As the use of social networks becomes increasingly commonplace, scholars have observed that associated requirements arise relating to how one’s digital self is practised, worked on, and disseminated (Cover; Miller; Papacharissi). Since the earliest forms of online interaction, scholars have tracked the importance of the question of “realness” in identity and social groupings (Burkhalter; Donath; O’Brien). More recently, as people become more connected, connect-able and subject to peer (as well as corporate and government surveillance) (van Zoonen), digital media cultures have increasingly demanded the performance of authenticity as part of the work of belonging online (Banet-Weiser; Keller). Drawing on Banet-Weiser’s and Keller’s work in particular, “authenticity” is defined here as the quality of being considered consistently “true to oneself” in a way which is socially legitimated. I suggest, online, that this demand for authenticity is manifested through two poles of authenticity: authentic individuality and authentic belonging.

In this paper, I discuss the interplay between authentic individuality and authentic belonging in (postfeminist) digital cultures, by using the case study of a set of meme blogs narrating youthful femininity on blogging social network Tumblr. This meme set, including the “founder”, I consider the production of authenticities where the simultaneous importance of connection and imitative differentiation is foregrounded, tracking the way authenticity is practised in the founder and follower meme blogs. I contend that the WSWCM founder claims authentic individuality, producing itself through claims to originality, and pre-existing “best girlfriendship.” I then suggest that the follower meme blogs foreground authentic digital belonging, by exhibiting certain affective cultural literacies that demonstrate insider status in this intimate digital feminine public (Berlant). I surmise these strategies are used to manage the demands of tension between proving one’s true and individual self and the need to be recognised as belonging through commonality.

The Authentic Self Brand and the Authentic Insider

I suggest that one expression of authentic individuality can be found in the increasingly prevalent practice of self-branding in digital cultures on social network sites (Banet-Weiser). In what Banet-Weiser calls “the authentic self-brand”, one sets up a simultaneous relationship to oneself, and a relationship between oneself and one’s audience. This double relationship is one of “innovation, production, and consumption [of the self], charged with ideally producing a unique, ‘authentic’ self” (73) for others. The self-social relationship offered by the authentic self-brand dovetails with what scholars identify as a postfeminist media landscape in the West (Gill; McRobbie; Negra). Postfeminist narratives promote highly commercial paradigms of self-surveillance, self-regulation and self-improvement, particularly for young women (Gill; McRobbie), whereby one’s body, social practices and relationships are evaluated as part of the marketability of one’s self-brand (Banet-Weiser, Winch). In this marketised recasting of social relationships, one must treat oneself as a product to be invested in, and remain vigilant of how one is perceived by an audience of potential “buyers”.

Notably, postfeminism relies on the idea of a deep, inhering individuality to justify the injunction to marketise oneself (Gill). Following this logic, gendered practices which may improve one’s feminine “self-brand” such as attention to beauty practices and body shape, must be cast as for “oneself” and part of one’s “true desires”. This occurs in a landscape where it is widely presumed that feminism has done its work, and women are now “free” to perform femininity however they wish (Gill). In postfeminist digital cultures, proving one’s acts are done for one’s true self, not for others becomes crucial in demonstrating one’s feminine authenticity (Dobson, Individuality; Performative), even as one is aware of the social value of one’s profile or digital brand (Banet-Weiser, Ringrose and Barajas). Drawing on this body of work, I suggest that authentic individuality, performed through imperviousness to social influence, is the way in which these contradictions of the postfeminist self-brand are just#fed.

At the same time, digital cultures can also be argued to offer “remix” spaces (Lessig) where the borrowing, imitation and adaptation of existing cultural artefacts demonstrates personally felt connections to wider social meanings. One common manifestation of this is the Internet “meme”, a unit of culture which relies on imitative adaptation and differentiation in its circulation (Shifman), which I discuss further in this article. Shifman illustrates the meme as a mode of interpretive connection with the example of YouTube meme “Leave Britney Alone”, which began with the founder meme video by actor Chris Crocker making an emotional plea that society leave singer Britney Spears in peace. Memes signal dominant social understandings of the original cultural unit: Shifman notes that with the “Leave Britney Alone” meme, the follower memes tended to mock Crocker’s perceived effeminacy, sexuality and excessiveness in their re-enactments of Crocker’s founder video. Authenticity in these forms of digital production might be argued to signify more about desires for legitimate or authentic belonging within digital publics as insiders, rather than proving a fundamental individuality.

