POSTFEMINIST DIGITAL CULTURES

Femininity, Social Media, and Self-Representation

Amy Shields Dobson

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Acknowledgments

This book and the research projects it draws on have involved much work from others that I am greatly indebted to. In particular, Anita Harris has been an invaluable colleague and mentor, initially supervising my doctoral research, and continuing to provide feedback on drafts of several of the chapters in this book. I am most grateful for her razor-sharp intellect, her detailed and keenly perceptive feedback, and her generous all-round support. I am also most grateful to Denise Cuthbert for her ongoing mentorship and support. I am in awe of Denise's insight and wisdom about so many pressing issues of our time, and her generosity, dedication, and critical eye as a scholar and research supervisor. Mark Davis and Grant Bollmer both kindly agreed to read chapters of this book and provided me with most insightful, crucial feedback. I am grateful for their time and passion for theory.

This manuscript is much indebted to Leo Keith, who has supported me with all things in life, work, and play ("support" may be an understatement). Leo helped proofread this manuscript, as well as download and categorize comments from YouTube, sort out computer-related problems and formatting issues along the way, and provided reassuring hugs at frequent intervals. His insights, time, and all-round love and care are invaluable. My parents, Candice Shields and Robert Dobson, also continue to provide me with the love and support that has enabled me to grow as a person and scholar, and I am indebted to them.

I'd like to thank all my colleagues and students in the Sociology Department and the Centre for Women's and Gender Studies in the Monash School of Social Sciences. In particular, conversations with JaneMaree Maher and Akane Kanai at the Centre for Women's and Gender Studies have been invaluable to my thinking over the past three years while I worked on this manuscript. I'd also like to thank

Chapter 1

Introduction

This book explores some social media practices and digital self-representations commonly engaged in by girls and young women. One of the central concerns of the book is to take girls and young women seriously as media and cultural producers. Cultural commentators quite often treat girls' and young women's media practices and self-representations not only with panic but also with disdain and contempt. The female "selfie," now that it has been named as such, has become the subject of seemingly endless editorials and "think pieces" questioning the narcissism of this generation, and female youth in particular (Senft and Baym, 2015), and questioning the self-esteem, mental health, and moral values of girls and young women today—as well as their value to society. In one such piece, noted technology writer John C. Dvorak writes in *PC Magazine* that "the only thing worse than selfie snapshots are the hordes of teens, again, usually female, who set up a webcam and begin to 'produce' commentary to post on YouTube. They are usually alone and grumbling about one thing or another in a way that's coy, cutesy, and often hipsterish." According to Dvorak (2013), "There are few guys, including adults, who partake in this sort of amateurish rant." When commentary about girls' and young women's digital media practices and self-representations does not fuel moral panics about their safety and well-being, it often mocks their interests and abilities in cultural production, as Dvorak's piece exemplifies. Hence, the only thing seen as "worse" than teenage girls' selfie photos are publicly posted videos made by girls and young women in which they *speak* to a camera. Their media practices and self-productions are framed as cringe-worthy, as well as risky or dangerous, and these deficiencies are often implicitly constructed as a weakness of their sex. Dvorak's derisive comments help to illustrate a central impetus behind this book: girls and young women are seen

as active users and media producers in the social media landscape, but they are often judged as being active in the "wrong" ways—thought to be engaged in projects of self-representation driven by vanity, or incessant social communication driven by insecurities and trivialities.

A growing body of scholarship addresses girls and young women as active users and producers in the social media landscape, speaking back to these kinds of hegemonic discourses, by tracing their practices of media and cultural production. The present book contributes to this work. But my main goal is to build on it and extend understandings of what it is to perform young femininity in contemporary digital cultures by focusing specifically and critically on gendered media practices and representations that are controversial and often framed as "wrong" for various reasons—hotspots of recent attention and sometimes panic. Young women produce media and culture of many different kinds and in many different spheres and genres. This book attends to the sphere and "genre" (Thumin, 2012) of social media self-representation. It does not attend to the extensive ways in which young women are producing media and culture in explicitly political or creative spheres; several other anthologies and authors have documented and analyzed this arena fruitfully (Piepmeier, 2009; Mazzarella, 2010; Bae and Ivashkevich, 2011; Kearney, 2011; Keller, 2012, 2015; Powell, 2015). This book is concerned with some media practices and representations that have largely been framed as "problematic" areas of heat; sexual self-representations on social network sites (SNSs); sexting; constructions of highly confident, "out there" feminine selves via SNS profiles' "Am I Pretty or Ugly" videos; and video-blogs (vlogs) describing girls' pain and suffering. These are media practices and representations that are not usually obviously "resistant" or politically "subversive" but, I suggest, can be seen as cultural modes of "survival" and "getting by" (Berlant, 2008, p. 27) and are politically significant in terms of what they reveal about negotiating the conditions of postfeminism and femininity in contemporary techno-social mediascapes.

