

The New Celebrity: How Funny Novelty Accounts Gain Social Influence on Twitter

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Abstract *Twitter, the second most popular social networking site in America, is host to a wide variety of users. The site design allows for more room for identity play, giving way to a wide variety of accounts that range from authentic representations of real life to completely fictitious. Novelty accounts fall on the fictitious spectrum, as personas developed for the purpose of tweeting comedic material. This has led to the rise of a new type of celebrity—one where a fictitious persona can be more popular than real life celebrities. I perform a case study examining the types of humor used by three accounts representative of a genre of female, white novelty personas—@girlposts, @WomensHumor, and @TweetLikeAGirl. The type of humor used by the accounts can help contribute to understanding how this new type of celebrity functions.*

Key Words Humor • Social Media • Twitter • Celebrity

Introduction

When Twitter, the second most popular social media site in the United States, was launched in 2006, the purpose of the site was not entirely clear to its creators (Lapowsky, n.d.) Nine years later, the same can still be said. Twitter is largely considered a microblogging site, but it is impossible to define one type of user or one type of use. Some come to Twitter to gain direct access to their favorite celebrity, some use it for news updates, some use it to interact with friends, some use it for commercial promotion—the possibilities are endless. While other social media sites, such as Facebook, actively discourage fake accounts that are not meant to be representative of the offline user (Edwards, 2013), Twitter is unique in that it hosts a combination of “real life” accounts and “fake” accounts. Sometimes the “fake” accounts are used for malicious purposes, such as spamming; however, many “fake” accounts are carefully curated by anonymous “real life” users.

The “fake” accounts have many different purposes, but there is a subset with some common features—they take on fictional, comedic personas. One type of account is what I will refer to as a “parody account,” created to satirize companies, celebrities, or current events. The other type is what I will refer to as “novelty accounts,” comedic personas who are not associated with a particular brand, person, or event. This paper is concerned with examining novelty accounts in an attempt to explain their online celebrity status. The popularity that novelty accounts achieve on Twitter does not make sense intuitively: “real” users enter the online Twitter space with some type of real world social status; parody accounts draw from the established ethos of the person, company, or event they are satirizing. Novelty accounts, however, are conceived from a much murkier social starting point, as the user is creating a persona that does not have real offline connections. These accounts manage to overcome the obstacle of obscurity, and are so popular that, by some estimates, the account operators can make thousands of dollars per tweet (Broderick, 2014).

At 68 million followers, Katy Perry (@KatyPerry) is the highest-followed account; this is not surprising, as she is an international superstar. Fans all over the world use Twitter as a tool to keep tabs on and interact with the account representing their favorite international pop singer. Perhaps Michelle Obama (@MichelleObama) is not as popular, but her social standing as the First Lady of the United States is still reflected by her 5.4 million followers. How, then, do we account for the novelty persona Common White Girl (@girlposts), who boasts of 5.3 million followers, with nearly as much Twitter popularity as the First Lady? The answer may lie in the entertaining nature of the account, whose timeline of tweets is largely comprised of jokes.

The purpose of this paper will be to conduct a case study analyzing the type of humor used by three popular novelty accounts with female personas—@girlposts, @tweetlikeagirl, and @womenshumor. I will discuss the dominant type of humor used by each account, and determine how often the accounts use self-deprecating humor. My research questions are as follows:

1. What is the dominant type of humor that is used by the novelty accounts?
2. How often is the humor self-deprecating?

3. What are the overall similarities between accounts? What are the differences, and how do you account for them?
4. Can the type of humor used account for the popularity of the persona?

