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**Abstract**

In this paper we make an argument for why thinking critically about neoliberalism is important for media and communication studies. We advance a case for a critical media analysis that will take seriously the affective and psychic life of neoliberalism as an increasingly central means of governing and producing people's desires, attachments, and modes of "getting by." To illustrate our broader theoretical argument, we will discuss the contradictory neoliberal regulation of affective dispositions for women, which prescribe confidence or alternatively, the pleasing, lighthearted readiness to "not take the self too seriously." We make a case for expanding our theoretical and conceptual vocabulary in order to foreground the relationship between neoliberalism, media and subjectivity in the maintenance of continuing inequalities.

Keywords: affect, neoliberalism, subjectivity, gender, feeling rules, inequality

### **Mediating Neoliberal Capitalism: Affect, Subjectivity and Inequality**

In her pioneering work on the link between capitalism and emotion, *The Managed Heart*, Arlie Hochschild begins by describing how a “crew-cut pilot in his early fifties” at a Delta Airlines training session addresses a room of 123 flight attendant trainees:

*Now girls, I want you to go out there and really smile. Your smile is your biggest asset. I want you to go out there and use it. Smile. Really smile. Really lay it on.* (1983/2003, p. 4).

Published in the same year as the first *Ferments in the Field* special issue of the Journal of Communication, in which the major debates centred on media’s role in the interaction of political-economic base and cultural superstructure (White, 1983), *The Managed Heart* showed how intimate practices of selfhood were implicated within a broader, unequal capitalist system. Later, Hochschild and Ehrenreich (2004) situate emotional labour within a longer history of the West’s extraction of value from colonized nations, mining the love and care of migrant nannies, maids and sex workers to fill the “care deficit” experienced in the West under the post-Fordist universal breadwinner model. Feeling occupies a central role in these structural, transnational accounts of inequality. Feeling, Hochschild (1983/2003) argued, is a mechanism through which we know what is due to one another – our seemingly spontaneous impulses to gratitude, anger, and dissatisfaction indicate our awareness of our value and acceptable limits of how we may be treated. But feelings also constitute a vital part of a functioning capitalist framework and indeed feelings follow social *rules*- rules, we contend, in which media are increasingly implicated.

Our argument in this paper is that the feeling rules and affective life of neoliberal capitalism urgently require study. We suggest that it is imperative for media scholars to take neoliberalism seriously via its affective and psychic registers, as an increasingly central means of governing and producing people's desires, attachments, and modes of "getting by." We use the term "psychic" to draw on a history of feminist media scholarship foregrounding the desires, investments and attachments through which subjectivities are made available to inhabit, and highlight media's central role in the production of these affective subjectivities. Here, our analysis draws mainly on feminist work demonstrating the entanglement of intimacy, gender, and neoliberalism through media. Media have become increasingly central to the biopolitical operations of neoliberalism in intimate, commercial, and public life, where structures of individualisation have produced the *self* as "subject of interest." As such, we need to expand our conceptual and theoretical vocabulary to explore the relationship between neoliberalism, subjectivity and inequality through media and mediated practices establishing new injunctions and prohibitions on how to feel.

Neoliberalism, in largely Western contexts, has been understood as a "theory of political economic practices that proposes that human wellbeing can best be advanced by liberating entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade" (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). However, Connell and Dados (2014) note that the continuing return to neoliberalism as a set of ideas rather than practices fails to properly grapple with neoliberalisms outside of the global North. A perspective that is more attentive to localized differences emphasizes neoliberalism as an accumulation strategy, a "contingent response to the recurring crises of the capitalist mode of production" (Tansel 2017, p. 8). Across varied contexts, neoliberalism holds together the promotion of economic de-regulation, and the extension of market principles into all areas of

life (Burchell, 1993; Springer et al, 2016), with the appropriation of increasing powers of the state to discipline, punish and coerce individuals into “productive” social and economic activity (Tansel 2017). As such, attention to the inducement and suppression of feeling according to rhythms of exchange value has become ever more vital in a cultural context where, as Wendy Brown (2015) has argued, market exchange is seen as an ethic in itself. When rights to secure employment and social safety nets are under continual attack, media are increasingly implicated in calling forth subjects who are “resilient,” “creative,” “flexible” and “positive.” Indeed, Barbara Ehrenreich (2010, p. 8) notes that “positive thinking ... has made itself useful as an apology for the crueller aspects of the market economy,” and it is no surprise that the “happiness industry” (Davies, 2015) and the “confidence cult” (Gill & Orgad, 2015) have taken off in a moment of crisis and austerity. The affective incitements, discipline and regulation produced through media are of particular significance in the current conjuncture, given the qualitative media saturation with which individuals are faced (Castillo & Egginton, 2016), and the entanglement of media within neoliberal logics mandating personal transformation. We are witnessing not simply the commercialisation of feeling, but a new era of “emotional capitalism” (Illouz, 2007) which is generating new “structures of feeling” (Williams, 1961).