Coming to the study of digital media cultures from a background in feminist theater and performance studies, I became interested in girls' and young women's self-representations on SNSs. When I first joined MySpace back in 2006 (before Facebook had become dominant in Australia) and became interested in self-representation on social media, I encountered a lot of sparkling, flashing fashion brand logos, Playboy bunny wallpapers, and cartoons of sexualized lips and mouths on young women's publicly visible profiles. Common profile decorations included images of shiny red lips with cherries sitting

precariously on protruding tongues with the words "so hot" flashing beneath, logos inviting viewers to "pop my cherry," or warning them, "don't stick your tongue out unless you plan to use it." Images of Paris Hilton were popular at the time: Paris Hilton sucking a red phallic-shaped lollipop, or naked but for black stilettos and tied up, Paris Hilton pretending to clean a pool, or crouching on the floor like a tiger. I also encountered a lot of photos of young women in brightly colored satin cocktail dresses laughing, smiling, and shouting, and young women with their limbs spread out across front lawns in the nighttime, and across each other, surrounded by half-filled bottles and casks of wine. The greeting texts on these profiles were often friendly and flirtatious invitations to view, friend, and message the profile owners, but this went along with disclaimers of "I don't give a f*** what you think," or "If you don't like what you see, leave." Blocks of text with distinctly "pErsoNaliZd" use of spelling and capitalization were made harder to read by common practices of switching colors and fonts every few words. Such text described the profile owners in tones of self-belief and confident self-promotion.

I was interested in, or perhaps more truthfully, *concerned* about the political implications of such self-representational practices by young women. When I first started browsing the public SNS profiles of young women, I viewed these profiles and their owners with a mixture of self-consciousness (at being in what felt very much like "their" space[1]) and self-righteousness (about my "feminist research" purpose and intent), fascination and concern, admiration and disapproval, curiosity and confusion. I was tempted to conclude that I did not approve. But how could I confidently disapprove of something that I did not, and still do not, really understand? I will never understand what it is to be ten years younger than I am and to have grown up in the age of Paris and the infamous bunny rather than Cyndi Lauper, Madonna, and Janet Jackson.

I was also interested in the question of what, if anything, might make such online self-produced representations of contemporary femininity different, politically speaking, from mass-produced images of women? Do young women's self-representations that are often seemingly gender-typical, "sexualized," or in other ways controversial and politically contested, indicate the power of popular culture in shaping youth and gender identities? Following a Foucauldian feminist line of thought (Bartky, 1988; Gill, 2007), might such mediated *self*-representations point to the narrow regulation and disciplining of female bodies and feminine gender identities? What kind of other important significations might such self-representations hold

about living young femininity today that feminists like myself perhaps miss through these kinds of quick and apparently intuitive appraisals? I wanted to explore the question of whether seemingly sexist and stereotypical representations of women could or should be read by feminist cultural scholars differently because of their *framing* within new, "participatory," "interactive" (Banet-Weiser, 2012), and "demotic" (Turner, 2010) digital media cultures, "self-produced" by girls and young women. In short, might the premise self-production (discussed further later) of even sexist media tropes perhaps disrupt long-standing gendered binaries of object and subjecthood and gaze relations, following feminist representational theories? This book attends to such questions about the politics of self-representation for girls and young women in the age of social media. It is driven by an effort to understand the ways in which media representations and practices of girls and young women simultaneously utilize and complicate the kinds of strong and sexy, hot and assertive, autonomous and confident constructions of a "postfeminist" young femininity that have become ubiquitous in globalized mediascapes through advertising, music videos, film, TV, and celebrity culture in recent years (Aapola, Gonick, and Harris, 2005; Harris, 2005; Levy, 2005; Gill, 2007, 2011; Tasker and Negra, 2007; McRobbie, 2009; Negra, 2009; Zaslow, 2009; Douglas, 2010; Ringrose, 2013; Evans and Riley, 2014; Harris and Dobson, 2015).