WhatShouldWeCallMe and Tumblr Remix Culture
Tumblr is a relatively under-researched but rapidly growing blogging social network, documented at the end of 2014 as the social platform with the most growth in user numbers (Lunden). Tumblr is known as a promising hub of burgeoning visual youth cultures (Third and Hart), possibly due to its norms of anonymity and significant pop culture content of posts. Images are a dominant form of communication on the site, and most content on Tumblr is public. Notably, 70% of Tumblr traffic occurs internally through the repurposing and reblogging of posts in the "dashboard" area (the equivalent being the ‘newsfeed’ for Facebook), rather than from external sources (Walker).

Tumblr users are able to follow each other, and like and reblog each other’s posts. However, direct comments on posts are not an available feature, unlike most “first wave” (Miller and Fink) blogging sites; if a user wishes to comment on a post, they can only do so when reblogging the post, which is then featured on their own blog. According to Tumblr founder David Karp, this feature discourages overly negative comments and flame wars because "if you’re going to be a jerk, you’re looking like a jerk in your own space" (Walker). These structures set up Tumblr as an ideal site for the production of memes as part of its remix culture, whilst still adhering to certain connective features of other social networks.

To provide some context, the founder WSWCM blog boasted 50,000 new Tumblr followers in the month following its creation in 2012, with independent traffic reports logging the number of page views as one to two million per day (Casserly). Each post on the founder WSWCM is on average liked and reblogged by hundreds of other Tumblr users, but its significance, which I consider here, lies in the way that it has been taken up in a prolific variety of follower meme blogs. Interestingly, unlike “Leave Britney Alone”, the form of imitative differentiation here is keyed at speaking at a more self-representative level, rather than making a comment on or satirising the founder, suggesting a level of personal connection.

Like "Leave Britney Alone", the WSWCM meme set can be understood as a founder-based meme (Shifman), with one originating, successful meme text which then inspires many follower memes, which are usually less successful. The follower memes I consider here adapt the GIF-reaction format which is used to narrate everyday experiences of youthful femininity. Blog posts are produced by matching a GIF image to situations such as “when my boyfriend forgets to DVR\ the Voice” or “when I hear my frenemy got dumped by her boyfriend”. GIFs are moving photo files excerpting about three seconds of movement from popular culture ranging from film, television and YouTube videos.

It must be stressed that the term “follower” does not necessarily connote a lack of originality. The imitation of the follower blogs is strategic: a deliberate, slight differentiation, which operates to set them apart, but still locates them within a youthful feminine public. The emergence of the WSWCM follower blogs is a dynamic one which, I suggest, has catalysed the founder to intensify its claims to legitimacy through authentic originality even as its funny and creative followers throw its uniqueness into question.

The Founder Meme Blog: Best Friendship as Authenticity Practice

One key way that the WSWCM founder makes claims to authenticity is through a “best girlfriendship”, which is also explicitly articulated as the driving force for the maintenance of the blog, rather than Tumblr followers or outside audiences. Whilst ads are hosted on the founder blog, it is explained that these are almost ancillary—to pay the bills of purchasing material to create the GIFs, pay for the site design, web-hosting fees, and other costs. The almost romantic figure of the female “best friend” features significantly, fitting with Winch’s claim that the female best friend becomes a new “soul mate”, beyond one’s (heterosexual) partner in postfeminist girlfriend culture. In this way, we see how certain social relationships become recognisable as authentic. The founder bloggers state in their FAQs: 

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

Whilst now, with potentially hundreds of thousands of followers, it is difficult to maintain that the blog is maintained solely as a means of keeping in contact, this long distance girlfriendship can be drawn on to establish the authenticity and social capital for the blog. The best friend is a productive space through which one can express one’s true, individual desires, free of others’ wishes and outside constraints. Many moments expressed in the original blog centre on (very funny) moments that are only shared with the best friend where one can really be “oneself”, such as “when my best friend and I stay in” (for a night in), or “when my best friend and I are DGAF in public” (“don’t give a fuck”). In the blog, the very exclusivity of the female best friend compared to other ambivalent relations with “other girls” and “guys”, can also be understood as a mechanism for carving out a space of feminine individuality.

