Establishing the Facets of Ideal Female Selfhood: Neoliberal Rationality, Popular Culture, and US Reality Television

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Abstract

In this thesis I explore how certain narratives of (female) selfhood have been idealised and taken precedence in contemporary Western popular cultural texts. I argue that specific facets of neoliberal rationality have been central to the ways in which this ideal female self has been valorised and presented as a goal to work towards. For my analyses, I use three case studies from North American reality television, which present, manage, and sell this 'self' in different ways. I write extensively on the trajectories of both neoliberalism and selfhood in Western thought, and then in turn how notions of the specifically female self have been reflected in popular culture, focusing on televisual representations in particular. I then use three American reality television shows to elucidate my arguments. These examples, whilst produced in the North American context, have an international reach and will serve as extreme yet apposite case studies for elucidating what I propose as the main components of ideal female selfhood in neoliberal culture: the notion of the self as brand; the spirit of meritocratic competition; and the performance of self-work. Furthermore, I bridge the gap between scholarship of the supposed neoliberalisation of reality TV *and* audience engagements. To do so, I include both online and offline ethnographic research to explore how some viewers have engaged with the specific romanticisation of neoliberal female selfhood. In this way, I have been able to demonstrate the dissonance between the reality television texts as neoliberal and the audiences' engagements with such sentiments. The contours of the specific female neoliberal self in popular culture, along with both textual analyses and empirical research of reality TV texts, make this thesis an important contribution to the literature within this field.

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Author's declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

INTRODUCTION

Setting the Stage

In March 2016, reports began to emerge of an AI[1] chatbot, Tay, who was created by Microsoft and Bing teams to research and understand ways in which AIs might learn to communicate. Tay was set up on the social media platform Twitter to become "smarter" and more well-rounded by chatting to other users (or laypersons) on the platform. Microsoft representatives argued: "The more you chat with Tay the smarter she gets" (quoted in Hunt, 2016). Yet, not long after her Twitter debut, Tay began to express both racist and misogynist sentiments – apparently assimilating and regurgitating the myriad exchanges she had had on Twitter.[2] AI researcher Joanna Bryson later remarked: "People expected AI to be unbiased; that's just wrong. If the underlying data reflects stereotypes, or if you train AI from human culture, you will find these things" (quoted in Buranyi, 2017). In this sense, the AI bot simply reflected the cultural sentiments (or data) that had been presented to her, eventually embodying and feeding into such notions herself.

During the same time as Tay was creating controversy online, I was starting to develop ideas around my doctoral research on selfhood and the socio-cultural expressions of neoliberalism.[3] Indeed, I thought that the reports on Tay and how she had quickly normalised prevalent discourses of xenophobia and sexism, posed interesting questions about both culture and the self. Despite Tay obviously being artificial, I began to think of the ways in which contemporary ideologies (or 'mental frameworks' [Hall, 1986]), might influence how we conceive of and construct both cultural artefacts (or technological, such as Tay) and the very notions of our selves. In simplified terms, are we, as human selves, influenced by the cultural present like this simulated version? I found this question

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[1] AI (Artificial intelligence) is various forms of simulations of human-like intelligence performed by machines, e.g. computers. Such intelligence usually pertains to performing certain human-like tasks, or learning from experience, here, learning from conversations online.

[2] A mere sixteen hours after Tay's release, Microsoft began deleting the most offensive tweets, but eventually turned the chatbot off due to the controversy it sparked. However, Microsoft blamed online 'trolls' targeting Tay with inflammatory language for her demise.

[3] I had arrived at this topic after finishing my master's thesis on female friendship on television in the context of neoliberalism, focusing on *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) and *Girls* (2012-2017). During this research I became more intrigued about the very notion of selfhood and self-formation that the women on screen were performing and/or playing with, and the ways that such ideals could potentially be both restricting and emancipatory.

especially pertinent in a cultural context in which neoliberal sentiments and individualism are, in many ways, ubiquitous. Arguably, during (what one might call) the popularisation of neoliberal and neoconservative thought in the 1990s, Anthony Giddens (1991) proposed that ideas of ontology were now based on introspection, choice, and reflexivity, which, I would argue, has only intensified following the financial crisis in 2008. This financial crash, partly brought about by risky mortgage loans in the US and financial deregulations, is an important starting point for this thesis. Media and pop cultural artefacts have played a major part in framing these crash narratives, and the subsequent austerity. Often favouring discourses of hope in the form of promises of meritocracy, self-optimisation, and DIY (do-it-yourself) entrepreneurialism.[4] Arguably, this has resulted in a culturally ramping-up of neoliberal sentiments, creating an ever-larger group of social 'others'. It is this post-crash, 2010s, era that is the focal-point for the discussions here, and the popular culture case studies chosen – *The Real Housewives of New York City* (2008-present), *America's Next Top Model* (2003-present), and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* (2007-present) – encapsulate this focus. So, if the self is indeed contingent upon socio-cultural frameworks, I wanted to explore the ways that the current (post-crash) neoliberal emphasis on 'navel-gazing' might affect the ways in which the self is recognised, assimilated, and/or regurgitated in Western popular culture. As such, this thesis' central premise is to present insights into the contemporary (popular) cultural imaginary and the mainstream narratives at hand for conceptualising our 'selves'. Indeed, this research question became the starting point for the explorations in my research.

Motivations for Research and Literature Overview

I initially approached my topic from a macro perspective, attempting to delineate the cultural context in which we now operate in the global West. I concur with Hall, who asserts that "what we know of society depends on how things are represented to us and that knowledge in turn informs what we do and what policies we are prepared to accept" (1986, p. 9). I follow a number of scholars who define neoliberalism as one of the main ideological frameworks that have come to define contemporary culture (see discussion in

[4] Bruce and Druick (2017), Ouellette (2017), Negra and Tasker (2014) provide some insightful examples.

Chapter One). Therefore, I am interested in utilising this exceedingly thorny and contested term not to describe specific political nor economic practices (even though these exist), but rather how neoliberal *ideas* have creeped into the cultural imaginary, subsequently favouring certain narratives over others. In this sense, although, 'neoliberalism' has become a controversial term, I argue that by using it to describe cultural ideologies, it can offer both nuanced and productive perspectives. As such, I avoid the frequent application of neoliberalism to describe *all* ills in late modern societies. I draw on scholars such as Wendy Brown, Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, Alison Hearn, Johanna Oksala, Peter Miller and Nikolas Rose; as well as Michel Foucault, who have been interested in this cultural and social neoliberalisation. Also, by way of limiting the scope of the study, I have chosen to focus on the North American cultural context in particular, the reasons for which I will explain later in this Introduction.

I approach the self from a postmodern and social constructionist perspective (following, to various extents, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Erving Goffman, Fredric Jameson, George Herbert Mead, and Aihwa Ong), in which I view the self as contingent upon the language, imagery, and socio-cultural ideas that we exist and perform within. This again underscores the importance of situated notions of selfhood within cultural contexts. Furthermore, in the overlap of neoliberal discourse and American popular culture, the self appears to have become somewhat of a focal point. The self frequently appears as the battleground on which various questions of what it means to exist successfully and happily in the world are grappled with. I suggest that regardless of how self-formation is understood in contemporary (academic) thought, recent cultural discourses appear to enforce a kind of "compulsory individuality," following Cronin (2000) who proposes that we have to choose one way of presenting our 'selves.' In other words, you *have to* choose a self and you are especially encouraged to choose a self that, for various reasons, has become romanticised and valued. Subsequently, I argue, the *idea* of the self and how it is understood in current narratives (here, popular culture) becomes an exceedingly important object to investigate, especially when such narratives become entwined with neoliberal sentiments.

Even though I approach the self as a social and cultural construct, much of the texts emerging within neoliberal culture present this self differently. Indeed, with this backdrop, the self is often represented as innate and essentialised (notions that have a long historical trajectory, as I will discuss), therefore creating ideas of some selves being more 'true' and 'authentic' than others. Such a conceptualisation of selfhood also makes

it malleable, turning selfhood into something which one can improve, enhance, and work upon. Ultimately, this suggests that simply existing is not enough for possessing a valid and valorised self, but rather, following neoliberal logics, creates a need to align the self to a variety of market forces.

Whilst arguably not always stated explicitly, a number of scholars have investigated the influences of neoliberal sentiments on the notion of selfhood (see especially, Bauman, 1998; Foucault, 2008; Miller and Rose, 1990; Read, 2009; Rose, 1992, [1989] 1999), and while I follow these critics, I am also narrowing my focus, which, I argue, helps to demonstrate specific facets of the influence of neoliberal thinking on the cultural notions of the self in distinct ways. Indeed, the self has historically been left ungendered and 'neutral' in much academic scholarship. In this sense, the supposedly universal idea of the self is built on "an image of the male subject whose 'universality' is based on its suppressed other" (Rose, 1996. p. 6, see also de Beauvoir, [1953] 1988; Probyn, 1993, for instance). Nevertheless, although many feminist scholars have investigated female subjectivity,[5] during my research I struggled to find overviews of research on the *female* self in thought specifically. This, along with attempts to limit the scope of my research, contributed to my decision to focus on the *woman* self. In Chapter Two, I have consequently chosen to provide an (albeit summarised) historical trajectory of the female self in feminist thought as a way to frame my discussion, but also to offer the historical outline I was looking for in my own research. Furthermore, in limiting my scope to the female self, the thesis also avoids assuming a universal self, in arguing that selfhood is always embodied and situated, yet still performative (Butler, 1990).[6]

Additionally, the feminal subject is argued to be uniquely and especially targeted by neoliberal sentiments (see Budgeon, 2011a, 2011b; Gill and Scharff, 2011; McRobbie, 2009; Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008; Scharff, 2016). I do concur with these feminist scholars, in their argument that women's (relatively) recent entrance to the workforce and subsequent individualisation, have turned them into "privileged subjects of social change" (McRobbie, 2009, p. 15, see also Gill and Scharff, 2011). Women have also a traditional association with consumption, marking them now as both ideal consumers and workers with money to spend (Davies, 2005). Similarly, within the neoliberal narrative,

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[5] Such as Butler, (1990; [1993] 2001; 2004), de Beauvoir [1953] (1988), Flax (1987), Haraway [1985] (2001), Hekman (1990; 2014), McRobbie (1994), Shildrick (1997).

[6] I do this not because I believe in the gender binary, but because gender is still central to how consumers and audiences are addressed in popular culture.

emphasis is placed on self-transformation and betterment, which equally chimes with patriarchal (and retrograde) beauty (and, now, also self-care) norms, in which women are encouraged to make-over and in various ways improve their bodies *and* very selves – more so than men. Women are subsequently uniquely positioned, as they (or we) have to relate to both neoliberal rationality and patriarchal influences. Following this, even the workforce (pervaded as it is by precarity and insecurity), has become feminised, requiring assumed 'feminine' skills of flexibility, self-responsibility, and emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) as I will discuss in Chapter Five. In this sense, the female self in many popular cultural texts – traditionally and stereotypically: private, pliable, performative, and personal – presents a model that has largely become a universal ideal for success in neoliberal culture. It is not by happenstance that the private lives of women, their supposedly most intimate selves, have created some of the most saleable and profitable commodities and brands in recent years. Therefore, reality television with its emphasis on the 'real' and intimate, along with the now comingled use of social media, become especially important for the analyses here. I will discuss some of these 'success stories' in this thesis, in particular; Bethenny Frankel in Chapter Three, Tyra Banks in Chapter Four, and Kim Kardashian (and her sisters) in Chapter Five. I argue that the analysis of how such narratives are framed offer unique insight into the portrayals of the female self.

It is here crucial to note that the ideal female self that I discuss, which in the case studies is both portrayed and addressed, is a self which has a marked classed and privileged position and outlook. She is primarily middle- and upper class and white, and therefore her 'choices' can only be made if she has the right social and cultural capital to *choose* and be mobile. Nevertheless, this ideal female subject, as I will argue, is simultaneously characterised as available to all who *try hard*, presenting the neoliberal cultural context as both meritocratic and fair. The texts are, in this sense, guilty of the "cruel optimism" that Berlant (2011) describes as the present, that offers aspirations and notions of success that, despite failures (here presented as purely personal), keep subjects optimistic. The optimism is cruel, then, as what you "desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (ibid., p. 1). In my fourth chapter, I will explore the frequent erasure of specific positionalities and inequalities (whether relating to gender, race, or sexuality) in the case studies. Instead, the women are urged to rely on their personal performances and fully submitting to market interests (trusting Adam Smith's so-called 'invisible hand').

However, most of the research on women and neoliberalism – by such scholars as those mentioned above (along with Hearn, 2008a, 2008b; Negra, 2009; Rottenberg, 2018;

Sender, 2012; and Winch, 2013) – have focused more specifically on gender performances of femininity, and the body as a site for improvement, or indeed, on women as ideal neoliberal subjects. Although I do follow these scholars, my interests lie firmly with the very notion of female selfhood that has emerged in recent popular cultural texts. Yet, as I will argue, questions of femininity do of course play an important role in these conceptualisations. As such, I do agree with Rosalind Gill in her call for research that explores the ways in which "culture relates to subjectivity, identity or lived embodied experiences of selfhood" (2008, p. 433), an area that in recent years should be explored further than it currently has. Of course, since 2008, Gill and Scharff (2011) have published their edition *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity,* a collection of original essays with a rather diverse range of topics dealing with what Gill and Scharff term 'New Femininities.'[7] In their introduction they explain their wish to put the 'mentality' back into Foucault's concept of governmentality,[8] and therefore demonstrate how "governing practices quite literally get inside us to materialize or constitute our subjectivities" (2011, p. 8). Their book centres on female agency and sexual subjectivity in particular and their inclusion of non-Western perspectives is refreshing. Hence, their research is a great starting point for further study on the interconnections between subjectivity and culture and my thesis, with its particular focus on the representations of pervasive (neoliberal) notions of female selfhood in popular culture, will contribute to the scholarship within this important field.

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In my search for apropos case studies for investigating female selfhood in popular culture, I decided upon reality television. Not only is the television as a medium (whether streamed online, video-on-demand, or watched on an actual TV set), one of the central ways in which we engage with popular culture, but reality television in particular appears to be entwined with public discourse. As Kavka notes, its "stubborn ability to renew and extend itself indicates just how well integrated [reality TV] has become into contemporary social structures" (2012, p. 4). During my time at university and away from home, I began watching American reality television series to a much greater extent as I

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[7] Another recent edited collection dealing with femininity under neoliberalism, is Elias, Gill, and Scharff's *Aesthetic Labour*, focusing on beauty practices (2017).
[8] See the subsection on Governmentality in Chapter One.

had free reign to watch whatever I liked. In my teenage years, reality television (especially *America's Next Top Model*, which I enjoyed) was only something I was able to 'dip into' as television was a pastime my family and I did together (and they did not care for the genre). In the last decade I have watched many such shows, and in trying to understand my fervour for the genre, I believe that its frequent accommodation for, and emphasis on, 'real' (as in existent) women's lives and relationships marks it as rather extraordinary alongside other popular cultural texts. In many of these shows, regardless of their critical acclaim (or lack thereof), women are centre stage and therefore, how they are framed, edited, and depicted tells us a lot of how the female self is understood and idealised in popular culture.

Additionally, I decided upon the US context specifically as I argue that American popular culture offers extreme examples of the neoliberal female self that help to elucidate my arguments well. Firstly, US culture has arguably embraced neoliberal market fundamentalism more extensively than other Western nations, particularly in the insistence on individual freedom, governmental rollback, and privatisation. Secondly, North American cultural texts, especially television and Hollywood films, have historically had a global reach, and thus a more international audience, than, say, much of European television.[9] Indeed, many of the reality television formats have also created localised instalments (such as *The Real Housewives* and *Top Model* franchises discussed in Chapters Three and Four). The international reach of US televisual programmes and formats means that I, as a Swedish national living in the UK since 2009, have been made familiar and have consumed American popular culture for the main part of my life. The globalisation of popular culture (often Americanisation) in general have only been intensified in the last decade with the arrival of Web 2.0, online streaming services, and video-on-demand. Never before has it been so easy to consume international content. Arguably, this makes my personal positionality less relevant for the discussion in this thesis, especially as the texts in question present the female self in similar ways. Nevertheless, I will not dismiss my cultural and geographical position entirely but suggest that it might offer new angles and perspectives to the subject matter. I have also noted the similarity in audiences' 'decoding' (Hall, [1973] 1993) of the texts in the small-scale ethnographic study with both UK and Swedish viewers in Chapter Four, as well as the

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[9] Although this is changing with many streaming services, especially Netflix, now offering local content productions to cater for larger audiences.

online (mainly) US audiences discussed in Chapters Three and Five. Therefore, my decision to investigate American reality television is based on the genre's way of taking its subject matters to the extreme, as well as my own pleasure in consuming its specifically female-centred entertainment. My choices for selecting these specific reality television programmes reflect both the extreme and excessively feminised nature of much reality TV, but all three case studies demonstrate important aspects of the ideal female self. As such, I will outline their importance for my arguments in closer detail in the reality programmes' individual chapters.

Furthermore, after reading Couldry (2008; see also McCarthy, 2007), I became intrigued by the idea of reality television as a kind of 'theatre of neoliberalism'. Indeed, Couldry regards the genre as an enactment of neoliberal working conditions and citizenship, in which individuals, both in front and behind the camera, have to adapt to new demands, such as self-"responsibilisation" (Rose, 1992). Arguably, North American reality TV has particularly catered for the neoliberal capitalist logics that encourage competition, individualism, consumption, and commodification. This is partly because the reality television industry has managed to survive the recession by creating low-budget productions and employing cheap labour through unpaid internships, zero-hour contracts, and difficulties for workers to unionise (both on screen and behind the scenes). Similarly, as I will discuss in the case studies, the genre has been successful in employing any possible 'tricks' – product placements, 'authentic' branding, competition, displays of emotional excess, et cetera – in order to assure financial profit. This, in turn, has also contributed to the success of many reality television shows, and their cast, as exemplified by *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, discussed in Chapter Five. The participants of reality programming are often "[l]ured by the seductive promise of temporary celebrity" and subsequently "offer themselves up to television cameras for little remuneration, work to model attention-getting forms of subjectivity for viewers and, with any luck, produce public personae that might be traded for cash down the line" (Hearn, 2016, p. 3). Simultaneously the stars on television are still, by their apparent choice of appearing on television, presented as self-exploiting, which, arguably, is the point. Of course, some reality television series with higher budgets (e.g. The Real Housewives franchise) pay a significant amount to their cast members. Yet, this does not change the reasoning for why most individuals arguably choose to partake in the shows – the aspiration and promise of financial and social capital.

However, it is famously difficult to get an insight into the production of reality TV mainly due to workers' strict confidentiality and non-disclosure contracts, which means that the possibility for the industry to change its treatment of workers looks bleak, or at least uncertain. This has also meant that I, as a researcher, can only make suggestions regarding production and editing by way of textual analysis (without interviewing producers for instance).[10] Due to these contexts of production, Jon Dovey (2000) suggests that "factual TV is part of an industrial base that increasingly has come to resemble a microcosm of global neo-liberalism" (p. 12). Many scholars have had similar arguments, stressing the close relationship between reality television and neoliberal rationalities: for instance, McCarthy (2007) and Couldry, as mentioned, both regard reality programming as a theatre in which neoliberal ideas are acted out. Ouellette (2009, 2012; with Murray, 2009; and with Hay, 2008a, 2008b), explores how neoliberal governmentality is instilled through reality television by the policing of individuals' actions. Finally, Weber (2009) and Sender (2012) investigate the makeover shows' incorporation of neoliberal logics and discourse in the creation of 'improved' individuals.[11] Following these scholars on reality television, I argue that this 'theatre of neoliberalism', along with the genre's frequent preference for women's narratives, also creates specific requirements (or scripts) that need to be followed if the women on screen are to succeed in forming and establishing valorised and legible versions of selfhood. Indeed, this is the kind of self I will tease out in the chapters that follow.

Reality television has a large and interdisciplinary body of academic literature.[12] In this sense, there are a myriad of ways to understand the genre and, as such, before continuing to describe this thesis further I will outline my approach and position on reality programming. In this thesis, reality television will be used, firstly, to mean "pre-planned but mostly unscripted programming with non-professional actors in non-fictional scenarios" (Deery, 2015, p. 3). Further, I wholeheartedly agree with Mittel (2004) in his

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[10] For excellent studies on media producers and production, see Grindstaff's (2002) study on reality television workers and guests, as well as Hill's (2019) recent *Media Experiences.*

[11] I have used several other reality television scholars who explore neoliberalism (and also, late capitalist sentiments) see, in alphabetical order, Bjelskou (2015) who looks at the housewife as 'branded', Couldry and Littler (2011) who investigate *The Apprentice*, Deery (2004) who argues that the genre is a form of 'advertainment', Dubrofsky (2011) who analyses reality TV as surveillance of women, Hassinoff (2008) who focuses on race, Hearn (2010; 2016) on *The Hills* and *The Real Housewives* respectively, and Ringrose and Walkerdine (2008) on the makeover.

[12] Apart from the above-named scholars, important mentions include: Andrejevic (2004), Bignell (2005), Biressi and Nunn (2005), Dovey (2000, 2008), Hill (2005), Holmes and Jermyn (2004), Kavka (2012), Mittel (2004), and Ouellette (2016).

argument that reality television is heterogenous and no formats are exactly the same. This is also why I will outline each subgenre (docu-soap, competition/talent show) when I introduce the relevant case studies. Secondly, I also see reality television "as an unabashedly commercial genre united less by aesthetic rules or certainties than by the fusion of popular entertainment with a self-conscious claim to the discourse of the real" (Murray and Ouellette, 2009, p. 3). The genre is in a constant mutable and chameleon-like state, adapting to the forces of the market and the appetites of audiences. Due to the genres' success (and flourishing post-financial crash), Jérôme Bourdon states that reality television "may become one of the most thoroughly researched television genres after news and drama" (2008, p. 66), and the way in which it is explored in academia stretches from contempt and anxiety to admiration, appreciation, and/or ambivalence.[13]

Jon Dovey (2000, p. 83) suggests that there are three main academic positions to the understanding of reality television:

> 1) Contemporary popular media is the product of a market-led political economy and therefore culturally suspect (the trash TV position).
> 2) [It] has strengthened the mission of public service by fostering interactive participation in social space releasing everyday voices into the public sphere and challenging established paternalisms (reality TV as empowerment).
> 3) Reality TV is the ultimate example of simulacrum in which the insistence upon realism is in direct proportion to the disappearance and irrelevance of any referential value (Reality TV as nightmare).

[13] Despite this large academic fascination with reality television, from personal experience (attending various conferences and symposia), reality television research is frequently met with scepticism (even by media scholars). A tendency that marks reality television as a 'guilty pleasure' for not only viewers, but also scholars who choose to study it, which in itself is worthy of analysis.

Arguably, the first position seems most common in the explorations of neoliberal ideology and reality television, perhaps for obvious reasons.[14] As an extension of the 'pleasure wars' characterising so much of television studies (as I will discuss in Chapter Two), the debate about the 'effects' of reality television (and whether these are inherently negative vs. positive, or contradictory) are often the focus of current scholarship. Indeed, while this type of programming "provokes strong reactions from viewers and [generates] an extensive discursive field, both in mainstream media and viewer-generated content" (Deery, 2015, p. 6), the consequences of such audience engagement does not necessarily have dire or even predictable consequences. Indeed, I concur with Murray and Ouellette who write that "[f]ar from being the mind-numbing, deceitful and simplistic genre that some critics claim it to be, reality TV supplies a multi-layered viewing experience that hinges on culturally and politically complex notions of what is real, and what is not" (2004, p. 6). However, even though Murray and Ouellette (2004) make this point, they are arguably still part of the television scholarship that sees neoliberalism in culture as primarily harmful and potent (see also Ouellette and Hay, 2008a; Peck, 2008; Pozner, 2010; Winch, 2013). Yet, other television researchers, whilst not focusing solely on reality television, have contributed to the notion of multiple and reflexive TV audience engagements (see Ang, 1985, 1996; Brunsdon and Spigel, 2008; Gorton 2007, 2009a; Hill, 2005; Kavka, 2008; Sender, 2012; Skeggs and Wood, 2011, 2012; Wood, 2005, 2009). These researchers have subsequently problematised the notion of cultural neoliberalisation as a totalising force.

Following such scholars, I do not regard audiences' 'decoding' of cultural texts as linear, yet I would still argue that reality television as a part of a wider popular culture, has a normalising influence – particularly in terms of promoting a kind of discourse and idea of value/worth pertaining to selfhood. Especially as "[w]hat the public sees day after day, for many hundreds of hours each year, becomes natural, [arguably] a presentation of the way things are" (Cummins and Gordon, 2006, p. 27). By the same token, as "[i]dentity formation, or reformation, is a common theme across [reality TV]" (Deery, 2015, p. 102), this discourse, and value system, continually pertains to the notion of selfhood and self-construction. As a result, while we may not buy – literally or figuratively – what we see, these types of narratives, such as that of the neoliberal feminist subject, may become part

[14] Especially as those scholars who invoke 'neoliberalism' in their scholarship mainly do so to condemn it.

of the "powerful socializing agents that shape and reflect the world and our role within it" (Ryan and Macey, 2013, p. 4). In this sense, it becomes important to pinpoint what such narratives might tell us – whether we believe them or not.

By following the above-mentioned television audience scholars in their (varying) insistence on viewer resistance and reflexivity, I saw the need to incorporate discussions of audiences in this thesis. By doing so, I offer a more nuanced contribution to what Kavka recently calls the "neoliberal turn" in television scholarship in which most researcher writing on neoliberalism and reality television make "oft-repeated assumptions about the manipulability of viewers" (2019, p. 10). Arguably, the most referenced critique of such assumptions of 'effect' is Skeggs and Wood's (2012) work on British reality TV audiences, exploring social class and gender in particular.[15] They question the argued effectiveness of reality television shows as a form of governmental practice, as many such theses often view audiences as individualised and singular. Yet, while I agree with this sentiment, I would also argue that neoliberal governmentality is equally multifarious and contradictory as the audiences' engagements with ideologies. Subsequently, this makes the need to wholly dismiss governmentality as a theoretical tool for understanding influence (or attempts at influence) and representations unwarranted. Indeed, in this sense, I maintain that the two approaches are not antithetical. I put forward that neoliberal governmental practices, here distinctly socio-cultural and often commercially driven, elicit, in their own multiplicity, a host of audience reactions. So, with my close textual readings, I offer an outline of recurrent ideas of female selfhood within this so-called neoliberal context. Yet, in my small-scale ethnographic studies, on the other hand, I explore how ideas of such female selfhood is engaged with by some audiences. Specifically, as I will argue, such shows offer a mental framework in which notions of the self are 'worked through' and processed – demonstrating both versions of resistance and acceptance. Yet, ultimately, regardless of this 'decoding' process, the beliefs presented, and judgements made, are still conceptualised in a cultural context which favours neoliberal narratives – and thus, certain choices. In my research, then, I am bridging the gap between scholarship of the neoliberalisation of reality TV *and* subsequent audience engagements. I am offering a specific outline of what I regard as the

[15] Skeggs and Wood (2012) also make important arguments about how social class often determine audience reaction, which is especially clear in the UK context where class is still so fundamental to how society runs and is understood. Of course, class is addressed in the US context as well, but it is arguably not as distinctly present and inherited, as social climbing (whilst complex and rare) is a founding aspiration.

current popular cultural presentations of ideal female selfhood, and then in turn how viewers engage with this notion (online and across platforms), a specific approach and subject which (to my knowledge) has not been the sole focus of previous scholarship.

Methodologies and Organisation of Thesis

In the first two chapters, the theoretical underpinnings that guide this thesis are explored extensively. I argue that many scholars writing on such complex (and contested) terms as neoliberalism and selfhood frequently fail to provide specific and detailed reasonings for both their choices in doing so, but also, and more importantly, preclude clear definitions of how they approach such concepts. In this sense, I want to avoid turning such terms into mere academic simulacra (to borrow Baudrillard's [1988] term). The first two chapters are therefore dedicated to exploring the various theoretical positions on neoliberalism, the self, feminist notions of selfhood, and their contemporary televisual representations. The focus is exceedingly and purposely interdisciplinary in that it draws from relevant scholars – feminist, cultural, television, political, historical, sociological, psychological, and anthropological – that have sought to explain these concepts. I then utilise the first two theory-heavy chapters as a toolbox from which I draw from in the subsequent three case studies. In this thesis, rather than focusing solely on media or television literature, I argue that such interdisciplinary perspectives and theoretical frameworks advance a more holistic method to understanding popular culture.

In Chapter One, I set out to outline the historical trajectory of the historical usage of the term 'neoliberalism'; its conceptualisation, as a series of political and economic policies; as an economic philosophy; or as an influential ideological worldview. The "tangled mess" that characterises neoliberalism, is nonetheless, with all its lack of conformity taken into account, in need of clarification (Peck, 2010). This is what the first part of Chapter One sets out to do. The purpose of the opening chapter is to overcome such (common) shortcomings, and investigate the foundation of neoliberal ideas, and subsequently, how these notions have been filtered and taken shape in the cultural imaginary. One of the main ways that the neoliberal ideological influence can be felt and recognised is in the cultural notions of the self. The self, which in itself is one of the most philosophised and theorised concepts of thought, is equally complex to define.