As Sarah Banet-Weiser outlines, the notion that girls and young women now produce, rather than just consume, media has been embraced (although not unconditionally) by many feminist scholars as a kind of "empowerment" (2012, p. 62). That girls and young women are now media producers themselves has meant we need to seriously reconsider research approaches and agendas that position girls as cultural dupes, or victims of negative media influence and effects like "sexualization" in straightforward ways. But scholars (such as Banet-Weiser among others) remain *ambivalent* about the kind of "empowerment" it is possible for girls and young women to achieve through media production practices and digitally enabled self-representations. In a media landscape that is increasingly "convergent," where the lines between media producers and consumers have been seriously complicated (Jenkins, 2006; Bruns, 2008), and where "participation" and content creation is actively encouraged as a profit strategy by social media companies and marketers, scholars of media and culture have argued we need to stay alert to, and seek refreshed understandings of, power, coercion, cultural influence, and exploitation (Turner, 2010; Andrejevic, 2011; Driscoll and Gregg, 2011; Banet-Weiser,

2012; Hinton and Hjorth, 2013; Marwick, 2013; van Dijck, 2013b). In short, individuals are asked to submit to new forms of control in order to participate in new media freedoms. I am primarily interested in the implications of girls' and young women's media practices and representations, especially those framed as sexualized, risky, or even pathological, for debates about flows of power and influence. This book addresses the areas of media practice and representation mentioned via an approach that does not see such media production a priori as evidence of girls' sexualization or poor mental or psychical health, and does not a priori seek to "protect" girls and young women through surveying their digital practices. Rather, my examination of hotspots of girls' and young women's digital cultures is conducted with the intent to illuminate the complexities, tensions, and shifting flows of power in media and in gendered subjectivity production in postfeminist digital cultures.

Contested and controversial aspects of cultural production are vitally important for what they tell us about "getting by" in the conditions of postfeminism (these are explicated in chapter 2). In all of these chapters I ask how media practices and representations framed as sexualized, risky, cringe-worthy, or pathological enable girls' and young women's daily survival in postfeminist digital cultures. How do girls and young women navigate the conditions of postfeminism and construct feminine selves that help them attain the relational and peer support, social legitimation, and pleasure needed to get by? In this particular framing of my key concerns and questions I am influenced by Lauren Berlant's suggestion that many people's interests are "less in changing the world than in not being defeated by it, and meanwhile finding satisfaction in minor pleasures and major fantasies" (2008, p. 27). The social media practices and representations discussed in this book can be seen as "juxtapolitical," following Berlant. In stating that a central concern here is to take girls and young women seriously as cultural producers, it is in this sense of giving attention to the juxtapolitical in postfeminist digital cultures that I mean. Berlant suggests the term juxtapolitical to describe a cultural sphere located next to, but not in politics, and responding to it. In this book I investigate representations and practices that are not overtly political in the way that, for example, online Slut Walk organizations or feminist forums are (see Keller, 2012; Cook and Hasmath, 2014; Powell, 2015), but may be politically significant in what they reveal about the quest to get by, to survive, and to *not be defeated* in/by postfeminist neoliberal Western societies. Like Berlant, I am interested in "the defensive, inventive, and adaptive activity of getting

by, along with the great refusals to go through power to attain legitimacy" (Berlant, 2008, p. 27).

I explore SNS self-representations, sexting, and YouTube videos drawing on data collected and analyzed using tools from feminist performance theory and cultural studies. I am less concerned with putting forth an argument about the meaning of girls' and young women's media practices and representations in postfeminist digital cultures overall, or for a particular scholarly discipline, than I am with answering questions about each of the specific media practices and representations discussed. What is it about particular media practices and representations engaged in by girls and young women that has become a source of fear and/or public concern? Why are certain, sometimes common, gendered media practices often constructed in public discourse as narcissistic, vain, or stupid?[2] What values are being contested? I also question political and critical assessments of young women's cultural practices, including my own, that feel intuitive, easy, fast, or heated, and to try to untangle causes of potentially justified political and psychosocial concern from hype and panicked reactions.

