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The best friend, the boyfriend, other girls, hot guys, and creeps: the relational production of self on Tumblr

Akane Kanai

Sociology and Anthropology, School of Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Newcastle, Callaghan, Australia

ABSTRACT
This article interrogates how youthful feminine selves are relationally articulated by reference to post-feminist economies of value on the blogging platform Tumblr. I examine a public on Tumblr in which everyday experiences in young women’s lives are narrated through reaction-GIF blog posts. Combining GIFs and captions, the posts capture moments ranging from the rage “when I see some chick getting all flirty with my crush” to the self-satisfaction “when my bestie and I congratulate each other on being the most attractive betches in the room.” In this context, post-feminist individuality is relationally made in two principal ways: through implicit assumptions of the reader as “spectatorial girlfriend” who is able to understand and “get” the references in the posts; and through the key social figures of the best friend, Other girls, hot guys, creeps, and the boyfriend, who are reconfigured as resources through which to tell a normative post-feminist self. Such techniques of conversion and use demonstrate not only that young women are labouring to demonstrate selfhood within frameworks of post-feminist normativity, but that post-feminist cultures also construct social knowledges which young women use to connect with imagined others.

Introduction
This article examines a digital context of sociality in order to understand how young women negotiate the post-feminist compulsion to enact individuality, whilst simultaneously maintaining a pleasing disposition for others. Specifically, I am interested in the ways young women negotiate belonging and enact connection with others not in spite of, but through the mobilisation of post-feminist economies of knowledge and value. It has been well documented that post-feminist notions of subjectivity depend on an imperviousness to the social (Rosalind Gill 2007). The contradictions of the post-feminist subject are held together through a deep neoliberal individuality (Gill 2007; Angela McRobbie 2007, 2009) and a performed indifference to the influence of others (Amy Shields Dobson 2015; Jessica Ringrose and Katarina Eriksson Barajas 2011). Yet, following Alison Winch’s (2013) work on girlfriendship, I argue that post-feminist notions of valuable feminine selfhood and resilient individuality are produced relationally, through the conversion of relationships into resources by
which to tell the self. This article considers how an intimate public (Lauren Berlant 2008) located on the blogging platform Tumblr can provide insights into cultures of sociality built around post-feminist knowledges of value and normativity. Tumblr has been chosen as a space for this inquiry, given that it is a digital platform that is particularly attractive for young people (see e.g. Matt Hart 2015), as a highly visual, largely anonymous space creating the conditions for affective flows and connections (James Ash 2015; Alexander Cho 2015).

In particular, this article explores the circulation of self-representative blog posts through which young women make themselves intelligible to others. The blog posts that I discuss here are derived from six anonymous Tumblr blogs authored by young women in the US, one of which constitutes a “founder” blog named “WhatShouldWeCallMe” (WSWCM) whose visual “reaction-GIF” format and themes have been adapted and taken up by the other blogs, which I term “follower” blogs, following Limor Shifman (2014). WSWCM exploded into popularity in early 2012, attracting up to one million views per day, and inspiring dozens of follower blogs like “WhatShouldBetchesCallMe” and “WhatShouldWeCollegeMe.” Indeed, interviewing the bloggers responsible for WSWCM, a journalist from Forbes noted that the blog seemed to have spoken to the “popular collective subconscious” of young women (Meghan Casserly 2012), producing a genre of humorous situations and experiences that young women both found relatable and wanted to relate to others. In the founder blog, and the five follower blogs I have selected as representative of this “collective subconscious,” these image-based texts act as codes referencing a set of youthful, feminine, middle-class knowledges presumed to be shared.1

This article aims to explore how the self is relationally made through post-feminist affective and discursive knowledges. Two aspects to this relational construction of self will be considered. First, I will examine the role of the imagined “spectatorial girlfriend”—the reader who is expected to “get” the references, experiences, and situations that are invoked by the participants in this space. Second, I will examine the relation to particular social “figures” in the blogs (Imogen Tyler 2008, 18) that are expected to be recognised by the spectatorial girlfriend. These figures—the best friend, Other girls, hot guys, creeps, and the boyfriend—are used as relational resources through which young women may articulate normativity within these post-feminist social knowledges. These figures, through varying relations of proximity and distance, materialise contradictory post-feminist compulsions to enact individuality whilst demonstrating social relatability to others.