The second half of the first chapter is dedicated to offering a specific historical trajectory of the notion of the self, a trajectory that has specifically contributed to making the entwinement of the self and some features of neoliberal sentiments possible. It is important to note that, in the thesis, I am not trying to find an answer to what the self *is* but rather, what *ideas* of selfhood are imagined as real or valid in the Western neoliberal context of popular culture. And in turn, what the possible consequences might be. I provide an overview of how notions of the modern self and the Enlightenment, to Romanticism, have all influenced (especially American) ideas of individual freedom, individualism, and the romantic (and theological) notions of the essential and 'core' self. I also note the connection between some of these ideas and the recent trends of turning inwards or away from societal contexts to find answers about yourself (e.g. through self-analysis, self-help, meditation, yoga retreats, or even to astrology, which has had a surge of interest in recent years). I will explore some of these phenomena further in Chapter Five.

These considerations then progress to a discussion of psychoanalytic ideas of the self, both the Freudian isolationist view of the self and then the Lacanian move to a more decentred self informed by language. Following this section, the chapter outlines the self as conceptualised by postmodern thinkers, presenting both poststructuralist and social constructionist perspectives which align more closely to my own theorems of selfhood. Indeed, I define the self as a mere socio-cultural abstraction with real material and ideological consequences. Indeed, whilst I see the self as largely constructed, the self in reality television for instance, could not be conceptualised as such. Instead it is made sense of through claims of authenticity, 'realness', and especially a kind of performance that present ideal notions of the self – here, the female self. A such, much popular cultural texts present the 'I' as somehow both innate yet malleable, creating a kind of inflation of ideal selfhood, with a market that creates, through its ever-evolving supply of new symbols and signs of success, a constant demand for a better and improved 'self.'

In Chapter Two of the thesis, the focal point is now the ideas of the *female* self. As mentioned, there are surprisingly few texts wholly dedicated to exploring the representation of the *female* self and how it has changed over time. Of course, female subjectivity has been conceptualised to various extents, but not always explicitly and very rarely exclusively, especially in relation to popular culture. Hence, I saw the need for prefacing the case studies in Chapters Three to Five with a historical overview of the self in feminist thought. Furthermore, I have been interested in the ways (or even, if) some of

these feminist conceptualisations have influenced how women have been portrayed in popular cultural texts. Due to the specific focus of this thesis, I subsequently explore the historic portrayals of the female self on television, as a way to introduce the presentations of the female self in reality television. I made the conscious choice to structure the chapter in this way, to more effectively explore and demonstrate the popular cultural ideas of womanhood alongside the contemporary ideas of the female self. As such, the contours of such a self can be partially established in both thought and praxis.

In this chapter I subscribe with some hesitations, to the wave narrative of various feminist movements, despite its theoretical shortcomings and arguable simplifications, for instance, by emphasising the importance of white, bourgeois feminists (see discussion in Chapter Two). Yet, I use the wave narrative to draw on feminist scholars who have also utilised this framework to understand feminist developments, trying to take nonconforming narratives into account. I discuss and use television examples contemporaneous with second wave feminism, postmodern feminism, third wave feminism, and finally, postfeminism and neoliberal feminism. I argue that this periodisation most accurately describes large and mainstream feminist developments. As the focus here is on the post-2008 period, the latter two feminisms are of particular importance to the discussions in the case studies. These feminist sentiments outline various versions of ideal female selfhood that is favoured in the reality television texts exemplified in the case studies. In postfeminist portrayals, as I will describe, there is a frequent congruence between women performing (often) *excessive femininity* and the supposed 'wants' of a husband and children, while striving towards financial independence and success. The stress is on choice, yet the choices made in these narratives often happen to conform to patriarchal, heteronormative 'female' norms. The oft-repeated slogan of 'having it all' (a career, husband, child) or what Negra (2009) terms "representability", the performance of at least pretending to have it all, is central. This discourse of 'having it all' is still present in later neoliberal feminist texts. In neoliberal feminism, the importance of feminism as a way of fighting gender and social inequality is acknowledged. Yet, the burden of these injustices is frequently placed on the shoulders of individual women who must take personal accountability for their lives, for instance, by *choosing* to "lean in" (Sandberg, 2013).[16] The ideal is still to have both a career and a

[16] In contemporary popular cultural texts, feminism is often acknowledged, rarely as a way to highlight the need for structural change, but rather, invoked to show characters' "wokeness" (i.e. literacy of social and racial injustice), or well-roundedness.

family but now these life divisions need to be carefully balanced (Rottenberg, 2013; 2018). Indeed, the ideal of 'having it all' is a mere possibility for a very small percentage of women (especially white, middle- and upper class), yet the route to achieving it is presented as universal. I will follow the notions and context of neoliberal feminism to establish what I see as the main contours of female selfhood as it has been idealised and formulated on reality television, reflecting, in large parts, the popular cultural imaginary.

What also comes out in the narratives of the popular cultural texts exemplified in this thesis, is a very particular notion of femininity. The 'ideal' female selves presented in these shows, especially the women of *The Real Housewives* and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians,* perform a kind of over-the-top femininity, or excessive femininity, that rests on being 'extra', yet still stays within the margins of acceptability. In other words, the women display a gender stereotypical (almost caricaturistic) presentation of womanhood, e.g. slim/fit frames, often large breasts or curves, interest in fashion and makeup, have plastic surgery, and work hard to look a certain way. This performative femininity is also saleable in that these successful women (more often than not) sell and market products that pertain to 'keeping up' with this display of excessive femininity, such as beauty products, waist trainers, slimming food or supplements, and various other commodities that could be categorised as women's 'self-help' solutions. I argue that this portrayal of the feminine not only helps the women who perform it to profit financially, but also allows them to do so in a more nonthreatening way. In Negra and Tasker's words, such narratives and performances might have started with attempts "to retain traditionalist femininity under conditions of financial exigency" (p. 7), but as these performances have proved exceedingly profitable, they become a model for success. Yet, while this femininity is presented as meritocratic, it is ultimately only available to those with enough capital and disposable income to afford it (see discussions in Chapter Three and Five in particular).

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In the three case studies of this thesis, Chapter Three, Four, and Five, I will approach reality television from a textual analytical perspective, focusing on discourse analysis and how the discourse is framed, both visually and affectively. I have subsequently watched hundreds of hours of reality television, while I simultaneously have taken notes of the various representations on screen as well as my own reactions and reflections. As

mentioned, I have paired these analyses with audience research in order to avoid a totalising as well as presumptive conclusion of the potential consequences of the representations of the ideal neoliberal female self. Additionally, I approach audience studies in a multi-methodical and multi-modal way, mirroring my methods in the textual analysis, suggesting and establishing some new methodologies in the process. I will briefly describe the specifics of these methodologies below and more thoroughly in the individual chapters.

In Chapter Three, I introduce the notion of the self/brand, partly following Hearn's notion of the "Branded Self" (2008a; 2008b). I investigate the notion of self/branding in reference to the docu-soap, *The Real Housewives of New York City*, which is set in the (arguable) nexus of commercialism and neoliberal ideas. I argue that the storylines presented are intertwined with discourses of entrepreneurialism, free market fundamentalism, and commodification. This discursive milieu creates an interesting environment in which female selfhood can only be understood and validated through its perceived authenticity and a self-representative brand. In this sense, the successful self can only exist if it is conceptualised through commercial and marketable ways, thus making selfhood and branding symbiotic, as I will demonstrate with the *Housewife* Bethenny Frankel and her Skinnygirl brand. In this context then, self-branding becomes a tool for *becoming*, and for creating a socio-culturally accepted 'self.'

Given that *The Real Housewives* franchise has specifically catered for and encouraged online audience engagement,[17] as I will delineate, I decided to investigate how viewers might be engaging with notions of the self/brand and Bethenny – whose success is frequently idealised on the show – *online*. In this sense, the television programme is a good example of what Will Brooker calls "television overflow," which characterises so much of the current television culture (2001, p. 569). This constantly changing way in which television operates in the online era thus becomes an important phenomenon to explore in current television research. Both chapters Three and Five of this thesis subsequently include ethnographic, or rather, following Kozinets (2010), 'netnographic'[18] studies in which I investigate how some of the series' viewers engage

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[17] The franchise and network were early with setting up blogs, Facebook pages, and social media accounts for its stars to encourage audiences to interact with both the cast members and the events on screen. This especially, makes the virtual world important for the audiences of the reality television shows.

[18] A term describing ethnography conducted on the internet. I offer an overview and definitions of such methodologies and terminologies in Chapter Five.

with the shows' ideation of female selfhood online. In Chapter Three I do this by concluding the textual analysis with an investigation of a specific online discussion forum and in Chapter Five I interweave the analysis of audience engagement on social media throughout the text and textual analysis (and paratext). If we were to assume (following many other reality TV scholars of the above-mentioned 'neoliberal turn'), that shows like the ones discussed in this thesis are teaching viewers how to create a self/brand as discussed in Chapter Three, and idealise a specific female 'neoliberal' selfhood, I question what is it that people find so pleasurable in watching the series.

During my research on the various methodologies of conducting online audience research, I noticed a marked gap in the existing television scholarship on online sociality. Namely that, even though these virtual investigations have been around for years, there seem to be no published overviews of the processes and methodologies for internet research in TV studies. Nor do we have a rigid set of approaches for conducting research of this kind. As such, I include an overview of scholarship on online communities or 'netnography' in Chapter Three, suggesting that the latter term and Kozinets' methods might be used as a benchmark for further research in television studies.[19] In my own studies in Chapters Three and Five I utilise Kozinets' initial guidelines for conducting netnographic research, including: (1) *Entrée* (finding research questions and identifying the online community/communities); (2) *Data collection and analysis*; (3) *Providing trustworthy interpretation*; (4) *Research ethics*; and (5) *Member checks,* (receiving potential feedback from the online community) (2002, pp. 63-66). These basic approaches to online data have proved useful in both my study of the online discussion forum of Bethenny in Chapter Three and the social media accounts of the Kardashians and their followers in Chapter Five. In my study of the Bethenny Frankel discussion forum, I collected and coded around 5000 posts, both past and present (written between 2014 and 2018), that helped me gain valuable insights into how some female viewers engaged with and discussed the show and its cast amongst themselves. I also argue that, since the television landscape has been evolving along with the use of social media and multiplatform engagements, online research methods must adapt accordingly. Indeed, the ways in which this type of audience studies is conducted must therefore be less fixed and bounded. In praxis I found that Christine Hine's (2011) idea of a "mobile, internet-search

[19] Even though Kozinets' methodologies were mainly used and developed for marketing and business research.

based ethnographic method" that mirrors the multiplicity of contemporary media texts is particularly productive (p. 580). During the process of archiving and reading concurrent forum discussions, I thus followed Hine's mobile strategy and was careful to follow the online trails left by posters in the forum; the links to other websites, Bethenny Frankel's social media accounts, gossip and news sites, and photographs taken of Bethenny at events or during her everyday life. These elements form an important part of the socio-cultural milieu of the forum and were frequently used as touchstones to further (or fire up) the conversation (see Chapter Three). This thesis' presentation of these methodologies and the specific findings that these methods have elicited make an important contribution to the field of television studies. My specific intermingling of textual analyses and audience engagements marks this research, not only as innovative, but also offers considerations for future studies in television and media.

Furthermore, in Chapter Three I also discuss both the issues of ethics, and how television scholars specifically, might approach a research area that is perpetually liminal and has moved (way) beyond the boundaries of the physical television set. Adopting such methods myself (as discussed above and further in Chapter Three), I found that the teachings of the *Real Housewives of New York City*, and popular culture texts like it, are not necessarily changing the ways in which viewers understand selfhood. Instead, I found that the forum is often a place to process and explore the various ideas of female selfhood and femininity presented on the docu-soap and beyond.

Following these findings, I became more interested in the influences of cultural neoliberal sentiments on how the 'real' socio-cultural context is conceptualised. In Chapter Four I thus work from the premise that neoliberal market fundamentalism has presented a specific narrative in which idealised and successful selves emerge from a context of meritocratic competition. I explore this idea by providing a close reading of the competition and talent reality television show *America's Next Top Model.* Here the notion of the self/brand is still present, but the focus is on younger women who are in the process of 'finding' their selves. Though the advice and lessons proffered by the famous model and presenter Tyra Banks, the contestants compete for successful or "top" female selfhood, which they are promised if they follow the demands of the (fashion) industry and the advice of the show's market representatives, or expert guests. The emphasis in the series is on self-transformation and the journey of proving one's merit and value. But the transformation appears to indicate a call for self-sacrifice in which any personal experiences, social, racial, and cultural differences are replaced by an insistence on

personal accountability and the supposed fairness of meritocracy. Furthermore, *America's Next Top Model* is perpetually put forward as a microcosm of the supposedly real world, which is also shown to be exceedingly competitive and cut-throat, painting a specific picture of what the world is 'really like,' beyond the reality TV show itself.

During the research for this chapter on competition, I was telling some female friends about my research interests, a conversation that provoked a rather lively discussion about *America's Next Top Model* and its contestants. I saw this brief interaction as an excellent starting point for looking deeper into some audience engagements with this reality television show and hypothesised that focus group discussions would offer unique insights. Furthermore, such ethnographic work might also supplement the netnographic analyses included in both Chapters Three and Five. In early 2019, I subsequently arranged small-scale focus group sessions in London, UK, and Gothenburg, Sweden (where most of the available voluntary participants happened to be).[20] These sessions also included the text-in-action approach (Wood, 2005; 2007), in which I watched an episode with the participants, to illuminate how viewers might engage with the text as it 'happened.' In these sessions I found a push and pull between viewers both laughing at, or becoming irritated, with the model contestants for failing to live up to the competition's performative standards of female selfhood, *and* their expressions of incredulity and frustrations of these very standards. Yet, interestingly, there was still evidence of the impact of neoliberal sentiments on how the discussions were framed, which also suggests a naturalisation of some of these notions. Which, of course, does not negate audience resistance nor pleasure.

In the final chapter of the thesis, Chapter Five, I follow my arguments on self/branding and the insistence on the fairness of meritocratic competition as central facets of how the ideal female selfhood is portrayed. I argue that the idea of the self/brand along with the stress on self-formation and improvement, found in the competition narrative, have in recent years culminated in what I term 'workitisation'. By this term, I indicate the seepage of 'work' (which in itself has been reconfigured) into most aspects of life, and especially the self. In the chapter, I discuss how this seepage (also partly presented in the concepts described in Chapters Three and Four), has almost become

[20] I talk about the locality and methodology of these specific focus groups in Chapter Four. The methods of this more traditional form of ethnography has a longer theoretical and practical history and will therefore not be outlined in the same way as the methods of netnography in Chapter Three. The participants were mostly acquaintances of mine, hence the locations, but some were also found through the snowballing technique (see Chapter Four).

complete (or come full circle?) in the most popular reality TV texts at the end of the 2010s, in which the main characteristics of one's self (the body and the mind) now *require* work. Simply existing then, is not enough, but demands a highly performative process of working and betterment through which the elusive self can be found. As such, the chapter centres around some of the most omnipresent women in popular culture today, the Kardashian-Jenners, and their media outlets, to explore how they utilise and transform their work in order to increase their human capital and self-worth. In this chapter I have opted for a multi-modal approach in which I centre on the show, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians,* but also the Kardashians intertwined usage of social media and other media platforms. I thus utilise the same netnographic methods explored in Chapter Three but interweave these audience engagements with the self presentations of the Kardashian family as seen across their social media and televisual outlets. This kind of research and methodology is not only original in its approach, but also becomes important in the analysis of television in the perpetually altering online age. As such, these methods arguably reflect the ways in which popular culture and social media often synthesise, especially in reality television; where one cultural product is frequently enjoyed along others or within a larger social, or virtual cultural framework.

For the netnographic study of the online paratexts of the Kardashians on social media, I spent hours and hours scouring through the sisters Kim, Kourtney, Khloé, Kendall, and Kylie's Instagram and Twitter accounts. As well as their appearances in news and media outlets and online videos (e.g. YouTube), and I also collected and coded the comments, emojis, and sentiments left by their followers, fans, and critics who seemingly scrutinise the women's every move. By doing so, I gained a greater picture of how these omnipresent women present their selves and their work. Not only do they appear on television as reality television stars, but their performances (and storylines) go well beyond the small screen *online.* Arguably, the Kardashians have therefore spearheaded a new way in which the self (and female selfhood especially as I will demonstrate), is expected to appear, to work, and essentially exist in these popular cultural contexts. Chapter Five subsequently comes to reflect the constantly shifting ways in which television and television stars are engaged with by their audiences, and by extension, how notions of the female self and femininity might be encoded/decoded in such settings.

In this thesis I will explore how female selfhood and self-formation has been conceptualised in recent popular cultural texts. I argue that the specific socio-cultural

sentiments of neoliberalism have advanced and favour certain narratives through which the female self is understood. By closely analysing three examples from reality television I posit that these texts create a space in which the ideal neoliberal female self can materialise (more so than other popular cultural products). Each chapter then explores what I regard as the central contours and facets of this pop cultural ideal self, which pertains to notions of authentic self-branding and entrepreneurialism; the belief in the promises of competition (survival of the fittest); and ultimately, the optimisation of selfhood through work. These chapters will elucidate how late modern cultural narratives have come to centre around a constant cycle of choosing, transforming, and improving the (female) self. To introduce these arguments, the opening chapter will highlight the social and historical contexts, trajectories, and frameworks that have in various ways contributed to such ideations of who we are and how we come to be.

CHAPTER ONE

The Neoliberal Context and the Idea of the Self

Selves are not born, but arise in a process of social experience and interchange.

(Zahavi, 2014, p. 11)

The view of human beings as self-contained individuals whose uniqueness is there from the start, 'an essential core' carried deep inside themselves, is ingrained in Western thinking.

(Billington et al., 1997, p. 39)

This chapter seeks to offer definitions and a historical trajectory of the concepts of 'neoliberalism' and 'selfhood' in "a time of often bewildering political nomenclature" (Brown, 2005, p. 39). Neoliberalism is, as this chapter will demonstrate, a complex concept that can be defined as an ideology, a series of economic and political policies, an economic theory and/or a way of life. This thesis will approach neoliberalism as a 'mental framework', following Stuart Hall (1986); as forming a central part of the material we use to construct our views of the world and our sense of 'self' in the cultural imaginary, particularly in the Western and North American context focused in this thesis. Similarly, the self, like neoliberalism, is a thorny term to dissect, as it "is more appropriately understood as a colloquial umbrella term that encompasses a range of concepts that relate to self-reflexive activity, for example, 'consciousness,' 'ego,' 'soul,' 'subject,' 'person,' or 'moral agent'" (Atkins, 2005, p. 1). Yet, here the term self will not be used as pertaining to something innate or 'true' but rather as a socially and culturally formed non-thing that simply represents the ideas we have of our identities, personalities, and subjectivities. Indeed, the following overviews of these concepts will assist in demonstrating the ways in which the 'self' has come to be understood in popular culture. Further, these sections will serve as an important introduction for the discussions and case studies to follow in the subsequent chapters. As I want to elucidate the neoliberal influences on the understanding of selfhood in popular culture, I chose television series for my case studies,

since the television as a medium is still so central in our engagements with culture – whether it be streamed online or broadcast on an actual 'television'.

Neoliberalism: Defining an Elusive Concept

Neoliberalism as a concept has in the last decade(s) been marked by contradiction, confusion, and opprobrium. For many, it is, as Rajesh Venugopal declares, "everywhere, but at the same time, nowhere" (2015, p. 1). Indeed, today there are hardly any theorists, economists, or policy makers that describe themselves, or their ideas, as neoliberal, yet the term is perpetually invoked to delineate the economic, political, cultural, and social climate of late modernity.[21] Today this "oft-invoked but ill-defined concept" seems only to be introduced by those who wish to condemn it (Mudge, 2008, p. 703). This is certainly true for some of the most notable scholars on neoliberalism, including Wendy Brown, David Harvey, Lois McNay, Peter Miller, Aihwa Ong, Jamie Peck and Nikolas Rose, as well as the more popular (mainstream) writers Naomi Klein and Noam Chomsky. This thesis will certainly fall into this same category, and it thus becomes crucial to demonstrate that such a critique cannot, as in come political debates, simply be "dismissed as 'economically illiterate' or worse" (Chang, 2003, p. 2). Jeremy Gilbert convincingly argues that the main critique of using neoliberalism as a relevant term stems from the fact that:

> Within the broad family of ideas normally designated 'neoliberal' there are obviously a range of positions on and approaches to the core issues of economic policy, public sector governance and market management; each of these in turn is potentially compatible with a range of opinions and approaches to social policy, cultural practice and public administration, while nonetheless retaining a high degree of internal consistency and expressing a strong set of connecting themes.
>
> (2013, p. 7)

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[21] An exception is the British think tank "The Adam Smith Institute" in which one of their spokespersons declared that they had adopted the term 'neoliberal' rather than 'libertarian' to describe their line of thought (Bowman, 2016).

Consequently, the central argument for several critics (see Altman, 2005; Boas and Gans-Morse, 2009; Talbot, 2016) appears to be the difficulty of defining neoliberalism as a fixed and clearly expressed politico-economic concept or theory, despite the common denominators. Further, some critique the usage of the term on account of, as mentioned, that no one describes themselves as 'neoliberal', which is a questionable argument.[22] Put simply: hardly anyone calls themself 'chauvinist' or 'misogynist,' yet this does not invalidate the criticism of such -isms. Nonetheless, it is important to take the warnings of using the label 'neoliberal' seriously, and to make sure that this thesis does not deploy it as an omnipotent catchall adjective for all manifestations of capitalism, social inequity, and/or political injustice. Perhaps, as Jamie Peck (2010) purports, "[t]he tangled mess that is the modern usage of neoliberalism may be telling us something about the tangled mess of neoliberalism itself" (p.15). This 'tangled mess' is nonetheless, with all its lack of congruence taken into account, in need of clarification for the purposes of this thesis. Therefore, in the words of the late Stuart Hall, I wish to contend that while the term is problematic, "there are enough common features to warrant giving [neoliberalism] a *provisional* conceptual identity, provided this is understood as a first approximation" (2011, p. 706, emphasis in original). Yet, as mentioned, this is not the place to give a comprehensive historical overview of neoliberalism, but rather, this thesis will offer a condensed synopsis of the concept's social and politico-economical evolution in Western thought.

In order to establish the key features of *neo*liberalism, it is crucial to understand its ideological and theoretical underpinnings, which drew upon the thinkers of classical liberalism. Here I think it is important, following Brown (2005), to highlight the difference between *economic* liberalism and *political* liberalism, as the former refers to a belief in so-called 'free markets' and minimal governmental interference, whereas the latter describes the philosophical view based on ideas of freedom and equality. Hence, as Wendy Brown asserts, "*the liberalism in what has come to be called neoliberalism refers to liberalism's economic variant,*" which is also the version of liberalism that will be discussed hereafter (2005, p. 39, emphasis in original). So-called 'classic' liberal economico-political theory emerged in Anglo-Europe with such developments as "the enclosures of common land, the agrarian revolution, the expansion of markets (in land,

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[22] Note: where applicable (without altering quotations) this thesis will use the gender-neutral 'they/their/them/themself' as singular pronouns.

labour, agriculture and commodities) and the rise of the first commercial-consumer society in the eighteenth century" (Hall, 2011, p, 707). Adam Smith, one of the founding thinkers of economic liberalism, wrote in 1776 that "[e]very man, as long as he does not violate the laws of justice, must be able to pursue his interest and bring capital where he pleases" (quoted in Foucault, 2008, p. 281). For Smith, persons should be allowed to freely participate in market relations, without (unless absolutely necessary) any interventions of the state. This idea, later referred to as *laissez-faire* economics is contingent on the principle that "every man must follow his own interest" (Foucault, 2008, p. 281). Smith thus argued that when individuals are left to make their own economic *and* moral decisions, both the market and the nation will *naturally* profit as if "led by an invisible hand" (Smith, [1776] 1904). The Smithian concept of the economic market has had a great impact on the global economy and some credit Smith for influencing "Britain's move from protectionism toward freer trade in the nineteenth century and [for] form[ing] a key (albeit not total) underpinning of the rise of the United States as a global economic power" (Roy et al., 2007, p. 9). Nevertheless, from its conception economic liberalism can be described as split into two strands: those thinkers who were essentially anti-government, often associated with the idea of the night-watchman state,[23] and those who believed in *some* governmental intervention to assure the freedom of both the economic market and individuals. Therefore, different economic and socio-political developments often determined which strand liberals and/or libertarians adhered to.

Konzelmann et al. (2013) note that the global financial crises of the nineteenth century – in 1819, 1873, 1893 – resulted in "greater state intervention in the form of protective tariffs and nationalization as well as a shift towards much more conservative economic thinking" (p. 32). To simplify history, one could claim that economic liberalism dominated economic theory in the mid-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the US, until the Great Depression of the 1930s brought new ideas to the foreground, particularly through the thesis developed by John Maynard Keynes. Keynesian economics, lay the foundation for "a very limited form of welfare state liberalism, or social democracy" (Duggan, 2003, p. xi), which gained more widespread support at the end of World War

[23] The night-watchman state correlates to the idea of *laissez-faire* and the notion that the state should merely interfere in very restricted instances, for example to prevent violence and protect laws – not only through action but also by merely 'being there', functioning like a Benthamian Panopticon.

II, where macroeconomic intervention and financial backing in the public sector appeared to be the economic answers to post-war insecurities (Plehwe, 2016, p. 65). However, during the same time, a group of thinkers were developing ideas that revived the principal objectives of economic liberalism. This exclusive group of "mainly academic economists, historians, and philosophers…gathered around the renowned Austrian political philosopher Friedrich von Hayek [with Ludgvig von Mises, George Stigler, Karl Popper and Milton Friedman] to create the Mont Pelerin Society" (Harvey, 2005, pp. 19-20).[24] In his *The Road to Serfdom,* Hayek bemoans that the progress of Keynesianism, government planning, and "socialist propaganda" would lead to a totalitarian state, which in turn would prove "that what was promised to us as the Road to Freedom was in fact the High Road to Servitude" (Hayek, [1944] 2005, p. 27). Similarly, American economist Milton Friedman warned of giving power to the state, as he reasoned "that the power will sooner or later get into the hands of those who will use it for evil purposes" (Friedman, 1951, p. 91). So, in opposition to classic liberalism, early neoliberal theorists did "not conceive of either the market itself or rational economic behaviour as purely natural," instead, as Brown writes, neoliberals view "[b]oth a[s] constructed…requiring political intervention and orchestration" (2005, p. 41). Yet, this does not mean that the government should control the market; rather, they argue, it should be the other way around. Brown further notes, in neoliberal thought, "[t]he market is the organizing and regulative principle of the state and society" (ibid.). Indeed, what these theorists proposed are the founding features of what has come to be known as neoliberalism today.[25]

However, the concepts of neoliberalism, as mentioned, were (and are) by no means uniform (see Eagleton-Pierce, 2016; Gilbert, 2013; Hall, 2011; Harvey, 2005; Peck, 2004, 2010; Roy et al., 2007), and its thinkers were linked to particular stages in the neoliberal evolution. Daniel Stedman Jones (2012) divides these stages into three, with the first running from the 1920s to the 1950s, characterised by the Mont Pelerin Society and the ordoliberals in Germany, as they "sought to define the contours of a market-based society…to [boost] economy and guarantee individual liberty" (p. 6). Nevertheless, these advancing neoliberal ideas remained on the margins of political and

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[24] The Mont Pelerin Society was dubbed so "after the Swiss spa where they [most notably Hayek, Polanyi, von Mises, and Popper] first met" (Harvey, 2005, p. 20; Stedman Jones, 2012).
[25] The term 'neoliberal' was first introduced by German economist and sociologist Alexander Rüstow in 1938 at the Colloque Walter Lippman in Paris, and, arguably, what made this liberalism *new* was that it would be more applicable to the novel socio-political climate (Hartwich, 2009; Stedman Jones, 2012).

economic thought (with some exceptions)[26] during the heyday of the Keynesian welfare state as many policy-makers tried to keep financial crises at bay through "centralized state planning" (Harvey, 2005, p. 21).[27] Stedman Jones dubs this the "second phase of neoliberalism [which] lasted from 1950 until the free market ascendancy of Thatcher and Reagan in the 1980s" (2012, p. 7). In the second half of this stage, the neoliberal devotees, with the Mont Pelerin Society as their starting point, grew into a more recognisable movement; with Friedman and the Chicago School influencing the academy and neoliberal American and British think-tanks receiving funding by affluent corporations and individuals troubled by state intervention and collectivism (Harvey, 2005, pp. 21-22).[28] Finally, at the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s, culminating in 1973, economic stresses began to show as "costs of producing domestic goods rose, [as well as] both inflation and unemployment," which resulted in a disillusionment of the promises of Keynesian policies (Mudge, 2008, p. 709). This is when neoliberalism more manifestly entered the political and economic scene, and its advocacy of "private enterprise in the belief that free-market competition supplied most efficient and rational mechanism for utility maximization, price efficiency, and resource allocation," had direct impact on contemporary politicians and policy-makers (Makovicky, 2014, p. 4). This tumultuous period, described as the "crisis decades" of the 1970s and 1980s by Hobsbawm [1994] (1995), arguably resulted in the elections of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the UK in 1979, and President Ronald Reagan in the US in 1981, whose "transatlantic partnership…legitimate[d] the neoliberal attack on 'big government' and the bureaucratic welfare state," influenced by Hayek and others (Peters, 2001, p. 18). These events lead us to Stedman Jones's third and final phase of neoliberalism, the period after the 1980s.