The chapters and discussions focus on the key areas of "heat" mentioned previously: heterosexy SNS profile representations (a term I explain in more detail in chapter 2), youth sexting, representations of confident and "excessive" youthful feminine selves on SNSs, the question asked by young girls on YouTube "Am I Pretty or Ugly," and girls' YouTube vlogs describing gendered pain and suffering. These media practices and representations are critical because they are not just catalysts of moral panic but also areas of political contestation and debate for feminists and those concerned with the politics of representation and gender politics more broadly. I include myself here. The kind of feminist stance with which I am aligned is concerned with women's social equality and empowerment, as well as with challenging the gender binary and heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990); and, put simply, sees the representation and sexual objectification of women in media as deeply connected to women's social status. When I first began my research into young women's MySpace profiles, I wanted to see what shifts and reworks were required in feminist representational theory and analysis in relation to this new domain of female-driven cultural representation. But I was also driven by the urge to weigh-up and critically *evaluate* the self-representation I found on young women's profiles against these kind of feminist concerns about challenging the gender binary and disrupting conventions of sexual objectification; not entirely conscious, perhaps, of my own investment in girls and young women as "the future subjects

of feminism" and the future of feminism itself (Bae and Ivashkevich, 2011). In my analysis here I try to hold on to the former question, and, if not let go of the latter approach entirely, at least remain conscious of it. I argue that an open, curious, and "slow" approach to the analysis of girls' cultures and youth digital cultures more broadly is what is needed in future research also.

Slowing Down the Approach to Girls, Young Women, and Digital Cultures

By way of beginning with a key conclusion, I want to offer a simple suggestion about the kind of analytical disposition, or approach, needed in research exploring girls and young women's digital cultures. As adults concerned with the well-being of girls and young women, we need to *slow down* when it comes to assessing youth digital cultures on political, social, and psychological levels, and in constructing potential interventions. We need to be extra slow and careful in our evaluations when media practices of representing, and thus producing/constituting, a female self in some way appear to be new, potentially dangerous, and of "*urgent* concern." That is, we need to be *slow* when we are affectively *heat up*. A central issue in girlhood studies is the question of how to study and critically analyze girls' and young women's cultural practices, and the meanings that girls and young women give to them. We must be cognizant, scholars have argued, not to simply impose adult meanings onto youth cultural lives and values. At the same time, we must remain aware of the temptation to uncritically report the accounts girls and young women provide of their lives and cultural practices without attention to the discursive and material conditions that enable and produce personal "choice and agency" as a primary, largely depoliticized, mode of self-understanding and narration (Duits and van Zoonen, 2006, 2007; Pitcher, 2006; Best, 2007; Gill, 2007; Driscoll, 2008; Baker, 2010; Lamb and Peterson, 2012; Ringrose, 2013; Lamb, Graling, and Wheeler, 2013; Harris and Dobson, 2015). In suggesting the need to look closely, critically, but also slowly and curiously, at young women's more controversial digital media practices, I do not mean to suggest that there is nothing concerning about the practices I have mentioned for feminists and for others with a stake in the well-being of girls and young women. Rather, I mean that in the complicated terrain of postfeminist girlhood (outlined in chapter 2) and digital cultures where choice and agency operate as dominant frameworks for understanding lives, identities, and media practices, untangling

interplays of power takes time and steady effort, and, as Banet-Weiser (2012) suggests, often results in *ambivalence* rather than certainty.

Lisa Henderson calls for feminist and queer scholars to "slow down" that is, to be slow to judge, and "slow to discover meanings or to package sexual experiences and sexual cultures" (2008, p. 223). This is particularly important, Henderson suggests, when new cultural practices seem at odds with our own values, preferences, and politics. She terms this a call for "slow love." Describing the qualities of the slow food movement that Henderson wishes to imagine for "slow love," she notes that it is "place-based; it occurs in networks of producers, distributors, and consumers who know each other and who negotiate, in some contexts, in terms intended to protect an environmental and social future. Who slow down." (2008, p. 223). In response to feminist critiques of what I have described elsewhere as "participatory raunch" involving young women, such as *Girls Gone Wild* (Dobson, 2014c), Henderson writes, "I don't know whether to expect a lot of girls gone wild in the slow love movement, but if they show up, I'll learn something."

It is this kind of open, ambivalent, disposition I seek to bring to the investigations of girls' and young women's apparently provocative media practices and representations, and that I want to suggest as the kind of disposition needed in future analyses of such media. We need to actively invoke curiosity about such practices. Scholars and other stakeholders need to approach girls' and young women's cultures with a view to *learning something* about their lives within particular social, cultural, geographical, and political contexts, rather than with the intent to *evaluate* their media practices against preexisting theoretical criteria or ideals, including those associated with various strands of feminism. This is not to suggest that as feminists and scholars we should let go of our values, ideals, and projects associated with our particular disciplines, and theoretical and epistemological standpoints. It is to suggest that for myself, as for other scholars of girlhood, it remains crucial to remember to ask how our investigations of cultural practices and groups with whom we do not fully identify challenge and inform our views (Best, 2007); how our investigations of youth cultures and lives teach us things about our own beliefs, values, and theories, and add to them, rather than just measuring (or failing to measure) up. There are a lot of girls going wild in various ways on social media, not all of them expressly sexual, as we see in the following chapters. By examining their media practices and representations, and debates and discourses about them, slowly and carefully, by curbing impulses toward quick judgment,