As Jin and Phua (2014) demonstrated in their study on celebrity social influence on Twitter, number of followers and celebrity relatability are major factors in Twitter ethos. Therefore, in order to contextualize the humor, a description of the accounts is necessary. @girlposts is the most popular of the three accounts, with 5.37 million followers. The profile has a hyper-feminine design: pink text, a blonde Disney princess avatar, and a pink Victoria's Secret cover photo. This account tweets the most frequently, using a combination of textual and hypermedia content, but favors the hypermedia. This leads me to believe that the persona is a younger woman, perhaps teenaged. @WomensHumor is the second most popular account, with 1.4 million followers. While the profile still has a very feminine feel, with pink accents and an image of two dressed-up women as the cover photo, it is a more sophisticated femininity. The avatar is black with the account's name written in white. The dresses in the cover photo are black. The account tweets both text and hypermedia content, but heavily favors text. I will argue that the account persona is meant to be slightly older than @girlposts, perhaps a woman in her early 20's. Finally, @TweetLikeAGirl is the least popular of the three accounts, with a more comical, less feminine persona. The profile details are blue versus the pink of the other two accounts, the cover photo is a silly portrait of all the Disney princesses versus the sophisticated cover photos of the other two accounts, and the avatar is a picture of a popular male Youtube star dressed as a woman. The persona seems to fall between the age range of @girlposts and @WomensHumor.

While there are differences in the way the accounts are presented, there are some key similarities that make them representative of a particular genre of novelty accounts. Their personas are older teenagers to young 20-year-olds, they are female, and they are white. Dozens, if not hundreds, of these accounts exist on Twitter, each with thousands of followers. @girlposts, @WomensHumor, and @TweetLikeAGirl were chosen because they are of the most popular of these accounts.

Review of Literature

To date, I have found very little research regarding humor on social networks. I consider this to be a significant gap in the literature because humor is part of the fabric of social media. Serious discussion can be considered passé on sites that were designed for entertainment purposes, so humor functions as both entertainment and a socially acceptable way to discuss important issues. This research is an attempt to bridge the gap between social media performance and rhetorical humor theory.

Postmodern identity construction as discussed by Abrudan (2011) is a good place to start when considering identity on Twitter. She argues that because of the wide variety of images made available through mass media, people can take on many identities by re-purposing the media. Because of the anonymous nature of the internet, identities have become even more fragmented and are extremely fluid. This is relevant to the way that the novelty account personas are received—in the age of postmodernism on the internet, users do not have an expectation of a wholly “authentic” person; a generalized persona is acceptable. As Butler (1999) points out, “feminist theory has assumed that there is some existing identity, understood through the category of women” (p. 3). Gender identity, she argues, is performed. That is evident with these novelty accounts, who present themselves as caricatures of women. Because they embrace the stereotypes of the “category of women” and do not, as Butler suggests, embrace the differences within the category of woman, the personas are not deceptive in the same way that someone who makes a fake profile is deceptive—they are understood as characters.

Very little analysis of “fake” social media personas has been published. Much research has focused on how users craft personas representative of themselves. Twitter is a unique space because it does not quite encourage authentic representation like other social media platforms. As Binns (2014) notes, the design of Twitter makes it “perfectly acceptable to follow people you do not know, with celebrities and other elite banging their drums for attention” (p. 84). It does not pressure the user for personal information like Facebook, only providing a 160 character biography space and limiting tweets to 140 characters (Binns 2014). Jones (2014) distinguishes between “social network sites” (SNSs) in which “individuals interact with individuals who are

already in their offline social circles,” and “social networking...through which individuals attempt to expand their social circles by meeting new people” (p.84). Twitter falls into the “social networking” category, which has implications for how users craft their identities; if they are not socializing with people they know in real life, their identity construction is much less constricted.

Papacharissi (2012) discusses performances of self on Twitter, arguing that users create a “make-believe performative space to try on roles and identities” (pg. 9). Novelty accounts and “real people” alike use this strategy, so establishing a distinguishing criteria for novelty accounts is important. She discusses a collapse between public and private life of the “real life” user, and I would argue that the novelty accounts do not share this tension—they have no private life at tension with their public life. Zappavigna (2011) discusses “how language is used to build community” (p. 788) on Twitter. The assumption she makes is that users use hashtags to create a community, however these novelty accounts do not make much use of hashtags, suggesting that they are not on Twitter for the interpersonal social aspect. Her discussion assumes that people use Twitter for community-building and novelty accounts operate against these assumptions. The accounts do not achieve their celebrity-level status by creating a dialogue with users; a notable characteristic of the accounts is that they typically do not directly interact with other users. Faina (2012) more explicitly discusses the evolving meaning of celebrity; he states that “Twitter...enables users to construct various publics through the process of following” (pg. 66). Social media collapses physical space, so that the number of followers rather than the number of physical fans can determine celebrity status. This is important to consider, especially in light of Papacharissi’s performances of self on Twitter, and my suggestion that novelty accounts have no physical, private life.