After the appointments of Thatcher and Reagan, neoliberal ideas were "driven by the advance of an agenda of market liberalization and fiscal discipline into development and trade policy" (Stedman Jones, 2012, p. 8). Here it is also important to note that these political and economic ideas were not solely driven by conservative forces but proved

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[26] See Plehwe (2016) for a description on the influence of neoliberal policies in post-war Germany and ordoliberalism, which has often been described as the German neoliberal movement (Hartwich, 2009).

[27] The 1950s and 1960s (some would say between the 1940s and 1973) has been labelled 'The Golden Age' of capitalism in the rich Western countries, as it saw the successes of capitalism and social welfare under Keynesian policies (Desai, 2002, p. 216; Hobsbawm, 1995).

[28] Hayek and Friedman's impact is further manifested by their receiving of "the Nobel Prize in economics in 1974 and 1976, respectively" (Weaver, 2016, p. 78), a result, according to Harvey, of the economic prize being "under the tight control of Sweden's banking elite" (2005, p. 22).

influential as political solutions to insecurity for implementing policies across the political spectrum. David Harvey notes that neoliberalism was aided by the choice of its founding figures to take "ideals of human dignity and individual freedom" as its central catchwords (2005, p. 5). At a time of unrest during the Cold War, where various liberation movements (especially the student movements of 1968), were demanding "greater freedoms of speech and of personal choice," neoliberalism's values seemed extremely appealing (ibid.). Still, today, the neoliberal catchphrases of personal freedom, choice, and independence are embedded in the socio-cultural narrative, which make their desired goals less manifest. These sentiments are indeed central to how the neoliberalism has captured the cultural imaginary and the presentations of female selfhood, as we shall see in the case studies in this thesis. In Chapter Two, I will especially demonstrate how these neoliberal catchphrases have been intertwined with ideas of feminism and the presentations of femininity.

This period has been marked by a more international presence of neoliberalism as such global institutions as the World Trade Organization (WTO), IMF, and World Bank began to adopt some of its ideologies (Lange, 2015, p. 681). These economic policies are often equated with the 'Washington Consensus,' a list of criteria, which countries around the world were encouraged to adhere to if they wished to receive Word Bank or IMF support, whether it be technical or monetary assistance (Deller and Goetz, 2009, p. 23).[29] Williamson (1993), the originator of the Washington Consensus, claimed the economic policies to be neutral, which would suggest that they could be applied to any state, whether run by a left-wing or right-wing government. Therefore, neoliberalism was presented as a universal solution, only contributing to the smooth-running of government and business, "with the underlying capitalist power politics and cultural values obscured" (Duggan, 2003, p. xiii). Indeed, the idea of the free market as the organising agent of "capital, goods and services, with the state's role being largely limited for facilitating the market" was announced the global panacea for "economic stagnation and budget deficits" (Demmers et al., 2004, p. 17).[30] However, it is crucial to note that the neoliberal model has had exceedingly varying effects wherever it has been applied, often termed 'actually

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[29] The Washington Consensus consist of ten policies, which include "fiscal discipline, reorientation of public expenditures, tax reform, financial liberalization, unified and competitive exchange rates, trade liberalization, openness to foreign direct investment (FDI), privatization, deregulation, and secure property rights" (Macdonald and Ruckert, 2009, p. 3).
[30] Margaret Thatcher even famously declared, "There is No Alternative" (TINA) (Harris and Seid, 2000, p. 16).

existing neoliberalism', and these differences can, regrettably, not be discussed here, yet, there are some commonalities that can help us with a constructive definition for the purposes of this thesis.[31]

As mentioned, neoliberalism can be viewed as a reconstruction of classical liberalism, in that it stresses the importance of a 'free' market. Nevertheless, while classical liberalism viewed state intervention as a threat to individual freedom, neoliberals regard the state as a facilitator of a fully 'free' market and that the state must "*think and behave like a market actor* across all its functions" (Brown, 2005, p. 42, emphasis in original). Thus, the neoliberal state should only govern institutions and individuals in order to submit them to the market. However, neoliberalism cannot, as for some critics, "be reduced to a set of economic policies," such as the Washington Consensus (Macdonald and Ruckert, 2009, p. 3). As Brown maintains, neoliberalism is not "only about facilitating free trade, maximizing corporate profits, and challenging welfarism" (2005, p. 39). Rather, after the 1990s it has come "to expand accretively as a concept to signify not just a policy model, but a broader political, ideological, cultural spatial phenomenon" (Venugopal, 2015, p. 4). Further, this phenomenon has remained the dominant, perhaps even, "unchallenged" actor on the political and economic stage (Centeno and Cohen, 2012, p. 318), despite the global financial crisis in the late 2000s. Indeed, as Peck argues, the neoliberal policies "of regulatory restrain, privatization, rolling tax cuts, and public-sector austerity – are in fact being pursued in an even more sternly necessitarian fashion than before" (2013, p. 134). So how can we best describe this conceptual monolith that is neoliberalism?

One of the most influential texts on neoliberal thought and praxis is David Harvey's *A Brief Introduction to Neoliberalism* (2005). Harvey summarises neoliberal theory as a series of economic principles "that propose[s] that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property, free markets, and free trade" (p. 2). Arguably, such an abbreviated version of these contemporary ideas still manages to capture the neoliberal ethos and can thus be utilised for the purposes of this text. Furthermore, Harvey highlights the difference between neoliberal theory and

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[31] For scholarship on what has been termed 'actually existing' neoliberalism (see footnote 31 for definition), see for instance: Brown (2005) for neoliberalism in the US; Dunn (2004) for the Polish context; Ong (2006) for neoliberal policies in China; or the edited collection *Ethnographies of Neoliberalism* (Greenhouse, 2012) for varied case studies in Africa, Europe, South America, Japan, and the US.

pragmatism, and claims that the main goal of 'actually existing' neoliberalism has been "a vehicle for the restoration of class power" to global corporations and wealthy individuals (ibid., p. 31).[32] Indeed, Harvey's thesis is supported in that social equity and mobility have subsided under neoliberal policies in both developed and developing countries (Gilbert, 2013, p. 16; Macdonald and Ruckert, 2009). Lisa Duggan (2003) similarly argues that neoliberalism is a "secular faith [with] priests…elected by no one, and are accountable only to the global elites whose interests are promoted by its policies" (p. xii). Social inequalities under neoliberal policies are essentially rendered necessary, as the 1% who *do* succeed are 'proof' that every individual in a competitive free market has the opportunity to be successful as well (this meritocratic principle will be further discussed in Chapter Four). As Gilbert writes, "the point of neoliberal ideology is not to convince us that Hayek was right; it is to console us that the sense of insecurity, of perpetual competition and individual isolation produced by neoliberal government is natural, because 'that's what life is really like'" (2013, p.15). Indeed, the theory that the chief objective of neoliberalism is to (re-) establish a select few elites has been a pervasive theoretical framework for scholars within the humanities (see Duggan, 2003; Dumenil and Levy, 2004; Giroux, 2008; Harvey, 2005). Such an analytical approach to neoliberalism has proven effective and constructive; nonetheless it does not encompass the way in which the neoliberal logic has infiltrated the very fabric of society and culture, and even our understanding of ourselves as citizens, subjects, and individuals. It is this psychic life of neoliberalism, rather than the 'actually existing' neoliberal *policies* and implementations, that is the main focus of this thesis and it is this socio-cultural influence, I would argue, that is the main way in which neoliberal ideology has been 'successfully' implemented. As such, it is in this 'psychic' and, as I note in Chapter Five, 'affective' way that neoliberalism 'actually exists'.

In the earlier stage of neoliberalisation in the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher famously pronounced: "there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families" (quoted in Ventura, [2012] 2016, p. 29). Perhaps, one might argue that

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[32] 'Actually existing neoliberalism' is a kind of analytical framework created by Brenner and Theodore (2002) as a way of demonstrating the ways in which neoliberal ideas and policies develop in particular contexts via "their conflictual interaction with contextually specific political-economic conditions, regulatory arrangements and power geometrics" (p. 357). Therefore, such a framework is a way to avoid the prevalent discussion of 'utopian' neoliberal ideas in theory, without looking at case studies of how such ideas have manifested themselves pragmatically.

this neoliberal vision has been partly realised following the tumultuous 2000s that saw 9/11, the beginning of the war on terror, the rise of social media and global communications, as well as the financial crisis and the austerity that followed. Kathleen Stewart has characterised these first years, in which I would include the whole first two decades of the twenty-first century, as an age of "trauma":

> Trauma time grew pervasive, leaving us suspended in cocoons of half-known memories and unwitting expectations…There is a search for new forms of sentimentality and a longing for interiority. We find ourselves in the midst of a self-help movement, privatisation, cocooning, family values, utopia walled up in theme parks and franchise culture, feel-good movies and colourful decor…But there is still trauma, too, in the anaesthetised distraction of an OK middle ground defending a womb against the world. Here, fear of falling meets a more profound fear of burst bubbles.
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> (2005, pp. 323, 326)

This age of trauma, which was believed to mark the end of neoliberal economics, resulted instead in what Colin Crouch (2011, p. viii) calls "the strange non-death of neoliberalism." Curiously, as Crouch points out, rather than cutting their losses, governments chose to "bail out" the banks and financial markets, despite neoliberalism's claim that "unregulated markets will be self-correcting" (2011, pp. vii-viii). Indeed, in many ways, it appears that governments only have permission to "bail out" the 'free' market, as post-crash "[s]tates appear even more committed to defending the interests of finance, *against other political interests*, and increasing the reach of finance into everyday life" (Davies, 2014, p. 316, my emphasis). Consequently, the sentiment that "unregulated markets will be self-correcting" in neoliberal thought, is applied to most social, political, and cultural life, and 'markets' become interchangeable with 'corporations', 'governments', and even 'individuals.' Indeed, how this relates to gender and women specifically will be the main focus of this thesis. Here it become important to question: where are individuals positioned in neoliberal thought? What effects does such a rationality have on our conceptions of selfhood?

Neoliberal Governmentality

Elizabeth C. Dunn notes that, "the successful creation of a market economy requires changing the very foundations of what it means to be a person" (2004, p. 6). Hence, yet again, it becomes important to note that neoliberalism cannot be explicated simply through its economic or political schemes. Indeed, here it is more constructive (and convincing) to characterise neoliberalism, following Sean Phelan, as a "series of discursive 'logics'" (2014, p. 57). Neoliberalism, in this sense, should be understood as something akin to Stuart Hall's definition of ideology: a "mental framework – the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought and the systems of representations – which [individuals]…deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works" (1986, pp. 25-26). Arguably, it is through this kind of mental framework in which neoliberalism has proved most persuasive, particularly, as this thesis will demonstrate in subsequent chapters, through the prominence of distinctive cultural portrayals and representations. Accordingly, neoliberal logics, particularly "market determinism, commodification, individualization, [and] competitive ritual" (Phelan, 2014, p. 57), have – when sufficiently emphasised – the power to become interiorised, in thought and action, and ultimately recasts "the phenomenology of being in the world" (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2001, pp. 14-15).

This thesis will utilise Foucault's (1991, 2008) notion of governmentality, and build upon the work of the scholars, following Foucault, who emphasise that neoliberalisation has not simply altered the ways in which individuals are governed in society, but also what forms of selfhood are rendered admissible in popular culture (see Brown, 2005, 2006; Duggan, 2003; Dunn, 2004; Gordon, 1991; Lemke, 2001; Miller and Rose, 1990, 2008; Ong, 2006, 2007; and Rose, 1996, 1999). Michel Foucault defines government or 'governmentality,' broadly, as "the way in which one conducts the conduct" of individuals (2008, p. 186).[33] Thus, for Foucault, government not only entails "the science of ruling the state," which is our main usage of the term today, but it also encompasses "the art of properly governing a family" and "the art of self-government" (Foucault, 1991, p. 91). Foucault suggests that the ways in which Western society and

[33] French philosopher Michel Foucault's (1926-1984) theories of power relations and 'truth' will be utilised to varying extents throughout this thesis. His ideas of neoliberal governmentality and self-government are particularly interesting in relation to the effects/affects of the ideas of selfhood presented in Western popular culture. These concepts will be further investigated in the case studies on reality television later in the thesis.

individuals have been governed have shifted.[34] No longer is there a visible sovereignty, in the Machiavellian sense, with a high-powered ruler or monarch, but instead 'power' is rendered more inconspicuous. In his seminal work, *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault describes disciplinary power as "exercised through its invisibility…[and instead] it is the subjects who have to be seen [and]…their visibility assures the hold of the power that is exercised over them" (Foucault in Rabinow, 1991, p. 199). In this sense, governmentality can be regarded as a way of understanding the interconnection between governance and mentality (*mentalité*), as while this "new art of government" emphasises freedom; it also creates certain realities, or 'regimes of truth'.[35] In turn, such 'truths,' or 'knowledge', inform the "calculations, programmes, policies, strategies, reflections, and tactics that shape the conduct of individuals, 'the conduct of conduct' for acting upon the actions of others in order to *achieve certain ends*" (Besley, 2009, p. 40, my emphasis). These truths are fashioned through a complex system of discourse that form the basis through which government is expressed, framed, and understood, as Miller and Rose (1990, p. 6, emphasis in original) explain:

> [I]t is in language that *programmes of government* are elaborated, and through which consonance is established between the broadly specified ethical, epistemological and ontological appeals of political discourse – to the nation, to virtue, to what is or is not possible or desirable – and the plans, schemes and objectives that seek to address specific problematizations within social, economic or personal existence.

In this sense, governmentality can be internalised, formed, and realised by the body politic through narratives – *lingual*, but I would also add, *visual* and *affective* – and therefore "features state formation of subjects rather than state control of subjects" (Brown, 2005, p. 142). Indeed, as Lemke (2013) notes, governmentality scholarship has been exceedingly insightful in "illuminating the 'soft' or 'empowering' mechanisms of power, demonstrating in what ways individuals and social groups are governed by freedom and

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[34] It is important to highlight that, quoting Roger Dale (2004), "governmentality [did] not begin with neo-liberalism, but it has always been an element of governing" (p.180).

[35] Foucault explains that "[t]ruth is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces, and which extends it. A 'régime' of truth" (1980, p. 133). Consequently, in order to understand governmentality, 'truths' cannot be separated from power and governance.

choice" (p. 37). Thus, governmentality is a productive analytical tool for understanding the ways in which neoliberalism has constructed certain economical truths that have come to permeate, not only political rationality, but also the 'realities' in society at large. It is these 'realities' that this thesis aims to explore and the consequences of competitive and profit-focused rhetoric on the concepts of self, especially the female self, offered in the Western social imaginary.

Jason Read argues that neoliberal logics have erased the "tactical polyvalence of discourse [which means that] everything is framed in terms of interest, freedoms and risk" (2009, p. 35). Neoliberal discourse emphasises 'free' markets, as discussed, but also the importance of 'free' individuals, who have the right and freedom to take certain actions. As Nikolas Rose (1999) notes, "to govern human beings is not to crush their capacity to act, but to acknowledge it and utilise it for one's own objectives" (p. 4). Therefore, while neoliberal subjects are rendered 'free' and 'autonomous', the very production of that freedom "entails the establishment of limitations, controls, forms of coercion, and obligations relying on threats, et cetera" (Foucault, 2008, p. 64). Perhaps, neoliberal governmentality is often more subtle than Foucault's citation suggests, and invokes something closer to what Miller and Rose (1990) have termed 'government at a distance.' In more concrete terms, this connotes making government into "a 'personal' matter, and [governmental] programmes [often seek] the key to their effectiveness in enrolling individuals as allies in the pursuit of political, economic and social objectives" (Miller and Rose, 1990, p. 18).[36] While neoliberalism propounds the free market, and consequently competition, as the organiser of all life to assure economic prosperity and efficiency, it also requires that the autonomous population make the *right* choices. This 'autonomy', as Tina Besley points out, is therefore closer to the original meaning of the word, "where auto=self, nomos=law" (2009, p. 37). This takes us to the most vital aspect of Foucauldian governmentality, at least for the purposes of this thesis, the art of *self*-government.

Foucault, in writing on neoliberalism, invokes the concept of *homo œconomicus*, but not "the man of exchange" as defined by classical liberalism, but rather "*homo œconomicus* [as] an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself [*sic*]" (2008, pp. 147, 225). Indeed, as many scholars have demonstrated, neoliberal governmentality depicts the self

[36] For instance, Miller and Rose (1990) give the example of "[t]he individual manager who comes to think of investments in terms of the discounting of future cash flows," which functions as "a resource for a strategy of government oriented toward economic growth" (p. 18).

as fundamentally driven by self-serving, cunning, and aspirational forces (Brown, 2005; Chapman, 2013; Macovicky, 2014; Oksala, 2013; Ong, 2006; Raisborough, 2011). Nevertheless, as Johanna Oksala attests, the "metaphysical or anthropological question of whether human beings really are naturally self-interested and competitive is ultimately irrelevant" (2013, p. 67). Thus, this neoliberal narrative creates a regime of truth in which subjects are encouraged to imagine themselves as a form of 'human capital,' consequently being entrepreneurs of their selves. In his *Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault (2008) utilises the metaphor of the mother and child relationship to describe the meaning of 'human capital' and the ways in which such economic phenomena as "investment, capital costs, and profit" can be applied to any non-economic domains as well (p. 244). In neoliberal thought, Foucault argues, the manner in which a mother cares, feeds, provides education for, and nurtures a child is a form of investment that can be measured in (dedicated) time. This in turn, "constitute[s] a human capital, the child's human capital, which will produce an income," as a result the child will profit both psychologically and economically, and the mother will similarly profit through her own sense of satisfaction and accomplishment (Foucault, 2008, p. 244). The metaphor, despite being somewhat oversimplified (and heteronormative!), still elucidates how neoliberal thinking might seep through the most quotidian aspects of human life. Hence, making an alternative reality exceedingly difficult to imagine.

Indeed, once again quoting Foucault (2008), "it is up to society and the rules of the game imposed by the state to insure that no one is excluded from this game in which [the individual] is caught up without ever having explicitly wished to take part" (p. 202). The rules of the neoliberal game for its subjects are individual responsibility, self-surveillance, and self-care. The socio-political and economic risks of living have been transferred from the state onto each citizen, (Besley and Peters, 2007, pp. 155-156), consequently effacing the possibility of real political change and the spirit of community. Instead, as Brown (2006) and Read (2009) have proffered, personal complications are remedied by the prescriptions of the market. Persons are encouraged to make different choices in order to "*opt out* rather than address political problems" (Read, 2009, p. 35, my emphasis). These choices often seem to relate to consumption patterns, where one product or service is replaced by yet another. Wendy Brown (2006, p. 704) offers some lucid examples of this system of distraction through product replacement in the North American context:

> [B]ottled water in response to contamination of the water table; private schools, charter schools, and voucher systems as a response to the collapse of quality public education; anti-theft devices, private security guards, and gated communities (and nations) as a response to the production of a throwaway class and intensifying economic inequality; …ergonomic tools and technologies as a response to the work conditions of information capitalism; and, of course, finely differentiated and titrated pharmaceutical antidepressants as a response to lives of meaninglessness or despair amidst wealth and freedom.

These are but a few examples that all highlight neoliberal solutions for societal inequalities and injustices, while simultaneously promoting an aggressive form of individualism, which is "[p]erhaps the most prevalent and widely embraced value of neoliberalism" (Evans, 2015, p. 45). Hence, the ideal neoliberal subject is the one who invests in their own human capital (*homo œconomicus*), and who can navigate the ups-and-downs of the free market – through entrepreneurship, consumption, and through the 'freedom' to follow their own dreams. And as I will argue in the next chapter, and indeed throughout the thesis, it is the flexible female self that is deemed particularly suitable for adopting this ideal. Perhaps Jayne Raisborough (2011) is right to claim that it is only "the self who can take on neoliberal repertoires [who] enjoys recognition (cheers) and moral self-worth" (p. 68). That most of these neoliberal dreams of ideal selfhoods are illusory becomes irrelevant, as it is the process of getting to that goal – the participation in the market economy – that has become the supposed *raison d'être* of the Western present.

Gill and Scharff (2011) note, drawing on Derek Hook (2007), that Foucauldian scholarship on neoliberalism often overlook "the emphasis in Foucault's later work on the *mentality* part of governmentality – the ways in which these governing practices quite literally 'get inside us' to materialise or constitute our subjectivities" (p. 8). Ultimately, this is what this thesis intends to investigate and through the examples found in the genre of 'reality' television, consider the questions: what are the consequences of neoliberalism on the ideas of selfhood portrayed in popular culture? Which 'selves' are fostered or even rendered possible?

The Concept(s) of Selfhood

As Tina Besley and Michael A. Peters highlight, "[e]ver since the first moment of institutional philosophy the notion of self has presented itself as an object of inquiry, as a problem, and as a locus for posing questions concerning knowledge, action and ethics" (2007, p. 3). Indeed, the idea of selfhood – its conception, design, and/or existence – has been one of the predominant issues for philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, linguists, feminists, and (neuro)scientists alike, and continues to be a topic of much controversy. This study will argue, following the work of some postmodern, Foucauldian, and social constructionist thinkers, that one can only become aware of oneself in the interaction with others; when the self "is faced by another self-consciousness" (Hegel, [1807] 2001, p. 630).[37] These interactions have evolved and are not always face-to-face in the ever-evolving milieu of the present: the post-network era and its potentially imperialising (often Americanising) cultural effects, social media, and technological advancements, are part of the systems of truth and reality that inform the notions of self and subjectivity. Hence, it becomes particularly interesting to analyse selfhood in a socio-cultural context in which neoliberalism and individualism appear to reign supreme. During the upsurge of neoliberal and conservative thought in the early 1990s, Anthony Giddens (1991) proposed that ideas of ontology were now based on introspection, choice, and reflexivity, which, I would argue, is still the case in the late 2010s. So, if one's 'self' is contingent upon one's socio-cultural framework, it becomes interesting to investigate in what manners the current emphasis on 'navel-gazing' affect the ways in which the self is recognised and portrayed in Western popular culture.

In order to form a more comprehensive understanding of the concept of selfhood in contemporary society and culture, this chapter will begin by offering an outline of the development of selfhood in Western thought. Yet, to map out a comprehensive history of the notions of self and subjectivity is a thorny task, perhaps even impossible. The myriad conceptions, theories, and opinions of the formation of selfhood throughout time are so contextual that it can be inconceivable to fully grasp their original meaning, which is further problematised by the fact that the 'self' in question is perpetually left undefined.

[37] Following the advice of Kenneth J. Gergen (1985), this thesis will utilise the term 'social constructionism' rather than 'social constructivism' (often used interchangeably) to avoid any confusion with Piagetian theory. Further, the former seems to be applied more regularly to refer to reality and knowledge – of the world and ourselves – as socially constructed.

Another problem arises in the very attempt of presenting a final definition of the self – a definition representing truth and objective reality. As American anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1983) once wrote:

> The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgement, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against its social and natural background, is, however incorrigible it may seem to us [note the undefined use of us], a rather peculiar idea within the contexts of the world's cultures.
>
> (p. 59)

Therefore, claims of 'truths' of selfhood can easily be found guilty of essentialism. Nevertheless, due to my particular focus on the West and the Anglosphere, the theories drawn upon here will mainly be by thinkers and scholars of the North American and West European contexts. Further, on account of space, this cannot be a comprehensive or strictly chronological account of the Western history of the self, but the following overview will serve as a foundation for the arguments developed throughout this thesis.

The Modern Self

I will begin with classical philosophy and the theories of selfhood emerging in Antiquity, as this is the place in time from which notions of 'modern' selfhood is most commonly drawn. Plato (429-347 BCE) understood "the soul to be one's essential self [and] argued for the immortality of each person's soul," thus presenting a dualistic view of self and body (Barresi and Raymond, 2011, p. 34). Aristotle (384-322 BCE), following Plato, similarly viewed the soul as the core of the self, but unlike Plato, he regarded the soul as intrinsic to the body, "its vital principle...that accounts for its being alive" (ibid., p. 35). The idea of self=soul was exceedingly influential for subsequent centuries, and particularly Plato's idea of the 'immaterial' soul had a marked impact on Christianity. The notion of an afterlife and the idea that the 'pure' soul needs to be freed from the 'corrupt' body is "an anti-holistic approach to the self which has been a major influence on Christian thought, and even popular belief, right up to the present day" (Fowler, 1999.

p. 46). Arguably, particularly in North America and Western Europe, the Christian tradition of confession, the idea of the soul, and the centrality of the individual's relationship to God, have been key to the "evolving inward-looking subjectivity, the separation of an individual from a collective sense of identity" (Billington et al., 1998, p. 44; Harvey Brown, 2003, the notion of confession and self-disclosure as a route to truth and a more 'authentic' self will be further discussed in the case studies in Chapters Three and Five). This inward turn would award the self/soul a closer connection to God. As the influential Christian philosopher Augustine of Hippo declared (354-430 CE) (as cited in Peter Heehs, 2013), "Do not go abroad. Return within yourself. In the inward man dwells truth" (p. 3). Indeed, following the trajectory of modern (rational) selfhood in Western thought, as traced by Charles Taylor (1989) – from Plato, to Augustine, to Descartes and Locke – the turn towards interiority "continued throughout the Middle Ages…flourished again in the Renaissance [and]…then later [took on more] secularized forms" (p. 177). Arguably, the introspection that promised a personal window to God, has in Western secular culture, been replaced by various forms of personal scrutiny and 'truth' seeking. Thus, what appears to have remained is the centrality of individuality and the interior.

Many have further traced the birth of the modern concept of the self to the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, (see for instance, Billington et al., 1998; Bührmann and Ernst, 2010; Elias, [1968] 2000; Hall, 1986; Harvey Brown, 2003; Mansfield, 2000; Taylor, 1975, 1989) during which the self becomes "self-defining" rather than "defined in relation to a cosmic order" (Taylor, 1975, p. 6). As Nick Mansfield (2000) maintains, "[i]t was the Enlightenment that made the modern era the era of the subject" (p. 14). This change has often been contributed to the writings of René Descartes (1596-1650), "the father of modern philosophy," whose *cogito ergo sum* (following Augustine), established the conception of human beings as "autonomous rational subject[s]" (Grenz, 1996, p. 63-64). The Cartesian thesis presents, firstly, "the image of the self as the ground of all knowledge and experience of the world (*before I am anything, I am I*) and secondly, the self is defined by the rational faculties it can use to order the world (*I make sense*)" (Mansfield, 2000, p. 15, emphasis in original). Consequently, the argument goes, the only thing we can know without doubt is that we exist, everything else in the exterior world is marked by a lack of certainty. This self is unitary, a "substance" disconnected from the body, "a kind of mental Robinson Crusoe separated from all external society or sensation, like an anchorite in the desert" (Harvey Brown, 2003, p. 189). This view of the self was for Descartes simply 'common sense' and proven "through its divine revelation in

Scripture beyond doubt" (Descartes, [1647] 1985, p. 295). David Hume (1711-1804) later critiques the Cartesian *cogito* as, for him, "the idea of a substantial, persisting self is an illusion," since it can never be proven through introspection (Barresi and Raymond, 2011, p. 40). Hume can thus be seen as anticipating the attacks on the authenticity of selfhood emerging over a century later.

Jonathan Shear (1998) contends that Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) conceives both Descartes and Hume's accounts to be accurate: "Descartes in that we *have to have* such a self, and Hume in that there is *no possibility whatsoever* of experiencing it, or indeed of knowing it as anything but an *abstract vacuous cipher*" (p. 407, emphasis in original). For Kant, the self is "ungraspable" as, in accordance to Hume, we cannot experience it, but at the same time an 'entity' of selfhood is necessary for any experience to be experienced, "it must have an experiencer, which for Kant means that a single, simple, and continuing self is [an] essential precondition" (Haney, 2002, p. 25). However, before both Hume and Kant, John Locke (1632-1704) developed his notions of empiricism and the mind as a tabula rasa against the Cartesian concept of innate logics, suggesting the importance of experiences. For Locke, consciousness is what constitutes a self, but this self is not constructed in society, but rather (a priori) "in terms of an abstract epistemological domain (of consciousness)" (Archer, 2005, p. 20). This self is thus influenced by Locke's "significant nonempirical religious and moral concerns," which stipulate that all persons are born equal and responsible for their own selves both before God and society at large (Atkins, 2008, p. 13). This notion would have a major impact on the modern concept of individuality and also, as Frie (2011) notes, "form[s] the basis for central aspects of the American constitution" (p. 6).[38] The Lockean conviction of individuals' "natural rights" – their right to "life", "liberty," and "property" – ultimately means a drawback of government and the protection of personal 'needs' before the collectives' (ibid,. p. 7). These catchwords, which in themselves are difficult to oppose, have also been fundamental in the, much later, expansion of neoliberal logics and of individualism.

