THE JOY OF PRIVILEGE

Elite private school online promotions and the promise of happiness

Christopher Drew, Kristina Gottschall, Natasha Wardman, and Sue Saltmarsh

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Introduction

Images of happy, successful students are ubiquitous in "the education landscape and the idealized childhoods it invites us to imagine" (Saltmarsh, 2011, p. 33). Through a broad range of texts, policies and everyday practices, cultural imaginaries that equate childhood with happiness as simultaneously an ideal, an entitlement and a natural state of being, furnish normative frames of reference for which cultural understandings of childhood and studenthood emerge (Saltmarsh, 2011; Chapman & Saltmarsh, 2013; Fisher, Harris, & Jarvis, 2008; Youdell, 2006). In this paper, we consider how the promotional texts of elite private schools in Australia draw upon and contribute to the discursive constitution of childhood happiness as a commodified feature of ideal studenthood. We argue that in elite school promotions, happiness functions alongside institutional narratives of gender, sexuality, race and social class as a device that equates social status and privilege with idealised imaginaries of child/student subjectivities.

Australian education has, since the emergence and entrenchment of the neoliberal project in the late 1980s, been characterised by policies favouring choice and competition in schooling sectors (Symes, 1998; Whitty, Power & Haplin, 1998). As Kenway (2013) points out:

> …market liberalism and school choice have been the dominant policy discourses which…have led to a disastrous school funding model which has supported an exodus from the public sector, serious funding inequities between public and private schools and heavy burdens on the state sector which takes a disproportionate number of

students needing extra resources and care (p. 287).

In such a climate, independent, Catholic and public sector schools alike have been expected by successive governments to 'hold their own' in an education marketplace in which some have been better positioned than others for success. Placed in competition for students and funding, schools have become involved 'in various commodification (promotion and recruitment) practices at home, overseas and virtually' in which "'branding' through school and system websites becomes crucial" (Kenway & Fahey, 2014, p. 181).

Within such a context, our previous work in this field has highlighted and challenged the ways that educational marketisation exacerbates competitiveness, elitism and exclusionary educational practices (Saltmarsh, 2007; Youdell, 2004). In particular, we have been interested in how the promotions, marketing and impression management practices of elite schools discursively constitute their students as winners in the competitive educational climate, and in so doing simultaneously reinscribe the status and prestige of such schools (Drew, 2013; Saltmarsh, 2007, 2008; Gottschall, Edgeworth, Hutchesson, Wardman, & Saltmarsh, 2010; Wardman, Hutchesson, Gottschall, Drew & Saltmarsh, 2010; Wardman, Gottschall, Drew, Hutchesson & Saltmarsh, 2013; Symes, 1998). This work overall has maintained a sustained focus on the ways that gender, race, geographic location and socioeconomic privilege are invoked in school promotions in the service of competitive educational and social hierarchies.

Here we turn our attention to the ways that happiness is utilised in the semiotic elements and discursive practices of elite school promotional websites, in ways that position elite subjectivities as proximate to the happy, good, and desirable life. Institutional narratives of happy elite educational institutions, we contend, constitute elite subjectivities as inherently good, while excluding the possibility of unhappiness as a consequence of the marginalisation and competitiveness that underpin elitist narratives. Thus we focus on the ways that happy narratives of elite school websites produce educational inclusions and exclusions, enabling and encouraging privileged student subjectivities within the space of the elite school while discursively marginalising and sidelining non-privileged subjectivities as unhappy performatives. Such rhetoric, we argue, is not simply representational and symbolic, but also has the performative effect of entrenching discourses of the happy, good life as an exclusionary social imaginary. By highlighting how these happiness narratives are also contingent on the unhappy practices of marginalisation and competition, this paper challenges

the assumption of the promotional texts analysed that elite gendered, racialised and socially-classed subjectivities are necessarily and wholly happy, good, desirable, and superior.