**Post-feminist individuality and digital cultures**

It has been identified that post-feminist ideals of autonomous, independent feminine individuality resonate in Western digital cultures (Sarah Banet-Weiser 2012; Dobson 2015; Akane Kanai 2015a; Jessalynn Marie Keller 2014; Ringrose and Barajas 2011; Amanda Rossie 2015; Winch 2013). Given that post-feminism, Banet-Weiser (2012) argues, has almost seamlessly merged with consumer culture, it provides a rich discursive context for understanding and producing the self as a brand, particularly in its emphasis on individualised, marketised empowerment which is highly compatible in feminine digital spaces. Beyond the opportunities to broadcast the self, digital spaces constitute sites of self-surveillance, monitoring, and work. Indeed, young women have ably adopted strategies of disciplined identity production (Sigal Barak Brandes and David Levin 2013; Andrea Press 2011; Leslie Regan Shade 2008) and self-branding (Crystal Abidin and Eric C. Thompson 2012; Sarah Banet-Weiser
Rossie (2015) and Banet-Weiser (2012) argue that the logic of platforms such as YouTube rewards practices of production and consumption in which the self is made into a brand for continual feedback for audiences. Platforms such as Instagram and Pinterest have given rise to the extraction of value from traditionally feminine domains such as fashion, beauty, domesticity, and craft (Duffy and Hund 2015) where young women entrepreneurs portray “having it all.” But on the flipside of this aestheticised glamour and agentic self-production, girls and young women that do not meet such criteria are constructed as pathologically vulnerable, failing subjects, such as in YouTube videos where girls ask for others’ opinions on their appearance (Sarah Banet-Weiser 2014; Dobson 2015). Post-feminism, then, produces particular economies of gendered value that individuals are compelled to draw on and use, whilst feminine qualities that do not fit within this framework are disavowed as valueless.

Relatedly, such value and the modes through which it may be obtained operate in concert with what other scholars have theorised as “prosthetic” (Celia Lury 1998; Marilyn Strathern 1992) and “enterprising selves” (Paul du Gay 1996), in which the self is made through processes of mobility, experimentation, and accessing resources, in which the subject is “able to lay claim to features of the context or environment as if they were the outcome of the testing of his or her personal capacities” (Lury 1998, 3). As with post-feminist cultures and institutions more broadly, the imagined subject is autonomous, active, self-regulating, and entrepreneurial (Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff 2011). The post-feminist subject monitors and labours at not only her self-brand but how she feels and reflexively adapts her disposition towards possible obstacles and barriers. Correlating with McRobbie’s (2009) top girl, she is empowered, desiring, and ambitious, with emphasis placed on her modern feminine capacity. The individual is presumed to be able to draw on commodified attributes to live gender as a style, or aesthetic (Sarah Banet-Weiser 2007), rather than be produced through it as a historical, institutional, and cultural formation. Here, I draw attention to how post-feminist notions of individuality rely on a gendered inscription of key figures, from which flow certain affective dispositions that young women must effect in order to constitute self-determining subjects of value. As Beverley Skeggs (2004) notes, individuality and personality have historically been and are continually performed by middle-class men through the propertisation of others (Margaret Davies and Ngaire Naffine 2001) and of cultures “not of their own making” (Skeggs 2004, 176), effected through classed perspectives on “taste.” Post-feminist individuality, as part of a broader network of possessive individuality (C. B. Macpherson 1962), then, requires the presence of others, to appear as resources to be accessed, as I demonstrate with the use of the figures that circulate here.

**Approaching post-feminist negotiations through affective-discursive analysis**

Post-feminism is a central object of analysis in this article as it constitutes a framework that instates knowledges of valued contemporary femininity, as well as an affective-discursive disposition determining how such gendered value may be extracted and accumulated by the self. Meredith Nash and Ruby Grant (2015) note that post-feminism as a concept has been contested in terms of its explanatory power. Imelda Whelehan (2010) suggests it is an “empty” signifier, not only as it has been overburdened with multiple meanings, but also because young women increasingly do not have a recollection of feminism without the...
“post.” Yet, post-feminism, I suggest, as demonstrated through its use in the digital scholarship discussed previously, is a compelling means of understanding the affective and discursive conditions shaping young women’s digital self-production.