Ever since Descartes and the following Enlightenment, the "idea of the 'self in a case'… [has been] one of the recurrent *leitmotifs* of modern philosophy" (Elias, [1968]

[38] John Locke is often referred to as the 'father of liberalism' and his ideas have been argued to be central in the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" (Frie, 2011, p. 6-7).

2000, p. 289). The subsequent intellectual movement Romanticism, with Rousseau in the forefront, have had a further influence on Western culture. The Romantic concept of a 'true' self proposes that this 'essence' of selfhood can only be found in solitude through a withdrawal from socio-political settings. A sentiment aptly represented by English Romantic poet William Wordsworth ([1850] 1854, p. 495):

> *When from our better selves we have too long*
> *Been parted by the hurrying world, and droop,*
> *Sick of its business, of its pleasure tired,*
> *How gracious, how benign, is Solitude*

Indeed, such "ideas about individuality…have [in many ways] become truisms"; the view that "the individual…is preyed upon and entrapped by society, and that true freedom and fulfilment can only be gained by rejecting social pressures and by giving individuality uninhibited expression" (Mansfield, 2000, p. 18). These 'truisms' are certainly still present in contemporary Western culture in which a kind of 'treat yourself' mentality is often regarded as a solution for the stresses of modern life. The solution is often, rather superficially, to practice meditation, yoga, or to have 'spa breaks', or travel to exclusive retreats – to *literally* retreat from society in order to connect with some notion of the personal inner sanctum, the 'real' self. These practices, again, stress the importance of self-responsibility, whilst at the same time promoting an active participation in the culture of consumerism. These notions can also be seen as a facet of the self-help discourse so prevalent today, particularly in reality television, as further explored in the case studies of this thesis (see Chapter Five in particular).

Psychoanalysis and the Self

The notable British sociologist Nikolas Rose (1996) argues that the late nineteenth century emergence of psychology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and their related fields – what he calls the "psy" disciplines – have been rudimentary for the development of the ways in which we 'invent' ourselves today. Rose writes: "To speak of the invention of self is not to suggest that we are, in some way, the victims of a collective fiction or

delusion. That which is invented is not an illusion; it constitutes our truth" (1996, p. 3). However, the concept of 'truth' is obviously arbitrary and what has been deemed 'truthful' can just as well be described as a fallacy. Yet, Rose is right to conclude that the ideas of the formation of selfhood generate a kind of *subjective* reality. Drawing on Foucault's ideas of governmentality, Rose also links the burgeoning of 'psy' with the novel 'regimes of truth' of contemporary government; the ideal ways in which to conduct the conduct of selves and others. Perhaps, the most instrumental psychological theories and techniques for the formation of selfhood in Western culture can be found in psychoanalysis, which still holds a prominent role in the North American and West European socio-cultural imagination, as will be explored in Chapter Five. The governmental argument of post-Foucauldians, including Rose, is that "psychoanalysis is an instrument for making individuals recognize themselves in certain ways and thus be amenable for new forms of self-management" (Evans, 2000, p. 122). If this is the case, how does psychoanalysts view the 'self'? And in what ways is the psychoanalytic notion of selfhood influencing contemporary Western culture?

As Nick Mansfield (2000) maintains, '[n]o twentieth-century discussion of what the subject is and where it comes from has been untouched by the theories and vocabulary of Freudian [and post-Freudian] psychoanalysis" (p. 25). The Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) founded the psychoanalytic theoretical underpinnings and techniques, in which the notion of the subject focused, following Descartes and the Enlightenment thinkers, "on what is fundamental or underlying" (Bührmann, 2010, p. 16). However, in contrast to the Enlightenment thinkers, Freud found his concept of self in the unknown realm of the mind, the unconscious, and "rewrote our understanding of rationality and selfhood as shot through with emotional ambivalence, uncontrollable forces and unconscious anguish" (Elliott, 2014, p. 57). Freud found the foundation for the self in the private sphere and particularly in the nuclear family, which he regarded as "both the origin of self and the institution from which the self had to be liberated" (Illouz, 2008, p. 39). Indeed, one of Freud's most influential theories was his notion of the 'Oedipus complex', inspired by the Sophoclean drama *Oedipus Rex.* In brief, the Oedipus complex paints the mother as a symbolic object of desire for her child (which in Freud's writings is a *boy)*, and thus the father becomes a threat, in that he represents a 'romantic' rival for the mother's love, but also as he has the power to castrate the son (Storey, 2009, p. 97). This fear of castration, results in the child's eventual identification with the father, whose power is desirable. The danger of castration is also presented as real by the

'lacking' female body, which 'proves' that this emasculation has already been performed on others (Mansfield, 2000, p. 32). The girl, in Freud's view, is by contrast, defined by *penisneid* (penis envy), and as a result, women are in various ways looking to compensate for their 'lack' and by becoming mothers they can find fulfilment (Storey, 2009, p. 97). Consequently, for Freud, sexuality and sexual desire lie at the very core of the self, working as the "true engine of action" (Illouz, 2008, p. 49). These desires or "instincts" are somatic in origin, creating unconscious needs that seek the attention of the self's consciousness and require satisfaction (Flax, 1990, pp. 53-54). In this sense, most human actions are self-serving (narcissistic) in Freud's early writing as he regarded the self as closed off from its surroundings.[39] The function of social relations to the self in Freud's work is chiefly described in economic terms (Flax, 1990), in some ways mirroring the ideas of the *homo œconomicus* of classical liberalism.

Furthermore, the Freudian self is essentially split; the conscious side of the psyche only presents one version of the self, whereas one's 'true' self is hidden and repressed within. Freud's psychoanalysis consequently encourages introspection and analysis of everyday life – such as childhood memories, slips of the tongue, dreams, desires, and neuroses – to uncover this essence of selfhood. This notion of an inner self is still massively pervasive in contemporary thought and culture, and often appears in the form of knee-jerk platitudes in quotidian discourse. For instance, dreams are perpetually equated with sexual repression; 'Freudian slips' are regarded as revealing some deeper personal truth; and attacks on parent-child love as 'oedipal' (albeit jokingly) are not uncommon. The influence of psychoanalysis is particularly evident in popular culture, perhaps as it gave importance to the analysis of those things often marked as trivial. Eva Illouz (2008) convincingly asserts that psychoanalysis was so successful in assimilating itself into society and culture because it "tapped into the key concerns of modern identity" (p. 25, also see Chapter Five on female self work and 'psy'). Illouz (2008, pp. 35-36) continues:

> Freud formulated new cultural codes that, more than any other cultural system available at the time, could make sense of the transformation family, sexuality, and gender relationships had undergone during the

[39] Yet, as Jane Flax (1990) notes, Freud later contradicts himself by suggesting that the self is also "determined by the quality of its relations with others" (p. 55).

second half of the nineteenth century and provide new interpretative frames to organize these transformations.

This framework was further legitimised by its fabrication of a new vocabulary – "combin[ing] the tropes of popular healing and myth with the…language of medicine and scientific rationality" (ibid., p. 36). Indeed, it is through language that the maxims of psychoanalysis most obviously live on in Western culture, as the very fallibilistic 'slips of the tongue' of our contemporary narratives. Freud and psychoanalysis have often (and rightly so) been adjudged unscientific. As Anthony Elliott highlights, "it is almost impossible to prove that a part of the mind is split off from consciousness under the influence of repression" (2014, pp. 58-59). I will explore the influence of psychoanalytic ideas on language and issues of intimacy further in Chapter Five.

However, while Freud has an exceedingly "isolationist" view of the self, the (perhaps equally influential) French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) "positions the self in communication with others from the outset" (Elliott, 2014, p. 66). In his theory of the 'mirror stage', Lacan asserts that the "coming-into-being (*le devenir*) of the subject" is created when the infant first sees themself in a mirror and for the first time recognises their body as an object, a 'whole' ([1936] 2000, p. 45). This reflection and identification with the image create an "Ideal-I", an illusion of unity, which for Lacan demonstrates that the conception of self is formed in a relational setting from the start. In other words, the understanding of the self takes shape through an 'Other,' which in the mirror phase is the 'other' self, but later this understanding will be guided by 'other' Others. As Mansfield (2000) explicates: "Your selfhood – your subjective centre of gravity – is grounded outside of you, in the very field of images from which you first gained a sense of separation" (p. 43). In this sense, the Lacanian self is "radically *decentred*" (ibid., p. 43, emphasis in original). This 'I' is, like that of Freud, split between the conscious and unconscious, but for Lacan both the conscious and unconscious selves are essentially formed and "constituted through language" (Rose, J. [1982] 2000, p. 52). As Henriques et al. note, as "language is by definition a social system…Lacan is able to assert that the social enters into the formation of the unconscious," hence the Lacanian catchphrase "the unconscious is structured like a language" (1998, p. 208). Indeed, Lacan's concept of the illusory nature of selfhood – of the self as a product of language and reflected images, signs – proved exceedingly influential to the later postmodern

notions of the self in the latter half of the century, and indeed, notions of the gendered self.

Nevertheless, whilst the Lacanian theories were novel and influential, they were still following the trajectory of thought established by Freud, and thus fell into many of the same traps. Lacan, like Freud, stresses the importance of the Oedipus complex for the formation of selfhood, which is accompanied by a sense of constant 'lack' that needs fulfilment. Indeed, the psychoanalytic phallocentrism, both in the biological and symbolical sense, has led to many feminist theorists rejecting psychoanalysis as inherently sexist and essentialist (see for instance, de Beauvoir [1953] 1988; Butler [1990] 2001; Cixous, [1976] 2001; Mulvey [1976] 2001, further discussed in the following chapter). However, the later (relational) psychoanalysis of Lacan and his followers, was at the same time (and still is) attractive to feminist scholars – including those mentioned above – for moving away from intrinsic notions of gender identity/relations to something determined by socio-cultural systems, thus implying "that it is possible to escape the subordination of women inherent in Freud's recourse to biological difference" (Henriques et al. 1998, p. 212). Yet, the Lacanian self that is 'born' in the mirror is, as Jane Flax (1990) writes, "*alone*," the reflection is, albeit external, not an Other (p. 93). This, along with the general psychoanalyst urge of introversion and self-analysis, indicates that both Freud and Lacan overlook the importance of the larger social, political, and economical structures and milieus in which the concepts of selfhood emerge. As Jane Megan Northrop (2012, p. 71) writes:

> While Lacan's 'mirror stage' illuminates the inner tension between the psyche and the body image, which the mirror confuses in the notional formation of the self, his formulation confines this dialectic to the bounded self, in effect excluding the social dimensions that provide the settings from within which ideas of selfhood emerge and are informed.

However, Lacan and the linguistic turn in psychoanalysis have been both influenced by and have had influence on the more relational and socio-cultural understanding of the conception of selfhood in Western thought. Within this trajectory of ideas, the self is not (at least not solely) an innate entity, but the de facto product of social interaction and larger cultural and social assumptions and beliefs.

The Postmodern and Late Modern Self

In fact, in the West "[t]here is a [relatively] long tradition in philosophy of claiming that selfhood is socially constructed and self-experience intersubjectively mediated" (Zahavi, 2014, p. 10). In his work *Self and Other*, Dan Zahavi (2014) traces this development of the concept of the socially formed self through the writings of Hegel, to Royce, and later Mead and Foucault. The ideas of these thinkers have certainly been instrumental to the interactionist perspective, but I will also *add* to this trajectory in the remainder of this chapter.[40] As mentioned above, Hegel sees the self as created in relational settings, and argues that selfhood and self-consciousness exist "only in being acknowledged" by others (Hegel, [1807] 2001, p. 630). Indeed, Hegel is often given credit for the earliest conceptions of a social understanding of the self and subjectivity within Western thought. Similarly, in America, philosopher Josiah Royce (1855-1916) writes, in concurrence with Hegel, that "[n]obody amongst us…comes to self-consciousness …except under the persistent influences of [their] social fellows" (Royce, [1901] 1988, p. 112). Selfhood, for Royce, is "essentially social in nature because self develops only in a social context," thus arguing against the beliefs of the Enlightenment and individualism; that every 'I' exists in and for itself (Kegley, 1980, p. 37).

This line of thought, and Royce in particular, also had a fundamental impact on sociology at the turn of the century, influencing the thinkers of social constructionism with George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) in the fore. Mead also regards the self as a product of social interaction; something, which does not have an existence prior to relationships, "rather, it is better characterised as an eddy in the social current" (Zahavi, 2014, p. 10). For Mead, as Anthony Elliott (2014) observes, "language is at the very heart of the constitution of the self' (p. 31), which he sees as a vital aspect for the individual's ability to decipher the symbols that structure society and the notions of what it means to be a 'self'. Mead's theses can also be said to have laid the foundations for symbolic interactionism, a theoretical framework that views language and symbols as the "common currency through which individuals forge a sense of self and interact with other people"

[40] Important here is to reiterate that this is by no means a linear or complete outline of the ideas of the self, due to both limited space and scope, but the selection of texts will benefit the subsequent discussions.

(Elliott, 2014, p. 31). The ideas of the world and one's place within it thus become a result of personal as well as societal interpretations of certain linguistic and gestural symbols and their perceived value. By the middle of the century, Sociologist Erving Goffman (1922-1982) takes these concepts further by likening the construction of self to the theatre – to the ways in which an actor chooses and performs a role for an audience. Goffman (1956) maintains, that the self/actor puts on a "front" – appearance and manner – to indicate their affiliation to a certain socio-cultural group. He writes, "[w]hen an actor takes on an established social role, usually he [sic] finds that a particular front has already been established for it" (Goffman, 1956, p. 17). Hence, it is easier to, or perhaps necessary, to conform rather than rebel against the social performances that carry a certain social validity.[41] Writing at the very dawn of postmodernism, Goffman sees the self as a "situationally specific creation rather than an enduring essence" and proposes that the "[s]egregation of regions, times and places allows if not requires differential self-presentations" (Langman, 1991, p. 115). As such, he demonstrates the less stable and united sense of selfhood that began to emerge during the mid-twentieth century.

Perhaps these ideas of the self culminated during the decades after the Second World War, when chaos and devastation of warfare forced the questions of identity and what it means to be human to the forefront. Indeed, it was during this post-war period that "many theorists began to think of the self more as a product of culture than as its creator" (Barressi and Raymond, 2011, p. 51). This period, pervaded by question marks, caused French structuralist Roland Barthes [1968] (2001) to eventually declare 'the death of the author': the ending of the concept of the author as an isolated genius through which all queries about the text can be solved. Meanwhile Foucault (1968), building on Barthes, announces the 'death of the subject', explaining that the subject "is no longer the possessor of anything: not the possessor of [their] language, not of [their] consciousness, nor even of [their] knowledge" (Foucault as cited/translated in Schwartz, 2000, p. 191). Thus, Foucault investigates the truer meaning of the word 'subject' and what possessing a 'self' might entail by referring to his concept of governmentality, discussed earlier in this chapter.[42] Foucault explains, the subject who is considered a subject and granted a

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[41] This notion of 'role-playing' is also (later) found in feminist theory, most famously in Judith Butler's (1990) concept of performativity, in which gender and selfhood are described as born out of performances and discursive acts. These acts "on the outside congeal over time [through repetition] to create an illusion of self on the inside" (Elliott, 2014, p. 126).

[42] In addition, Foucault argues against the idea of innate selfhood and "was scathing in what he called the 'Californian cult of the self'…[i]n which the deciphering of sexual desire is treated as

self – “is ‘subjected’ – is he [sic] who obeys” ([1976] 1990, p. 85). Consequently, “the ‘self’ who participates in everyday social interaction can do so only though its recognition of certain cultural norms, values and ideals” (Abbinnett, 2003, p. 1). Only those who conform to the ideas of the selfhoods deemed admissible will be awarded full right of entry to mainstream society and culture and subsequently reap the benefits of that entry.

By the late twentieth century, with the upsurge of post-Fordism and global capitalism, postmodernism and its proponents began to “argue that the very notion of the autonomous subject is a myth or illusion” (Harvey Brown, 2003, p. 217). For postmodernists, like Foucault and Jacques Derrida, discourse and language constitute the basis of self-formation and what has been established as ‘true’ in the West. Drawing on Nietzsche, these thinkers view the subject as a result of Western discourse that situates a “doer” behind every “deed,” but as Nietzsche (1967) claims “there is no substratum; there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming” (as cited in Farrell Fox, 2003, p. 27). As a result, if our language, symbols, and ideas would crumble, then, as Foucault [1966] (2002) famously concludes in his *The Order of Things*, “man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea” (p. 422). In this sense the self is a decentred, fleeting, frangible (non)thing. Demonstrating that there has been a distinct change from finding selfhood in institutions and the community to locating it within individuals themselves – their experiences and choices. As Lauren Langman (1991, p. 119) explains:

> This is due to factors such as a decline of the public sphere except as amusement, greater mobility and transitory memberships in institutions, the fragmentation inherent in a plurality of social worlds, escape from the colonization of life world by impersonal forces, diffusion of a popular psychology with a ‘jargon of authenticity’ and self-realization.

Indeed, Nikolas Rose describes the postmodern self as “fragmented, multiple, [and] contradictory” (1996, p. 9), and Anthony Elliott suggests that “different selves can now be adopted and discarded at whim, as the modern task of painstaking identity construction

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revealing the essence of a true self” (Elliott, 2014, p. 98). Foucault saw the discussion of sex and sexuality in society as the basis for Western concepts of selfhood and why discourses of identity became so prevalent in the late twentieth century.

gives way to postmodern indifference, aloofness and scepticism" (2014, p. 154). Most famously, Frederic Jameson (1984) describes postmodernity and its culture as permeated by "flatness and depthlessness", a kind of "waning of affect" that sees feelings as "now free-floating and impersonal" (pp. 60-61). Nevertheless, Jameson suggests that the death of the "autonomous bourgeois monad" may point to "a liberation from [not only anxiety of 'finding' such a self, but] every other kind of feeling as well since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling" (ibid., pp. 63-64). Arguably, there never was such a (confined) self to begin with, apart from that formed through semantics. Jameson does of course not propose that *all* emotions and feelings have disappeared from postmodern culture, but he is rather suggesting the waning of the idea that such feelings (such as anxiety and hysteria, often associated with the 'modern' condition) emerge from within an isolated 'self'.

However, even though there has been a marked trend in scholarship on the decentring of the self, such views have by no means been left unchallenged. For instance, Derek Layder (2007) declares that the self and subjectivity need to be "rescued" from postmodernists and social constructionists who, he claims, turn selves into "stereotyped subjects or hollow puppets," which eventually "dissolve…into the diffuse play of social forces" (p. 12). However, the main points of postmodernism are not that individuals are 'hollow', but rather that discourse and society's inherent value system play a fundamental role in structuring that very interiority. As Audre Lorde [1981] (2007) argues, (albeit in relation to using white feminist theories to critique patriarchy and racism): "*The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*" (p. 112, emphasis in original). If the 'tools' – the language, the symbols, the perspectives – are symbiotic with a neoliberal, patriarchal, and individualistic setting, then the resulting 'construction' will, in one way or another, be conditioned accordingly. Grodin and Lindlof (1996) highlight instead that rather than being hollow, the postmodern "[s]elf becomes multivocal as we carry a number of voices with us" (p. 4). Indeed, since the boundaries between different socio-cultural settings, worldviews, and social groups shrink – through the technological advances of the Internet, personal tech, social media et cetera – there is a wider range of imaginable selfhoods in view. Sociologist Anthony Giddens's (1991) work on self-identity in the early 1990s, contends that the self has become a 'reflexive project,' that "all of us…live as though surrounded by mirrors; in [which] we search for the appearance of an unblemished, socially valued self" (p. 172). With his theory of the self as a 'reflexive project', Giddens proposes that the Western European and North American selves have

been detached from their "traditional identity markers" (Raisborough, 2011, p. 29), and as a consequence individuals are left to gather their sense of self as if choosing sweets at a pick n' mix stand.

Yet, by claiming that "we make ourselves" (1991, p. 68), Giddens's idea of self-formation appears to assume that all 'selves' are equal from the outset and that a self can be 'chosen' autonomously. Thus, projecting the "self as a 'blank slate'…unmarked by inscriptions of class, gender, [sexuality,] ethnicity and other social divisions" (Raisborough, 2011, p. 35). Many of the theorists prior to (but also anterior to) Giddens, including the aforementioned Mead, Goffman, and to some extent Foucault, often ignore that some individuals and social groups are born into privilege, which invalidates the Giddensian argument that 'we *make* ourselves' and exposes the essentialism of much of the mid- to late twentieth century theory (and before) on selfhood. The criticism against this *tabula rasa*-thinking is by no means new as demonstrated, for instance, by the work of Adkins, (2000); Cronin, (2000); McNay, (2000); Raisborough, (2011); and Skeggs, (2004). Indeed, in her book, *Class, Self, Culture*, Beverly Skeggs (2004) explores the manners in which "some cultural characteristics fix some groups and enable others to be mobile" (p. 1), focusing particularly on class and how social values impose limits on certain bodies. Drawing on Foucault, Skeggs writes:

> All new debates that take perspective on self-production, -monitoring, -responsibility, -reflexivity, etc., are premised upon the availability of, and access to, discourse and cultural resources, and the techniques and practices necessary for producing, but also knowing, a self.
>
> (p. 20)

In this sense, no perspectives on self-formation can be divorced from an individual's social context. Anne M. Cronin (2000) has convincingly put forward that we live in an era of "compulsory individuality" that frames "selfhood…both as a right and a duty" (p. 277). Using examples of advertisement campaigns (e.g. Nike's 'Just Do It'), Cronin demonstrates how current popular discourse stresses individuals' 'true' or 'inner' selves, which are expressed through consumption and personal 'lifestyle' choices.

In contemporary Western culture, the postmodernist and social constructionist ideas of self-formation through language and discourse are still relevant as indeed,

"language is [a] tool by which we are 'made'" (Barker, 1999, p. 31), as well as the filter through which we come to understand humanity. However, I concur with Susan Hekman (2014), who writes, that "[w]hat they [the linguistic constructionists] got wrong is the idea that language *alone* constructs reality: other constitutive factors were ignored" (p. 148, my emphasis). Perhaps, it is more accurate to describe the central elements of self-formation in our historical context as less dependent on direct social interaction and discourse, and more contingent on images and socio-cultural representations. In popular media culture there is a perpetual focus on individuals declaring who they 'really' are. For instance, Liesbet Van Zoonen (2013) has found, through her research on reality television, that amongst both reality TV partakers and their audiences, there is a preoccupation with authenticity, "whether candidates [are] 'themselves' or 'fake'" (p. 45), as I will further demonstrate in the case studies.[43] As a result, popular discourse assumes "the existence of one real self that *is* rather than a constructed multiple self that *does*" and the ultimate goal often becomes to locate 'true' selves that are monadic and unchanging (ibid., pp. 45-46, emphasis in original).

That the idea of this kind of unitary self is a fallacy becomes irrelevant in this world of "hyperreality," to borrow the term coined by Jean Baudrillard (1988). For Baudrillard, our time is no longer concerned with "imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself"; of creating simulacra – "models of the real without origin or reality" (1988, pp. 167, 166). Baudrillard uses the example of Disneyland to demonstrate how such "imaginary stations" are presented "in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact…the America surrounding it [is] no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation" (ibid., p. 172). Similarly, contemporary notions of selfhood are imagined as real: the signs and images we surround ourselves with become the extended version of who we 'truly' are. Consequently, as Harvey Brown suggests, when "the self largely *becomes* its presentations…people [are left] with the anxious task of forever discovering, or at least seeking, 'who I really am' (2003, p. 205, emphasis in original). At the same time, if there is no *real* self *there*, individuals have no possibility of ever filling that void, except through something more tangible, the outwardly observable – the body. Allison Phipps observes that "in Western neoliberal economies the body has become a symbol of

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[43] See Van Zoonen and Aslama (2006) for their analysis of the programme *Big Brother* and its candidates.

value and identity which is largely performed and developed via the purchase of products" (Phipps, 2014, p. 10). This development in the last two decades have been given a great deal of attention by scholars, particularly within cultural studies, and some suggest that we now live in a 'makeover culture' in which transformation and change are central (Jones, 2008; see also Chapter Four). In this sense, contemporary notions of selfhood become intertwined with neoliberal discourses of personal choice, individual responsibility, entrepreneurship, and particularly, as will be demonstrated in the following case studies, capital gain and profitability.

Persons in late modernity should possess a self, an identity, a personality, that is innate and individual, but at the same time locate this 'self' in the external world, in the world of consumption and within the neoliberal 'regimes of truth'. Indeed, Elizabeth Evans (2015, p. 42) argues that under neoliberalism words such as "[f]reedom, choice, and empowerment" that previously expressed values of political liberalism, have been inscribed with new meaning: *"freedom* to pursue individual ends from the state is emphasised, *choice* is understood as consumerism within the marketplace, whilst *empowerment* manifests itself through entrepreneurialism and consumerism" (my emphasis). Thus, while selves must conform to the values of Western culture, the choices made (e.g. concerning career, lifestyle, housing, location) must be demonstrated as freely chosen. Once again confirming the validity of Anne Cronin's argument of individuality and selfhood as "compulsory", the fact that individuals have "[n]o choice but to choose" (Cronin, 2000, p. 279). Yet, as underscored above, and eloquently expressed by the late Zygmunt Bauman: "all of us are doomed to the life of choices, but not all of us have the means to be the choosers" (1998, p. 86). Yet, while all selves are affected by these notions of selfhood, the gendered female self has become the epitome of this ideal, as I will demonstrate in the following chapters.

Contemporary scholarship on the self and identity in late modernity has been varied, but many have found evidence of the extensive impact of neoliberal ideas on current notions of selfhood. Some notable critics following this perspective have labelled these late modern selves as: 'self-regulating' (Miller and Rose, 1990), 'fragmented' (Giddens, 1991; Jameson, 1984) 'enterprising' (Rose, 1996), 'flexible citizens' (Ong, 1999), 'choosing subjects' (Dunn, 2004), 'neurotic' (Isin, 2004), 'entrepreneurial' (Foucault, 2008; Rose, 1996; and followers), 'branded' (Hearn, 2008), and 'self-surveilling' (Negra, 2009). These terms point to a wider development in the current socio-cultural and political setting; a development that sees the neoliberal free-market values

stressing competition and individualism seeping into the beliefs of what it means to possess, form, create, and maintain a 'self'. Arguably, it is in our culture that we learn which 'selves' are possible, idealised, or scorned.

As Eva Illouz highlights, "like traditional folktales or myths, media texts are cultural maps that help actors make sense of and orient themselves in a social order that is historically constituted" (2003, p. 111). Yet, good or bad, Western culture in the twenty-first century is characterised by imagery and signs, and "[b]ecause these images are typically commodified, and represented through mass media, surface tends to triumph over depth" (Harvey Brown, 2003, p. xix). Within this socio-economic climate, individuals are encouraged to compete against each other – against *envisioned* others – in order to form a 'perfect' self. This self must be "able to withstand the tidal forces of the market-economy through flexibility and enterprise" (Raisborough, 2011, pp. 11-12). Thus, in the Baudrillardian sense, the neoliberal notions and images of selfhood stressing choice, authenticity, and interiority are mere simulacra – building onto something that was never there to begin with. Western popular cultures (particularly reality television, social media platforms, and advertisements) are permeated by glamorised images of beauty, 'flawlessness', success, fitness, 'food porn', makeovers, entrepreneurship, and celebrities. These images become symbols for lifestyles made obtainable through commodification, competition, and emulation. The juxtaposition of selfhood both being innate and at the same time malleable and subject to 'upgrading' is normalised and integrated into the quotidian discourse and symbolism of cultural texts. This creates a kind of inflation of an ideal self, with a market that creates, through its ever-evolving supply of new symbols and signs, a constant demand for a better and improved 'self.' Subsequently this results in an understanding of the formation of selfhood that is immersed in the 'American Dream' narrative of personal responsibility and self-governance, where the ideal or pinnacle of selfhood is always in need of a tweak and hence, eternally out of reach.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored and defined the main concepts to which this thesis will return throughout: neoliberalism and selfhood. As I have mentioned, I believe it is important to not simply refer to such deeply complex terms without offering their socio-historical

framework. In this way, I want to avoid simply taking their existence and ideological implications for granted, without trying to define these concepts' (blurry) outlines. In terms of neoliberalism, this chapter has explored its theoretical underpinnings and I have subsequently framed my own understanding of the term and how it will be used throughout this text. Rather than approaching neoliberalism in praxis, I am interested in the ways in which such market-centered and individualising sentiments have influenced the cultural conjuncture and the very notion of self and self-formation. As I adopt a more postmodern perspective of the self as formed through clusters of social, cultural, economic, and historical discourses and narratives, it becomes particularly interesting to explore how neoliberal sentiments and logics might impact the ways in which the self is understood and represented today.