The Promise of Happiness

In commonplace western thought, happiness is an emotion to which all should strive in their daily lives (Frey & Stutzer, 2002); or as Ahmed (2008b) puts it, "Happiness is often described as what we aim for, as an end-point, or even an end-in-itself" (p. 11). Contemporary discourse positions happiness as an indisputably positive emotion, and its attainment is prized as a sign of success in life. This way of thinking has driven the contemporary "happiness industry" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 4) that includes positive psychology, consumable self-help books and courses, and statistics outlining how individual happiness might be achieved (Ahmed, 2010). Global happiness, too, is consistently measured and lauded as an ultimate social goal to be achieved through scales such as the Gross National Happiness (GNH) indicator and the Happy Planet Index. Happiness and goodness are frequently elided in such projects, which assume that to induce happiness is inherently good. (Ahmed, 2010; Frey & Stutzer, 2002).

The happiness industry has been instrumental in the commodification of happiness as a good that can be acquired (Frey & Stutzer, 2002). In 'the virtuous liaison of happiness and profit' (Rose, 1999, p. 86), economic capital and consumer choice enable people to make up their lives through goods, services, and 'experiential commodities' (Kenway & Bullen, 2001, p. 126) equated with happiness. As Frey and Stutzer (2002) argue, "Economic activity—the production of goods and services—is certainly not an end in itself but only has value in so far as it contributes to human happiness" (p. 1). In this context, advertising promotes happiness within the terms of consumption and economic capital.

However, recent cultural studies approaches focus not on how happiness might be achieved, but on "what does happiness do?" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 1). This approach can be seen as part of the affective turn in cultural studies that has gained traction largely since the emergence in the 1990s and 2000s of Thrift's nonrepresentational theory, which focuses on "the excessive and transient aspects of living" (Lorimer, 2005, p. 83). Thrift (2007) points toward the limits of representation theories concerned only with semiotic indicators, and instead focuses on affective practices and actions. Following Thrift, Lorimer (2005) argues that "the tendency

for cultural analyses to cleave towards a conservative, categorical politics of identity and textual meaning" (p. 83) has overlooked how peoples' emotions impact their behaviours, calling for increased attention to emotions within social interactions.

Sara Ahmed's (2004, 2010) concern with cultural politics asks how emotions such as happiness might be *constituted through* discourse. From this vantage-point, we consider happiness as an emotion that does not exist outside of social and cultural assumptions about what constitutes a good, desirable and successful life. This approach highlights how cultural discourses can position certain privileged subjectivities as comported towards happiness, while foreclosing other, non-normative subjectivities as unhappy and therefore undesirable. Rather than happiness being rendered a factual and inevitable outcome of certain ways of being, we consider it as a performative rhetorical device that constitutes subjectivities as worthy or otherwise within cultural discourse.

Ahmed argues that emotions are discursive, and rely on cultural and historical understandings of particular objects and subjects as necessitating particular emotional reactions. For Ahmed, emotional reactions such as happiness are learned and sustained through discourse. Ahmed suspends the assumption that things that are happy are necessarily good or worthy, and argues instead that happiness produces things as good and worthy: "to be happy about something makes something good" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 210). When happiness is discursively associated with some ways of being more than others, it emerges that happiness is something to be achieved by striving towards certain subjecthoods. As Ahmed (2010) argues, "some bodies more than others will bear the promise of happiness" (p. 45). Happiness, here, is "what you get for being a certain kind of being" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 12).

Ahmed's examinations of emotion in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) involve readings of the ways texts generate emotive effects that influence the readings of represented subjects. The "emotionality of texts", she explains, is produced through framing strategies—such as "figures of speech" and "metonymy and metaphor" (2004, p. 12), in ways that mark some subjectivities as desirable through their proximity to happiness, and others as unhappy and therefore undesirable. Texts, she argues, can use discourses of happiness to produce some interactions and narratives as requiring particular emotive responses to certain subjectivities. From such a perspective, texts performatively reiterate the happiness and goodness or otherwise of certain bodies, thereby entrenching, sustaining, or challenging discursive understandings of the happy, good and desirable subject.

Here, we utilise Ahmed's happiness theory to consider how happiness might be used in elite school websites to frame certain student subjectivities as desirable and worthy within the context of elite education, and to foreclose other subjectivities from happy, good and elite subjecthoods. In considering the promotional, semiotic and discursive features of these websites, we aim to challenge prevailing educational discourses within our region. We see the promotion of educational elitism as situated within a marketised educational policy context that encourages competition and stratification of schooling sectors. The elision of happiness with the consumption of elite education, we contend, contributes to inequitable discourses that privilege some schooled subjectivities over others.

