Bread, Cats, and Postfeminism: Rethinking the Digital Affectivity with Evans and Riley

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Evans, A., Riley, S. 2023. *Digital Feeling.* Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

At the end of April 2025, media outlets such as CNN (2025), BBC (2025), and Business Insider (2025) reported on a seemingly marginal news story: actress, businesswoman, and – according to some also – 'health guru' Gwyneth Paltrow had started eating bread, cheese, and pasta again. As indicated by the comments on the BBC's Instagram post about this news (bbcnews 2025), such a report may be seen as wholly inappropriate for media giants like the BBC and CNN. However, if we follow the argument of Adrienne Evans and Sarah Riley in their recent book *Digital Feeling* (2023), a news item about an actress who has long been reporting on her lifestyle making a radical change to her diet may indeed be a significant story in the structure of the digital everyday life's discourse.

The book *Digital Feeling* is part of a large corpus of texts in which authors Adrienne Evans and Sarah Riley deal particularly with postfeminist sensibility, digital and postdigital life, and postdigital intimacy. In the latter area, Adrienne Evans is a key figure, as a co-founder and the principal investigator of the AHRC network Postdigital Intimacies and the Networked Public-Private. The book thus builds on their previous efforts to bridge the domains of media and cultural studies, as well as psychology, from a feminist perspective, with the psychological domain primarily represented by Sarah Riley, Professor of Critical Health Psychology. In this sense, *Digital Feeling* is predominantly concerned with postfeminist sensibility, following Rosalind Gill's definition of the term, as a structure of feeling.

The book is structured into one theoretical introductory chapter, five analytical chapters, and a brief conclusion. The theoretical chapter establishes continuity with previous publications, defines basic concepts, and indicates the direction the ensuing analytical chapters will proceed in. The analytical chapters, formed as stand-alone case studies, cover a reasonably broad spectrum of digital culture, from sarcastic, highly politicised Instagram accounts and fitness and body positivity to the cornerstone of the internet – cats.

The theoretical chapter bears a title that also sums up the main perspective of the book – namely, 'Postfeminist Sensibility as a Structure of Feeling'. The central concept of the book is thus postfeminist sensibility, which is primarily defined in the terms of the canonical texts in this area of feminist research – namely, the works of Rosalind

Gill and Angela McRobbie. According to the authors' interpretation, a postfeminist sensibility is a way of viewing postfeminist rhetoric as inseparably linked to consumerism and neoliberal ethics, characterised by the complete individualisation of choice and the necessity of self-discipline and self-surveillance. When it comes to digital culture and the digital form of late capitalism, the authors look specifically at the concept of neoliberal subjectivity, where 'individuals are required to participate in forms of self-branding, especially in social media, online forms of dating and "hook up" culture, and in relation to employment, including "gig economy"' (p. 3). Following this definition of postfeminism and postfeminist sensibility, the book seeks to trace 'the shaping of postfeminist sensibility in digital flows and through online culture' (p. 4), while linking this shaping to 'the role of emotion and affect in the way postfeminist sensibility saturates contemporary culture' (p. 4) and, last but not least, emphasising the complications that accompany a postfeminist sensibility in the context of popular or neoliberal feminism (p. 4).

Quoting the relevant literature, the authors move fluidly between the different concepts and signifiers of the field they are exploring. The book alternates between different discursive objects such as 'online culture', 'digital culture', 'contemporary culture', and various online and digital spaces. From a media theory perspective, this fluidity at times obscures a given interpretation; for example, on page 5, where the authors justify the absence, presumably literal, of the term 'digital culture' in Rosalind Gill's 2007 text as follows: 'At that time, many of today's recognisable mainstays in digital culture were only just evolving (e.g. Twitter was founded in 2006, Instagram was 2010)' (p. 5). One can hardly doubt that Instagram is currently a 'recognisable mainstay of digital culture'; this is, however, already to some degree a questionable claim to make about Twitter, now called X. To retrospectively define digital culture through the emergence of specific social networks is at any rate not clearly comprehensible or convincing argumentation. From a genealogical perspective, digital culture is more likely to be related to digital media as such (see, e.g., Silver 2004), and not directly to the emergence of social networks, and if it is associated with social networks in a historical perspective, then one cannot ignore crucial social networks such as Myspace, which emerged in 2003, or Facebook, which emerged alongside Twitter. I would emphasise at this point that this is not a cherry-picking of terminological ambiguities; a certain fluidity in terminology is explicitly acknowledged in the book in relation to the second fundamental concept of the project, namely, the concept of feeling.