Feminist media scholars have argued that the prevalence of lifestyle and reality television in the West over the past two decades has taken a leading role in fostering affective and entrepreneurial modes of subjectivity in domains previously considered “private” or unrelated to the commercial sphere (McRobbie, 2009). Facilitated through the explosion of reality television, the makeover paradigm that is part of a dominant “postfeminist” media sensibility, shows no sign of abating (Lovelock, 2016). Pedagogical in structure and in logic, makeover shows address spectators as *ontologically entrepreneurial* citizens in a distinctively

gendered address, with women and girls the most visibly monitored subjects in this paradigm (Negra, 2008). Teaching dissatisfaction and relentless self-monitoring, and promising redress through the frame of “taking charge” of one’s life, therapeutic narratives of self-transformation disconnect emotional labour from obligation to an employer and re-intensify its necessity by framing it as voluntarily taken on *for the self* in varied personal domains of life.

The widespread uptake of digital media indicates the further extension of neoliberal modes of operating within intimate life, that are adopted in particular by girls and women as seemingly ideal neoliberal subjects (Gill & Scharff, 2011). Seen in the proliferation of lifestyle, beauty, fashion and “mom”-based digital brands (Berryman & Kavka 2017; Duffy & Hund 2015; Wilson & Yochim 2015), girls and women are at the forefront of transforming personal life into a source of monetisation, producing new relationships where the social is recast as an audience of potential consumers. Based on principles of adaptation, self-monitoring and innovation (Banet-Weiser, 2011), a gendered intimacy becomes the currency of this branded relationship. This re-anchoring of gender through affect can be also seen in the production of digital surveillant technologies in the form of smartphones, tablets, and applications that are geared towards feminine self-monitoring and self-improvement. These tools assist and incite “aesthetic labour,” showing how the logic of exchange value permeates one’s sensory apparatus – literally inculcating affective modes of evaluating and critiquing the body (Rettberg, 2014; Elias & Gill, 2017).

It is vital to examine how contemporary neoliberal media comport affective and psychic qualities that are inextricable from yet compound existing notions of gender, race, class and sexuality. Self-transformation under neoliberalism, we suggest, is linked not simply

to the notion of personal change (in appearance, parenting skills or sex life) but, importantly, mobilising, acting on, and being sensitized to the *right feelings*. In the remainder of this piece, we want to highlight three indicative examples of the way that media are implicated in new modalities of feeling in neoliberalism. Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad's (2015) recent research on the cult of confidence explores how injunctions to confidence are increasingly seen in media ranging from advertisements, to magazine stories of self-transformation, to the realm of financial, educational and sexual advice. The discursive imperative to be self-confident is addressed in particular to girls and women through a set of arguments and techniques which are remarkably similar across domains (Gill & Orgad, 2017). First, women are proposed as lacking confidence. Similar to discourses of "girls in crisis," gendered social positions are envisioned via therapeutic narratives to be related to inadequate levels of "self-esteem" (see also Banet-Weiser 2015). Second, this lack of confidence is diagnosed as the source of women's ills in the world and, as such, there is a turning away from structural accounts of inequality and injustice. Repudiating – or only briefly acknowledging – the injurious nature of patriarchal capitalism, confidence is offered as a technology of the self - to paraphrase Foucault and Marx, a means through which subjects may (re)constitute themselves through practices "not of their own making." Thirdly, then, activities to heighten confidence – such as "power poses" (empowering body language), apps to flag up or delete insufficiently assertive language (e.g. Google Chrome's "Just Not Sorry" add-on) or exercises to practice gratitude or note down positive feelings – are mandated as necessary in order to pull oneself up, lean in and push oneself forward.