Elite school websites were located using internet search engines, through which we searched for schools following Gaztambide-Fernández's (2009) criterion for identifying elite schools. This criterion search involved the identification of high-profile local schools that featured elite school identification markers including: influential alumni, longevity of establishment, boarding options, elite geographical indicators such as sandstone buildings and large manicured lawns, and participation in elite interschool rugby and rowing competitions (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009). We identified twelve schools that met Gaztambide-Fernández's (2009) definition of elite, which we de-identified and renamed as Schools A – L in no particular order. Three of these schools are co-educational, five all-boys, and four all-girls. We collaborated on the synthesis and analysis of the data using discourse analytic (Fairclough, 2001; Foucault, 1972; Lee, 2000; Threadgold, 2000) and social semiotic (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; O'Halloran, 2004; Yell, 2005) methods. We searched for semiotic and discursive representations of happy elite subjectivities, and critiqued the performative inclusions and exclusions within the images, videos and written text in order to examine the ways happiness was used on the websites to produce particular subjectivities as good, worthy and desirable within the elite school contexts. Semiotic indicators of happiness included, but were not limited to, smiling faces, physical proximity of the students, hugging, giggling, eye contact, harmony, soft and natural lighting, and words alluding to the school's and children's joy, excitement and contentment. Discursive indicators included references to social and economic comfort, inclusion, access to exclusive and privileged lifestyles, and references to positive psychology discourse which might imply that happiness is an end goal of attending the institution.

Happy schools are happy families

Images of happy children and teachers appear in every website studied. Generally found on banners both static and moving at the top of the homepage, smiling children welcome viewers to the site. These smiling faces work to set a tone for the cyber-visit, as do the well-manicured, uniformed students walking through serene grounds. Students smile toward the camera, offering a visual invitation into the school's online space. Happiness, as one of the most immediate messages being conveyed on the webpages, functions as a central ingredient to the production of the school as a good and desirable place to be. As Ahmed (2010) puts it, happiness is not just an effect of goodness, but also "participates in making things good" (p. 13).

Frequently, homepages and 'boarding school' pages on school websites allude to the notion of the school as a *happy family*.

> We care for our Boarders as if they were family members in a warm, supportive, safe, and nurturing community, and take the time to listen to each of their needs. [School I]

> Like any family, you have your ups and downs, however we seem to have had many more ups than downs. The range of friendships, the care of the students, the respect, and the Christian values that our children, all four of them, have received as a result of being enrolled at [School G] has helped them become the happy and successful people they are today. [Parent testimonial, School G]

The repetition of the notion of family on most school websites analysed emphasises a proclaimed commitment to family and its associated discursive ideals – loyalty, safety, nurturance and togetherness. Just as the family "promises happiness in return for loyalty" (Ahmed, 2008, p. 13), constructing the school within these terms equates the school brand with happy ways of being.

The school 'family' is also conspicuously heteronormative, with gender norms and sexualities closely policed over the course of students' stay at the school. The all-girl School A, for example, introduces socials with boys in Grade 9, the same grade when they become mentors for the younger girls in the form of junior sport captaincy. Such a structure constructs proximity between the responsibility to mingle with the opposite sex and the requirement to mentor younger girls in how to appropriately conduct oneself when in proximity to boys and masculine public space. The legitimacy of femininity and female sexualities rests on its manageability within highly contrived, heteronormative scenes of romantic mingling with boys, with no place in frames of recognition for queer subjectivities.

Older girls are often given the opportunity to socialise with boys of the same age under controlled circumstances, and younger girls are kept away from boys, sustaining a narrative of asexuality for younger children and heteronormative sexuality for older girls (Robinson, 2013).