The main means by which the users craft novelty account personas is through humor. Lynch (2002) argues that “humor and laughing are essential parts of what it is to be human” (pg. 423), and emphasizes the basic social function of humor. Perks’ (2007) discussion of ancient rhetorical humor theory defines the three main theories of humor—incongruity, relief, and superiority—in the context of the classic rhetorical writings of Aristotle, Plato, Cicero, and Quintilian. I will also consider if the humor is self-deprecating, working under Gruner’s (1985)

assumption that this type of humor is well-received by audiences. Glick's (2007) discussion of stand up comedy is useful in order to understand the way that novelty accounts present their jokes. He argues that stand up comedians rely on knowledge "of regular social 'voices', typical events of language use, and cultural ideologies" (pg. 292). These novelty accounts function very similarly to stand up comedians and fall in line with Glick's characterization. Understanding novelty accounts as stand up comedians can help account for their lack of interaction with other Twitter users.

Another dynamic of the novelty accounts is that they take on young, female personalities. This is important to consider in relation to the power dynamics of gendered humor; as Sen (2012) points out, humor is often used by men to assert their power. Lynch (2002) also notes that the motivation for all humor is control. When considering humor as a form of dominance, the caricature-ish nature of the accounts may be accounted for. If they were associated with actual women, they may not be as popular as it would be seen as violating gender roles. It may be more acceptable for female personas, and not women, to use humor as a main mode of communication. Joseph (2009) points out that though our American society likes to believe that we live in a post-feminist world, coded, sexist situations still exist. Interacting with funny female personas rather than funny women may be an example of navigating the post-feminist world without actively acknowledging the prejudice against female comedians.

Methods

The data presented in this paper is from three novelty accounts: @girlposts, @tweetlikeagirl, and @womenshumor. These accounts were chosen because they are representative of the genre of novelty accounts with female personas: each performs a similar persona, each tweets mostly humorous content, and each has similar Twitter popularity, with over 1 million followers per account. As Wimmer and Dominick (2003) note, resources for random sampling should not be expended upon beta testing, which is why a representative sample was chosen. The tweets were gathered over an established two week period, from March 25, 2015 to April 7, 2015. The purpose of this was both to limit the data load to a manageable amount, and to standardize the data to account for any current events or trends that may have

affected the content of the tweets. Twitter also only allows for users to go back to view the last 3,200 tweets, or until October 2013 (Tweet Activity Dashboard, n.d.). Because some of the accounts tweet very frequently, March 25 was the earliest date showing all tweets. While Twitter offers the ability to embed multimedia into tweets, I am limiting the analysis to text-only tweets; all tweets containing images, video, GIFs, emojis, and hypermedia external to Twitter will not be considered. Internal hypermedia (linking within Twitter), such as hashtags or @mentions, will be included. The purpose of this research is to provide a textual reading. A visual analysis in the future is definitely warranted, as multimedia and images are a large part of the content; however the analysis will stick to the familiar rhetorical mode of text as combining humor theory with social media is unfamiliar terrain, and because there is little literature regarding visual humor theory.