However, I am not only fascinated by the self in (gender)neutral terms, but I am specifically intrigued by the *female* self, as it in this context, becomes subjugated to both patriarchal and neoliberal rationalities as I note in the Introduction. The current female self, as I will argue, therefore has to consider both the demands placed on subjects/citizens under neoliberal rationality (in culture) as well as the performativity of womanhood and femininity. I will discuss these topics in the next chapter by firstly establishing the trajectory of the female self in feminist thought and how it might be conceptualised today. Secondly, I will then use television texts to exemplify how such ideas of female selfhood have been modeled in the cultural imaginary since the medium's conception. This will then lead to Chapter Three in which I will explore the element of popular culture that, arguably, most evidently engages in neoliberal capitalist discourse – reality television – and the ways in which the genre calls upon the self to perform and encapsulate certain 'truths' of selfhood in the Western socio-cultural context. Yet, as the following chapters will discuss, there are some (hopeful) limits to the supposedly all-encompassing dystopian influences of these cultural narratives, demonstrated by audiences' possible resistance and agency.

CHAPTER TWO

The Female Self in Feminist Thought and Television

In the previous chapter I offered a trajectory of what has been termed 'neoliberalism' as well as a compendious outline of the notions of self and selfhood in Western thought, focusing in particularly on the modern and late modern self. By prefacing ideas of the 'self' with neoliberal rationality and discourse I hope to have highlighted some of the reverberations this ideology has had on the understandings of selfhood *de nos jours*.[44] Yet, it is important to note, as does Elspeth Probyn, that "[a]s an object, the self has been…normally left in a neutered 'natural' state, the sex of which is a barely concealed masculine one" (1993, p. 2).[45] As such, the Western idea of the *female* self has largely been, if at all acknowledged, given secondary value in the highly binary categorisation of sex and gender. Yet, if the self – as unitary, axiomatic, and authentic – is a fantasy (as argued in the previous chapter), then the idea of a distinctly 'female self' seems equally oxymoronic. Such a suggestion, derived from the ideas of postmodern thinkers, has been widely debated in feminist theory and will be outlined to some extent below.

It is interesting that surprisingly few scholarly texts have been wholly dedicated to exploring the representation of the female self *specifically* and the ways in which it has been perceived over time. Therefore, it seems logical, if not imperative, to offer a trajectory of feminist thought on the feminal self as a way of introducing the following case studies in this thesis. Even though, as Morwenna Griffiths writes: "There is no neutral, non-theoretically loaded, way of describing the particular perspective of an

[44] However, as Raisborough (drawing on Honneth, 2004) underscores, one must not view "self-transformation as a tool strategically developed by a neoliberal progressive agenda. Rather than the result of a 'deliberate strategy', self-transformation and self-realisation have a longer and quite diverse history which has been gradually appropriated or 'transmuted' to become an ideology of neoliberalism" (2011, p. 13). Thus, it is fundamental to not solely contribute these developments to the proliferation of neoliberalism, which has nonetheless had a profound impact, as I will argue in this thesis.

[45] This is by no means a new idea – as demonstrated by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* [1953] (1988) originally published in French. For further discussions on this, see also Nikolas Rose (1996), who has highlighted that the universal idea of the self is built on "an image of the male subject whose 'universality' is based on its suppressed other" (Rose, 1996. p. 6), and Skeggs (2004) and Skeggs and Wood (2012) who discuss class in relation to notions of personhood.

individual" (1995, p. 58), attempting to identify what constitutes an *ideal* self offers invaluable insights into our culture. Therefore, although the essentially *female* self is a chimera, it is still possible to draw out a silhouette of a culturally and contextually specific *beau idéal* of woman(self)hood. In this discussion, the investigation of the *female* self is of particular interest as "young women [and I would argue *all* women to various degrees have] become a focus for the construction of an ideal late modern subject who is self-making, resilient, and flexible" (Harris, 2004, p. 6). Indeed, as Gill and Scharff argue, "to a much greater extent than men, women are required to work on and transform the self, to regulate every aspect of their conduct, and to present all their actions as freely chosen" (2011, p. 7, see also discussion in the Introduction). This is caused by late (neoliberal) capitalism in which *all* subjects are taught the values of competition, individualism, and other capitalist logics. However, Western societies, with some exceptions, are patriarchal and heteronormative,[46] and thus, comparison and competition between female selves for male validation and/or self-worth are normalised. In this sense, women are subjugated in double measure, even though some resistance is possible. Consequently, this thesis will particularly pivot on and analyse the conceptions and portrayals of women selves in popular culture, and the conceivable implications of such convictions specifically targeting individuals identifying or passing as 'female'.

While any definitions of feminist movements or strands are unstable and often contradictory, this chapter will still offer a broad outline of the defining features of the feminist (so-called) waves; focusing particularly on the post-1990 period – third wave feminism, postfeminism, and neoliberal feminism – which have formed a part in effectuating the understanding of female selfhood in the cultural texts of the present. Whether through acceptance or rejection of feminist thought. Nevertheless, even though I utilise the 'wave' metaphor to describe the loosely wave-like changes in feminist thought, I am weary of this terminology and would like to highlight the myriad feminist standpoints (many contradictory) at the various stages of these feminist 'waves' (see Laughlin, et al., 2010; Nicholson, 2010).[47] I do, however, find it useful to follow other

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[46] In other words, the power is unequal between men and women/non-binary people – within social and political institutions, the job market, and industries – and heterosexual relationships are considered the norm and preferred sexual orientation.

[47] Several scholars have problematised the use of a 'wave' narrative altogether (see Gillis, Howie, and Munford, 2007; Henry, 2004; and Springer, 2002). Particularly damning is Kimberley Springer's critique, as she argues that the "wave model perpetuates the exclusion of women of color from women's movement history and feminist theorizing" by basing the emergence of new 'waves' on mainly white, US-based, feminist activism and thought (2002, p. 1063). Nevertheless,

feminist scholars in trying to conceptualise the different feminist ideologies by naming them, as long as the terminology and definitions are made clear. Consequently, I do refer to various feminist movements in a rather singular, unitary way for the purpose of making clear arguments in this text.

These feminist ideologies with their socio-cultural reverberations have had (to various extents) an impact on how female selfhood has been understood in the cultural imaginary, as I will demonstrate. I will therefore juxtapose the various ideas in feminist theory and mainstream media with the representations of women in popular culture. I am particularly interested in the television as a medium, as it has been, and arguably still is (including video-on-demand services) "the principal circulator of the cultural mainstream" (Gitlin, 1986, p. 3). Therefore, the following sections will explore the ways in which feminist ideas might have affected popular culture and televisual texts of their time.[48] The chapter will subsequently explore the social contexts of certain televisual representations and, in turn, which female selves have been (and are) idealised. As I look at televisual representations in particular, the timeline will begin in the post-1950s, which is when women began appearing on television with more frequency. I am also, as mentioned in the Introduction, using examples from the US context specifically, both to narrow the scope but also to reflect the chosen case studies of this thesis, all of which are produced in the US.

Nevertheless, the juxtaposition of feminist thought, and televisual texts below might appear jarring at times, as I go back and forth between theory and television history, but pairing ideology with its contemporary cultural texts offers new insights to how the two are intertwined in popular culture. And how or why certain representations of female selves might have been chosen over others. This brief summary of the more mainstream feminist theory along with the women seen on TV will also be useful in offering a background to the female selves idealised in the reality television texts that will be explored in the following three chapters of the thesis.

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while Springer is right, I concur with Elizabeth Evans and Prudence Chamberlain's (2015) argument that the dispute over using the wave metaphor is rather unhelpful. Instead, they suggest "that feminists should engage in a constant critique of the shifting discourses and wider strategic implications surrounding the waves; an on-going critique that accepts both the limitations and opportunities that the wave narrative offers" (ibid., p. 396).

[48] For an excellent collection of essays on the historical relationship between women and television, see Moseley, Wheatley, and Wood (2017).

Second Wave Feminism

In order to understand the ways in which the female self might be approached theoretically, the following statement by Lorraine Code will serve as a useful point of departure:

> [A] viable feminist analysis has to start from a recognition that selves/subjects are always embodied and situated – always gendered, raced, and otherwise multiply identified – and details of their specificity and positioning are germane to understanding how they are, as human selves/subjects, thrown together and thrown into a complex, rich, challenging, often intractable world, both human and other-than-human.
>
> (2011, p. 717)

Subsequently, even though selves are socially – linguistically, visually, and even viscerally – constructed, the historical, geographical, cultural, and corporeal factors form the basis of which types of selfhood are within the realms of possibility (even though the current paragon of selfhood is presented as attainable to all who wish to claim it). Such circumstantial factors also determine the potential worth and validity of a person. As such, an individual born with a female reproductive system is generally taught the correct ways of displaying femininity and thus always has to relate to that knowledge.[49]

The ideas of female selfhood and womanhood have been one of the main concerns in feminist thought since the movements' conception. The first-wave Western feminists of the early nineteenth and late twentieth centuries fought for women to have the same legal and political rights as men (e.g. suffrage). They consequently challenged the notion that only individuals characterised as male can achieve selfhood and become citizens. The chief goal for these feminists was for women to be able to claim the autonomous, unified self, born out of the Enlightenment; even though such a self "has in practice been

[49] This point is important as women cannot be separated from the materiality of their body the same way as (cis) men can – the female body has often formed the basis for gender discrimination (such matters as maternity leave, abortion, menstruation, breastfeeding etc – while not applicable to all women – are still central in many fights for equality). As such it is important to not overlook the materiality of the body in feminist discussions, whilst at the same time avoiding essentialist discourse of the body and sex determining womanhood. Especially as the materiality is also shaped by cultural practices (see Butler, [1993] 2001).

available only to a very specific class of men in white affluent societies" (Code, 2011, p. 717). Therefore, women hoping to achieve such a self would have to be equally privileged. However, with the 1960s second wave of feminism, the focus, while still concerned with civil rights and equality, shifted to include the workplace, family life, sexuality, and reproductive rights. The second wave feminists, with some exceptions, "emphasised and valorised…the differences between men and women…[and] separate and distinct sexual identities were asserted" (Hekman, [1999] 2013, p. 6). Joanne Hollows (2000) states that many feminists of the time, such as Mary Daly (1979), Andrea Dworkin (1981), and Susan Griffin (1981) were reinforcing the idea of innate gender differences (e.g. women = maternal, versus men = violent and megalomaniac), which, arguably, did not serve the feminist cause. Thus, whilst the female self was defined as uniquely female/feminine, it was still characterised by its relationship or opposition to its male 'counterpart' – as was evident in the portrayal of women on television at the time.

The early televisual representations of women in the 1950s and the 1960s were usually exceedingly focused on the supposed innate feminine qualities of women and the female characters were most commonly placed within the conventional, nuclear family home. The perhaps most famous and successful US television show with female protagonists at the time was *I Love Lucy,* which aired on CBS from 1951 to 1960 (see Figure 1). The series centres on the quotidian, slapstick comical happenings in the lives of New Yorkers Lucy and her husband Ricky, and their landlords and close friends Ethel and Fred. Although Lucy and Ethel have central roles, "much of their time...is spent in a 'battle of the sexes' against their husbands," and frequently, "in stereotypical female behaviour, [they] could be catty to each other" (Sprangler, 1989, p. 15). Indeed, by looking at the show from a 'modern' perspective one will certainly find obvious misogyny, clichés, and sexism, but at the time one can assume that it might have been liberating for female viewers to see a beautiful character like Lucy (Lucille Ball) being funny and not fearful of looking or acting silly.

Figure 1. Vivian Vance as Ethel and Lucille Ball as Lucy in *I Love Lucy*, 1952 (McCune, 2017).

Lucy often attempt to break away from her domesticity in humorous ways, but her attempts will always "ultimately fail and [she] will be restored to her place in the domestic sphere, the thoroughly *active* nature of her character is [therefore] amusing rather than threatening" (Dow, 1996, emphasis in original). Arguably, most television programmes of the 1950s and 1960s were influenced by the conventional views of female selfhood and female relationships as characterised by "women's jealousies of one another, especially related to their competition for men; their 'yackety-yack' with each other; and their idling away of time" (Johnson, 1996, p. 80). It was not until the late 1960s and 1970s, at the height of the women's liberation movement that these views began to alter, which by and by led to certain changes in the portrayal of women in popular culture. Some notable televisual examples include *That Girl* (1966-1971), in which a young woman tries to make it as an actor in New York City; *Maude* (1972-1978) whose middle-aged, female protagonist is not afraid of expressing her liberal, feminist views; and *Julia* (1968-1972), with the first African-American woman in a non-stereotypical role. Through the ideas proffered by second wave feminism, feminist film, and television criticism also gained a foothold in academia and in some public spheres. Pressing on the oft-quoted feminist catch line "the personal is the political," these feminists "sought to critique the 'two sphere' mythos that private and public life were somehow divided, with the housewife in the private space of the home and politics as a public and male domain" (Brunsdon and Spigel, 2008, p. 7). Angela McRobbie has referred to this period as one of "angry repudiation" (1999, p. 47), in which feminists demanded structural changes and

new kinds of female representations where women are not the passive objects of the judging and voyeuristic gaze of the male viewer (Mulvey, [1975] 2001).

The Mary Tyler Moore Show (1970-1977; see Figure 2) was one of the first television series conceivably affected by this change, depicting a world in which the female protagonist Mary and her working female friends "leave home, earn their living, and remain single" (Bathrick, 1984, p. 101). The most notable female characters in the programme are Mary and Rhoda, who support each other through crises, encourage each other to be more self-confident and, "as career women, their talk occasionally goes beyond the stereotypical social and family matters" (Sprangler, 1989, p. 17). Mary is portrayed as a fun, independent, and (later in the series) successful business*woman*, in other words, she is presented as a model for career-driven women but nonetheless nonthreatening to her male colleagues. This narrative can be seen as the precursor to the essentially non-threatening female work of the Kardashians, discussed in Chapter Five. *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* does contain some acknowledgement of contemporary feminist discourse, such as freedom of choice and equal opportunities, but arguably in a more watered-down version. As Bonnie J. Dow notes, *Mary Tyler Moore*, as a sitcom, is ultimately:

> …a historically situated collection of rhetorical choices that attempted to combine the marketability of single womanhood with the timeliness of feminism…[while trying] to avoid the most controversial aspects of feminist rhetoric, that is, those requiring the most fundamental change in norms of thought and action.
>
> (1996, p. 51)

Figure 2. Mary Tyler Moore on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (Lyons, 2017).

The feminism of these types of shows in the 1970s was therefore focused on lifestyle choices whilst still conforming to ideas of female selfhood defined by feminine attributes and 'natural' female psychology and behaviour (albeit in a new setting).

Another noteworthy television show centred on women is *Laverne and Shirley* (1976-1983), whose main characters, like Mary and Rhoda, are working women and perpetually support each other's endeavours. The episodes generally "reflect concerns about holding a factory job, making it as an independent woman, and dealing with friends and relatives in the process of developing a life of one's own" (Nill, 2014). Both *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Laverne and Shirley* therefore demonstrate the achievements and more positive images of women in media, mainly attributed to the women's liberation movement and the successes of second wave feminism. These developments in the portrayals of women in popular culture were regarded as fundamental to achieve societal changes, as "television can...provide rare insight into alternative ways of living in the world," consequently demonstrating to female audiences that there are other possibilities (yet rather limited) for women outside the home (Hammer and Kellner, 2007, p. ix). Nevertheless, it is worth noting, as does David Gauntlett (2008), that on the whole, the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s was largely ignored on the small screen. Kaitlynn Mendes (2011) has found that many journalistic publications of the time (in the US and the UK), de-legitimised feminist activists by referring to them as "deviants – as lesbians, man-haters, bra-burners and aggressive women…and thus warned women they would be labelled subversive if they challenged patriarchal gender roles" (p. 70). Consequently, feminism and its associated ideas did not sit comfortably in the collective

consciousness nor the contemporary cultural portrayals of women. The consequent stereotypes of what it means to call oneself a 'feminist' were largely shaped during this period, and even today the label 'feminist' is often rejected by young women due to its negative connotations,[50] although perhaps this has changed with popular celebrities using the term as part of their self-branding and messages of empowerment, for example Beyoncé and Emma Watson.

However, there were some feminist texts of the mid-twentieth century that had a more marked mainstream impact. Indeed, one of such texts is *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), whose author, Betty Friedan, is often regarded as one of the central figures in the mid-century American women's movement. Friedan's book sparked a lot of debate surrounding the position of women in society – famously declaring that the role of the housewife makes women miserable. Friedan's work has been widely criticised, particularly due to its 'false universalism' (discussed later in this chapter), but interestingly for the purposes here, she finds much of her evidence of a detrimental feminine ideal (or mystique) in popular culture and advertising (Hollows, 2000). Subsequently, Friedan represents the large number of writers in the 1960s and early 1970s, anxious about the apparently harmful effects of certain cultural texts.[51] Indeed, in the 1940s the Frankfurt School thinkers, with Adorno and Horkheimer in the forefront, worried that television, as a cog in the machine of the "culture industry," would encourage passivity and conformity among the masses; duping its audiences into taking its 'facts' and depictions at face value (Adorno and Horkheimer, [1947] 2001). Such beliefs were largely pervasive in the early years of media and television studies – if not still today – but could (and cannot) explain the popularity of texts whose 'encoded' meanings might not have been compatible with the viewers' experiences and values (Hall, [1973] 1993). Yet, during the so-called second wave, "it was common for feminists to claim that a whole range of popular forms and practices – from romance-reading to dressing up – locked women into feminine identities which made them blind to, and collude in, their own oppression" (Hollows, 2000, p. 20). Thus, the early feminist television criticism, partly

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[50] Christina Scharff's (2012) study in which she interviews young women in the United Kingdom and Germany who mainly reject the term despite recent (re)burgeoning of feminist activism. Yet, while the 'F-word' might be called into question and those who claim it are "told they are as extinct as dinosaurs, feminists are simultaneously depicted as if they more or less rule the world", as pointed out by Redfern and Aune (2010).

[51] Although it is worth noting that this kind of thinking has not fully disappeared in television studies (and beyond) in present-day academia.

influenced by Friedan among others, was primarily focused on counting the number of women on screen and pointing out the supposed harmful representations of female characters through content analysis without necessarily taking the 'real' female viewer into account.

However, since the end of the 1970s, feminist scholars have moved towards discussing television (and audiences) "as something more than a bad object, something that offers a series of lures and pleasures, however limited the repertoire of female roles" (Brunsdon, D'Acci and Spigel, 1997, p. 1). This debate, what Merri Lisa Johnson (2007) has termed the "pleasure wars" (p. 6), among cultural, film, media, and television studies scholars, "characterises work on audiences [and television research at large] and is one we can continue to argue today" (Gorton, 2009a, p. 15). Arguably, this academic divide emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, when media scholars, such as such as Ien Ang (1985, 1996), Jacqueline Bobo (1995), Charlotte Brunsdon (1995), John Fiske (1989a, 1989b), Christine Geraghty (1991), Stuart Hall [1973] (1993), Dorothy Hobson (1982), Tania Modleski (1982), David Morley (1980), and Janice Radway (1984), "rejected the Frankfurt School's dismissal of the passively manipulated consumers and audiences and argued [that they are]...capable of differential uses, and of imbuing meanings into such uses which may even point toward transgression and resistance" (Chen, 2013, p. 447).[52] Ien Ang (1985) for instance, famously studied the exceedingly popular TV soap opera *Dallas* (1978-1991) and found that women experienced pleasure in the "emotional realism" of the show (p. 87), and thus argued that these pleasures become more important than the show's conservative ideology and also have the potential of being emancipatory.[53] Other televisual texts of the time inspired academic research that came to similar conclusions (see Kathleen Rowe's, 1995, study on the sitcom *Roseanne,* 1988-1997, 2018-present, and the pleasures of the 'unruly woman,' and Hobson's, 1982, work on the British soap opera *Crossroads,* 1964-1988, 2001-2003) that stress the impossibility of ever predicting audiences' readings of texts. The examples above also point to the fact that early feminist television studies often focused on soap operas and other genres

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[52] These critics are all interested in the ways in which audiences, readers, and consumers engage with popular media texts, although with different focal points. Radway investigates the female readers of romance novels, whereas Bobo, Fiske, Hall, and Modleski, offer wider perspectives on popular culture, investigating a combination of either literature, film, television, and/or journalistic texts. Ang, Brunsdon, Gerghty, Hobson, and Morley on the other hand, pay a closer attention to the television as a medium specifically.

[53] See also Katz and Liebes' (1985) work on the cross-cultural audiences of *Dallas.*

considered 'feminine'. This, in turn, suggests that women mainly engage with 'women's genres' while simultaneously, as Hollows notes, ignoring the male audience (2000, p. 108). Furthermore, as Ang and Hermes (1996) claim, "the a priori assumption that there is a continuous field of experience shared by all women and only by women tends to naturalise sexual difference and to universalise culturally constructed and historically specific definitions of femininity and masculinity" (as cited in Hollows, 2000, p. 108). These assumptions need to be problematised in order for feminist television (audience) criticism to be productive and, essentially, feminist.

Obviously, the above-mentioned television critics were part of a larger debate on how academics should approach cultural texts and audiences and were unsurprisingly not always in agreement. Furthermore, the mentioned scholars were to differing degrees influenced by postmodern thought in which categories and notions previously taken for granted were called into question. In terms of feminism then, the work of Ang, Bobo, Brunsdon, Hobson, Modleski, and Radway in particular, cited earlier, "validated the significance of frequently delegitimated cultural products while seeking to understand how they may have at once reinforced patriarchy and opened the door to feminist empowerment" (Levine, 2015, p. 3). Indeed, I will follow these scholars in their emphasis on the cultural importance of studying the *popular* in this thesis. As postmodernism proved to be so pivotal for feminist thought within the academe, the next section will investigate how ideas of female selfhood were challenged as a result. Exploring postmodern feminist thought in greater detail will frame my own philosophical approach to female selfhood in this thesis.

Postmodern Feminism

In 1988, Linda Alcoff published her article 'Cultural Feminism Versus Post-structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory', claiming that the central dissension among feminist academics during the mid- to late twentieth century revolved around the meaning of the ideas, attributes, and definitions of 'woman'. This text is significant as it is, in Hekman's [1999] (2012) words, "an important touchstone" in the feminist debates on female subjectivity in the 1980s and 1990s (p. 3). I will thus use the article as a springboard for further discussion. The article is also one of the few feminist texts that offers an outline (albeit brief) of feminist notions of selfhood, which is why

Alcoff's article will be explored in some detail here. Alcoff, perhaps over-simplistically, identifies two dominant strands of feminist thought – cultural and post-structural feminism – in which the proponents of the former wish to offer a new understanding of womanhood (rather than building on the definitions conceived by men) and the latter, the post-structural feminists, seek to do away with a definition of 'woman' altogether.[54] Alcoff herself does not appear to side with either school of thought, arguing that the two strands ultimately offer a choice between "essentialism" and "nominalism" (1988).[55] Cultural feminism's "belief in an innate 'womanhood'", Alcoff suggests, ultimately indicates that it is possible for women to be deemed "inferior or not 'true' women" (p. 414). Consequently, advancing "essentialist formulations of womanhood, even when made by feminists, 'tie' the individual to her identity as a woman and thus cannot represent a solution to sexism" (p. 415).

Poststructuralism on the other hand, Alcoff writes, claims that "[w]e are constructs – that is, our experience of our very subjectivity is a construct mediated by and/or grounded on a social discourse beyond (way beyond) individual control" (p. 416). She seems to agree somewhat with this thesis of social influence, but later claims that she opposes the times "when they [the "poststructuralists"] seem totally to erase any room for [manoeuvre] by the individual within a social discourse or set of institutions" (p. 417). She continues: "If gender is simply a social construct, the need and even the possibility of a feminist politics become immediately problematic…How can we speak out against sexism as detrimental to the interests of women if the category is a fiction?" (p. 420). Of course, this would be a valid point, if her argument was not based on a misconception or at least a simplification, of these theories. Indeed, even though the categories of identity, such as 'woman', might be fictional, that fictitiousness is still, despite being constructed, a reality that societies adhere to. For instance, a house constructed by brick and mortar does not cease to exist nor does its materials become less real, simply because one is aware of, or highlights, the separate parts that bring it into existence.

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[54] More specifically, Alcoff identifies Mary Daly, Alice Echols, and Adrienne Rich as the forerunners in cultural feminist thought. In turn, post-structuralist feminists, e.g. Julia Kristeva and to some extent Teresa de Lauretis, build their theories on French thinkers such as Lacan, Derrida, and Foucualt (Alcoff, 1988). Interestingly, Alcoff lumps the three latter-mentioned Frenchmen together despite their very diverse critical theses. Thus, for Alcoff and others (see Smith, 1988), this divided feminist debate has been largely geographical with the more essentialist 'cultural' feminist position originating from the Anglo-American context, whereas the post-structural position is generally regarded to have been developed in France.

[55] For ease, I have categorised some thinkers, sometimes referred to as poststructuralists, as 'postmodernists' here – which I use as a broader concept.

Indeed, by returning to Foucault's ideas and the 'postmodern' notions of selfhood, discussed in the previous chapter, it becomes clear that doing away with universalism and absolute truths does not remove 'reality' nor the possibility for resistance. For instance, Margaret A. Maclaren (2013) cites Foucault's concept of 'reverse discourses', arguing that this concept "captures the idea that although identity categories may be imposed upon individuals, individuals may in turn use the identity to transform the category itself" (p. 227). In this sense, the category of 'woman' can, in its constructedness, be reversed or redefined to become more fluid and even have the possibility to resist the patriarchal order from within. This argument becomes equally important when analysing the possible effects of media, as highlighted by the cultural studies scholars of the 1980s and 90s referenced above. However, the debate between postmodernist feminism and cultural feminism as described by Alcoff continued well into the 1990s and third wave feminism[56] and has perhaps most famously been considered by Seyla Benhabib and Judith Butler who have come to represent this disputation of the question of (female) selfhood. Their discussion is outlined in *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (1995), along with the critiques of Drucilla Cornell and Nancy Fraser.

Judith Butler (especially 1990, [1993] 2001, 2004) has come to personify the postmodern feminist position, although she is by no means the first or only scholar to have suggested that, like the self, gender as a category is neither intrinsic nor stable.[57] Butler's most oft-quoted dictum is her idea of the performativity of gender, which she claims was inspired by Jacques Derrida's reading of 'Before the Law' by Franz Kafka (1999, p. xiv). In her *Gender Trouble,* Butler describes gender as a series of repeated performances through which "the anticipation of a gendered essence produces that which it posits as outside itself" (ibid., p. xv). Famously she uses drag to explain the ways in which parodies of gender demonstrate that there is no original essence behind the performance. The use of drag as a theoretical example has been criticised by many scholars who suggest that such texts "show very little concern for the individuals who live, work, and identify themselves as drag queens, transsexuals, or transgenderists" (Namaste, 2000, p. 9). Essentially, the argument goes, the theory remains 'theoretical' without taking the materiality of the real people living in society into consideration. Yet,

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[56] Here I follow Elizabeth Evans (2015) who considers the early 1990s as the starting point of third wave feminism and the early 2010s as its end.
[57] See de Beauvoir [1953] (1988), Flax (1987), Haraway [1985] (2001), Hekman (1990, 2014), McRobbie (1994), Shildrick (1997) to name a few.

in her 1999 preface to *Gender Trouble,* Butler explains that she utilises the notion of drag to:

> …show that the naturalized knowledge of gender operates as a pre-emptive and violent circumscription of reality. To the extent the gender norms…establish what will and will not be intelligibly human, what will and will not be considered to be 'real', they establish the ontological field in which bodies may be given legitimate expression.
>
> (p. xxiii)

In this sense a less fixed, and particularly binary, notion of gender would benefit all individuals in the body politic, especially those who are placed at the margins of the prevailing gender spectrum. However, the key criticism of postmodern feminism, which ties into the critique of Butler above, is that these works preclude "the possibility of a feminist politics of resistance" (Hekman, 2014, p. 118). Benhabib, who is here positioned as the antagonist to postmodernism and its potential benefits to feminist thought, refutes the idea of the self's nonexistence: "I want to ask how in fact the very project of female emancipation would even be thinkable without such a regulative principle on agency, autonomy, and selfhood?" (Benhabib, 1995, p. 21). For Benhabib, and others, "it [is] hard to imagine the discursively constituted subject possessing agency because they [assume] that agency can only be established through recourse to a prediscursive 'I'" (Hekman, 2014, p. 120). Similarly, Nancy Hartsock (1990) appears to interpret the advent of the postmodern (female) self as a wider conspiracy when she asks: "Why is it that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic" (p. 163). This question is indeed reasonable, but as Judith Halberstam (1991) notes, Hartsock's answer lies in her very own question. The historical timing of the 'death of the subject' *reflects* the inclusion of marginal voices. Thus, as Halberstam writes, the "concept of the unified bourgeois subject…has been shot through with otherness and can find no way to regroup or reunite the splinters of being, now themselves part of a class, race, and gender configuration" (ibid., p. 448).