Constructing the school as a family also anticipates a potential concern of future clients – that children who board will spend extended periods of time away from home. School websites anticipate and attempt to address these concerns by constructing school as a 'home away from home':

> Sending a child away to school is a significant decision for any family to make. At [School B] we appreciate the responsibility parents entrust in us, to nurture and guide their daughter through her formative years. Our goal is to provide a safe and happy 'home away from home'. [School B]

> The emphasis in boarding is on creating a home away from home atmosphere with extra touches such as flat screen TV, pool table, music and a large common area [School C]

By invoking the idea of school as a home, the school is constructed as a private space, a personal sanctuary for the students (Christensen et al., 2000; Sibley, 1995; Valentine, 2004). The home is a refuge and source of comfort, whose symbolism takes its meaning for its direct contrast to the world beyond (Sibley, 1995). The home is exclusive; a space which others generally enter only on invitation. In this way, the home can come to be a location that is highly policed and made to match the ideals of the owner. Unwanted people, and indeed unwanted ideas, can be excluded more easily in this private space than in public realms beyond. In this way, home can become a sanitised (Walkerdine, 1999), child-friendly space for anxious parents hoping to preserve the 'innocence' and 'safety' of their children.

This recurring 'happy family' motif implies that happiness comes from embracing family ideals and norms, through which a shared sense of identity and belonging is derived. Normative family discourses also have a disciplinary effect, constructing conformity as a means to personal and shared happiness:

> We know that if a girl feels 'liked' and happy within herself, she is more likely to be able to concentrate on her school work. [School I]

> …boarder students need to have the ability to communicate positively with the school community and remain happy to learn! [School G]

Happiness and camaraderie in conformity is confirmed in images as well as written text, such as on the School J site, where gender conformity is reinforced. On one image, girls hold hands whilst skipping along in lines through the green manicured grounds, with trees and grass framing the image. Another image shows the girls covered in mud and hugging whilst smiling at the camera. They are enjoying nature together. We have highlighted elsewhere that the emphasis elite school promotions put on girls' connectedness to nature uses nature as a trope through which femininity is constructed" in order to sell the schools as producing "'proper' and 'respectable' upper-middle-class 'ladies'" (Wardman, et al, 2013, p. 9). This constructs nature, and attendance at the school, as inherently good for girls.. It attests to the schools' production of 'well-rounded' *girls* who will gain mastery over potentially unruly bodies and minds through performatives of naturally feminine ideals.

Furthermore, the intertwined arms and smiling faces in these images threads the girls together and removes distance between them – a visual strategy implying closeness and connectedness. Images of happiness and physical interconnectedness confirm a sense of family, closeness and indeed a shared destiny, constituting natural femininity as a happy, hence inherently good, performative within the exclusive sanctuary of the school grounds. Natural girls are good girls, whose posture, dress, behavior and dispositions are consistently depicted as appropriate for their gender and social status as elite schooling subjects.

The heteronormativity within the 'boarding school' pages of the websites also produces the school grounds as places where some people can walk freely, and others – queer girls, at-risk students, disabled students, rebellious students – are conspicuously absent. Here, it is clear that there exist within the spaces of these schools what Alexander and Knowles (2005) call "territorial notions of space" (2005, p. 6), wherein spaces can be owned and possessed by particular groups of people, and in which people can appear to belong or otherwise to specific spaces. As feminist geographers have recently argued, moral geographies or specific kinds of emotional and empathetic investments and morally infused identities are inextricably tied to specific spaces and places (Creswell, 1996; Little, 2007; Pini, Mayes & Boyer, 2013).This is particularly evident in the 'private' and 'homely' space of the private school, wherein the school has ultimate control in regulating the makeup of the student body. In these spaces, subjectivities and conduct aligned to the social class, gender and heterosexual order of the school are privileged, and at-risk, disabled, queer, poor and working-class subjectivities are conspicuously excluded.

Images of homogenous and happy gender normative bodies within the schools thus orient prospective parents and students toward notions of individual and collective happiness and harmony. Boarders who embrace these norms are situated as both good and happy, amongst their peers and the school community more broadly. As Ahmed notes, "groups cohere around a shared orientation towards some things as being good, treating some things and not others as the cause of happiness" (2008, p. 11). Inclusion and happiness of the boarding student in these images is contingent on managing one's subjecthood in relation to the collective norms reiterated within the elite schooling context. Norms of gender and sexuality in these elite school settings bear the tacit promise of happiness; "if you do this, then happiness is what follows" (Ahmed, 2008a).