The authors define the structure of feeling primarily in reference to the work of Raymond Williams and his view of culture as a processual phenomenon, while they also draw on the Deleuzian-Guattarian concept of becoming (pp. 13–14). Following

this same line of interpretation, the authors also refer to Sara Ahmed's view of happiness as a specific channel for reproducing structural inequalities (p. 15) and an examination of the affective turn (pp. 15–16). The authors conclude their interpretation of the 'affect turn' and the different approaches to the difference between affect and emotion by emphasising the socio-politico-technical framework of both affect and emotion and – employing the fluid approach to the signifiers of different concepts described above – summarise the interpretation as follows: 'We understand affect as central to the social, and vice versa; that the social shapes the affective capacities of bodies. For us, the discursive and the non-discursive, the conscious and the non-conscious, and the psychic and the social are in dynamic interplay, not separate realms of experience or logic, and we make no hard distinction between the terms "affect", "emotion", "feeling" and "sensibility", except for when it is analytically useful' (p. 18). The fluid approach to the use of concepts – except in cases of 'analytic utility' – so transparently described here is certainly possible. But for readers who are not as thoroughly familiar with various traditions of thinking on affect, emotion, and sensibility and digital, internet, and new media culture, beyond the introduction to these ideas offered by the authors, it may be more challenging to grasp and follow the ideas and argumentation on which the authors base their interpretations of phenomena in the world of digital culture. Oscillating between an interchangeable use of terms and their occasional use in a specific way has the effect of obscuring, to a degree, some parts of their interpretation. It should be noted, however, that the introductory chapter cites extensively from the literature on this topic, and it is not necessarily challenging to trace the specific concepts they refer to.

In the first analytical chapter, entitled 'Gender, Race, Nation ... and Barbie Savior', the authors primarily focus on analysing the Barbie Savior Instagram account, the content of which consists of photographs of Barbie dolls superimposed onto distinctly stereotypical images from an unspecified African setting. It is a satirical, humorous account that, according to the authors, '[…] has become a cultural reference point for talking about the industry surrounding aid, humanitarianism and voluntourism, and people who participate through social media' (p. 28). Thus, in this chapter, the authors are primarily concerned with the gendered nature of 'voluntourism', which is a fusion of volunteer work and tourism that takes place in parts of the developing world, mainly undertaken by young women, including celebrities (p. 38). Using the example of the Barbie Savior account, they also show the specific form of such activity, namely, so-called selfie humanitarianism (p. 40), which, according to the authors, portrays a specific conception of transnational sisterhood (pp. 40-41) and emphasises care-oriented femininity, including the portrayal of selfie humanitarianism's orientation toward orphans (p. 43). Although the account in question is no

longer active, the character of Barbie remains a contentious figure in contemporary feminism, as evidenced by the Barbie film, which was released after the book under review was completed. The debates surrounding this film included both a celebration of the emancipatory potential of the highly successful film and a critique of the alleged trivialisation of feminism in the movie.

In the second analytical chapter, entitled 'Sweat Is Just Fat Crying', the authors analyse the phenomenon of 'fitspo', a term that describes fitness inspiration drawn from the social media sphere. The central concept of this chapter is 'postfeminist healthism' (p. 55), which is based on the idea of improving one's body primarily for the sake of health and the moral imperative associated with such rhetoric. Emotionalisation (p. 57) is seen as quite central to the discourse surrounding this way of looking at the classic postfeminist makeover paradigm, implying an imperative of infinite transformation. Along with so-called 'cruel optimism', this involves 'attaching health and the benefits of exercise to a sense of personal well-being, value in life, spiritual and emotional contentment, and general goodness as a person' (p. 73). Emotionalising the connection between physical fitness as demonstrated by specific ableist, racist, or cisheteronormative bodily traits and female empowerment is embedded in the appeal to 'affective flows of optimism, hope, pride, and positivity' (p. 79), but also in the inversion of these feelings, that is, in shame, which the authors conceptualise as 'sticky affect' (p. 76). Adopting the idea from Sara Ahmed, the authors view shame as 'sticky' in the sense that it adheres to specific groups on the grounds of historical oppressions (p. 76). Shame is also 'sticky' in that it adheres to other adverse affects, such as envy or hatred (p. 77). At this point, I would like to draw attention to a recent book that, although not referenced by the authors because it was published later than their book, presents Kate Manne's own experience with these sticky affects. This is the book *Unshrinking: How to Fight Fatphobia* (2024), which is interspersed with descriptions of feelings of shame and guilt associated with body sizes that are not viewed as normatively thin. The resulting text is an excellent philosophical treatise on issues related to fatphobia based on the author's own experience.