It cannot be assumed that every tweet produced by the accounts is humorous, therefore a definition must be established. Humorous tweets were determined based off the definition provided by Canestrari, Dionigi, and Zuczkowski (2014): “a switch from an unpleasant physiological and psychological arousal, due to what can be called today an incongruity, to a positive one, resulting from what is known as its resolution” (pg. 264). The authors approach humor from a psychological perspective; they conducted a study that attempted to capture the temporal thought process of audiences processing humor, from the initial reading, to the moment of incongruity, to the moment of resolution. Because there is little agreement in the rhetorical literature over the definition of humor, I felt that borrowing from psychology, as a scientific field with a more operationalized definition, was appropriate. I determined if a tweet was humorous if it would not make literal sense to a typical English-speaker. There must be, as Canestrari, Dionigi, and Zuczkowski (2014) argue, a moment of surprise that requires a resolution. The humorous tweet will start out with a recognizable assertion, and the moment of surprise is caused by a statement that does not match the tone or subject of the initial assertion. The difference between a humorous statement and an incomprehensible statement is that the moment of surprise can be resolved, whereas the change in tone or subject for an incomprehensible statement cannot be resolved. My assumption is that as a native of American English, I will be able to distinguish which Tweets are considered humor. It should be noted that humor is highly contextual,

therefore a more specific definition of the moment of surprise is not possible. The danger of a joke is that an attempt at humor may merely be an incomprehensible, incongruous statement to some audiences. By working with an operationalized definition, personal biases of what is funny should be minimized; native speakers should be able to recognize an attempt at humor, even if one personally does not laugh.

The top 10 most popular tweets from each account (for 30 total tweets) were coded. Popularity was determined by number of retweets and favorites, where retweets were assigned a higher score (see below). Favorites appear in a separate, tangential feed on a the favorit-er's account while retweets cause the tweet to be posted to the retweet-er's main profile feed, thus creating higher visibility for the tweet; therefore, retweets should be considered a more substantial indicator of tweet popularity, so their value will be double that of favorites in the calculation

$$x = \# \text{ of favorites}$$

$$y = \# \text{ of retweets}$$

$$2y + x = \text{numerical representation of tweet popularity}$$

The tweets were then coded for which of the three theories of humor was most saliently present. Below are the criteria used for coding:

Incongruity: the statement violates commonly-held social expectations. This is the dominant type of humor if the other two are not present, because, according to the Canestrari, Dionigi, and Zuczkowski (2014) definition, all humor has an incongruous element to it.

Relief: there is an existing external pressure that is relieved by the humor, such as a current event.

Superiority: The humor is explicitly directed at a third party.

The tweets were also coded for self-deprecating humor, i.e. if the persona referred back to itself in a way that invited the audience to laugh at it. Charles Gruner (1985) argues that

“humor that is self-disparaging may further enhance speaker image” (p. 142). Because I am interested in determining why the accounts are so popular, self-deprecating humor is a potential means to determine the level of success of a joke.

Results

@girlposts is the most popular of the three accounts, with 5.37 million followers at the time of writing. During the two week period, the account produced 100 text-only humorous tweets. The top 10 most popular are displayed in Figure 1 below. The type of humor was split equally, with five instances of incongruity and five instances of relief. The majority of humor was self-deprecating, with six instances.

Tweet	Date	Retweets	Retweets total	Favorites	Total
person: OMG YOU DIDN'T STUDY FOR THE TEST???!?!?! me: nope person: BUT HOW ARE YOU GONNA PASS??? me: i'm not	4/1/2015	54000	108000	12000	120,000.00
if i was dating myself i would break up with me	3/31/2015	4000	8000	75000	83,000.00
i hit rock bottom like every 2 weeks	4/2/2015	4000	8000	72000	80,000.00
My boobs are getting bigger					
April fools	4/1/2015	11000	22000	16000	38,000.00
Who needs April Fools when your whole life is a joke	4/1/2015	12000	24000	13000	37,000.00
april fools prank: replace all the sugar in your house with cocaine	4/1/2015	9900	19800	15000	34,800.00
somewhere between Jesus dying on the cross and a giant bunny hiding eggs there seems to be a gap of information	4/5/2015	7900	15800	16000	31,800.00
I wish my grandma would just tell me I'm the princess of Genovia by now so I can drop out of school	3/27/2015	7900	15800	13000	28,800.00
7th graders nowadays are worried about boys and drugs, when I was in 7th grade my main concern was how I was getting out of running the mile	4/3/2015	6300	12600	14000	26,600.00
I hate April fools day because I'm really gullible	3/31/2015	7600	15200	9900	25,100.00

Figure 1

@WomensHumor is the next most popular feed, with 1.4 million followers. During the two week period, the account produced 85 text-only instances of humor. Figure 2 shows the most

popular of those tweets. Of the most popular, nine were marked incongruity, while one was marked relief. The majority were not self-deprecating, with only four marked.