Gill and Orgad discuss, for example, recent turns in advertising where not only body work but *psychological self-work* is promoted as necessary. In a disingenuous twist, women's desires to attain thinner and more normatively beautiful bodies are attributed to women's own

perfectionism rather than cultural beauty standards inculcated through sustained emphasis on slimness in advertising and media. A recent advertisement for Special K, a diet cereal brand, illustrates this “turning away from culture” in pathologizing women’s preoccupation with body size, in favour of the confidence Special K promotes. In the advertisement, feeling “fat” is characterized as an abject sentiment that women must simply stop doing as an act of self-sabotage. Declaring that 93% of women “fat talk,” the sentence flashes upon the screen: “you wouldn’t talk this way to anyone else.” The ad resolves statements of dejection such as “I’m feeling so disgusted about my figure at the moment” by literally silencing women: “SHHH.” At the end of the advertisement, women are pictured laughing and hugging each other, each mouthing “sshhh.” In a single neat movement, advertising culture is let off the hook; women are implicitly told to look to the self as the cause of one’s own inadequacy; and confidence is advocated as the solution.

We note that such injunctions to invulnerability are carried through in young women’s own self-representations. Akane Kanai’s (2017a) research shows how young women are producing ‘affectively relatable’ pleasing online selves amenable to circulation in digital economies. Kanai analyses a “meme”-based set of blogs, in which a popular humorous founder blog run by two young women narrating everyday “girl” experience, has inspired a number of similar adaptations by other young women in authoring their own blogs. In this digital “intimate public” (Berlant, 2008), blog posts narrating feelings and reactions through GIFs and captions circulate based on assumptions of “common experience” in comedic, self-effacing ways.

While recurring themes centre around failures relating to eating and the shape of the body; the inability to be as sexually attractive as desired; and problems with university and



work, the tone of the posts is upbeat, funny and witty. Kanai argues that the blogs demonstrate key constraints on the production of femininity in neoliberal times: whilst young women may acknowledge the existence of problems, they must be quickly resolved through humour, with the individualized self as the butt of the joke. Humour is used to *defuse* the notion that one is overly impacted by the stressors of university life, body standards and heterosexualized relationships (Kanai 2017b). In directing lighthearted humour against the self, the blogs attempt to walk the line between traditional affective regulations that mandate girls and women apologise for their presence, please others, and take up less emotional space; and contemporary demands to singlehandedly demonstrate confident, positive selfhood in relation to the degrading conditions of contemporary capitalism.

There is an interesting tension in the way that this self-deprecating humour sits alongside the injunctions to confidence observed by Gill & Orgad (2015; 2017). In sharp contrast to the assurances of commercially-mediated confidence cult(ure), pure self-confidence when performed by ordinary girls and women often does not pass the test of “likeability” in everyday mediated environments. What we see is the injunction for women to not show *too much confidence*; or rather, to only show confidence within limited parameters where to not do so would take up the emotional resources of others. To show that one has *no* concerns about the body is not “relatable;” women must show one’s attachment to feminine concerns just enough to demonstrate their “normalcy,” but not too much so as to be a drag. Indeed, it would seem that a certain kind of performative insecurity has historically been a mandatory element of femininity. This is evident in the compulsory self-deprecation practised by most female celebrities and conversely the hostility meted out to those who do not engage in well-worn feminine genres of self-criticism such as body hating or fat talk. Victoria Beckham is a good example: she is frequently indicted in the media for her failure to

“smile” (in just the way that Hochschild’s flight attendants were enjoined- where “smiling” connotes a whole range of valued feminine emotional qualities), and for her resultant coldness, aloofness and unlikeability. This may indicate the limits of the confidence cult and the sense that confidence for women is required to be in a state of *becoming*, as to be fully self-confident is to put one at risk of failing to comply with other feelings rules of femininity.

This research indicates a continuing and intensifying double bind, as well as the distinctiveness of the current moment, in which traditional gendered expectations remain while women must become ever more adept at fielding new affective obligations to act as though such obligations do not exist. One must be “relatable” but “confident” in the appropriate proportions. With intensified calls for “authenticity” (Banet-Weiser, 2012) as well as entrepreneurial adaptability, it appears that women are being caught between the new “heel and toe” (Hochschild, 1983/2003) of affective neoliberalism: both enjoined to gamely take on the pain of existing inequalities whilst only being able to speak of suffering in purely individualized terms of resilience, always already on the path to “making do.” What both tendencies share, then, is the requirement to disavow the injuries of contemporary life or to acknowledge them very briefly or in attenuated (e.g. humorous) form only to move on quickly to a more “positive” and “appealing” display of emotions. They rest upon the outlawing or rendering as toxic (for women) of certain feelings or states, including insecurity, shame and – crucially - anger. Discussing a range of contemporary popular mediations of feminism, Gill (2016) has argued that they rely upon a repudiation of anger in favour of more upbeat and palatable emotions centred around acceptance (“we’re not judging”), celebration and “inspiration,” which kick off explicitly or implicitly against the figure of the “feminist killjoy” (Ahmed, 2010).