In referring to affect, I follow Margaret Wetherell’s (2012) understanding of affect as a socially based, looser form of emotion that cannot be neatly disentangled from its discursive conditions. This understanding enables me to analyse the blog posts of my case study, which, indeed, articulate emotions presumed to be recognisable and decipherable within girlfriendship cultures. In these posts, young women articulate affective reactions to everyday experiences through “reaction-GIF” blog posts. These posts articulate a scenario, by combining a caption such as “when I see some chick getting all flirty with my crush” (Figure 1), with a GIF, a looping image that provides the punchline content for that scenario. GIFs are sourced from diverse media such as television, film, or YouTube, articulating feelings ranging from frustration and rivalry, to joy and embarrassment in the posts. In the post excerpted in what follows, for example, the reader must understand that Kim Kardashian shooting a rifle articulates the desire to eliminate one’s rival in love, to “get” the joke.

These posts, then, can be understood to constitute part of the broader turn to the visual in articulating feelings and emotions in digital culture (see e.g. Sun Sun Lim 2015) and operate on the presumed literacy of the reader to piece together the affective signification of the post. I frame this space of circulation of these blog posts and concordant readerly

![Figure 1](image). Some chick getting flirty with my crush—posted by TwoDumbGirls.
understanding as an “intimate public,” in order to call to mind the affective magnetism of such a space in which texts are seen to represent the “core interests and desires” (Berlant 2008, 5) of its participants. This is a space in which a sense of commonality and likeness is offered through the circulation of texts, through Tumblr’s reblogging and liking functions. Here, humorous moments are circulated based on their “relatability,” constructing an intimate public in which likeminded readers are invited to participate, relate, and belong based on “post-feminist knowledges.”

My analysis here is the result of an affective-discursive analysis (Wetherell 2012) of approximately 800 posts across the blogs over the course of 2014–2015, unpacking how these figures are materialised, mobilised, and rejected both via post-feminist discourses and via the distillation of affects and feelings producing a valuable feminine self. In conducting this analysis, I had recourse, in particular, to McRobbie’s (2009) notion of post-feminist luminosities, which sensitised me to themes arising in my analysis, and Skeggs’ (2004) work deploying a Foucauldian framework of how the self is made through discourses and technologies. I am not concerned with whether such figures reflect the “reality” of the bloggers; rather, following Tyler (2008), I am interested in what the production of these figures does and what it shows about how young women relationally negotiate the compulsion to demonstrate value (Skeggs 2004, 2009; Beverley Skeggs and Helen Wood 2013).

In this article, I outline how affective-discursive knowledges are mobilised by young women to make themselves intelligible to other young women within post-feminist economies of value. These knowledges enable the figures of the best friend, Other girls, hot guys, creeps, and the boyfriend to tell a story about the self that is recognised by young women in a digital context where little other identifying material is available. Post-feminist individuality is enacted as a relational disposition towards others, requiring relationships with others to be objectified and reified in order to display value. I begin with the feminine figures of this public: the “best friend” and “Other girls.”

The singular best friend

One of the central figures that circulates in this public is the “best friend,” a figure that commonly features in feminine popular culture (Winch 2013). The best friend is defined through a relation of proximity; she constitutes a mirror reflecting back a self with idealised feminine traits. Importantly, there is only one best friend, matching the individuality of the authorial self of the blog posts. Such a figure is exalted above any boy(friend); she usually perfectly matches the interests, pleasures, and activities that the blogger engages in. The resolutely heterosexual girlfriend provides a means of demonstrating both an affective “relatability” as well as, importantly in terms of post-feminist subjectivity, a lack of sustained concern for men (Kanai 2015b). Only she can “get” all the coded signals that one sends. References to the best friend in the blogs usually involve enjoying the same activities together: shopping, eating, cocktails, parties. When one’s best friend is introduced to a favourite new song, she also loves it. In the texts of the various blogs, the best friend creates a sense of mutual warmth and simplicity. One cannot function without one’s best friend; as a mirror, she constitutes part of the self. As Winch (2013) notes, girlfriendship in popular culture is usually portrayed as two women embodying or becoming an essential feminine sameness or complementary versions of the same person, enacting a privileged exclusivity and feminine normativity.
At the same time, the best friend also shores up the individuality of the self, as she constitutes an asset. The follower blog WhatShouldBetchesCallMe ("WSBCM") exemplifies the use of the best friend as per Winch’s (2013) description of the female heterosexual companion. The best friend in this context is an asset, someone who assists in the attainment of successful post-feminist subjectivity, reflected in posts such as, “When my bestie and I congratulate each other on being the most attractive betches in the room.” Here, on WSBCM, the bestie and the blogger as a girlfriend dream team mutually shore up their own “erotic capital” (Winch 2013). This relationship, however, is not free from rivalry. Whilst the best friend must be similarly attractive, when she is too much so, feelings of resentment surface, such as in the post “When your bestie is cuter than you” (WSBCM). The post juxtaposes a purportedly loving description with a caustic punchline: from “she’s adorable” to “fucking bitch.” Regardless of whether or not casual insults are used affectionately in the best friend relationship that is cited here, the post mobilises a cocktail of girlfriend affects including warmth, resentment, and envy.