we can learn something, I suggest, about gendered subjectivity and about living youthful femininity in postfeminist Western cultures. We can also learn something about the limitations of current feminist theory and analysis, and where our own views are challenged and potentially require shifts and revisions in relation to new youth cultures and practices.

Self-Representation and the Premise of Self-Production in Social Media

Scholars have suggested that social media and SNS profiles can be viewed in terms of "identity performance" (boyd and Ellison, 2007; Buckingham, 2008; Liu, 2007; Westlake, 2008; Cover, 2012a). The ideas of sociologist Erving Goffman about the "performance of self in everyday life" have been taken up in scholarship on social media to explain processes of identity construction and management. SNS profiles have been theorized as conscious, reflective performances of the self for particular audiences. Visual and textual expressions including images, graphics, and texts are constructed to give off impressions about the self and foster particular narratives about one's life and identity for a particular audience, most often for peers (boyd, 2008). This process is theorized as similar to how one usually presents the self appropriately for one's audience and context in daily life offline, through dress, speech, embodiment, and so on. However, Nancy Thumin suggests that it is important to distinguish between the presentation or performance of self as something we all do all the time, in a way that is "neither bounded nor indeed a necessarily conscious process," and "self-representation" produced by individuals as a "bounded text, however fleeting and ephemeral that text might be." In other words, Thumin uses the term "self-representation" to distinguish between more general notions of the presentation and performance of self, and the conscious, mediated representations of selves that can be found on social media, as well as other kinds of media. The key difference for Thumin is that "When a self-representation is produced it becomes a text that has the potential for subsequence engagement" (2012, p. 6). I add that another key difference is the level of conscious intent and reflectivity typically assumed by audience members/viewers. Via media, one is required to use text and images to symbolize the self, and I suggest that this is generally assumed by viewers to require a higher degree of consciousness and reflectivity about the self than conventionally required in face-to-face self-presentation.

Further, Thumin suggests that self-representation can be thought of as a "genre." A genre is a contract or "tacit understanding" between audiences and cultural producers, and the genre of self-representation is centered on conveying notions of authenticity (Thumin, 2012, p. 163). Thumin suggests that, as a genre, self-representation usually includes certain generic conventions or elements of focus, including focus on ordinary people or communities, experience, personal histories, journeys and interior worlds, emotion, as well as conventions such as speaking to a camera in close-up, scrapbook-style aesthetics, family photographs, and personal artefacts (pp. 166–167). The genre of self-representation is thus not specific to social media, nor is all social media use self-representation, but it is increasingly and particularly prevalent in social media. I follow Thumin's use of the term "self-representation" here to delineate a cultural genre and to distinguish conceptually between general notions of performativity and self-presentation, and the mediated self-representational texts, communications, and expressions with which I am concerned in this book.

Thumin suggests that in self-representation there is an implicit or explicit claim that "people are '*doing it for themselves*'" (2012, p. 8) rather than being represented by another implicitly more powerful group or individual. This claim, I suggest, effects how self-representation *via social media* is viewed, understood, and engaged with in a way that requires some further explication. Self-representations via social media most often proceed from a premise of agentic, conscious, and "authentic" self-authorship. The tacit understanding at work in social media self-representations between viewers and viewed means that members of a networked public generally take a SNS personal profile as an indicator of someone's self-chosen and "authentic" identity, produced for personal use. The term "networked public" is discussed further, but in brief, it is used to describe the way in which social media audiences can be thought of as members of a public, bound together by their use of a common platform such as Facebook. Grant Bollmer has suggested that increasingly, legitimated, socially accepted participation in networked publics is dependent on the extent to which users are willing and capable of representing their "true selves" to the exclusion of more playful and fluid notions of identity (Bollmer, 2012; see also van Zoonen, 2013).

Thinking more specifically about self-representation on social media platforms, there is perhaps a higher-level claim to "authenticity" assumed on personal social media profiles because the contract, or tacit understanding, between producers and audiences is usually also