Tweet	Date	Retweets	Retweets total	Favorites	Total
Always keep a bottle of wine in the fridge for special occasions. You know, like Monday.	3/30/2015	2100	4200	2300	6500
Shaved legs + fresh bed sheets = HEAVEN	3/31/2015	1300	2600	2600	5200
I'm a proud advocate of messy hair and sweatpants.	4/1/2015	1500	3000	1300	4300
Every pizza has the potential to be a personal pizza if you believe in yourself.	3/30/2015	1300	2600	1500	4100
My heart says chocolate and wine, but my jeans are all like, "SALAD."	3/26/2015	1200	2400	1500	3900
Wine-drunk is the only acceptable weeknight drunk.	4/7/2015	827	1654	1800	3454
Girls just wanna have brunch.	3/29/2015	1100	2200	1200	3400
I don't need fewer clothes. I need more closet.	4/6/2015	1100	2200	1100	3300
"Fuck it." - my final thought before making most decisions	4/6/2015	1000	2000	1300	3300
Every day is a struggle between looking good naked and "Treat Yo' Self!"	4/2/2015	943	1886	1300	3186

Figure 2

@TweetLikeAGirl is the least popular of the three, with 1.34 million followers. The account produced 10 humorous text-only tweets over a two week period. The tweets are shown in Figure 3. Five were determined to be incongruity, three were determined to be relief, and two were determined to be superiority. Half were marked as self-deprecating.

Tweet	Date	Retweets	Retweets total	Favorites	Total
April fools day is tomorrow but it doesn't matter cause everyday of my life is a joke	3/31/2015	13000	26000	13000	39,000.00
Beyonce will turn 35 on September 4, 2016 and thus is eligible to be our next president	3/27/2015	6900	13800	14000	27,800.00
S/O to the boys who still open car doors for their girls #yourmommaraisedyouright	4/3/2015	5900	11800	16000	27,800.00
April Fools is no different from any other day because my jokes are funny as hell 365 days a year baby	4/1/2015	8300	16600	11000	27,600.00
My parking job is not a reflection of who I am as a person, I hope people remember that	4/4/2015	6400	12800	10000	22,800.00
never let a boy treat u like a purple jolly rancher bc ur a blue one	4/5/2015	5700	11400	11000	22,400.00
All girls are crazy So pick your crazy	4/7/2015	5300	10600	8600	19,200.00
I know I'm a handful but that's why you got 2 hands	3/31/2015	5200	10400	6500	16,900.00
I'm at the point in the semester where if a car hit me, I'd probably say thank you to the kind stranger.	3/25/2015	4200	8400	7500	15,900.00
sending out I miss u texts on April fools	3/31/2015	4000	8000	6500	14,500.00

Figure 3

Below are visualizations of the data. As seen in Figure 4, the most frequently used type of humor was incongruity. As seen in Figure 5, self-deprecating humor was used in half of the instances.