The mixed feelings about a best friend being “cuter” refer to a tacit best friend bargain as described by Winch (2013): the agreement to mutually shore up each other’s erotic capital, whilst not detracting from each other’s spotlight. Drawing on Bourdieu, Winch’s concept of erotic capital signals the way in which women’s bodies are seen as mechanisms through which they are able to gain advantage in a market of feminine attractiveness, thus setting women up in a position of competition with each other. The body is thus objectified as “capital” for women; erotic capital is more about the value of the body from its visibility in a heterosexual market, rather than the desires that are felt through the body.

The best friend thus inhabits a singular privileged position as the feminine mirror to the self, though such a position is dependent on meeting certain gendered requirements. This space is extended to the spectatorial girlfriend who digitally reproduces and re-performs the acuity of the best friend, being able to “get” the references in the sparsely worded blog post. Belonging in this public, then, is predicated on both the possession and mobilisation of post-feminist knowledges, as well as a disposition towards others of warmth predicated on a sameness of experience.

**The many Other girls**

Whilst offered a space of mutuality and homogeneity with the best friend, however, the self must be distinguished and distanced from a feminine mass in the form of “Other girls.” Other girls are numerous, frustrating, shallow, and tasteless. They dare to wear velour tracksuits; they ask stupid questions; their choice in heels leaves much to be desired; their thong is visible. The self is evidently always already positioned against such figures. For example, in the blog post “When my best friend asks what I think about the new girl her ex is dating,” Queen Bee Regina George from the movie *Mean Girls* (2004) is summoned to vehemently respond, “fat whore” (WSWCM). This “new girl,” who is deemed to neither have control over the shape of her body nor her sexuality, is situated at the nadir of post-feminist economies of value. Regina George, as a pop culture figure who has a complicated relationship with her own girlfriends, is constituted nonetheless as a figure that privileges her best friends above Other girls as a matter of course, regardless of the innocuous actions of the Other girl.

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

These disciplinary affects tied up with Other girls are strongly and consistently carried across the blogs. Sometimes, as with the Other girl who speaks to the blogger’s boyfriend, this hostility occurs due to feminine rivalry stemming from jealousy or possessiveness. One example constitutes the post in Figure 1: “when I see some chick getting all flirty with my crush.” However, this hostility appears to circulate almost as a result of simply being a girl with whom the blogger is not familiar; it often precedes the girl’s actions, intentions, and characteristics. “When I find myself in the middle of group of sorority girls” is met with suspicion and alarm in Pitchin’ Hissy Fits, the Tumblr blog of a “20-something city girl workin’, livin’ and goin’ to school in small-town Texas.” Being part of a sorority, in and of itself, incites an othering, before words are even spoken.

Across the blogs, the relation between the self and Other girls is set up as a tension between an individuated relatable feminine self, and an unlikeable, failing mass femininity. Such posts articulate disdain “when I see a girl in a velour tracksuit” or “when girls refuse to man up and wear real heels,” as a means of demonstrating the almost masculine, discerning, middle-class qualities of the self. Undifferentiated Other girls should accordingly be seen as productive; they are used affectively-discursively as a foil, the constitutive limit (Skeggs 2004, 2005) producing the self as a relatable post-feminist individual. It is thus deemed that it is recognisable, even normal, to show antipathy towards this abject mass femininity. It is not clear who or what the defining characteristics of the Other girl may be, apart from an “outside” produced through a moving surface-boundary of hostility, condescension, and anxiety about femininity more generally. The spectatorial girlfriend reader can thus never be the Other girl, being textually invited to share in collective gripes about her.