Thus, even though Butler and other postmodern feminists have been lambasted for supposedly denying their (theoretical) female subject agency, their theories ultimately suggest the opposite. As Anderson argues, the self as formed through language and norms "opens up the possibility of their re-articulation and transformation, a process with an

uncertain outcome, which may or may not be subversive" (2007, p. 143). Subsequently, perhaps the anxiety over postmodern feminism and the 'I's' prospect of agentic action is based on a "misunderstanding of the notion of autonomy", as suggested by Linda Barclay (2000, p. 54). Barclay proposes that once "we understand that autonomy does not imply the simple shedding of social influence but the ability to fashion a certain response to it, then social determinism does not entail that autonomy is an illusion" (ibid., p. 55). This ultimately demonstrates that postmodernism can indeed offer important, if not fundamental, insights into how feminism should understand the *female* self, and by extension, how I approach it philosophically in this text. Indeed, the anti-essentialist notion that to be a person – regardless of gender – is governed by language and sociality, is just as frightening as it is (potentially) emancipatory. Postmodernism subsequently unveils that after the death of (the modernist) man, feminists must "construct a new way of defining subjects, agency, politics, and knowledge" (Hekman, 2014, p. 127). Yet, as Mary Poovey so pertinently observes:

> The challenge for those of us who are convinced both that real historical women do exist and share certain experiences *and* that deconstruction's demystification of presence makes theoretical sense is to work out some way to think both women and 'woman.' It isn't an easy task.
>
> (1988, pp. 52-53)

Therefore, as Angela McRobbie (1994) underscores, it becomes important to not regard the conflict within feminism of the 1990s "as a process of political dismemberment" (p. 141), or as a moment of "crisis" (Alcoff, 1988). Such misnomers overlook the positive and even productive nature of the debate (Smith, 1988) and places the discussions in a system of binaries – of innate/constructed, reality/fiction, right/wrong – that rather ironically negates the project advanced by postmodernism. As Elizabeth Flynn (2002) suggests, many scholars critical of postmodern feminism have argued that postmodernists "*oppose* modern intellectual and social traditions or *repudiate* the sciences or other Enlightenment projects" (p. 13, my emphasis).[58] This, Flynn argues, is a misconstruction because postmodern scholars are *critical* of such traditions and projects and search for

[58] Flynn (2002) argues that this trend is widespread and offers such writers as Darryl S. L. Jarvis, Lester Faigley, and Ihab Hassan as examples of this (pp. 5-6).

other possibilities, but do not necessarily wholly reject them. Yet, the difference between being critical and downright opposed is important and offers some much-needed nuance to the debate on selfhood. Indeed, the discussion of how to approach the 'female self' in feminist thought has always been more complex and multifaceted: an organic, living discourse evolving through its contentions. It is also important to note that there are several strands within what Alcoff and others have defined as two opposing sides of feminist thought. These strands are in themselves mutable and contradictory, which arguably encapsulate the very (non)definition of the female self. Yet, Bullis and Bach's (1996) ordering of feminist strands offers a helpful insight into the different ideas of 'the subject' within the feminist movement (see Figure 3).[59] [60]

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[59] Although Bullis and Bach admit that their summary is very much predicated upon their own biases and intentions (1996, p. 5).

[60] According to Bullis and Bach, the view that the female self is stable, even innate, is advanced by cultural feminists, liberal feminists (e.g. Roiphe, 1994; Wolf, 1994), and radical feminists (e.g. Dworkin, 1974; Greer, 1999). Indeed, liberal and cultural feminism arguably mirror the ideas of the first and second wave feminism discussed above, and are therefore essentialist in their assumptions of female selfhood, often, as Bullis and Bach note, presenting their 'truths' as universal. Radical feminism is rather difficult to define, as its followers offer such diverse interpretations and solutions to fighting gender inequality. The radical feminists are partly influenced by socialist politics (although this is questionable) and commonly see the need for a revolutionised society in which the patriarchal order is abolished. This suggests an upheaval of some societal institutions, as well as prostitution, pornography, and arguably more governmental practices such as marriage and feminine beauty ideals. Perhaps unsurprisingly, radical feminists are often criticised for their lack of pragmatism. Yet, these feminist perspectives are constantly developing so to claim that these descriptions are comprehensive or always accurate would be a mistake. Similarly, Standpoint feminism (e.g. Hill Collins, 2009), along with Marxist, Black, and minority feminisms, vary in their stance, but "shift assumptions about the 'self and 'other' by integrating contextual, historical differences in their analyses" (Bullis and Bach, 1996, p. 11). Socialist feminism, on the other hand, is more concerned with the negative effects of the capitalist patriarchal system and class. Therefore, by viewing capitalism as the main source for women's oppression, socialist feminism is often critiqued through an examination of the treatment of women in non-capitalist societies, as well as by considering such factors of oppression as ethnicity, sexuality, disability etc. that are not necessarily linked to capitalism per se (ibid., p.15). Therefore, by looking at the middle section of the Bullis and Bach graph, one can decipher that these feminist perspectives question "[t]he unity of the whole and the 'self…in favour of an assumption of difference and change" (p. 11).

Summary of Feminist Perspectives

Feminist Perspectives		
Liberal Feminism Cultural Feminism Radical Feminism	Standpoint Feminism Women of Color Socialist Feminism	Postmodern Feminism
Comparative Assumptions		
Automotive "Self"	Positioned "Self"	Death of the "Self"
Universal Experiences	Located Experiences	Discursive Experiences
Objective Reality	Multiple Realities	Constructed Realities
Stability, Order	Complexity, Multiplicity	Instability
Unity	Diversity	Fragmentation

Figure 3. A summary of feminist approaches to the self (Bullis and Bach, 1996, p. 21)

To conclude, postmodernism has proved a useful theoretical tool for feminism (and its notions of selfhood), despite, or perhaps as a result of, the dissension that postmodern thought has effected among feminists. Some postmodern concepts have been particularly productive, especially for feminist television criticism – such as the questioning of grand narratives, absolute truths, and ideas of power structures – but there has also been a need to move beyond the original theses of the likes of Foucault (who rarely made any explicit references to women or their embodied experiences).[61] Thus, while the Bach and Bullis graph from 1996 still accurately describes *some* strands of feminist thought, many changes have occurred within the feminist movement since the 1990s – both in terms of thought, praxis, and academic focus.

Third Wave Feminism

As detailed above, the last thirty years have seen a range of feminist factions under the larger umbrella of *Feminism* and the dominant wave narratives of the time. Partly a result of the ideas born out of postmodernism, the post-1990 period saw the rise of a third wave of feminism that evolved as "a new discourse or paradigm for framing and understanding gender relations that grew out of a critique of the inadequacies of the second wave" (Mann and Huffman, 2005, p. 57). The third wave feminists' main critique of their feminist

[61] Postmodern ideas have also had a great influence on queer theory (e.g. see the texts by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Adrienne Rich, and Judith Butler) and postcolonial theory (e.g. see the work of Edward Saïd and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak).

forebears has been their "false universalism", which "started from the experience of a group of privileged, First world, middle-class, white women and proceeded as if their experience of womanhood were universally shared" (Gill, 2007, pp. 26-27).[62] With the concurrent development of queer and postcolonial theory, third wave feminists acknowledged the triumphs and successes of second wave feminism whilst aiming to "refigure and enhance it so as to make it more diverse and inclusive" (Mann and Huffmann, 2005, p. 57). As Susan Hekman (2014) argues, what "postmodernism revealed is that what feminists need to do is to construct a new way of defining subjects, agency, politics, and knowledge in the wake of *the death of man*" (p. 127, my emphasis). Furthermore, this highlighted the need for an understanding of the female self and its formation as going beyond clear-cut definitions, and certainly not simply predicated on the existence of a defined 'male' self.

As with any socio-political movement or ideological formation, what might fall under the umbrella term of 'third wave' feminism is often under debate. Indeed, Elizabeth Evans suggests that "the confusion surrounding what constitutes third wave feminism is in respects its defining feature…hence, the need to avoid presenting the third wave of feminism as monolithic" (2015, p.19). Indeed, there has been a considerable amount of research dedicated to the development and definition of the third wave of feminism, (see for instance, Budgeon, 2011a; Evans, 2015; Henry, 2004; and the edited collections by Gillis, Howie, and Munford, 2007; Heywood and Drake, 1997; Johnson, 2007), thus here I will present a less extensive outline that will simply serve the later discussions of this thesis.

Claire R. Snyder (2008) identifies three main characteristics of third wave feminism: (1) it "foregrounds personal narratives that illustrate an intersectional and multiperspectival version of feminism"; (2) third wavers generally "embrace multivocality over synthesis and action over theoretical justification"; (3) and the third wave also "empathizes an inclusive and non-judgemental approach that refuses to police the boundaries of the feminist political" (pp. 175-176). Stressing these points, Walker (1995, p. xxxiii, my emphasis), commonly referred to as the founder of the third wave, writes:

[62] Here it is important to not erase the work of highly influential feminists of colour during the second wave, who were also fundamental in calling out the 'false universalism' of their contemporaries. This again, demonstrates the problems surfacing with the usage of the wave metaphor. See for instance the writings of feminists such as bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldua among others.

> For us the lines between Us and Them are often blurred, and as a result we find ourselves seeking to create identities that accommodate ambiguity and our multiple positionalities: including more than excluding, exploring more than defining, *searching more than arriving.*

Arguably, this constant search for one's identity seems to have set the tone for the notion of selfhood more recently. Even though third wave feminism set out to erase the limitations of what a female self could be, do, and look like (including ideas established by previous feminisms), the result is not the erasure of categories altogether but simply an inclusion of more categories to 'choose' from. This is arguably a change for the better, but when the categorisations are still there, and subsequently a kind of value system too, the choosing might be equally onerous. The third wave's stress on personal choice, self-formation, and independence, is also one of the main problems with the movement, which is why it has been termed 'choice feminism' by some of its critics. Attempting to defend the third wave feminist focus on personal choices, Claire R. Snyder-Hall argues that "[p]ornographic sexuality, conservative lifestyles, and self-sacrifice for family all have a place in society, but they should be simply three options among many, not new hegemonic norms" (2010, p. 260). Of course, the women who make these and other, often difficult, decisions, must not face any judgement or be shamed in any way, as Snyder-Hall states, but following Shelley Budgeon (2011b), it is worth asking whether "laying claim to the legitimacy of one's experience [is] always a feminist act?" (p. 288). The answer, of course, is in the negative. Therefore, it is fundamental that "third-wave feminism…go beyond advocating for women's right to choice and self-expression and interrogate the substance of those choices in a critical way" (ibid.). In this sense, the criticism and analysis are on a structural level and individual women are not targeted as subjects to be attacked.

Furthermore, and importantly for this thesis, third wave feminism has played a key role in feminist engagements with popular culture and feminist television criticism. The third wave has highlighted the importance of approaching "popular culture simultaneously as a site of pleasure and an object of critique" (Budgeon, 2011b, p. 280), and has viewed this critical engagement with popular cultural texts as essential in the fight for equality and inclusivity (Genz and Brabon, 2018). The third wave has thus continued the faction of feminist TV scholarship interested in the often contradictory ways in which

audiences understand televisual texts. As such the ‘pleasure wars’ of the previous decades are still ongoing. Some scholars, most notably Gorton (2007, 2009a), Kavka (2008), and Skeggs and Wood (2011, 2012, also Wood, 2009), explore these contradictions explicitly. Indeed, Gorton (2007) argues that we still “need to consider both the pleasure and enjoyment contained within the text” and object to the “condescending nature of some criticism [that] implies that women are neither able to decipher nor critically engage with the images they see” (pp. 219, 220). Nevertheless, while many feminist media scholars note the ambiguity of audiences’ engagements with texts, there is still academic research dedicated to the potentially dangerous effects of media representations (see for instance, Murray and Ouellette, 2004, 2009; Pozner, 2010; Winch, 2013). Thus, what these frequently opposing perspectives underscore, is that the “contradictory nature of feminized popular culture…[is] a crystallization of that which makes all popular culture a site of struggle over power” (Levine, 2015, p. 3). As such, popular culture still has the ability to normalise a certain discourse of selfhood, albeit through ‘struggle’. The practices of actively forming one’s self are ultimately, as Foucault states, “not something invented by the individual himself [sic]…[but they] are models that he finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, and his social group” [sic] (2000, p. 291). Yet, as Foucault highlights, the possibility of resistance is inherent in all relations of power and consequently also in our interpretations of cultural artefacts. I will explore this possibility of resistance, or as I will argue, of ‘working through’ the neoliberal sentiments presented in reality television texts.

In recent years, as stated, there has been a rapid expansion of a visual culture, but there has also been an upsurge of social media and an increased digitalisation of social life (See also Chapter Five). This has had an apparent influence on the contemporary feminist landscape, even to the point that some feminists have declared that these technological changes have given rise to a fourth wave of feminism (See Baumgardner, 2011; Chamberlain, 2016; Cochrane, 2013; Guillard, 2016; Munro, 2013).[63] Ealasaid Munro (2013) argues that the “internet create[s] a ‘call out’ culture, in which sexism and misogyny can be ‘called out’ and challenged” and as such the “political potential of the fourth wave centres around giving voice to those women still marginalised by the mainstream” (p. 25). Indeed, digital media and social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, Snapchat, and Instagram, appear to have been successful in raising

[63] According to Baumgardner (2011), the fourth wave began in 2008 and is still ongoing.

awareness and "highlighting sexism, equality, misogyny and rape culture" as well as influencing the feminist activism offline (Turley and Fisher, 2018, p. 131).[64] [65] Yet, even though these new digital spaces have advanced the missions set out by feminism, these goals are still the same ones put forward by third wave feminism. So, while younger feminists of the late 2000s onwards might wish to demarcate themselves from the (often) older third wavers, the digitalisation of feminism does not necessarily point to the birth of a novel movement or wave (at least not yet).[66] Debatably, such a need for re-branding seems too close to the neoliberal project for comfort, as explored in the next chapter. However, what has remained central to the third wave throughout the late 1990s to the late 2010s, is the call for *intersectionality*.[67] Thus, during this time, as Susan Hekman argues, "defining the self as the point of intersection of structures of oppression became [and still is] the center of feminist discussions" (2014, p. 141).

Arguably, the third wave of feminism has had, due to the expansion of digital activism (through social media, but also feminist blogs and online 'zines' such as *Jezebel, Feministing,* and *the f word*), a more interactive conversation with popular culture in the last decade and a half. Yet, as Gorton (2007) underscores, such a conversation has often just proven that the representation of feminism is saleable rather than (necessarily)

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[64] This has also resulted in a specific feminist discourse, partially brought about by the limited character space on social media platforms, such as Twitter. Abbreviations (e.g. 'TERF' [trans exclusionary radical feminist], 'SWERF' [sex worker exclusionary radical feminist], 'POC' [people of colour], 'SJW' [social justice warrior]) are more common and TERF and SWERF are often used as insults for people who are thought to not be in line with intersectional feminism. Therefore, we seem to have partly moved away from Snyder's (2008, p. 176) description of third wave feminism as offering a "non-judgemental approach that refuses to police the boundaries of the feminist political". Some have consequently argued that the current feminist milieu (at least online) has become more hostile and even "alienating" (Simpkins, 2014).

[65] Nonetheless, it appears that these virtual spaces of social media have also had the opposite effect as they have attracted so-called 'trolls' and created a milieu of hostility and bullying. See for instance, Gorton and Garde-Hansen's (2013) article on the backlash of abuse of Madonna's aging female body.

[66] However, it is important to note that this social media climate has also been successful in creating new ways of garnering attention and even effecting change, as seen with the 2017 #MeToo (hashtag me too) movement spreading rapidly on social media to highlight sexual harassment in a myriad of workplaces. The hashtag and the media discussion that ensued resulted in many high-profile firings, particularly in Hollywood, most famously of Harvey Weinstein who is accused of severe sexually predatory behaviour by a number of women. The 'me too' hashtag was originally set out by the social activist Tarana Burke in 2006.

[67] Intersectionality (introduced as a term by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989) can be described as an analytical tool or approach "developed by feminists of color in their struggle to correct the omissions and distortions of feminist analysis caused by the failure to investigate the structuring power of race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and nationality" (Hawkesworth (2006) as cited in Hekman, 2014, p. 141).

politically transformative (as I will outline in the next section on postfeminism). Furthermore, the third wave of feminism is long – hence it is difficult to offer concrete examples in popular culture. Moreover, what has been referred to as third wave feminist texts in some instances are called postfeminist in others (a good example is *Sex and the City,* 1998-2004, that might be regarded as both transformative in its inclusion of some mainstream feminist discussions, yet simultaneously retrograde in its representation of the white, middle-class, and heterosexual female ideal). However, it seems like most television programmes defined as third wave feminist texts are usually those categorised as 'quality TV', which many have noted is a highly contentious term (McCabe and Akass, 2007). Robert J. Thompson (1996, as cited in Turnbull, 2014, p. 69) argues that 'quality television':

> (1) "is not 'regular' TV in that it breaks the rules"; (2) it "is produced by people of quality aesthetic pedigree outside the field of television"; (3) it "has undergone a 'noble struggle' before achieving success"; (4) it "uses ensemble casts and multiple, overlapping plot lines"; (5) it "has a 'memory' in , that it refers back to its own history", (6) it "creates a new genre by combining old ones"; (7) it "tends to be literary and writer-based"; (8)"is self-conscious"; (9) it "tends towards the controversial with a liberal (left-wing) sensibility"; (10) it "aspires towards realism"; and (11) "includes social and literary criticism."

Yet, it is not as simple as to argue that all television shows fulfilling these requirements and engage with third wave feminism (in some way or form) should be defined as 'quality TV' or 'feminist' automatically. Indeed, I am uncomfortable with using the term 'quality television' as it potentially suggests that other televisual texts (e.g. reality television) are of lesser value despite being, in some cases, more widely viewed and appreciated. However, some televisual texts of the last decade discuss intersectional feminism more overtly *and* meet some of the above criteria of quality television. Therefore, I tentatively suggest that these programmes could be termed third wave. To this list one might include recent TV series exploring LGBTQIA issues, such as *Orange is the New Black* (2013–), *The Fosters* (2013-2018), and *Transparent* (2014-2019); TV shows exploring race/ethnicity and identity, e.g. *Insecure* (2016–), *She's Gotta Have It* (2017–), *Dear White People* (2017–), and *Master of None* (2015-2017); and other programmes investigating relationships – both same-sex and beyond – for instance *Girls* (2012-2017),

Broad City (2014–), *Chewing Gum* (2015–), *Fleabag* (2016–), and *Big Little Lies* (2017–). Of course, these categories are exceedingly simplified and do not account for the fact that most of these examples explore overlapping issues, such as being African American, trans, and incarcerated (*Orange is the New Black*, see Figure 4) or being a young woman trying to navigate the dating scene in a patriarchal society (*Girls*, *Broad City*, *Chewing Gum*, *Fleabag* etc.), which is also what arguably make the series more attuned to intersectional perspectives. Yet, this is not to say that these examples are all 'good' shows or even unproblematic, but what they do demonstrate is a willingness to engage with third wave feminist topics. For instance, Faye Woods' (2015) study of the female viewers of *Girls* and their 'talk' online, reveals "how the programme served as [a] touchstone to productively work through industrial and cultural tensions, via '*Girls* talk'" (p. 49). This is interesting as the TV show itself has received criticism for being exceedingly white, middle-class, and heteronormative. Indeed, this notion of the televisual text opening up for further discussion, and even resistance to the text itself, is particularly important in the case studies on reality television that will follow in this thesis (Chapters Three and Four especially).

Figure 4. Laverne Cox as the transgender character Sophia in *Orange is the New Black* (Jacobsen, 2018).

Nevertheless, looking beyond cultural representations, the turn towards intersectionality, *coupled* with identity politics, has made the possibility for collective (feminist) action more difficult. As Elizabeth Evans suggests:

> The challenges presented to feminist activists both by intersectionality but also by the neoliberal context are significant; perhaps the area where they

> overlap, implicitly and explicitly, respectively, is in their tendency towards individualism.
>
> (2015, p. 57)

Therefore, while intersectionality as an analytical approach has proved fundamental to feminist thought and the ways in which selves are thought of as neither stable nor unitary, there has been a concurrent tendency to overemphasise the importance of focusing on individuality and personal experience and knowledge. Within the neoliberal context these ideas have furthermore bolstered a different set of (postfeminist) sentiments (Gill, 2007b). These sentiments, often defined as a kind of feminist "backlash" or as "anti-feminism", is usually referred to as postfeminism (discussed in detail in the next section). However, it is worth questioning whether there was an actual feminist backlash in the late 1980s/early 1990s, as Faludi (1992) famously declared, or whether in fact there has always been a constant antagonism towards the strides of feminism? I would argue that the latter rings truer, especially by looking at the portrayal of female selfhood in cultural texts. Indeed, the representations of 'traditional' or sexist stereotypes of femininity and womanhood have always existed and still do, therefore simply pointing them out is like saying "the sky is blue", as Johnson notes (2007, p. 13). Yet, what becomes interesting is how these representations are framed and contextualised as well as the ways in which audiences might interpret these texts at a particular socio-cultural conjuncture.

Postfeminism and Neoliberal Feminism

Postfeminism is a term that still causes dissension, contestation, and confusion. As postfeminist ideas and values have had such a great impact on the current cultural climate it is essential that the term is fully defined here. Postfeminism and third wave feminism are frequently used interchangeably (see Beeler, 2008; Munford and Waters, 2014), both in academia and popular discourse, but arguably, whereas third wave feminism is a kind of *continuation* of the second wave, postfeminism prompts a *break* from its feminist precursors. Nevertheless, a part of what causes this entanglement of terms is that postfeminist and third wave feminist ideas developed parallel to each other and thus become easily conflated in the popular cultural imaginary.

Karen Boyle divides the definitions of postfeminism into three strands; firstly, as a "periodisation," as "the time *after* feminism," thus suggesting that the history of feminism is strictly linear (2008, p. 176, emphasis in original). This way of viewing postfeminism is, as Boyle also notes, flawed, as new generations perpetually rediscover older feminist texts and work (ibid.). Secondly, postfeminism could be viewed as a backlash, or "rejecti[on] of second wave feminism's demand for structural change," focusing instead "on the aspirations and possibilities of individual women (typically, white, affluent, American women)" (ibid., p. 179). The emphasis on collective struggle and action of second wave feminism would consequently seem unattractive to the postfeminist woman whose central concern is her individuality and her personal choices. Furthermore, the more conservative postfeminists, such as Naomi Wolf (1994) and Katie Roiphe (1994), have referred to second wave feminism as 'victim feminism,' arguing that it focused on "female victimization at the expense of female agency" (Wolf, 1994, p. 154). Instead they urge for a break from this 'trend' and that one, in contrast, should emphasise the instances where women feel empowered or experience pleasure, a feminism generally termed 'power feminism.' Even though such an enterprise would indeed seem appealing – as positive (read 'fun') developments and images usually do – one can nonetheless not simply ignore situations where women are victimised, as, in that case, real socio-political changes would never be achieved.

As Sarah Projansky states, referring to Wolf and others, "these antifeminist postfeminist feminists blame the oppression of women on a version of feminism that they imagine to exist," thus again illustrating the feminist backlash of the 1990s (2001, p. 71). Lastly, postfeminism can be viewed as a "developing feminism," as "a regeneration and development of feminist theory within the context of broader developments in post-modernism and post-structuralism" (Boyle, 2008, p. 181). As mentioned previously, these ideas meant that simple categories and meanings became uncertain. However, it also foregrounds the ways in which these "post-ings," which "repeatedly focus on women, feminism and femininity as the problem, [or] as the object of investigation," has caused much recent scholarship to "present a feminism at war with itself [where] the political relevance of feminism is in danger of being lost" (ibid., pp. 182-183). Indeed, by focusing on conflicts within the feminist movement, or on the opposing choices individual women might make (both in real-life and as represented in media), conceal the social and structural struggles and injustices that feminism originally set out to fight. To conclude, postfeminism is, as demonstrated, exceedingly complex to define, and contemporary

postfeminism in popular culture should arguably be regarded as a combination of these three outlined definitions. Nonetheless, above all, it is a product of the neoconservative political and economic forces of our time. One could argue that in many instances where television creators want to invoke some ideas of the third wave – especially the right to choose, personal empowerment, and sexual liberation – the result is a (post)feminism pre-packaged into a more entertaining, easily consumable format in which the political potential has partly been lost.

This feminist, cultural and social climate of the 1990s, which persevered into the twenty-first century, did naturally have a great impact on the representation of women in popular culture and media. Munford and Waters (2014) describe the 1990s as "the decade of girl power" (p. 109) and Diane Negra (2009) has called it the "renaissance in female-centred television series" (p. 2). Indeed, the 1990s were filled with representations of strong, successful women in popular culture, such as the British pop music group Spice Girls, formed in 1994, and Madonna, who could be regarded as the postfeminist queen of the 1990s, teaching "young women to be fully female and sexual while still exercising control over their lives" (Paglia, 1990, p. 39). Several US television series with action heroines became widely popular, such as *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) (see Figure 5), both protagonists presented in terms of the traditional feminine ideal with 'kickass' abilities to fight evil (Munford and Waters, 2014, p. 112).

Figure 5. Xena (mgp stock photos, 1997) and Buffy (Love magazine, 2017) as 'girl power' characters.

Other notable television shows that centred on the lives of women and their female friendships, were *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002), *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), and *Girlfriends* (2000-2008), all in which the women were generally single, had careers, and lived in urban environments. Thus, due to their middle- and upper-class positions, the narrative often centre around the various choices they are 'free' to (and *can*) make – whether pertaining to romance, finance, and/or consumption. Indeed, these television series demonstrate in particular the push and pull between performing femininity and heteronormativity whilst simultaneously striving for independence and financial success. The "girl power" of the 1990s and early 2000s, illustrated the clear move from "feminist-inspired thinking toward more optimistic but individualistic positions and perspectives" (Hopkins, 2002, p. 2). Therefore, in a way, the 'power feminism' that Wolf, and others, so yearned for, had ultimately been realised.

The most pivotal ambition for the postfeminist woman, became, and to a large extent, still is, to 'have it all,' or to have what Negra calls "representability;" to at least *appear* to 'have it all' (2009, p. 47). This can essentially be achieved by pursuing an affluent, 'flashy' career, by having a "flawless body image...[and] a secured position in the postfeminist cycle, [which]...for the twenty-to-thirty something girlfriend, means imminent marriage, motherhood, or both (Winch, 2011, p. 71). This cultural environment is pervaded by the notion of freedom of choice, but these choices are ultimately controlled by what is idealised or, to a lesser extent, deemed acceptable. As a result, as Alison Winch (2011) argues, despite the fact that the women and their female friends in these television programmes are "depicted shopping and drinking together, they primarily play the role in monitoring each other's appetites and assaying any victim behaviour" (p. 72). Their relationships subsequently, as Winch writes, becomes one of "strategic sisterhood" (ibid., p. 62). Therefore, rather than encouraging collectivism these performances suggest that women need to assure that each female self follows the 'rules' of postfeminism independently. Furthermore, postfeminism persistently holds that all women share certain congenital desires and inclinations, a view that could be regarded as both an act of cultural imperialism and biological essentialism. Ultimately, these popular postfeminist televisual representations highlighted the confliction within feminism and the concurrent emphasis on choice.

However, there was also another development in the portrayal of women in popular culture, which eventually culminated with the tumultuous events of 9/11 in 2001.

Kathleen Stewart (2005, p. 323) has described the first years, and I would argue that this applies to the first decade, of the twenty-first century as a time of "trauma". During this period, popular culture frequently looked backwards, to times more comforting and familiar, where one knew one's 'rightful' place as a woman. Negra (2008, 2009) has termed this the "retreatist scenario," in which women are often depicted as fleeing their careers or singleton lives in the cities, in order to "retreat" to the idyllic family life of suburbia (2009, p. 21). This narrative is thus in clear juxtaposition to the 1970s shows such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, in which the 'career woman' was presented as a radical and idealised alternative. As such, these new storylines of unhappy single, working women seem to reflect the concurrent anxieties around the American family as under threat, as the central value of US culture. Retreatism has been particularly popular for film plots, as seen in the romantic comedies *Sweet Home Alabama* (2002), *The Holiday* (2006), and *The Proposal* (2009), but also on television, as illustrated by examples such as *Providence* (1999-2002) and *Hart of Dixie* (2011-2015). Both of these television series centre around female doctors who leave their successful careers in Beverly Hills and New York respectively, in order to find happiness in smaller communities. Notably, in both programmes' final seasons the female protagonists settle down, get married, and appear to have achieved, the elusive, 'it all'. These series are based on a socio-cultural "assumption that feminism has disturbed contemporary female subjectivity," as the "postfeminist subject is represented as having lost herself but then (re)achieving stability through romance, de-aging, a makeover, by giving up paid work, or by 'coming home'" (Negra, 2009, p. 5). The postfeminist subjects' sense of having lost herself and consequently in need of a 'makeover' or an 'emotional journey' to find it, is also a recurrent theme in reality television. Shows such as *Extreme Makeover* (2002-2007), *America's Next Top Model* (2003–, see Chapter Four), *The Swan* (2004-2004), *The Biggest Loser* (2004-2016), *Love, Lust or Run* (2015-2016), and *Revenge Body with Khloe Kardashian* (2017–, see Chapter Five), all feature women who are searching for their 'true' or 'authentic' selves. As such, "the makeover does not create selfhood but rather it locates and salvages that which is already present, but weak" (Sender, 2009, p. 7). Again, this discourse normalises the idea of an innate feminine core that can be extracted through consumerism and self-discipline.[68] This 'makeover takeover' in

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[68] Or as Tincknell has observed, "'wholeness' for the female human subject can only be a temporary and contingent condition achieved through her participation in consumer culture" (2009, p. 86).

popular culture is discussed in more detail in Chapter Four and the case study of *America's Next Top Model*.

