus sometimes involves negotiating a difficult set of self-revelatory requirements, within the four conditions of post-feminist girlhood noted earlier. It is no wonder,

perhaps, that young women might feel the need to discursively perform or affect a sense of 'shamelessness' and pride in their public online self-presentation. In the final sections, I build on previous work where I have suggested 'performative shamelessness' as a way of understanding young women's online identity performances (Dobson, 2013) to expand on why a 'shameless' affect may be precisely the kind of shield young women need to survive the post-feminist online terrain. But, I suggest, it also represents an urge towards self-definition outside the terms of 'psycho-pathologised' femininity noted by McRobbie.

Performative shamelessness: A necessary affect and an 'agentic urge'?

Keeping in mind the broad social-cultural context I have described, it is not difficult to see the kind of public discourses about young women that would perhaps engender a sense of needing to perform confidence, boldness and shamelessness publicly in their online personas. It is also not difficult to see why young women would feel they need to defend the online personas they are presenting from scrutinising adult gazes. Displays of 'sexiness' and of drinking and raucous sociality are aspects of performativity that have been constructed as a key parts of young femininity within the domain of popular culture recently whilst still being heavily pathologised for young women in particular (Day et al., 2004; Dobson, 2012b; Jackson and Tinkler, 2007). These young women may feel a sense of needing to display such behaviour in line with an appropriately post-feminist 'out there' and 'up for it' self (Gill, 2007), while also needing to emphatically defend themselves against the possible judgements of onlookers that their behaviour signals the dreaded disease of 'low self-esteem'. We can see such defences, such performative shamelessness, I suggest, in the mottos like those quoted above that greet us on these young women's SNS profiles.

In the claims of proud imperfection and self-acceptance, as well as in the more ardent challenges to viewers who dare 'judge' the profile owner, we can see the possibility that these subjects feel a sense of threat from other peers that needs to be defended against when exposing themselves in this public and mediated context. Such passionate, sometimes defensive, statements of 'just being yourself' and disregarding the opinions of others may be an essential form of self-protection for young women in a context where 'drama' and social conflict has been found to be common for girls, and is often carried online from offline environments and offline from online environments (boyd, 2008; García-Gomez, 2011; Marwick and boyd, 2011; Ringrose, 2010). Previous research with teens and young adults about their use of SNSs suggests that they feel most threatened, uncomfortable and ill-equipped not in their dealings with strangers online but with other known peers (boyd, 2008; Green et al., 2011; Livingstone, 2008; Livingstone et al., 2011). While the imperative to communicate the sense that you do not care what others think of you is a central part of girl-power rhetoric, in statements like 'Judge me' (Micki, accessed 17/09/07) we can see not just a proud declaration of self, but also perhaps a defence against the perceived critical gazes of peers and other viewers.

Shameless performativity can then be seen as the kind of affective and protective shield perhaps regularly needed in a socio-cultural context where girls and young women are under intense scrutiny from multiple sources of surveilling adult and peer gazes, at the same time as social participation in the online context appears to require of them an immense amount of self-exposure and 'out there', 'up for it' complicity (Gill, 2003). The kind of 'shameless self-exposure' I am seeking here to isolate may be more celebratory and confident than that discussed by McRobbie, but we can see how it still suggests something of the harshness of the post-feminist online terrain, and the difficulties perhaps associated with the conventions of being 'out there' and 'wild' in one's expression of self, as well as so confident about this 'out-there-ness'.