Other girls are mythic, mobile, and adaptable, produced as always already outside the surfaces constructed through the affective inclusion of the best friend and spectatorial girlfriend. In the way that her “otherness” almost precedes her description, the Other girl becomes everyone and no one. In her descriptive brevity and status as a constitutive limit, the Other girl becomes a stand-in for an overgeneralised, weak, and failing femininity, rather than an individual in one’s life story. Overall, Other girls, or simply “girls” are conceptualised as a feminine “mass,” the limit of strong, individual selfhood. Thus, femininities are divided into a bubble of sameness in which the best friend, as normative mirror, and the spectatorial girlfriend reader are invited to participate. Outside this bubble is an otherness represented by almost any other girl. Individuality accordingly might be seen as the adoption of a default masculine standard. Yet, even as a post-feminist masculinity is taken as a default standard of individuality, actual “guys” are often theatrically treated with ostensibly little respect.

**Hot guys and creeps: desire, discernment, and detachment**

Given the post-feminist subject of value projects an active, discerning, and desiring heterosexuality, the “hot guy” features prominently as a figure across the blogs, particularly given
they often describe undergraduate university-related social situations. This heterosexual zoning occurs within an established genre of post-feminist femininity, where an emphasis on active and discerning heterosexuality is used to establish a young woman’s independence or individuality (McRobbie 2009). The “hotness” of men serves the double purpose of proving an active heterosexuality and a young woman’s individual desirability, in the demonstration of attractiveness to girlfriends when socialising with hot guys, and through the retelling of hook ups. Accordingly, desire is usually signalled by referring to the guy as “hot,” and by “hot” it is clear that this equates to a physical attractiveness that acts as a visual cue to desire. Yet, this figure is also characterised by a relation of ambivalence through which such desire is managed.

Desire, when it is described, constitutes an affect which is abundant and always ready to be activated, something that almost precedes the “hotness” of the “guy” in question. One blogger relates the situation when a friend instructs her to “discretely check out a hot guy” behind her (Pitchin’ Hissy Fits). Through a moment extracted from the popular sitcom, *How I Met Your Mother* (2005–2014), an anticipatory desire to check out the hot guy is articulated through the exaggerated body movements of Barney Stinson, a character known for his heterosexual “conquests” (Figure 2). Sitting with his friend Ted in a diner, Barney’s body whips around to articulate lecherous desire, while Ted, positioned as the friend who has advocated for discretion, rolls his eyes in resignation. Heterosexual desire is articulated here as a form of hyperbole that the spectatorial girlfriend is meant to recognise, conveying a sanctioned feminine attitude that circulates in response to a guy’s “hotness.”

However, this desire is complicated by what is often depicted as a middle-class feminine inability to capitalise on that desire. A certain awkwardness or cheesiness is recurringly highlighted in the depicted flirtatious reactions. This is conveyed through ridiculous or exaggerated winking, eyelash fluttering, or, as in the *How I Met Your Mother* GIF, over-eagerness in response. Such awkwardness is set up as an object of humour. These flirtatious techniques are often conveyed to be bumbling and inappropriate by using GIFs of animals or men aping femininity for laughs. For example, the follower blog TwoDumbGirls features American

When my friend tells me to discretely check out the hot guy behind me

![Figure 2. Hot guy behind me—posted by Pitchin’ Hissy Fits.](image)
comedian Conan O’Brien fluttering an obvious pair of false eyelashes vigorously, but with
difficulty; WSWCM uses a GIF of a very overweight Puss in Boots from *Shrek the Third (2007)*
sliding down a cat scratch pole, and writhing around on his cat bed in a parody of feminine
seduction. The self is generally positioned as not “feminine” enough to inhabit a deliberate,
flirtatious feminine subjectivity with ease. Such contrast between the desire and the exag-
gerated lack of sexual competency can be seen as a technique for negotiating classed, social
systems of value. The bumbling disposition towards the “hot guy” constitutes a means of
enacting a middle-class femininity in which pride in one’s sexual pursuits must be disavowed,
or at least qualified (Skeggs 2005; Tyler 2008), unless enacted in contexts of licensed trans-
gression (McRobbie 2007, 2009) such as at college parties in which “hook up” culture is
prevalent.