Winning as a happy enterprise

Images of victorious students on sporting fields are emblazoned upon 10 of the 12 websites examined, with children depicted high-fiving, holding up trophies, and jumping in the air after victories. School C, for example, contains an embedded video showing boys in the foreground holding up a football trophy, which is superimposed over an image of boys high-fiving immediately after the victory. The dominance of boys within the images of sporting victory produces sporting achievement as a sign of masculine success. Predominantly these victories are related to rugby, the 'good' Anglo-Celtic tradition of all-boys' elite schools in Australia (Light & Kirk, 2000), with rowing also and cricket also featured. What is particularly interesting about the rugby successes is the cultural meaning associated with rugby. To win at the 'elite school sport' of rugby is to be among the upper echelon of social class elites. Furthermore, rugby's hyper-physicality offers the ideal semiotic opportunity to promote masculinity, reproducing "a traditional, hegemonic form of masculinity" (Light & Kirk, 2000, p. 163) reliant on "the production of physical force [as] a prerequisite for success" (Light & Kirk, 2001, p. 85). The depiction of smiling faces celebrating rugby victories in the all-boys' and co-educational elite school websites, therefore, reinforces both a commitment to elitism and a particularly physical form of dominant masculinity, while also demarcating it as 'happy' vis-à-vis the inherent 'goodness' of success.

Consumers of these images of happy 'winning' students are invited to anticipate the sporting event in a certain way: to view the event expecting happiness to come from winning, not from playing. Winning, we suggest, is a far more exclusionary act than playing. Yet in these

images, winning is foregrounded as the more socially desirable outcome than playing. This is underscored in a montage on the School F website which features football team huddled together with celebratory smiles, as if they had just scored a goal or won a game. Winning and happiness have a relational impact in these images. The children are happy because they are *winners* not because they are players.

Other websites similarly depict fit, well-toned bodies executing tennis shots or lunging out of the water mid-stroke. These images, too, represent elite sporting bodies—as exemplified by the refined movements and toned bodies of school boys and girls. However, these bodies are not smiling, but rather are depicted in action shots (Caldwell, 2005) in which the dominant expression is *focus*. In one all-girls' school website, for example, a girl riding mid-hurdle on horseback is shown with an intensely focussed face, eyes on the landing point and brow furrowed with determination. Rather than depicting happiness as *attained*, we suggest that these images of focus imply happiness as *ahead*. The emphasis, again, is on joy in winning, not playing: *when we win we can smile*.

Winning is a concept defined by its proximity to the top of social hierarchies (Light & Kirk, 2000). It is a concept entwined with neoliberalist notions of competitivism, winners-vs-losers, and outdoing others. While football may have the potential to generate 'happy diversity' through the provision of "a level playing field" (Ahmed, 2008a, p.123) based on an aspiration and talent; elite school websites emphasise hyper-masculinity and winning as exclusionary middle class ideals. Winning as an elite accomplishment sits in stark contrast to social democratic notions of collaboration and collectivism, and happiness associated with winning is framed as proximate to power. To have access to the cultural, social and economic capital of elite schooling enables and guarantees sporting wins, through which happiness is conferred to students. Whether in education or in sport, to be powerful and successful, hence superior, is to be happy.

This message continues elsewhere on the School F website, where a circuit montage of 9 images on the homepage – 4 containing smiling students – have the accompanying headings 'Dare to achieve', 'Lead', 'Excel', and 'Grow'. Again, occupying a place at the pinnacle of social hierarchies is reinforced as furnishing the conditions for happiness. These children who have 'excelled' are smiling: they are happy elites. The image equates attendance at the school with the acquisition of winning, elite aptitudes that will orient students towards an ostensibly

happy life. Happiness connotes winning, leading and excelling as desirable attributes, consistent with neoliberalist competitivist ideals and economic notions of success.

While the images of winners and leaders are produced as ideal, they are also explicitly tied to notions that collective happiness and worth are secured by participation in, and success in, sport. Above one image of a sporting success on the School F website is a caption:

> The great sense of team-spirit and unity that exists at the college can be seen at the many sporting events when the entire college community comes out to support the [School F] boys [School F]

The children who have met the school's ideal of being 'winners' are rewarded through collective adulation. Their bodies are watched and lauded under the banner of 'support'. The sport is placed below the boys, so that the community comes to watch the home players, not the game itself; they are there to "support the … boys". Such a framing strategy, in which winners are the foremost image, constitutes the school as a place where sporting winners are placed first. Winning is the goal through which individual and collective happiness is attained.