From another angle though, performative shamelessness on SNS can also be seen as an 'agentic urge' toward self-definition (Dobson, 2013). That is, this more celebratory kind of 'shameless self-exposure' may be in part a response to cultural understandings of normative femininity as psycho-pathological and 'melancholic'. In a socio-cultural context where, as McRobbie (2009) argues, gender melancholia is being normalised for young women, these subjects appear to draw some kind of strength from publicly embracing the performatively 'defiant' aspects of girl-powered and laddish contemporary femininity. These are aspects of contemporary femininity that appear to reject, or at least sit uncomfortably next to, the terms and framing of 'gender melancholia'. Valerie Walkerdine (2011) briefly suggests an interpretation of young women's 'laddish' performativity in her review of McRobbie's important book that is close to the interpretation I suggest we consider *part* of the overall picture here. She writes:

While McRobbie reads working-class ladettes being loud, 'getting their tits out' after drunken nights as giving in to patriarchy by having to attract men as well as being like the lads, such young women have long been read as over the top, oversexed and vulgar, outside the norms of respectable femininity. We might in fact read the difficulties associated with this positioning of white working-class women as a play on and intensification of the very over sexualisation of which they are constantly accused and therefore against which they have constantly to defend themselves. This is not to say that such young women are not caught by the complexities of male desire, nor that they are in any sense free – after all they are caught at the very poor end of the job market, but I wonder if the acts express a longing to be 'larger than life', to be 'seen' in a space other than that which, as McRobbie shows us, is so often a very familiar space of humiliating normalization. (Walkerdine, 2011: 703)

We need to keep in mind, I am suggesting, a reading of performative shamelessness online as an urge towards a definition of the young feminine self outside the terms of pathology, outside 'sexualisation', victimhood, damage and melancholia – using precisely the ingredients of a more 'out there', active and laddish feminine subjectivity made available to young women through popular post-feminist discourses of 'girl power'. Post-feminist girl-power recipes for feminine subjectivity

combine performative sexiness, strength, confidence and 'carefree-ness' in a way that may be at times experienced as a pressure by young women and at other times may be experienced as a powerful and useful strategy of self-definition.

Conclusion

I find much resonance in McRobbie's account of the post-feminist terrain, particularly in her description of the normalisation of gender melancholia and the pathologisation of femininity as well as her assertion that feminism can be seen as a loss that has made the source of young women's pain more opaque. McRobbie writes eloquently that 'The young woman in contemporary political and popular culture is asked to reconcile autonomy and the possibility of achievement with compliancy with a patriarchal order which is dissolved, de-centralised, and nowhere to be seen' (2009: 122). McRobbie further assesses the position of young women within this situation, surmising that 'illegible pathologies' are normalised as 'culturally intelligible, if not always survivable' (2009: 122). This is a striking and bleak assessment of the current socio-cultural situation, and yet one which resonates strongly on a personal and political level, being a (relatively) young woman myself and watching as I have almost every close female friend struggle with an eating disorder along with accompanying depression/anxiety/agoraphobia at some point in their young adult lives. But within this bleak terrain, we must be extra careful not to miss or dismiss what may be 'signs of life'. Through the way they perform shamelessness on SNSs, we can perhaps see how the young women described here are capable of locating and appropriating the cultural signs, symbols and affectations they need to shield themselves within this terrain and to navigate their way through the challenging conditions of girlhood outlined at the start of this paper. It is also possible to see here some resistance to their own pathologisation as feminine subjects. The pertinent questions for further research then become ones such as: do these shields hold up in the social world? Are young women able to enact such performances of shamelessness to productive effect in their face-to-face or social online encounters? Under what conditions? *What kind of currently pathologised behaviours and/or representations by young women may actually enable their survival?*

Productive examination of such questions will entail the further development and deployment of complex feminist psychosocial approaches and methodologies (Ringrose, 2012) in order to research carefully, sensitively and politically areas of gendered behaviour and representational practices both on and offline that currently engender intense public panic and neo-liberal individualising frameworks of understanding. Some work is starting to examine 'panic button' gendered issues involving young women, digital technologies and feminine subjectivities such as 'sexting' (Ringrose et al., 2013) from such feminist perspectives. It is vital that future research continues in this direction, as it is necessary to continually question and unpack neo-liberal individualised and pathologised framings of gendered youth practices in order to avoid further cementing 'illegibility' and blind spots around *gendered* resilience, rage and possible resistance.

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