To “hook up,” according to Shelly Ronen (2010) and Rachel Kalish and Michael Kimmel
(2011), means to engage in any type of sexual activity with someone, ranging from kissing
to sex, without being in a steady relationship with that person. Hooking up, Kalish and
Kimmel argue, is particularly entrenched within the ritually enacted “spontaneity” of parties
where alcohol is consumed in large amounts, allowing the making of party-related “mistakes.”
Posts abound about stopping friends or being stopped by friends from hooking up with
“ugly” guys or, effectively, hook ups which would not have happened without the influence
of alcohol. The follower blog WhatShouldWeCollegeMe relates the experience of “when my
friend tries to pull me away from the guy I’m hooking up with” using a GIF of Rachel McAdams
from the romantic film epic *The Notebook (2004)*. McAdams’ face is teary and she sobs, “You’re
not gonna tell me who I’m gonna love.” In this context, McAdams’ teariness invokes a drunk,
over-emotional reaction as a humorous recognition of situations when intoxicated friends
are determined to pursue courses of action that their hapless but well-meaning friends are
unable to prevent. Hooking up, then, as a means of enacting desire, is squarely posited as a
phenomenon of drunken party culture—as part of practising social belonging, but impor-
tantly, without appearing to try too hard (Kalish and Kimmel 2011). A certain post-feminist
nonchalance is effected; one must be fun or silly as a result of licensed drunken abandon,
but not too desperate for male attention.

Hook ups with “hot guys,” then, are drawn on as a social resource. Described in a noncha-
lant manner, they work as a source of humour through which the desirability and fit within
youthful party cultures may be demonstrated. When hook ups occur, they are narrated as
though they are “hilarious,” with the guys doing embarrassing or noteworthy things that are
worthy of social media disclosure. In and of itself, a hook up might be fun, but there is a
notable silence as to the pleasure experienced in the actual encounter. The pleasure in the
hook up is translated into “clocking” the experience, listing the experience as part of a social
currency to draw on in cultures of girlfriendship. Accordingly, the line between engaging in
heterosexual pursuit as a desiring individual, and participating in collective social rituals of
enacting desire as a means of demonstrating post-feminist normativity, is blurred. Being
desired by “hot guys” has value in a feminine social group in terms of building one’s erotic
capital (Winch 2013). Hotness can thus doubly demonstrate one’s active heterosexual desire,
while also drawing a line against those who are not worthy of that desire: the ugly guy, or
the creep.

The creep is a figure that circulates in the blogs mainly to function as the abject double
of the hot guy. As such, he constitutes an affective-discursive resource demonstrating the
powers of distinction of the discerning post-feminist subject. Clear differences between the
hot guy and the creep are not fleshed out, requiring the reader to mobilise girlfriend knowledges of the significance and signification of the creep as a repulsive figure within the post-feminist subject’s life lexicon, who desires her, but who must be rejected. In posts like “creeps at the bar” on the blog 2ndhandembarrassment featuring a generic reaction of disgust, the creep, like the hot guy, is constituted through the process of being named, rather than through the recounting of his actions. The parameters of what constitutes “creep-like” activity are difficult to determine, with rejection appearing to be the sole consistent, defining characteristic. Like the Other girl, rejection precedes him. Whilst the odd cheesy pick-up line might be invoked as a reason to reject the creep, or when the guy is “multiple inches shorter” (WSBCM), generally the creep is characterised through his negation from the outset. Whilst Other girls act more broadly as the constitutive limit of the self, the creep acts as a sexual boundary, the limit that produces a discerning, sexually empowered post-feminist subject.

There is a distinct lack of description as to why the creep is creepy, which could be due to a range of common practices such as encroaching upon personal space, or engaging in other types of unwanted harassment. This absence suggests two dominant explanations. It may be that the blogger relies on the reader’s spectatorial girlfriendship in relation to “getting” what a creep is: the guy at the bar who relentlessly stares, takes up one’s space, and/or is uncomfortably persistent in his advances. However, I suggest that this lack of description also indicates the difficulty within a post-feminist lexicon of articulating feminine victimisation; the self must be articulated in relations of control, picking and choosing relations with others. Of course, sexual harassment or assault is not funny, and this blog-based public operates on a humorous affective relationality. Yet, curiously, in a university context where much recent discussion highlights the endemic proportions of sexual assault on American campuses (see e.g. Michael Kimmel 2015), there is a notable absence of the sense of being personally wronged when creeps are cited. In a post-feminist vocabulary of individualised sexual empowerment, I suggest that the creep is only speakable as the ugly twin of the hot guy; he exists for the important purpose of showing discerning sexual taste and the post-feminist power of sexual rejection of inferior men. Thus, parallel to the way in which “hotness” signals an immediate viability, the creep and the hot guy as relational figures signal the feminine capacity to reject as well as selectively welcome heterossexual advances.