We are reminded of Ahmed's contention that (2008b), "happiness is an orientation" (p. 10) insomuch as certain activities or objects are understood as good *because* they are happy. That is to say, by constructing winning as a happy enterprise, these schools frame winning as something that is individually and socially desirable. What are left outside of these images are notions of play, creativity, camaraderie and physical wellbeing. Without inclusion of these notions within the images, a narrow and individualistic sporting narrative emerges: *our school produces winners, so join our school and become a winner*.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have argued that elite school websites promote happiness as both a commodity and an entitlement that can be acquired by attendance at a particular school. As one of the first points of contact between parents and schools, one of the primary functions of school websites is to explain to prospective clients what they can expect to get for their money (Drew, 2013). It is thus important to read these websites as a form of marketing within the highly competitive schooling sectors in Australia. A key promise made by schools via this form of marketing is happiness. Over and again, the school websites we examined reiterate

that happiness comes about as a result of attending the school, as is exemplified in this quote from the Principal's page on the School F website:

> We are here to help boys, entrusted to us by their parents, to find genuine fulfilment, happiness and security in their lives. Our support and encouragement goes far beyond the time students leave us at graduation. As a college community we take great joy and strength from our ongoing relationship with our Old Boys and their families. To be part of the Joeys family is truly a gift for life [School F]

This implies that students can attain the social class status and cultural capital that the school has accrued over time (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009) and carry it with them throughout their lives. Attending such a school is not simply a matter of acquiring an education, but it also involves the acquisition of lifelong identities, social status and networks. In such narratives, attendance at the school involves purchasing a way of life associated with happiness accrued through alignment to the gendered, sexed and social class norms preferred, promoted and preserved through school participation. Consumption of an elite education, in this sense, is not just to purchase a product, but to "assemble a way of life" (Rose, 1999/1990, p. 230) which both endorses and aspires towards images of privilege which, it is implied, will ultimately lead to happiness for the children and their parents.

We have also highlighted the ways in which discursive proximity to notions of happiness can frame exclusionary imaginaries as individually and socially desirable. The happiness of the gendered bodies in the websites constructs gender norms as happy norms. By being a normatively gendered body, happiness could follow. As Ahmed (2008b) puts it, "happiness means … living a certain kind of life" (p. 12), or being a certain kind of person. It is thus our contention that the use of happiness in these texts is a rhetorical device that compels viewers to consider the exclusionary norms of the schools as being good and desirable, specifically because they can lead to personal happiness.

We concur with Ahmed's contention that happiness should be read as a discursive emotion, with texts informing viewers about ways of being that might lead to happiness even before those ways of being are materially encountered. According to Ahmed (2008b):

> the judgement that certain objects are 'happy' is already made, before they are even encountered. Certain objects are attributed as the conditions for happiness so that we arrive 'at' them with an expectation of how we will be affected by them … happiness is an expectation of what follows (p. 11)

The school promotional website, then, "inevitably 'produces' what it claims merely to represent" (Butler, 1990, p. 5)—through representation, the website constructs normatively

gendered, heterosexual, winning, and elite subjectivities *as happy – and therefore good and desirable – subjectivities*. The happiness of being/becoming an elite social subject, these websites imply, is what students will get for being a certain kind of student, and what parents can expect in exchange for their school fees. As Ahmed (2008b) states, happiness "is promised through proximity to certain objects" (p. 11). It "directs us to certain objects, as if they are the necessary ingredients for a good life" (p. 11). Yet these happiness narratives are implicated in demarcating the space of the elite private school as exclusionary – as schools that are *for* people who aspire to educational happiness in its commodified form, and *not for* others who fall outside its frames of reference. Analysis of these websites, we suggest, warrants a re-thinking of the notion of happiness. We read these texts as producing happiness narratives through which parents and students are invited to participate in forms of education associated with achievement, success, winning and social status. We also read them as producing exclusionary ideals and significant limitations with respect to what is able to constitute happiness and happy subjectivities within these schools

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