This links to the third feature of the affective landscape we wish to discuss: namely the emphasis in media targeted at (or enacted by) women of a warm, affirmative address, marked by a sense of generalized, diffuse “boldness” or “defiance” – which has no particular target. Examples of this are ubiquitous in media culture. A typical example is Dove’s 2016 campaign MyBeautyMySay, which begins with a variety of women’s to-camera statements: “They said I was too pretty to fight... They said I was too fat... They said I didn’t dress for my age” (etc) and then segues seamlessly into assertions of what we might call *hollow defiance* by the same women: “I am not going to be defined by anyone’s expectations...I’m me...My style is 100% unapologetic” before ending with Dove’s taglines voiced by the women and then emblazoned on the screen: “My beauty, my say.” This taps into a long history of feminism-lite style advertising in which a generalized expression of female pain is cursorily evoked only to be resolved through defiant assertions of individualism, often couched in terms of “rights” to be who you want to be (e.g. “Your hair, Your way,” “Express Yourself”) or emphatic expressions of female capacity (“This Girl Can,” “You are more beautiful than you think”) connected, of course, to the product being marketed.

This set of meanings and injunctions is also dispersed more widely across cultural life: it is to be found in the messages of charities and NGOs – even perhaps in the theme of International Women’s Day 2017 BeBoldForChange - as well as in the proliferation of “inspirational” ideas that flow through greetings cards, posters and wall art, and across social media - exhorting women to “embrace who you are,” “follow your dreams” and “dance like nobody’s watching.” In contrast to the future-oriented self-improvement advocated in media makeover culture, much of this “small media” fare is concerned with being and living the best possible life *right now*: being in the moment, seizing the day, following instructions to “live, love and laugh.” What makes this interesting for scholars concerned with the affective

dimensions of ideology is that it evokes a generalized spirit of rebellion and a refusal to be governed by rules or expectations, yet it neither specifies who or what is constraining women, nor calls forth any kind of social, economic or political change, but simply a hedonistic “emboldened” attitude. Resistance and defiance come positively charged, but remain locked into the individual – indeed the psychological – requiring self-belief and sass but not – crucially - social transformation.

### **Concluding thoughts**

In an interview in 2017, Arlie Hochschild argued that “we need to expand space for critique...As we analyse neoliberalism, we need to add questions about the changing feeling rules around us and the selves we are asked to ‘hold.’” In this paper we have responded to this call. We argue for the need to better understand the affective and psychic life of neoliberalism through media, and to pay particular attention to the way in which new gendered expectations reveal both the incorporation and adaptation of neoliberalism into ways of living. This represents an urgent direction for future research in the field of media and communications. We must take seriously the affective and psychic life of neoliberalism and media’s implication in its continuing force.

We observe a mediated trend where women in the West are being asked affectively and psychically to *lean into* globalized, neoliberal capitalism in ever more intimate, personal ways. It appears that women’s everyday affective labour to attenuate the difficulties of living under neoliberalism – which may take the form of performances of confidence, of pleasing yet resilient femininity, and of a kind of boldness/ hollow defiance or what Amy Dobson (2015) describes as “performative shamelessness” - is indispensable to its continued

functioning as “common sense.” As such, it is vital for media scholars to expand our theoretical and conceptual vocabulary in foregrounding the relationship between neoliberalism, media and subjectivity in the maintenance of continuing inequalities.

In focusing on scholarship exploring the affective positioning of women in middle class Western assemblages, and the discourses – including those they self-author - that produce them as consumer-citizens, our aim is to position this scholarship as a springboard for further inquiry. What, for example, are the feeling rules addressed to men in post-industrial nations who have lost relative economic stability and privileges in the post-GFC environment? What regulation of feeling might be experienced by migrant workers struggling in the flexible, digital “sharing economy?” It is vital that media studies widen its capacity address the overlapping ways in which neoliberalism transforms gender, race, class, ability, and geography transnationally, as a flexible and differentiated form of biopolitics. What kinds of media are needed in order to maintain what seems to be an otherwise *unsustainable* attachment to individuality? These and other questions, we argue, are of pressing matters that require scholarly intervention. Our analysis thus goes some way to responding to Lisa Blackman’s (2004) call for critics of neoliberalism to take seriously affect and emotion, and we contend that such an approach represents an important and original direction for future media and communications scholarship.

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