The third analytical chapter, entitled 'Making-Up Enterprising Selves', focuses on the structure of feeling of influencer culture as a form of postfeminist entrepreneurialism (p. 89). Based on an analysis of the Get Ready With Me videos, the authors explore forms of post-Fordist work in influencer culture. Here they build on the historical feminisation of specific industries that require 'service with a smile' (p. 89) and performative pleasantness (p. 93). Within influencer culture, this post-Fordism is particularly evident in the 'emotional ethos of "Do What You Love"' (p. 94). The authors identify three affective shifts here, the first being 'a therapeutic suffering' (p. 99), wherein influencers demonstrate that their successful lives were born from

conditions of hardship that they then overcame. The second affective shift is the explicit mention of bodily enjoyment as central to influencer content (pp. 99–100). As in the previous chapter, these categories include 'feeling fit' (p. 100), which appears to be less related to appearance and more to an inner sense of well-being. The third shift, however, is the interaction of emotional elements with the aesthetic labour of influencers, which is facilitated by the makeover paradigm, applied to both the mind and feelings as well as the body (pp. 101–109).

The fourth analytical chapter, entitled 'Hot Men on the Commute', shifts from the primarily digital environment to the boundaries between digital and non-digital culture and explores the fluidity between them. The starting point for this chapter is the website TubeCrush.net and associated social media accounts, where photographs of 'hot men' from the London Underground are posted (p. 115). The authors' primary focus in this chapter is on the fluidity of both the digital and non-digital environments and on a specific space that is both public and personal – namely, public urban transportation. Crucial here is the act of taking and then sharing photographs on the web or social media, whereby the image maker expresses a very intimate thing – who it is that she finds attractive. Sites like TubeCrush.net are thus inherently affective, highly private and intimate, and at the same time public, like a journey on public transport.

The last analytical chapter is entitled 'Cute! Cats! Intimacies of the Internet', and here the authors focus on cuteness as 'a technique of control that often reinstates the human/non-human animal hierarchy while hinting at cultural fears around a human sense of powerlessness' (p. 142). This chapter examines how the affectivity and intimacy evoked by photos and videos of internet cats originate from the way different socio-political and economic contexts are bridged through the creation of an audience that shares a view of a particular being as 'cute' (pp. 152–159). Furthermore, the conventionality and unproblematic nature of the topic, object, or being that connects this audience are essential to the concept of intimate audiences and the affectivity associated with them (p. 159).

Although Gwyneth Paltrow does not appear in BBC or CNN texts accompanied by a cute kitten, it is probably clear by now that the approach to the introduction of this review was not chosen by accident. The actress, who established her Hollywood career in the period of early postfeminist sensibility, transformed her media and digital presence over time in line with the transformation of postfeminist principles. From the early adoption of a strict approach to her body and diet, she gradually shifted to the affective rhetoric of feeling good and fit. Now, in the interest of bodily affectivity, she has returned to consuming food groups that she had previously rejected in pursuit of the same feelings. After all, the Goop brand (2025a) is 'an indispensable

resource for a beautiful, thoughtful life' that brings 'more agency, depth, and joy to life' (Goop 2025b).

To return to the book, the authors of *Digital Feeling* map interesting aspects of digital affectivity and intimacy, which, in all its forms, is highly political, whether it is explicit, politicised satire or the politicality that is concealed in the seeming apoliticality of cats. This relatively short book provides a robust annotated a robust list of references on each topic, through which the authors chart recent findings in cultural and media studies, media psychology, and, of course, the field of studies concerned with postfeminist sensibility. In this sense, the book is a rewarding and quality read for those already engaging with these topics as well as for those who are just learning about them, as it is constructed in a manner that is both clear and, in terms of its argumentation, convincing.

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