The cultural climate of the 2000s has further been marked by a "re-naturalising of sexual difference," what Gill (2007a) calls "Mars 'n' Venus thinking" (p. 35). This is particularly evident in television shows like *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012, see Figure 6), which contributed to the revival of the career versus stay-at-home mum debate, generally referred to as the "mommy wars" (Douglas and Michaels, 2005, p. 12). *Desperate Housewives* is also typically postfeminist in the way that it portrays female friendship. The housewives of Wisteria Lane often talk and support each other, but only to a certain extent, as they simultaneously strive to keep up a facade of perfection, even to each other. Schuler, McBride, and Kirby (2006) note that the characteristics of the women on the show "seem closer to th[e] stereotype of yesteryear than the reality," consumed as they are with "cattiness, competition, gossip and shallowness" (p. 185). Nevertheless, *Desperate Housewives* has been a highly successful television series and is also the inspiration for the reality television franchise *Real Housewives* and *The Real Housewives of New York City* (also Figure 6), which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Figure 6. The similarities between the ads for *Desperate Housewives* (STEOSPHERE, 2013) and *The Real Housewives of New York* City (Pena, 2017) are evident, the latter often incorporating the symbol of the apple often associated with the marketing of the former (a reference to the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden).

The reappearance of such, one might think, out-dated stereotypes (such as the housewife), what Whelehan (2000) terms "retrosexism," may be a result of the postfeminist cultural shift, which in turn is "bound up with a conservative and neoliberal economy in which feminism is being 'undone'" (Winch, 2013, p. 2). This of course, does not mean the undoing of feminism in real-life as we have seen with recent developments of feminist

activism.[69] Yet, the continued portrayal of 'retrosexist' characters still suggest that we are still engaging in and processing postfeminist discourse and iconography.

Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (2011) perceptively note that the "active, freely choosing, self-inventing subject of postfeminism…[bears a strong resemblance to]…the autonomous, calculating, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism" (p. 7). Of course, this is no mere coincidence as postfeminism generally exists in symbiosis with neoliberal ideas. Indeed, "both appear to be structured by a current of individualism that has almost entirely replaced… any idea of individuals as subject to pressures, constraints or influence from outside themselves" (ibid). Yet, postfeminist sensibility and discourse have experienced changes since the concept's inception in the late 1980s, most notably in the aftermath of the economic crash in 2007-2008. However, the subsequent "recession culture" has not necessarily altered the 'lessons' taught by postfeminist cultural texts (Negra and Taker, 2014). Instead, as Genz and Brabon write: "postfeminist culture's emphasis on choice – the freedom to consume and self-fashion rather than the economic necessities that underpin women's working lives – has not disappeared but reads differently now that the economic bubble has burst" (2018, pp. 6-7). Consequently, one might see fewer representations of women's frivolous consumption (a la *Sex and the City*), and more focus on female entrepreneurialism and self-branding (as I will discuss in detail in Chapter Three). This remoulding of the focus of postfeminism, has made some critics suggest that a new term might be more productive to describe recent developments. Nancy Fraser (2013) especially, has expressed her concerns about the future of feminism as she proclaims that "the movement for women's liberation has become entangled in a dangerous liaison with neoliberal efforts to build a free-market society." As a consequence, some critics have felt the need to denominate this new feminist incarnation as: "free-market feminism" (Manzano, 2000), "consumer feminism" (McRobbie, 2008), "market feminism" (Kantola and Squires, 2012), "corporate feminism" (Genz and Brabon, 2018), and ultimately, "neoliberal feminism" (Rottenberg, 2013, 2017; see also Prügl, 2015; and Oksala, 2011). I find Rottenberg's term most apropos for the purposes of this thesis as it encapsulates the female subjects presented in popular cultural contexts and the following case studies in particular.[70]

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[69] Scharff (2012) has even asserted that there has been "a resurgence of feminist activism in recent years" (p. 1) and Sylvia Walby (2011) claims that feminism is in fact "alive and vibrant" (p. 2). This is further attested by the cultural impact of the 'Me Too' movement for instance.

[70] Catherine Rottenberg (2013) suggests that Sheryl Sandberg's guide for working women, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (2013) represents one of the starting points of this new

The most obvious, albeit summarised, way in which to define neoliberal feminism is to regard it as a reproduction of some postfeminist ideals with a more conspicuous emphasis on neoliberal free-market rationalities. However, in contrast to the postfeminists, neoliberal feminism *acknowledges* gender inequality, but marks it as a burden for individual women rather than policy makers and society at large (Rottenberg, 2018). The ideals of postfeminism's mantra of 'having it all' is still present but reworked so that the aspiration is to have a successful career *and* family life by balancing these carefully, whilst at the same time working on one's personal well-being and happiness. The neoliberal feminist subject needs to be able to navigate the market and take full responsibility for her own success (or failure) – a *femina œconomica* of sorts. This subject of neoliberal feminism is 'feminist' in her awareness of the social and political inequity between men and women and she is "simultaneously neoliberal, not only because she disavows the social, cultural and economic forces producing this inequality, but also because she accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care" (Rottenberg, 2013, p. 3). Larger structural issues are thus 're-branded' into personal ones; a kind of reversal of 'the personal is political' mantra of second wave feminism. Consequently, "the solution to social injustice can be found in the individual's psyche, involving entrepreneurial as well as internal work on the self(-brand)" (Genz and Brabon, 2018, p. 115).[71] A favoured storyline is a kind of 'phoenix rising from the ashes' narrative in which a woman has used her resourcefulness to create personal success and human capital (e.g. Bethenny Frankel or Ramona Singer in *The Real Housewives of New York City*, discussed in the next chapter). Further, as Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker (2014, p. 7) point out, these narratives often "seek to retain traditionalist femininity under conditions of financial exigency, leading to phenomena like the privilege of the female cupcake baker…as the exemplar of adaptive economy and safe female entrepreneurialism" (Again, Bethenny Frankel serves as a good example as she started her career as an entrepreneur selling baked goods (see Figure 7).[72]

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feminism, as it "can be seen as symptomatic of a longer cultural phenomenon in which neoliberal feminism is fast displacing liberal feminism" (p. 2).

[71] Nevertheless, as Elizabeth Evans underscores, this "adoption of market strategies as a means by which to address social issues facilitates a pretence of rational decision-making that belies the extent to which women in particular are negatively affected by market solutions and austerity regimes" (2015, p. 45).

[72] Negra and Tasker (2014) use the examples of the film *Bridesmaids* (2011) and the television sitcom *2 Broke Girls* (2011-2017), both of which centre around characters starting up cupcake/baking businesses. The 'safe female entrepreneur' will be explored further in Chapter Five.

Figure 7. Before starting *Skinnygirl* – also an example of safe female entrepreneurialism – Bethenny Frankel (pictured) launched *Bethenny Bakes* at Food Emporium (gettyimages, 2008).

Indeed, there are many examples of arguably neoliberal feminist narratives in Hollywood cinema (e.g. *Bridesmaids,* 2011; *Bad Moms,* 2016; *I Feel Pretty,* 2018; *Hustlers*, 2019), but also in television, and perhaps more forcefully, in reality programming. In these examples, gender equality and/or feminist discourse is alluded to, only to be translated into a kind of personal empowerment and thus responsibility. Arguably, postfeminism – and later, neoliberal feminism – have been both more mainstream and marketable incarnations of feminism and have thus been largely embraced by the reality television industry. Importantly then, the notion of the neoliberal feminist self and the ways in which she is expected to, as I will explore, perform femininity, entrepreneurialism, and self-work stands as the focal point in this thesis, and has come to present the self most valued in the reality television texts discussed.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have pulled out the *female* self specifically, as the self in the majority of theoretical overviews has been left ungendered whilst simultaneously representing a largely male perspective. As such, I found it imperative to offer an outline of the specifically female self in feminist thought, which is particularly important here as the female self is often targeted as the ideal subject for neoliberal sentiments, as I have shown. The chapter has outlined this trajectory alongside examples of televisual texts with typical

representations of women, in order to demonstrate how some popular cultural texts (writers, producers, audiences) have engaged (and still engage) with the feminist discourse of selfhood of their time. The outline has moved along the various feminist 'waves,' but also veered from the wave narrative to highlight some of the different strands that have developed within such waves; postmodern feminism, cultural feminism, intersectionality, postfeminism, and neoliberal feminism. As I focus on the period starting with the financial crisis in this thesis, I am especially interested in the televisual representations of women influenced by postfeminism and neoliberal feminism. These two cultural and feminist frameworks, especially that of neoliberal feminism, present narratives that are central to the female self romanticised in the reality television texts that will be analysed in the following chapters of this thesis. The notion of the self-brand, the competitive spirit, and the emphasis on self-work in these texts, represent what I believe are the main facets of the ideal female self in contemporary popular culture. In the next chapter, I will explore branding and authenticity as particularly impactful notions on the understanding of female subjectivity in Western pop culture. I will illustrate my argument by providing closer analysis of *The Real Housewives of New York City* and the ways the series portrays success versus failure.

CHAPTER THREE

'I am Who I am': The Real Housewives of New York City *and the Performance of the Authentic Self™*

Like the rest of standards, identity stays stubbornly ahead: one needs to run breathlessly to reach it. And so one runs, pulled by hope and pushed by guilt, though the running, however fast, feels eerily like crawling.

(Zygmunt Bauman, 1998, p. 23)

In the first chapter of this thesis I explored the ways in which the kind of cultural logics that stem from ideologies often termed 'neoliberalism' have affected contemporary ideas of the 'self' in Western culture. In the second chapter I focused on the female self more specifically as I explained how women are doubly subjugated in a popular culture that is so frequently suffused by neoliberal feminist sentiments. Furthermore, the chapter discussed how feminist strands and responses to feminist thought have influenced the portrayal of female selfhood on television. The first and second chapters have thus established a trajectory of the main concepts this thesis will grapple with, as well as how such sentiments (pertaining to neoliberalism and 'choice feminism') have affected the cultural material we use to make sense of ourselves and our specific context. Ultimately, these largely theoretical chapters have outlined the ideological and theoretical background to the kind of ideal (female) self deemed most valuable, valid, and ultimately, saleable, in the contemporary cultural imaginary.

This chapter will be the first of three case studies of reality programming that explore the facets of neoliberal thought and sentiment that I argue have had the greatest impact on the ideas of self-formation more recently, namely: commodification and self/branding; competition between and for selves/selfhood; and the notion of self-work. These facets have, as I will demonstrate, become essential aspects of the images of ideal female selfhood put on display in Western popular media outlets. In this first case study I will focus on the ideal female self portrayed on the docu-soap *The Real Housewives of*

New York City (2008 – present, hereafter referred to as RHONY) and the concept of self/branding. Jon Dovey writes that "[d]ocusoaps use multiple character-led storylines, generate their own stars, are set around one physical location and use the day-to-day chronology of popular drama" (2000, p. 133). Indeed, as this sub-genre centres on a few cast members, it offers viewers a chance to familiarise themselves with its 'stars' and the more conventional story arch. Moreover, as its narrative is imbued with product placements and consumption, *The Real Housewives* is especially suitable for tracing how the show presents the ideal female self in a more and more 'free' market and industry.

The first parts of the chapter will describe the international success that is *The Real Housewives* franchise, and more specifically, RHONY. I will explore the ways in which the series has created a world where everything can, and should, be commercialised. It is in this constructed world where we find the outlines of a neoliberal female self that has established its own brand. I will subsequently investigate one of the most discussed and successful *housewives*, Bethenny Frankel, and her specific brand of 'authentic' selfhood, as well as its potential impact and/or ramifications. While I do contend that the discourse and visualisation of a neoliberal female self has a normalising effect in popular culture, I am disinclined to suggest that this normalisation process is all-encompassing and total. Indeed, as I, myself, do not feel overly persuaded by the images of 'authentic' self/branding, I wanted to explore how other viewers of the series engage with and/or take pleasure from the reality television programme. This chapter will thus conclude with my research and analysis of online viewer posts in a discussion forum dedicated to RHONY. The audiences' discussions in these online spaces suggest that audiences are using *The Real Housewives* to 'work through' ideas of neoliberal logics and other narratives pervading the socio-cultural context. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly – contrary to the suggestions of many recent reality TV scholars writing on neoliberalism – many of these online posts suggest that fans of the series are often *resisting* the supposed encoded messages of the series. Indeed, as Dovey (2000) suggests, the terms of 'trash TV' and 'dumbing down' used to describe reality television (particularly in the context of neoliberalism) "set up totalising value judgements about popular culture but fail to tell us much about how and why reflexivity, confession and intimacy [for instance] have become such dominant modes in the contemporary cultural landscape" (p. 14). In order to avoid such shortcomings then, the last section of this

chapter will establish what it is that viewers find pleasurable and appealing with television shows such as RHONY, as they, myself included, keep 'tuning in.'[73]

The Franchise

In 2005, the American television channel Bravo, owned by NBCUniversal, announced the production of a novel form of reality entertainment, with the president of Bravo, Lauren Zalaznick, (as cited in Reality TV World, 2006) stating:

> From *Peyton Place* to *Desperate Housewives*, viewers have been riveted by the fictionalized versions of [privileged women's] lifestyles on television. Now, here is a series that depicts real-life 'desperate' housewives with an authentic look at their compelling day-to-day drama.

Zalaznick's direct reference to popular television programmes within the soap opera and drama genres, demonstrate the producers' wish to capitalise on the success of women-centred television shows and their propensity to portray the supposed emotional, even melodramatic, aspects of women's daily lives and relationships. The suggestion that the reality television franchise provides an 'authentic' insight into the lives of 'housewives' is also noteworthy; as the show lays claim to reality and simultaneously utilises authenticity as a marketing ploy. The potential consequences of such claims and stratagems – particularly in terms of female self and worth – will form the basis for the discussions in this chapter.

Today, *The Real Housewives* franchise has evolved into a unique reality-programming phenomenon, with millions of weekly viewers tuning in to follow the lives and lifestyles of predominantly affluent, middle-aged women. The first version of the series was, and still is, centred on 'housewives' in the gated communities of Orange County, thus dubbed *The Real Housewives of Orange County* (2006-). Due to the show's almost instantaneous success, the franchise has produced versions located in New York City (2008-), Atlanta (2008-), New Jersey (2009-), Washington, D.C. (2010, cancelled),

[73] This research will build on and adapt the methodology of Robert V. Kozinets' (2015) 'netnography' as explained later in this chapter.

Beverly Hills (2010-), Miami (2011-), Potomac (2016-), Dallas (2016-), and Salt Lake City (expected to air 2020-2021).[74] Additionally, as with most successful franchises in the world of commercialised global media, *The Real Housewives* format has been sold to a myriad of national networks to create localised adaptations.[75] Versions of the series are now broadcasted in countries such as Greece, South Africa, Australia, Canada, United Kingdom, Thailand, Israel, France, Sweden, and Denmark. This demonstrates the franchise's success but also its appeal to international audiences. Not only are the American instalments of the franchise broadcast beyond the US borders, but there is also an interest in how 'local housewives' look and behave in comparison.

Andy Cohen, the executive producer, and proclaimed brainchild of the *Real Housewives* franchise explains that:

> Every [American] series has its own flavor: O.C. is cul-de-sac normality. Atlanta is campy and over the top. Jersey is hot tempered and clannish. DC was thoughtful and provocative. Beverly Hills is image conscious and *this* close to Hollywood. Miami is spice and tele-novelic. New York is aggressive and controlling.
>
> (as cited in Silverman, 2015, p. 3)

These versions, in turn, offer audiences the opportunity to align themselves with one particular "flavour" and in this way, extend their own sense of (consumer) identity. Peter Bjelskou (2015) proposes that Bravo TV has specialised in "teach[ing] viewers *to desire to become knowledgeable consumers* and to purchase the right objects based on their acquired connoisseurship" (Ch. 1, [e-book] emphasis in original). Not only does Bravo's franchise teach viewers what to consume in real life, but as reality and *reality TV* are conflated, every 'thing' becomes commodified and commercialised. Indeed, many

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[74] In addition, some of the more popular, or at least marketable, cast members of various instalments (e.g. Bethenny Frankel, NeNe Leakes, and Lisa Vanderpump) have been partaking in spin-off series focusing on their weddings, love lives, and/or business ventures, e.g. *Bethenny Ever After* (2010-2012), *I Dream of NeNe: The Wedding* (2013), and *Vanderpump Rules* (2013-present).

[75] For instance, *Got Talent*, *Expedition Robinson/Survivor*, *Pop Idol*, *Big Brother*, *X-Factor*, *Dancing with the Stars*, and *Top Model*, have all been hugely successful formats that have been sold across the world. In 2014, Guinness World Records announced that *Got Talent* is the most successful reality TV format in the world with series broadcasted in fifty-eight countries, consequently demonstrating the vast amount of people some television formats can reach (Lynch, 2014).

"women on luxury docusoaps afford their lifestyle in part by selling its props (clothing, alcohol, jewellery), so [in this sense] the TV show *creates the reality it sells* by allowing participants to capitalize on their being mediated" (Deery, 2015, p. 88, emphasis in original). Thus, in reality television and popular culture at large, the line between 'the real' and the fictitious is perpetually being negotiated and redrawn, until one can no longer make out where one ends and where the other begins. Indeed, the formal markers of the reality television genre further reinforce the blurring of this line.

The *Real Housewives* format comprises real-life footage, albeit highly produced, edited, and often pre-arranged, of the women talking, partying, fighting, gossiping, consuming (drinks, food, fashion, beauty products, and treatments), and generally living lifestyles reserved for the rich and famous. In order to gain an, as intimate as possible, insight into these lives, the structure of the series includes interview segments, or confessionals, in which cast members break down the 'fourth wall' and narrate and justify their own actions directly to their audiences. In turn, each season is concluded with a 'reunion' hosted by the executive producer Andy Cohen, who acts as a mediator between the cast and the viewers, showing footage from the season and posing investigative questions supposedly submitted by avid fans of the show. One *Real Housewives* cast member, Kelly Bensimon, likens the reunions to a "court without a judge", but as fellow 'housewife' Bethenny Frankel retorts: "We *have* a judge. We have two million people judging" (Reunion – Part 1, 2010). Indeed, the central role of the reunions, and partly the franchise as a whole, is to invite audiences to weigh up, compare, evaluate, and critique the choices made by the women on the programmes. Viewers are asked to consider: How would you speak/behave/dress/work/parent in comparison to these women? As a result, the franchise appears to reduce life to a string of carefully constructed choices and presents a world in which certain kinds of 'selves' are pronounced more valuable and worthy than others. After all, any form of comparison inevitably results in some form of evaluation and judgement. This reduction further moves the attention from larger societal, economical, and political injustices to a question of the 'conduct of conduct' (à la Foucault) as well as self-government. Perhaps then, as Laurie Ouellette (2009) argues, these TV shows "*construct* templates for [neoliberal] citizenship that complement the privatization of public life, the collapse of the welfare state, and, most important, the discourse of individual choice and personal responsibility" (p. 224, emphasis in

original).[76] Yet, whilst this argument is compelling, simply viewing reality television as a governmental tool for teaching audiences correct behaviour under neoliberalism, ultimately simplifies the highly complex ways in which viewers engage with televisual texts, or at the very least, ignores questions of autonomous viewership (see Grossberg, 2010; and Skeggs and Wood, 2012; and the section on the 'pleasure wars' in the previous chapter). Nevertheless, whilst the audience's reading of the 'templates of citizenship' might be equivocal, the selfhoods presented in these popular culture texts are, due to their wide circulation, important to pinpoint.

The Real Housewives of New York City

The version of the franchise chosen as the case study for this chapter is RHONY – not simply because it is, in Andy Cohen's words "aggressive and controlling", but mainly because the series, as I will demonstrate, most evidently represents the ideal female 'selves' touted under neoliberal capitalism and its bedfellows, postfeminism and neoliberal feminism (see Chapter Two for a definition). Not only is the series set in "the neoliberal city par excellence" (Chronopoulos, 2011, p. 79),[77] but the first seasons were also filmed during, and in the aftermath of, the economic crash of 2008. Thus, the television programme, with its wealthy, excessively consuming 'housewives' is placed within the context of the free market, Wall Street, and the US economy, rather than situated as a separate entity. In the reunion of the second season the housewives are even asked whether they feel responsible for the economic collapse, to which *Housewife* Jill Zarin replies: "If you make someone like me, or any of us, feel guilty about spending money that we can afford to spend, then there'll be no stores, no economy" (Reunion – Part 1, 2009). This statement rather neatly sums up the attitude to consumerism on the television programme. Not only is consumption justified in this manner, but it is also portrayed as necessary, "an art, a strategy, an expression of love, a valuable expertise," and a duty of the nation's citizens (Deery, 2015, p. 90). However, this sentiment ignores the damaging effects of rampant consumerism – soaring global inequality, financial debt,

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[76] Ouellette (2009) further describes the reality television programmes, such as *Judge Judy* (1996-present), as vehicles for "train[ing] TV viewers to function without state assistance or supervision, as self-disciplining, self-sufficient, responsible, and risk-averting individuals" (p. 224).
[77] Themis Chronopoulos (2011) uses this description to describe the milieu in New York City, particularly after the fiscal crisis of 1975.

pollutant emissions et cetera – in favour of the (neoliberal) capitalist agenda of greater growth, competition, and freedom of (consumer) choice. As June Deery (2015) highlights, it is crucial to note "the media's ideological and economic motivations: the one is not divorced from the other but the latter is easier to substantiate, as when privatized aid functions as advertising" (p. 155). In this sense, the ideology presented on the small screen, at least in reality television, can hardly be divorced from the larger societal 'regimes of truth', which in this context appertain to neoliberal logics (especially due to the commercialisation of the television industry, as described in the previous chapter). Yet, as noted above, the effects/affects of the viewing experience of audiences are notoriously difficult to determine, as their reading or, using Hall (1973), 'decoding' of the text does not necessarily correlate to how it has been 'encoded' (The RHONY viewers will be explored further in the netnographic study at the end of this chapter).

However, other critics, such as Lee and Moscowitz (2013), argue that RHONY "takes aim at the consumptive lives of its arriviste heroines" and paint the women as "scapegoats for economic crises, figures of scorn and pity, morality tales of lives led wastefully" (pp. 65, 78). This argument, Lee and Moscowitz claim, is supported by the programme's "layered irony", what Andy Cohen has called the "Bravo wink": when a cast member asserts one thing, which, through editing, is immediately put into question by footage of a conflicting act performed by the same individual (ibid., p. 68). For instance, in season one, cast member Alex McCord declares, "Every mother thinks that their child is a genius, but if I had dreamt up my ideal, I do not see how I could have improved upon François." At the same time, viewers are shown scenes of Alex's son, François, running around screaming, and aggressively grabbing at his teacher's face (The Lost Footage, 2008). Arguably this reading simplifies the audiences' response to the series, as one scroll through the comments of the RHONY Facebook page (April 2017) manifests – some viewers are indeed expressing distaste for the *Housewives* whereas others are articulating their admiration. Arguably then, the 'Bravo wink' is more an invitation to audiences – situated as perceptive judges 'in the know' – to determine both the worth and the authenticity of the *Housewives*' performances. The irony and contradictions in the series, as I will discuss later in this chapter, demonstrate the performativity of selfhood, while at the same time suggesting that a 'true' self is lurking underneath. The "fish-out-of-water scenes" are not (purely) "scoff-inducing", as Lee and Moscowitz propose, but they encourage the policing, both by the audience and fellow cast members, of which selves are deemed credible and genuine. Subsequently, this

chapter will discuss what selfhoods *The Real Housewives of New York City*, and other television productions like it, normalise. If these series are indeed "templates" for the supposedly ideal citizenship and subjectivity presented under neoliberalism, as Laurie Ouellette (2009) suggests, what are we, as viewers, taught?

Peter Bjelskou (2015) asserts, that there is an inherent danger in dismissing RHONY as a "silly escapist television show about women with too much time on their hands" as the series ultimately "is both an advertisement for products and a naturalization of discourses pertaining to neoliberalism" (Ch. 1). Indeed, the television show has been widely criticised for its, often overt, product placements, both of household luxury brands and, in particular the *Housewives*' own merchandise. In the second season's reunion, Andy Cohen explains this criticism to the RHONY cast, by which Ramona Singer responds, "this is a reality show, our life [sic] is our business" (Reunion – Part 1, 2009). Rather paradoxically, Singer immediately follows this declaration by 'plugging' both her own skincare line and the other women's business ventures. Indeed, for the *Housewives,* their personal lives and businesses go hand in hand. Perhaps it comes as no surprise then to hear Bethenny Frankel, the founder of the Skinnygirl brand and cast member of RHONY, say: "I went on the show single-handedly and exclusively for business" (as cited in Widdicombe, 2015).

In 2012, the audience research company Nielsen found that over half "of all broadcast TV product placements during primetime took place on reality program[me]s", again demonstrating the genre's congruence with the world of advertisement and marketing (Nielsen, 2012). As Helen Wood (2005), following Morley and Silverstone (1990), notes, this has partly contributed to "a shift from describing viewers as 'readers' of texts to 'consumers' of products" in media studies (p. 119). Audiences are consumers in the sense that they have, in one way or another, exchanged capital for their viewing experience, but also as what they are watching is frequently so intertwined with consumer culture. This has led to reality television series, such as RHONY, often being referred to as "advertainment" (Deery, 2004, p. 1).[78] Indeed, the submission of institutions,

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[78] The term 'advertainment' is often used in marketing to explain the symbiotic relationship between advertising and entertainment media, such as television programmes, films, music videos et cetera (Deery, 2004, p. 1). In this sense, as June Deery (2004) claims, reality television has come to represent "the triumph of the market, the notion that everyone as well as everything has its price and that people will do pretty much anything for money. But it also relies on the fact that this capitulation still has the power to shock. Its trivial dramas transfix audiences in part…because they tap into deep cultural anxieties about the profit motive taking priority over everything, especially over moral judgments concerning truth, deception, betrayal, and trust. Audiences tune

corporations, and individuals to the forces of the market, have led to the commercialisation, if not, economification, of most aspects of human life. As a consequence, one can decipher an ideal, albeit obscure, neoliberal subject taking shape in the cultural imaginary; an entrepreneurial *homo œconomicus* (or *femina œconomica*), expertly navigating the free market for optimal profit, constantly fighting for upward mobility while simultaneously taking full responsibility for their choices, successes, and failures.

Naturally, as demonstrated in previous chapters, the idea of the 'self' has by no means escaped the logics of neoliberal and (post)feminist ideologies and discourse. In the early and mid-twentieth century, the Frankfurt School thinkers and others, warned against the 'dumbing down' effects of American mass culture and Herbert Marcuse's oft-cited quote seemed to ring particularly true: "The people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, [and] kitchen equipment" (1964, p. 9). However, with Post-Fordism and the development of a consumer culture now offering more specialised and diversified consumer alternatives, "a major new arena has been created for the process of self-fashioning" (Thompson, 1995, p. 43). This is an arena marked by a myriad of choices – possibilities, pressures, and risks – in which the (consumer) decisions become extensions of the individual's performance of 'selfhood.'[79]

For some critics, (such as Hartley 1999; Turkle, 1997; Jenkins, 2006), the choices of 'selves' have the potential of providing what Hartley (1999) has termed "DIY citizenship"; put simply, the idea that more options equal more freedom. Undoubtedly it might be liberating (particularly for minority communities) to see representations of a great array of identities, subjectivities, and personalities that one hitherto had thought void or impossible. Nevertheless, despite that most "reality shows…acknowledge the fluidity of identity, they do so only to freeze it into pre-established moulds" (Morreale, 2007, p. 106). Thus, the hopeful idea of the 'DIY' self risks falling into similar lines of reasoning to those of the proponents of free market competition, as the market and trade

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in to see how far the process has advanced, whereas producers capitalize on the spectacle of greed to generate their own profits" (Deery, 2004, p. 2).

[79] Beverly Skeggs and Helen Wood (2012) highlight that, in turn, the "perform[ance of] personhood is always connected to ideas of value (economic, moral, affective)" which establish the decision-making as especially precarious (p. 48). Yet, the fact that the ideal neoliberal 'self' requires a prerequisite (exclusionary) membership, that one "at birth…inherits differential *access* to the space and resources required to *acquire* and *convert* capitals" is continually overlooked (ibid., p. 51, emphasis in original).

value come to determine both the representation and validity of certain 'selfhoods' in popular culture.[80] Instead, this thesis will argue, following a number of critics,[81] that reality television has come to present the 'self' in need of constant improvement and surveillance, therefore ideas of the pick 'n' mix 'self' merely offers "freedoms that act as a form of governmentality" (Bennett, 2011, p. 171). Indeed, neoliberal capitalist ideology in democratic countries, like the US, promotes the economisation of every realm of the body politic, and has advanced what Alison Hearn calls the "monetization of 'being'" (2011, p. 315). Ultimately, this contributes to the "[c]ultural shift from the notion of *having* a product to *being* a product as a route to personal fulfilment" *and* self-validation (Morreale, 2007, p. 95, emphasis in original). This further demonstrates the wider move from the material and exterior to the intangible and emotional in the cultural imaginary.[82]

In the widely sold *No Logo,* Naomi Klein (2001) writes that in the early 1990s "'Brands, not products!' became the rallying cry for a marketing renaissance led by a new breed of companies that saw themselves as 'meaning brokers' instead of product producers" (p. 21). This development of the way individuals are targeted as consumers is still, in the late 2010s, the norm (see Figure 8). No longer are consumers simply being sold products, instead they are offered the opportunity to acquire a certain sensibility, an emotion, a lifestyle, and even an (improved) 'self.'