I suggest that this best girlfriendship should be understood as a permutation of the authentic self-brand, practised to achieve a form of authentic individuality. In Winch’s conception, postfeminist girlfriendship is about strategy rather than solidarity; girlfriendship becomes an “investment in the individual” as it is “essential in enabling feminine normativity” (2). This may be reflected in the way best friendship is mobilised as a brand for WSWCM. At its inception, WSWCM only used the "Minimalist" theme for its layout, a free theme offered by Tumblr, which is still visible in the formats of some of the meme blogs.
However, in early 2014 the bloggers changed to a different header to distinguish their site. I suggest this can be understood as a response to establish originality and authenticity through a best friendship brand, in opposition to the other meme blogs, which had also adopted the founder theme. The WSWCM header features cartoonish depictions of the two bloggers, one in New York with the silhouette of skyscrapers behind her, and one on a beach with an open laptop, the blog visible on her screen.
This header clearly alludes to the fact that the bloggers are separated, in different places, but links them by depicting them as virtually identical. Somewhat similar to “Bratz” dolls, they are both represented with oversized heads, tiny bodies, long hair, and large eyes, with the only differences being that one is blonde with pale skin and blue eyes, the other brunette with tanned skin and green eyes. I suggest that what is striking about this cartoonish image is the way it fits into a commercial genre of representation of “girlfriends”. Further, whilst girlfriends are often positioned as differing, their differences are often positioned as complementary, to strengthen a united co-brand (Winch). The differences here are noticeably nominal, skin-deep—the slight variation in hair, eye and skin colour hint at “‘tantalising differences within a normative paradigm” (Winch 46).

I am not suggesting here that the best friendship of the bloggers is artificial or purely commercial, but rather, that this production of digital best friendship coincides with strategies to achieve authentic individuality recognisable in postfeminist digital cultures. The best friend is thus crucial to the performance of authenticity in the original blog. It is important to note, however, that these practices exceed postfeminist self-branding in certain ways. Given that WSWCM has indeed inspired follower memes keyed in a self-representative register, this suggests possibilities of broader connection and a sense of intimacy through recognisability of shared femininity. From one form of insider practice—the WSWCM best girlfriendship—to another, other Tumblr bloggers through follower meme texts have also signalled their insider status, as young women able to narrate forms of feminine experience held out as representative and legitimate.

**The Follower Meme Blogs: Connective Differentiation**

In contrast to the founder’s production of authenticity through claims to originality, and through a relationship, which is held out as distinct from the desires to gain Internet followers, authenticity is practised differently in the follower memes. Authentic individuality is decentralised; rather, the follower blogs appear to foreground the importance of authentic belonging. This becomes clear in the followers’ imitation of the founder in their positioning as similar, but slightly different. For example, in the blog *WhatShouldBetchesCallMe*, the blogging subject still narrates quotidian feminine trials and tribulations, but is much more knowingly confident and sassy; in *WhatShouldWeCollegeMe*, the blog focuses more on the experience of being at university than the founder meme.

Shiftman foregrounds the process of repackaging and imitation in the adaptation of memes; I suggest that what also must be considered in this meme set is connective differentiation, which repositions this repackaging as simultaneously a form of distancing and connection. Here, the connective differentiation of the follower blogs is a way of citing one’s knowledge and understanding of youthful feminine experience. By creating a self-representative, knowingly derivative but different follower blog in this meme set, this subsequent variation demonstrates one’s legitimate belonging in the feminine public sphere of WSWCM readership.