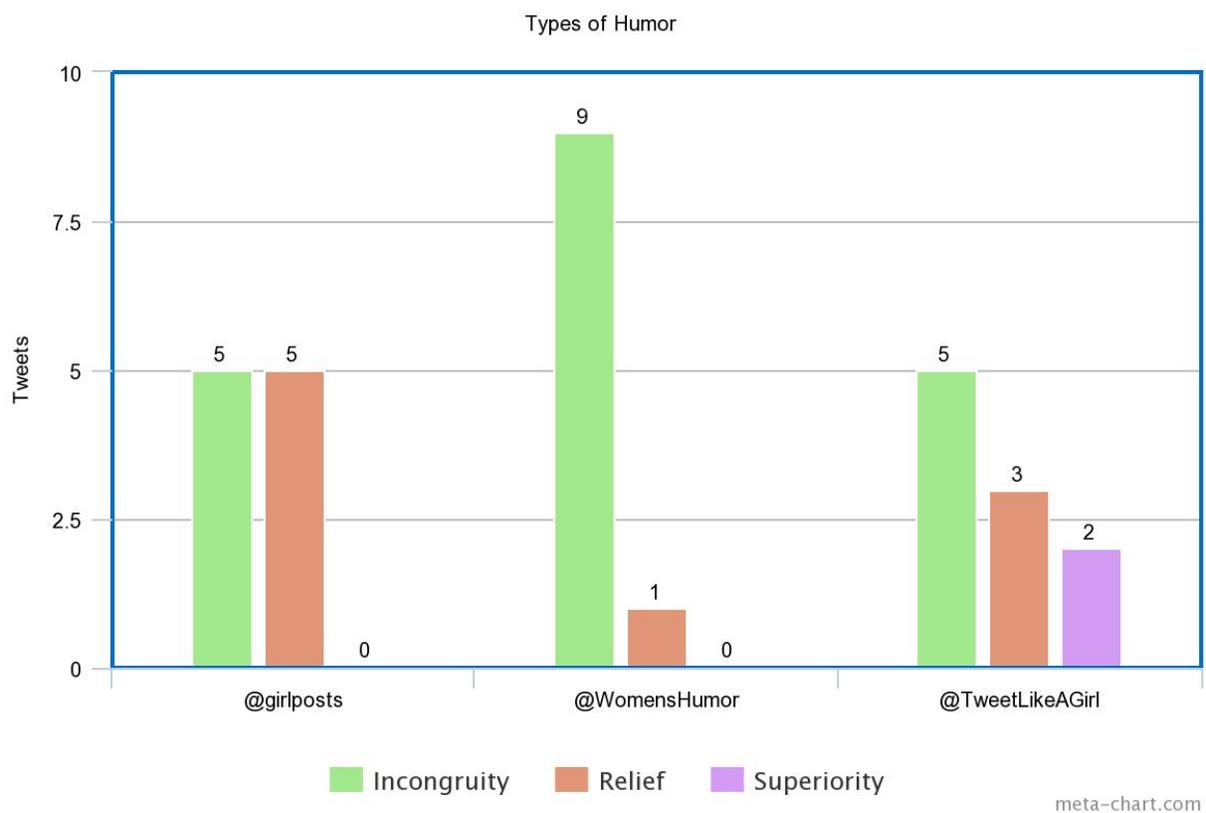


Figure 4

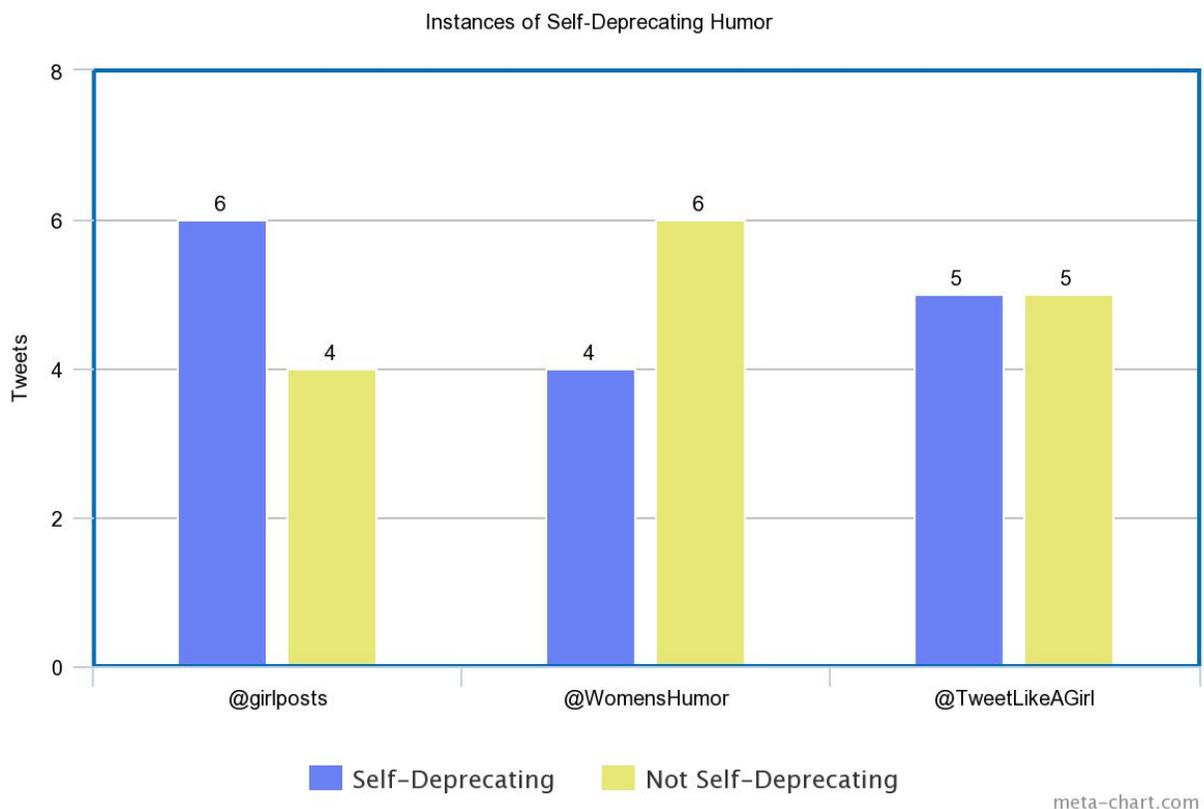


Figure 5

Discussion

It should be first and foremost noted that this research is in a very preliminary stage. The observations in the discussion are not final conclusions, but merely trends noted from the limited data set that should be further explored.

The Dominant Type of Humor

Incongruity was by far the most frequently occurring type of humor. This is not surprising as it was the default form; relief and superiority had qualifiers. Relief was the second most common. It should be noted that the data collection fell over two days with major events: Easter (4/8/2015) and April Fool's Day (4/1/2014). The frequency of relief, therefore, may be skewed, especially in consideration of the fact that these are comedic accounts, so there may have been extra motivation for users to retweet and favorite April Fool's Day-related tweets. Superiority was the least frequent of all the three types of humor. As Perks (2007) points out,

superiority humor provides an “unequal distribution of benefits” (p. 126), and she points to Aristotle, who warns that the subjects of the humor may become angry. Superiority humor is alienating, and therefore, it is unsurprising that celebrity-status accounts would avoid its use.

Frequency of Self-Deprecating Humor

As noted, self-deprecating humor occurred in half of the instances. Because this research topic has not yet been explored by others to my knowledge, I have no point of comparison to determine if this level of frequency is high, low, or typical. We may, however, conclude from the data sample that it has a solid presence within these accounts’ humor. We can assume that this falls in line with Gruner’s (1985) observation that self-deprecating humor endears the speaker to his/her audience; these accounts are very popular, so their brand of humor must be appealing.

Similarities and Differences Between Accounts

There were two major similarities between all three accounts: all used incongruity and relief, and all used self-deprecating humor. The differences, however, are where the interesting implications lie. @TweetLikeAGirl was the only account that had instances of superiority humor. Perhaps related, it is the account with the least amount of followers. I hesitate to draw a correlation because this account also tweeted the least; there were only 10 instances of textual humor, compared to 100 instances from @girlposts and 85 instances from @WomensHumor. It is possible that the account is less popular because it creates less content. However, the difference should be noted. The two instances of superiority were gendered criticisms of males—while the humor of all three accounts is geared towards women, it is definitely conceivable that there are male followers as well. @girlposts and @WomensHumor may be more successful because they do not use humor that actively alienates a potential audience base.