**The boyfriend: the must-have accessory**

Compare these heterosexual figures, however, with the figure of the boyfriend, who plays a different accessorical role. The boyfriend is one of the most central and recurring figures in the blogs, either in his current or longed-for future presence. The boyfriend is a reassuring stalwart who appears to deserve affection, or at least, much more so than the other men who populate the life script here. Blog posts circulate the sense of comfort in relation to this figure, articulating the freedom to act in an unfeminine manner with the boyfriend by doing things like eating food, or pressing the boyfriend for attention or affection. Whilst hot guys peripherally circulate desire, sexual activity with the boyfriend accords with sanctioned post-feminist practices of sexuality. As the masculine counterpart who confirms a young woman’s desirability on a respectable long-term basis, sexual desire for the boyfriend is more “speakable.” When the boyfriend oversteps the line, these are generally minor transgressions: “when my boyfriend forgets to DVR the Voice” (2011–2016), a reality singing competition
show, this is met with consternation, but a humorous resignation (WSWCM). Accordingly, a warm humour often frames this relation.

However, while more fleshed out than generic hot guys, the substance of the boyfriend tends to be fairly thin—again, suggesting a convention through which to make oneself intelligible as a post-feminist subject of value. The boyfriend is treated affectionately but talk of substantial emotional dependence on him is eschewed. Like the other figures, the boyfriend is a device to tell the self: a means of demonstrating the blogger's preferences, playfulness, and normative desires. Anecdotes about the boyfriend do not appear in a linear timeline; rather, the boyfriend is drawn on as a humorous resource, about whom a stock of amusing observations are available to be posted which may also jostle with posts about being single and going out with girlfriends for a night out.

The boyfriend may accordingly also be seen as an instrumentalised, accessorial figure—but he is an accessory a young woman must be able to talk about. Similar to Diane Negra's (2008) insight into how marriage becomes an item to tick off for the successful post-feminist woman, a boyfriend also becomes an accessory to some degree in these texts. Despite occasional posts articulating the need to “upgrade” when the boyfriend starts to “let himself go” (WSBCM), the boyfriend, while sometimes undermined in personal value, does not lose his overall ontological importance in relation to the self. The boyfriend is in demand—and when absent, this lack is spoken about as a reflection on, or failing of, the feminine self, though the impact of this failure is disavowed by its humorous articulation. Not having a boyfriend is clearly understood as a personal disadvantage.

The absence of a boyfriend is often felt to produce social exclusion on the basis of “everyone else” (one's girlfriends) having one. Being the only single person at a party, or at a group dinner party, is a central, frequent theme which is articulated with frustration, annoyance, and often sadness. This lack is often signalled through recourse to food as a crutch, suggesting an excessive, undisciplined body. Consumption of junk food in particular is often viewed as sad, inadequate, a poor substitute for possession of a boyfriend. Alcohol in this context is similarly positioned as a crutch, to be consumed to numb the sensation of being excluded as a single person. In one example, one post on WSWCM shows a young woman sitting on a couch saying, “So, I’m the only single one?” The young woman pauses, stops smiling, then says, “That’s fine,” taking a gulp of a very full glass of wine. The resort to food or alcohol adds further significance to the young woman who lacks the key figure of the boyfriend. It suggests that this lack is understood to reflect poorly on the feminine self that, in a post-feminist social landscape, fails in some way to properly regulate and control her life through her body as well as through her inability to embody independent, acquisitive (hetero)sexuality. She has failed to acquire the key figure demonstrating her desirability, even as she might be enjoying the company of “hot guys.”

Far from voicing a simple dependency on a heterosexual partner, the lack of boyfriend speaks to losing at the game of successful femininity. If one is the “only single one,” it also suggests the erosion of previously intimate homosocial spaces, at the same time that young women are required to affect a type of nonchalance in relation to men unless they are conventionally sexually desirable. For example, one WSWCM post documents the blogger’s reaction as grumpy Salem the Cat from TV show Sabrina the Teenage Witch (Nell Scovell 1996), shouting “I will not be ignored” and pushing a vase off a table, when her best friend “ditches” her for a night in with her (the best friend’s) boyfriend. Here, friends who then successfully acquire boyfriends threaten homosocial attachments—the loss of “girlfriends.”
Thus, the boyfriend can be understood as a rather more complicated figure than the peripheral hot guy, crush, or creep. He is also a figure that complicates relations with girlfriends. One’s own boyfriend is simultaneously a figure that is needed for social status and power, as an object of “achievement,” but a figure that cannot be seen as having an excessive impact on individual feminine subjectivity. The boyfriend is accordingly cast as benign, whilst critique of boyfriends in general can only be levelled at other girlfriends’ partners.