I suggest Berlant’s conceptualisation of intimate publics is useful here in explaining how slight variations on an original theme play out in a culture in which authenticity is held up as essential. Berlant argues that women’s culture in the West, centrally shaped by relations to commodities, creates expectations of both
normativity and commonality whereby the market claims to offer texts and objects which are true to women’s “particular core interests and desires” (5). This provides a “generic-but-unique” femininity (6) through which women can expect to be recognisable in this public. Arguably, what the memes opt into—through being recognised as derivative—is a form of recognition in an intimate feminine public.

Thus, the follower memes adhere to these rules of recognisability in order to be seen. Recognition as belonging in this intimate public through social knowledge becomes more useful for the follower memes, which cannot rely on the status of originality of the founder meme. What this practice of discerning, connective differentiation may signal is a configuration of authenticity which manages the tension in demands of digital culture—signalling one’s individuality yet demonstrating one’s social embeddedness. As O’Brien (1998) notes in relation to early online social interaction, if one wants to be recognised and recognisable, one must draw on established social, cultural codes.

Notably, many of the situations which are put forward in blog posts of the follower memes are not necessarily easily distinguishable in genre or content from the blog posts of the founder memes. Though the founder meme text places particular emphasis on best friendship, other forms of youthful, feminine (middle class) experience are recycled and re-adapted for circulation. Many of the situations which are put forward in the meme set, while creatively assembled, are ultimately generic so that they can be circulated on Tumblr to connect with others. Consequently, posts abound about social rituals of excessive drinking, struggling through university, and inadequacies in flirting technique. However, I note that these generic posts are still specific at the same time, requiring a highly discerning ability to capture and narrativise affective moments from diverse, miscellaneous pop culture material. The well-chosen GIF articulating one’s despondency as a single girl demonstrates a level of cultural and affective awareness of the semiotic intelligibility of the GIF, and the recognisable trials and tribulations of youthful feminine experience.

Fig. 3: “When I’m depressed and have too much to drink.” 2ndhand-embarrassment.tumblr.com, 11 Feb. 2015.

Thus, showing one’s specific knowledge of shared experience demonstrates an affective authenticity of connection and belonging. This authenticity works to prove one’s digital authority to micro-broadcast one’s life in a youthful feminine public, through showing one’s knowledge of the recognisable pitfalls, idiosyncrasies and experiences of being a young woman.

I emphasise that it is this situated knowingness that comes through in the meme set in general, particularly in the follower memes. Given the generic nature of the content of posts across the meme set, the importance of “true” emotion is decentralised—rather, what is vital is knowing which affective situations have the capacity to connect and be recognisable. Whilst the revelation of inner emotional truths have otherwise been considered key in the practice of authenticity in celebrity culture (Biressi and Nunn; Hesmondalgh and Baker), I propose that in the context in which this meme set is situated, this is not necessarily the most useful form of social currency. In these remix digital cultures, I suggest the interpretive premise of the digital audience is not that these products of remix literally speak to one’s experiences. Rather, remix cultures provide a means of demonstrating insider knowledge, which connects other insiders—a form of authentic belonging.

Conclusion

This paper has traced differing practices of feminine authenticity visible in the intersection of social network and remix cultures on Tumblr by examining the WSWCM meme set. I have suggested that the founder meme employs particular strategies of maintaining authentic individuality, such as resorting to the performance of
an exclusive, "original" best girlfriendship brand. In contrast, the follower memes perform cultural and affective knowingness of youthful femininity, to assert their digital insider status—and right to belong.

This meme set presents some productive questions through which to think through authenticity in digital cultures. Could striving for authentic belonging constitute one strategy of responding to a media-saturated culture, where authentic individuality is constantly elevated yet (perhaps) harder to achieve? These blogs demonstrate how the significance and practice of authenticity transforms in managing different configurations of social desires to belong, or be recognised as individual and original in (postfeminist) digital cultures.

References


Keywords

authenticity; postfeminism; remix; youth; identity

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