The next notable difference is that @WomensHumor used the least amount of self-deprecating humor. This may be accounted for by the more subtle persona variations between the accounts. As noted in the introduction, @WomensHumor has a slightly more mature persona than the other two accounts; self-deprecating humor may not be appropriate for a confident 20-something woman. @girlposts, the teenage persona, had the most instances of self-deprecating humor, which is more appropriate for the notorious awkwardness of teenage years. It should also be noted that @girlposts, as the most popular account with the most

self-deprecating humor, falls in line with Gruner's (1985) argument that self-deprecating humor is popular. @TweetLikeAGirl had equal instances, falling in line with the persona's more ambiguous age range.

Finally, @WomensHumor had the least instances of humor that was not incongruous. 90% of the persona's tweets were incongruity, while only 10% was relief. I will cautiously attribute this to the fact that the persona does not have the same celebrity-status as @girlposts, and therefore is more reserved with its humor. As I mentioned, Easter and April Fool's Day both occurred during the data set time period. 5/10 of @girlposts's top tweets were regarding the two holidays, while 0 of @WomensHumor's top posts acknowledged them. Easter is a religious holiday, and April Fool's may be viewed as juvenile; therefore, @WomensHumor may have tried to avoid the potentially unpopular topics. @girlposts, however, has 4 million more followers than @WomensHumor and can take on slightly more risk. @TweetLikeAGirl does not seem to prioritise mass appeal, as evidenced by the use of superiority humor and its less sleek profile presentation.

Humor Type as Predictor of Popularity

The only conclusion that I feel comfortable to draw based on the data set is that superiority humor is alienating, and may account for a less popular persona. While @girlposts, the most popular account, also uses self-deprecating humor with the most frequency, I'm not sure that we can conclusively determine that is the cause—the difference in frequency is almost negligible. Also, @TweetLikeAGirl used more self-deprecating humor than @WomensHumor, and had less followers. More data may indicate a stronger trend in the future.

Future Study

This research is in preliminary stages. As I continue to explore novelty accounts, I would take a qualitative approach. I regret not beginning with a qualitative analysis because I believe that this would have helped me operationalize my definitions of humor and the types of humor for which I was coding. A quantitative approach should have come second, especially since there is such little agreement in the humor field over definitions. While I am satisfied with my results and feel that they are generally representative of the nature of the personas, I do not feel

confident that my coding criteria is operationalized enough to be replicated exactly.

Operationalizing humor is extremely difficult, as Reyes, Rosso, and Veale (2013) demonstrated in their unsuccessful attempt to create an algorithm that detected irony on Twitter.

I also would have considered interactions as I collected my data. As I review my data, I realize that since my research motivation is to determine how these personas overcome social obscurity, considering their interactions with others on the site is important. I noticed that there is very little interaction with other users via @mentions and hashtags, and I think that considering that in future research will help to paint a more accurate picture of the personas.

In order to expand upon the research, a few paths should be explored. First and foremost, more data should be collected to determine if the conclusions posited in the discussion hold up to a larger sample size. Secondly, a visual analysis should be incorporated for the tweets that contain multimedia. Images and videos are a large part of the content output by the accounts, so a comprehensive analysis will include consideration of the visual elements beyond the Twitter profiles. Thirdly, the racial aspect of the accounts' personas should be considered. Each account is very obviously white; even the name of the @girlposts account is "Common White Girl." In my overview of the accounts, I did not encounter a version that featured any other races. I suspect that this has to do with issues of postmodern identity, where we are reduced to visual representation online, and therefore rely on familiar stereotypes to mediate identity; however, this is just a guess, and further study should be done. Finally, other models of humor should be considered. Meyer (2000) argues that the three main theories of humor explain the "creation of different aspects of humor" but fall short "explaining the rhetorical applications of humor" (p. 310). An audience-focused theoretical framework may provide more insight as to how the accounts reach celebrity status.

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