(Recon)figuring the self through post-feminist economies of value

This article shows how relational figures materialise the struggle to demonstrate value within and through the terms of post-feminist knowledges, in particular, in exhibiting independence and discernment across domains of feminine life. My affective-discursive analysis shows a clear instrumentalisation of key “others,” where relationships, feelings, and situations that are understood to have value are converted into resources for telling the self. Young women narrate their relations to these figures in such a way as to position the self through post-feminist understandings of feminine normativity. Through the reification of select, recognisable relationships, the self may gain exchange value in negotiating the tensions of feminine autonomy and belonging.

Relations with social figures become essentialised and distilled so they are able to circulate and become accessible in this intimate public through the lens of girlfriendship. Desirable select individuals may be incorporated as an extension of the self (Strathern 1992), on the basis of a normative sameness. As such, the singular best friend and the spectatorial girlfriend, who is positioned as knowing reader, are invited into this mode of identification and belonging. Yet, (any) Other girls are positioned as the constitutive limit of the feminine self. In contrast to excessive or inadequate Other girls, the self is established in a position of post-feminist “moderation,” exhibiting rationality and resilience at the same time as sporting an active, desiring heterosexuality. The boyfriend, hot guys, and creeps are accessorialised in this drive to establish the self: the boyfriend as stable heterosexual life asset; hot guys and creeps to demonstrate a discerning heterosexuality and desirability. Relations with others are invoked in a snappy way in order to position the self as fun but invulnerable.

Post-feminist individuality, then, is enacted relationally. It is important to underline here that the blogs do not straightforwardly reproduce post-feminist discourses or affects, but rather, reveal a set of knowing dispositions, instrumentalisation, and distillation of situations and feelings to demonstrate legitimacy and belonging with post-feminist economies of value. Through the address to the reader, they also invite a sense of belonging within these terms. Post-feminist affects and discourses are reconfigured in a collective social game of decipherment. Demonstrating independence, fun, individuality, and sometimes struggle, these essentialised figures become a way of fostering an abstract connection with readers. The sparse description of the posts makes the shared knowledge of the spectatorial girlfriend more vital, engendering a sense of abstract, mutual recognition in this intimate public which is predicated on moments that are recognisable through adopting post-feminist knowledges.

Rather than constituting significant relations for the bloggers in and of themselves, these essentialised figures, I contend, constitute an important means of anchoring and framing the miscellany of the blogs in a recognisable way for the reader, generating a sense of commonality and girlfriend sociality. The GIFs show neither a “real” reaction, nor even an accurate
representation of one’s facial expression or movements through which an emotion is expressed; the accompanying text gives little explanatory detail—hence the importance of the feeling of a collective spectatorial girlfriendship which is brought to bear on the texts. The pleasure offered to the reader by the combination of the caption and GIF lies in the ability to make meaning based on personal knowledge that is social knowledge at the same time. The theatrical exaggeration and generalisation of feelings in the moments related here suggest that they are not necessarily intended to be read at face value, but invoke moments of shared knowledge that unknown others will “get.”

My analysis indicates that post-feminist economies of value are reinstated, but as reference points through which the self is made socially intelligible and legible to others. The relational figures of the best friend, Other girls, hot guys, creeps, and the boyfriend signal that post-feminist affects and discourses about individuality, sexuality, and attractiveness are distilled in order to achieve some sort of connection through recognition by imagined readers in the public. The conversion of these relations into resources for telling the self suggests the adoption of post-feminist knowledges as common sense. The use of such knowledges does not necessarily signify that these blogger subjectivities are simply “captured” within the terms of post-feminist media culture. Yet, I ask whether it may also indicate widening possibilities—where young women are adapting, reworking, and mobilising such knowledges, in order to engender abstract forms of connection with others.

Note
1. See Akane Kanai (2016) for more discussion of the type of visual analysis undertaken of the “reaction GIF” format.

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Notes on contributor

Akane Kanai is a lecturer in social theory at the University of Newcastle, Australia. She has published on gender, race, class, and cultures of affect and sociality in digital spaces and in popular culture. Her work can be found in Celebrity Studies, Social Media + Society, and M/C Journal. E-mail: akane.kanai@newcastle.edu.au

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