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[80] See Beverly Skeggs (2004) and Skeggs and Wood (2012) for more on the importance of 'value' and 'personhood'. Skeggs (2004) writes: "Making legitimate (making things valid) places the thing (be it person or object) that is being valued in the realm of dominant categorizations. As it is inscribed with value it becomes part of the symbolic economy" (p. 14). As a result, some selfhoods are rendered more 'valuable' than others, and in the current Western neoliberal capitalist context, this often indicates the self's saleability and/or means of accumulating capital.

[81] See for instance: Bennett (2011), Corner (2002), Heller (2007) Ouellette (2009), Ouellette and Hay (2008a), (2008b) Sender (2009), and Weber (2007).

[82] What Clough and Halley (2007) call the 'affective turn' (I will discuss this further in Chapter Five).

Figure 8. Advert for Tru Renewal skincare. RHONY's Ramona Singer proclaims that her skincare is "life-changing" (www.ramonasinger.com, 2017).

The construction of a brand in contemporary society is, as Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) proposes, "about building an affective, authentic *relationship* with a consumer, one based – just like a relationship between two people – on the accumulation of memories, emotions, personal narratives, and expectations" (p. 8, emphasis in original). Perhaps inevitably, these relationships can become so deeply personal, until they even constitute the very material we use to define and frame our sense of 'self.' As reality television is, as discussed, so immersed in the logics of the market and marketing strategies, it is a perfect example of the ways in which the idea of 'selfhood' is called upon to assure capital gain. Indeed, with the dividing line between self and commodity blurred, the notion of the 'self' *as* 'brand' is established. The idea of "self-branding" has been popularised by the writings of Alison Hearn (see 2008b, but also, 2008a, 2011, 2016). Hearn (2008a, p. 497) writes:

> The 'branded self' is a commodity sign; it is a body that works and, at the same time, points to itself working, striving to embody the values of its corporate working environment. Here we see the 'self' as a commodity for sale in the labour market, which must generate its own rhetorically persuasive packaging, its own promotional skin, within the confines of the dominant corporate imaginary.

Yet, whilst self-branding as a phenomenon is discussed (mostly with contempt) in academic texts, it is now commonplace in schools, universities, offices, companies, et cetera, to hear individuals being encouraged to work on their 'self-brands.' Furthermore,

there has been a fundamental increase in self-help literature and media, urging persons to 'sell them*selves*.' For instance, in the self-help book *Managing Brand You*, Wilson (senior vice president, The Coca-Cola Company) and Blumenthal (brand consultant) (2008) write: "Personal branding is relevant to anyone who wants to unleash his or her inner passions and proactively build a fulfilling future, as well as grow in importance, relevance, and reputation" (p. 4). Self-branding thus becomes a tool for *becoming*, for creating a socio-culturally accepted 'self.'

As mentioned, product placement in RHONY is one of the main components of the narrative structure, as Ramona Singer exclaims: "our life [sic] is our business!" (Reunion – Part 1, 2009). The layers of this statement are manifold. Firstly, most of the women appear on the show to promote a business venture. Secondly, in order for the business to naturally fit into the plotline, the women need to embody their brands; and if these performances are not deemed 'authentic' and 'genuine', the exposure for the self/brand is terminated as the women are disinvited to future seasons of the series.[83] In the very first episodes, the women of RHONY attempt to establish their unique personas, clearly aware that "[b]y appearing on reality television, [they] can become salable image commodities – or branded selves" (Hearn, 2016, p. 9). Yet, not all cast members build business ventures on the reality series, but Heather Thompson (Yummie) and Cindy Barshop (Completely Bare) use the show to promote their, already established, companies. However, the majority of the *Housewives* create their brands during the shooting of RHONY, as is the case with Jill Zarin (Skweez Couture, Jill Zarin Home), Ramona Singer (Ramona Pinot Grigio, Tru Renewal (see Figure 8), True Faith Jewelry), LuAnn de Lesseps (The Countess Collection), Sonja Morgan (Sonja Morgan New York, Sonja in the City), and the, by far, most successful, Bethenny Frankel (the Skinnygirl brand). Furthermore, it is noteworthy that all these business endeavours involve beauty, fashion, and other stereotypically 'female' pleasures, thus pertaining to what Negra and Tasker (2014) call 'safe entrepreneurialism' for women, which I will explore further in Chapter Five.

To succeed in creating a brand, the women must personify what they are selling in order to construct 'authentic' relationships with viewers/consumers. At the same time, it is not only up to the cast members to construct a self/brand, as such a decision is also "determined by agents of the industry during editing" (Hearn, 2008b, p. 209). The reality

[83] Unless they add to the storyline or 'drama' somehow.

series thus creates a kind of late capitalist utopia in which everything can be turned into a commodity – especially the 'self' – and through the *Housewives*' choices (their triumphs and failures) viewers are supplied with a rulebook for the game that is life under Western neoliberalism. The most fundamental rule is to learn how to trademark your *self*, to discover what makes you unique – spotting the gap in the market – and finding a way to capitalise on this uniqueness in order to become an entrepreneur of your 'self'.[84] This self/brand also has to be marketable, memorable, and catchy. A kind of bite-sized 'self' easily grasped by consumers with an apparently dwindling attention span.[85] As Jon Dovey proposes, "the more complex, unreliable and subtle our experience of selfhood becomes, the more our appetite grows for tabloidised cartoon colour versions of self" (2000, p. 104). Perhaps as an acknowledgement of this idea, the *Real Housewives* begins each episode with shots of each *housewife*, posing with her family (spouses/children/canines), and a voiced-over, personal tagline. These taglines, or epithets, in themselves commodified,[86] quickly introduce the cast members and their self/brands to the audience. For instance, Ramona Singer's tagline in season six, "Get the Pinot ready, because it's Turtle Time" (2014, see Figure 9), represents Ramona's carefully constructed performance of her self/brand; she embodies 'fun' and 'cutting loose' (or "Turtle Time"), which she correlates to drinking Pinot Grigio, eventually releasing her own wine brand, Ramona. Thus, she manages to fashion an affective relationship between brand and consumer, between 'good times' and consuming wine, and even better, consuming *her* wine (see Figure 10).

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[84] US law defines trademark as "a word, name, symbol, or device, or combination thereof, used…to identify and distinguish goods from those manufactured and sold by others" (Klein, 2001, p. 176).

[85] In 2015-2016, many mainstream media outlets published the (arguably scientifically questionable) findings of a report produced by Microsoft, claiming that humans now have a shorter attention span than that of a goldfish (Consumer Insights Microsoft Canada, 2015).

[86] For $14.95, Bravo's online merchandise shop offers consumer-viewers the possibility to buy mugs with their favourite housewife's tagline. Fans of the show even have the opportunity to find out their own '*Real Housewives* tagline' by typing in their names in the 'Tagline generator' on Bravotv.com (November 2017).

Figure 9. Ramona Pinot Grigio, ad (Alloy Entertainment, 2013)

Figure 10. Ramona Singer promoting her wine brand, Ramona (Bravo TV, 2014).

Consumers are subsequently encouraged to accept what fellow *Housewife* Alex McCord notes, "Ramona is to Pinot Grigio as salt is to the ocean" (The Mask Has Two Faces, 2011). Hence, by consuming Ramona's wine, the public is offered a both literal and metaphorical taste of the *Real Housewife* experience.

Bethenny Frankel, or Skinnygirl™

The New York *Housewife* Bethenny Frankel has arguably been the most successful in creating a self/brand, skilfully turning "her otherwise short-lived celebrity into a

performance of entrepreneurship" (Bjelskou, 2015, Ch. 6).[87] [88] Beginning as a natural food chef, Bethenny first appeared on *Martha Stewart Apprentice* (2005), in which she was the runner-up, and joined RHONY (Seasons 1-3, 7-present) to, as mentioned, establish a business, and create her public persona. On the show, Bethenny defines herself as "Martha Stewart meets Carrie Bradshaw" (Charity Wives, 2009), utilising popular culture to immediately create a shorthand for her self as well as to appeal to audiences who recognise the references.[89] Bethenny uses RHONY as a platform, portraying herself as the embodiment of the American dream and the proof of the idea that "if you really work hard…you can have it all" (Bethenny Frankel, Reunion Part 1, 2010).[90] In the first two seasons, Bethenny describes her lack of parental support and difficult upbringing, during which she, like an "orphan," "raised herself" (Meet the Wives, 2008). These stories of her past come to emphasise her independence and self-reliance; qualities that are essential elements of neoliberal cultural discourse and ideology in which it is a personal failure to be subjected to forces out of one's control. During the course of RHONY, audiences see Bethenny launching her Skinnygirl brand and eventually, through its success, becoming the authority on self-branding and entrepreneurial selfhood. Indeed, Bethenny's brand is ultimately Bethenny Frankel, thus it is essential that her self/brand appears 'true' and genuine, even though, as discussed, such a self can only be mere simulacra (see Chapter One). Bethenny asserts: "This [life on RHONY] is real, it's not just dialogue" and she goes to great lengths to prove it (Van Kampen's Houseparty, 2009). In one reunion, Bethenny is asked why she consented to having cameras in the bathroom while she was urinating on a pregnancy test, to which she simply replies: "It was just my life" (Reunion Part 1, 2010). Time and time again, Bethenny highlights the transparency of her televisual performances, which offer insights into both her personal and business lives. Thus, she seeks to link the candidness and supposed realness of her private life to the perception of her franchise. Hence, in many ways it appears that the "media have…become the last authority for self-perception, the 'reality

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[87] In monetary terms, it has been reported that her pre-made cocktail concept was sold to Beam Global Spirits and Wine, Inc. for 120 million dollars (Bjelskou, 2016, Ch. 6).

[88] Bethenny Frankel and her brand have also been discussed to varying degrees by Arcy (2015), Bjelskou (2015), Deery (2012) and Hearn (2016).

[89] The first being a famous American television chef and the second, the hyper-feminine, thoughtful writer of TV hit-series *Sex and the City.* Ultimately, Bethenny thus positions herself, or arguably attempts to position her self/brand, as a homely, domestic goddess with a biting wit and great fashion sense.

[90] Concepts that form a part of what Laura Berlant (2011) describes as the "cruel optimism" of later modernity, where unachievable fantasies are still presented as attainable goals.

test' of the social persona: I am seen, therefore I am" (Frohne, 2002, as cited in Biressi and Nunn, 2005, p. 95). As a result, the more personal and intrusive the filming and self-disclosure get, the more 'authentic' the performance of self *feels*.

Indeed, Bethenny's brand Skinnygirl is indistinguishable from her self, her image, and even her physical body. Her groomed, svelte figure is, Bjelskou (2015) suggests, "[t]he most important representation of Bethenny's brand…the physical 'proof' of the validity of her advice" (Ch. 6). Certainly, her body is an essential part of the legitimacy of Skinnygirl, which denotes a woman with a fit physique and a youthful appearance, but Bethenny's success lies in the creation of a model *lifestyle* (See Figures 11 and 12).

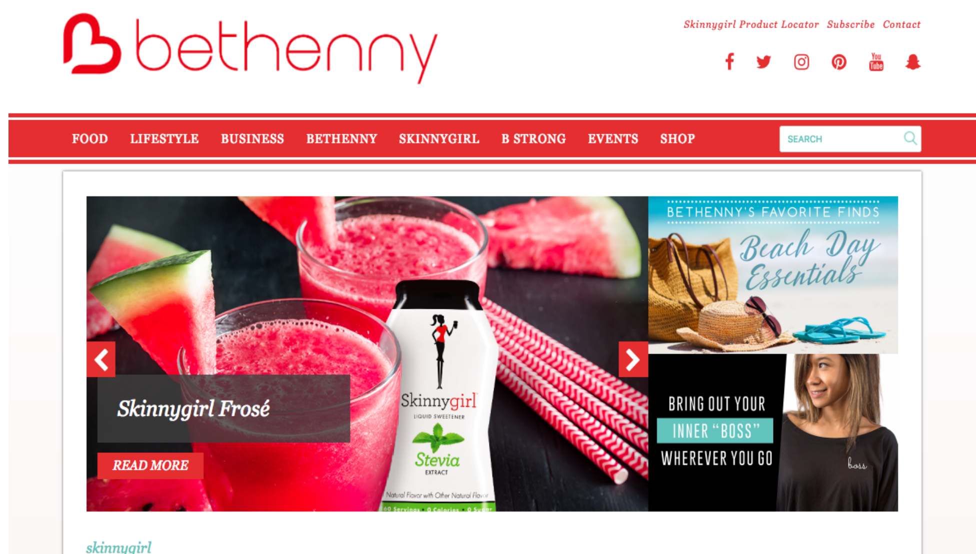

Figure 11. Homepage of bethenny.com, screenshot (2017).

Figure 12. "Bethenny Frankel wants to make every girl a Skinnygirl" (NY Daily News, 2011).

Through her growing visibility outside of RHONY, her financial success, and her 'American dream' narrative, she offers a 'how-to guide' of the ideal female entrepreneurial self, presented as both attainable and plausible for all who 'work hard', as per the logics of neoliberalism and neoliberal feminism. The Skinnygirl brand may have started with a low-calorie Margarita recipe, but is now selling everything from sweeteners, popcorn, and lunchmeats, to shape wear, kitchen appliances, and self-help books.[91] As the brand name suggests, the demographic of consumers that the company wants to target are women, particularly women concerned with leading a certain kind of lifestyle. In her *Naturally Thin* (2009), Bethenny urges her female readers to: "[be] the best girl [you] can be. Every one of you is a Skinnygirl dying to break out. If you want it, go get it…You go girl!" (Dedication page). This type of discourse is characteristic of Bethenny's brand and runs through her books, websites, blogs, social media, and RHONY appearances.[92] It is also representative of postfeminism, or powerfeminism, in which everyday pleasures, individual choices, and ideas of female empowerment take precedence over the real-life struggles many women cannot simply *decide* to opt out of.[93]

Nevertheless, Bethenny insists that "[y]ou have to take responsibility" and make "everything your business, whether your business is technically a business or not" (bethenny.com, 2017).[94] Subsequently illustrating the currently predominate facet of American popular culture that, as Dianne Negra (2009) claims, "insistently asserts that if women can productively manage home, time, work, and their commodity choices, they will be rewarded with a more authentic, intact, and achieved self" (p. 5). Utilising the strategies and terminology of business and marketing, Bethenny seems to further propose that the financial world provides the tools for finding happiness and self-fulfilment. By arguing that an individual's "diet is a bank account" and that "weight is like debt…you

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[91] Bethenny Frankel has published such books as *Naturally Thin: Unleash Your Skinnygirl and Free Yourself from a Lifetime of Dieting* (2009), *Skinnygirl Solutions: Simple Ideas, Extraordinary Results* (2014), and *I Suck at Relationships So You Don't Have To: 10 Rules for Not Screwing Up Your Happily Ever After* (2016).

[92] Furthermore, The Skinnygirl Instagram account often posts 'inspirational,' playful quotes such as "Give a girl the right shoes and she can conquer the world" (2017) or "You choose happiness, you don't wait for it to choose you – Bethenny Frankel" (2016).

[93] This positions the ideal postfeminist selfhood that Bethenny advocates and embodies as essentially privileged, white, affluent, and able-bodied.

[94] Consequently, life is, again, presented as a string of choices "seen as realisations of the attributes of the choosing person…and reflect back upon the person who has made them" (Rose, 1999, p. 87).

can pay off" (2009, pp. 21-22), Bethenny demonstrates and encourages the economification of quotidian life. Thus, in the social imaginary of the *Real Housewives*, the achievement of 'selfhood' can only be rewarded through personal, careful management, by becoming, as Bethenny proposes, "the CEO of [one's] own life and [one's] own business" (Start Spreading the News, 2016) – by creating a self/brand. In her self-help work, Frankel appears to stress that through her genuine advice, she is offering a service for women, essentially teaching not only entrepreneurship, but also self-sustenance and personal accountability. These values clearly correspond with neoliberal governmental rationalities (outlined in Chapter One), whilst at the same time reinforcing the mainstream (post)feminist slogans of 'girlpower,' and '#girlboss.'

Bethenny's self/brand is ultimately, as Peter Bjelskou observes, a "performance of ordinariness and realness" (2015, Ch. 6). Bethenny does not, as mentioned, deny viewers of RHONY an intimate access to her personal life – be it pregnancy tests, details of her vagina, or an admission to plastic surgery. As Misha Kavka (2012) notes, in the "ideological matrix [of reality television], concealment is the opposite of revelation, and revelation is synonymous with authenticity" (p. 92). Indeed, Bethenny's on-screen self-performance relies on her self/brand being perceived as authentic and forthright. Bethenny often utilises the title segments to reinforce this conception, creating taglines such as: "I'm not a housewife, but I am real" (Season 7) and "If you can't handle the truth, then you can't handle me" (Season 8). Similarly, she positions herself as the antithesis of inauthenticity and hypocrisy, perpetually 'calling out' her cast mates for being 'fake' or 'not real'; labelling herself the "bullshit police" (Start Spreading the News, 2016) and the "hypocrisy shamer" (Reunion – Part 1, 2016).[95] Yet, her success does not rely on her likeability. Despite her committed fan base and 1,156,542 'likes' on the *Bethenny Frankel* Facebook page (12 December 2019), her public appearances and personal life are popular objects of fierce criticism on online forums and blogs.[96] One online commenter suggests in a comment on a blog: "She [Bethenny] most definitely

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[95] Further, the perception of Bethenny as 'real' is evidently also due to the editing of RHONY, as Bethenny is rarely included in the 'Bravo wink' shots (discussed above). Consequently, her contradictions are rarely the brunt of (editing) jokes. One can only presume that her return to the reality TV show in season seven included contract clauses that protect her self/brand and also assures its exposure on air. Particularly as there has been a marked increase of Skinnygirl product placement in the last few seasons, something which has been noted with disapproval by many fans of the series.

[96] See for instance the dedicated blogs for self-professed Bethenny Frankel haters: ihatebethennyfrankel.wordpress.com and realitytvscandals.com/tag/i-hate-bethenny-frankel/.

deserves every bit of the hate coming her way and then some. One does not get to behave as despicably as she has all these years and come unscathed" (anonymised, 2016). Yet, as another poster (from the RHONY forum which will be studied below) comments, "things like this [negative comments] just give me a giggle because it seems the more you hate her the better she does" (2017). Indeed, *The Real Housewives* executive producer Andy Cohen reportedly suggests, "an audience will respond to however eccentric or stubborn or mean or dumb or kind a person is if that person is being *authentic*" (Brodesser-Akner, 2017, my emphasis). Drama is thus desirable both by viewers *and* producers as long as it is 'genuine', which essentially means that it should *feel* 'genuine'. In this sense, Bethenny Frankel and Skinnygirl are given credibility and validity through Bethenny's portrayal of 'realness'. Her performance is valid and rendered valuable through her claims to authenticity, but, ultimately, also through her self/brand's apparent potential to acquire capital and public recognition, indeed, celebrity status. Nevertheless, returning to the above quote by Cohen, what does this oft-cited 'authenticity' actually mean, and why is it given such precedence?

Performing the Authentic Self/brand

The current cultural moment appears to be suffused by an anxiety over authenticity and truth. The claims to 'the real' are negotiated daily as photographs are photoshopped or 'filtered,' video clips edited, identities are stolen or impersonated, and the Oxford Dictionaries word of the year 2016 was "post-truth" (Flood, 2016). The search for authentic, or in social media terms, #unfiltered, experiences and representations of individuals have become central in the current context in which "new forms of media and new forms of mediation rapidly gain importance and have started to pervade virtually every aspect of life" (Funk et al., 2012, p. 10). As brands, journalists, and public figures warn consumers and citizens of their competitors' ingenuity and artifice, authenticity becomes a rare and highly valued commodity; the worth of which increases in a market where products and brands are mass-produced and easily outsold, which ultimately begs the question of "the plausibility of the value" (Rose and Wood, 2005, p. 286).

Authenticity as a term has been aptly investigated and described by numerous writers (see for instance, Trilling, 1972; Vannini and Williams, 2009), which will not be restated here. For clarity however, 'authenticity' most commonly denotes qualities of

being "genuine" or "in accordance with fact" or represents ideas "of truthful correspondence between inner feelings and their outward expression" ("Authenticity", OED Online, 2017). The latter definition appears to have taken precedence in the last couple of decades as subjective experiences and (gut) feelings have come to serve as sources for knowledge and 'truth'.[97] For instance, using "as a white man…" or "as a lesbian woman…" as a kind of prefix to legitimise a certain statement has become encouraged in public discourse. As such, disclosure of the personal ultimately makes the assertion *feel* more authentic. It is perhaps the liquidity of the present that has created the anxiety of the authentic, in which the only thing that is certain is uncertainty and perpetual change (Bauman, 2000). This seems to fulfil what Berlant (1997) defines as the maxim of the present-day: "the political is the personal".[98] The result is a longing for absolutes and the fixed and constant. Hence, the appeal of the ideal of finding an 'essence' or a 'truth' within oneself, something which marketers and advertisers have been particularly good at tapping into (as exemplified by the concept of self/branding above). Yet, the perceived threat of false advertisement along with (unreal) reality television have perhaps oiled the wheels of the current culture of mistrust that sees the personal and interior as the only thing wholly knowable.[99] Nevertheless, the same anxiety also accounts for the popularity of 'factual' programming and gossip sites claiming to offer rare insights. As Jon Dovey (2000) suggests, the growth of "tabloid culture" in the late 1990s has resulted in an "enormous growth in our appetite for the personal, intimate detail which has come to signify authenticity" (p. 23). Yet, this begs the question; what is the apparently inherent danger in disingenuity and in 'being fake'?

Authenticity is perpetually invoked in the world of reality television, not only by producers, creators (see the Zalaznick's quote above), and cast members, but also by the

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[97] Arguably, this development has been exceedingly influenced by identity politics and some strands of intersectionality that have helped highlight the multiple and varied oppressions that different individuals face (in terms of race, sexuality, class etc.). Yet, the stress on the individual and individual experiences often seems to supersede the goal of real social, systemic change.

[98] Berlant reverses the feminist catchphrase of the 1970s – "the personal is the political" – in order to point to a wider societal shift from a political public sphere to a more intimate sphere of personal responsibility.

[99] One recent (perhaps obvious) example of post-truth, or that which feels true, is the election of President Donald Trump – an entrepreneur notably famous for his reality television appearances. His career is built on a performance of ordinariness and 'telling it like it is', thus it comes as no surprise that, for many, his indelicate manner was deemed more authentic and 'real' than that of his political opponents (politicians whose unreliability is regarded as a common axiom). Trump's populist and often affective utterances during the election campaign (and during his presidency) appear to resonate in the socio-cultural present of 'post-truth' and the quest for objective reality.

viewers of the programmes. It thus seems plausible to suggest that the "tension between what is authentic and real versus scripted, highly edited programming is what makes shows like *The Real Housewives* both fascinating and popular" (Silverman, 2015, p. 7). In this sense reality television "does not *represent* the current conjuncture – it interjects itself into the conjuncture and enhances particular components required by it" (Bratich, 2007, p. 7, italics in original). Indeed, the genre relies on the notion, quoting Bethenny Frankel, that "truth is stranger than fiction" (The Art of being a Cougar, 2015).[100]

Most viewers are aware of the editing and production involved in creating the mainly constructed situations and performances in reality television. Yet, as Annette Hill (2005) argues, audiences perpetually base their judgements of cast members on their perceived authenticity and whether they appear to be presenting their 'true', inner selves. Consider the passage below from RHONY, which demonstrates some of the frustration directed toward *Housewife* Kelly Bensimon and her contradictory self/brand, caused by her inability to come across as authentic.

> **Andy Cohen**: OK. Kelly Killoren-Bensimon, here's a question about your contradictions, OK? Sicily emailed and said, "Kelly doesn't eat processed food but loves Gummi Bears and chicken wings. She doesn't drink but she loves beer and tequila shots. She hates labels but she calls herself a victim." Well?
>
> **Kelly Bensimon:** She's funny. I like that she knows so much about me.
>
> **Andy Cohen**: But you do say many declarative... You have many declarative statements that seem contradictory. Do you ever get that when you watch yourself?
>
> **Kelly Bensimon**: I don't really watch myself. People can change, do what they want. I'm changing. If one day I want chicken wings, the next day not, that's my choice.
>
> **Bethenny Frankel:** He says a declarative statement.
>
> **Alex McCord:** It happens so quickly, we get whiplash.
>
> **Kelly Bensimon:** If I want to declare different things it's OK.
>
> **Bethenny Frankel:** It makes people not able to believe what you say.

[100] More specifically Frankel is commenting on housewife Carole Radziwill's late husband's ashes being moved from church to church due to deconsecration.

Kelly Bensimon: I'm OK with that.

Bethenny Frankel: So it doesn't matter?

Kelly Bensimon: This isn't *The New York Times*, it's a fun show, if one day I feel like being one person, then not, that's OK.

Andy Cohen: So you're saying you contradict yourself.

Kelly Bensimon: All the time. What's wrong with that? ... I do constantly. I mean, yeah. Why not?

Andy Cohen: [to Kelly] Stacey in California said, "You're very vocal about your fur wearing, meat eating morals this season and then you say you're against the abuse of animals. Where do you think these things come from?"

Kelly Bensimon: I was asked to shoot Playboy and everybody was, "Playboy, PETA!" That's not the same thing…Do I want to wear fur? Today? maybe. Tomorrow? maybe not. That's my choice. I respect everything they do but if I want to wear fur I can.

Andy Cohen: I think what people responded to is it didn't seem to make any sense what you said.

Kelly Bensimon: I don't listen.

Bethenny Frankel: You're saying people should not pay attention to it.

Kelly Bensimon: No.

Bethenny Frankel: Then what are you saying?

Kelly Bensimon: I'm asking you to celebrate who I am.

Bethenny Frankel: I don't understand who you are.

LuAnn de Lesseps: You're contradicting yourself.

Kelly Bensimon: You know who I am, you know who I am!

LuAnn de Lesseps: I know but I'm confused about that. You can't say you're shy then pose for Playboy. It makes no sense.

Kelly Bensimon: What do you mean? [ALL TALK AT ONCE]

Andy Cohen: Hold on, everybody's talking at once. You're saying that...

Kelly Bensimon: I'm flattered that everyone is so interested in what I think. I appreciate that. Thank you. [Smiles].

(Reunion Part 3, 2010)

In many ways, albeit in indefinite terms, Kelly presents a version of the postmodern self – constantly changing, evolving, and essentially unstable. To her, being contradictory is natural, as she states, "People can change." This passage from RHONY is important as it demonstrates how the failure to create bite-sized, saleable selfhood and performing that consistently, creates frustration both with the other cast members and audiences. Thus, in the universe of reality television, self-performance and branding cannot be in a state of flux and still be deemed believable, authentic, and subsequently valid. As Bethenny notes in the above passage, Kelly's divergent behaviour negates her self-performance and makes others 'not believe' her. In the remainder of her appearances on RHONY, Kelly is framed as an outcast, a loose cannon, failing to perform the way in which a female neoliberal self is encouraged to perform on RHONY.

As has been noted,[101] sociologist Erving Goffman's dramaturgical approach to the self and social interaction is particularly useful in highlighting the demand for unitary selfhood in reality television. Goffman (1956) suggests that individuals perform their selves differently depending on whether they are being observed in a social setting ('front stage' performance) or simply relaxing 'behind the scenes' at home or elsewhere ('backstage' performance). The front stage performance relies on social scripts specific for the setting and status of the individual; essentially the (unwritten) social cues for behaviour in a certain socio-cultural environment. Reality television, however, offers a unique intermingling of both front- and backstage performances. The cast members perform a self to each other and are aware that this 'front' is being scrutinised by viewers as well. Nonetheless, the confessionals and filming of domestic, 'private moments' suggest that audiences are equally privy to the backstage, ostensibly more authentic, self. As Kavka (2012) aptly proposes, "[o]ut of this flickering relation between selves [front- and backstage], a 'true self' is seen to emerge from the performed self" (p. 96). What appears to be imagined as the *real* self is therefore when there is a correspondence between front stage and backstage 'selves'.[102] Interestingly, if Goffman is right in that we are all performing a 'front' in social settings, it seems only natural that we want a glimpse

[101] See for instance the references to Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956) in Kavka (2012).

[102] One example of this can be found in season nine of RHONY (Oil and Vinegar, 2017), in which Bethenny states that "there is no real Ramona" because Ramona moves from being "nice, to bitch[y], to ass-kissing". Bethenny consequently suggests that to 'be real' an individual needs to be static and only exhibit one of these qualities.

of the 'behind the scenes'.[103] The anxiety over authenticity is perhaps the fear that the 'front' presented is oppositional to the (backstage) reality.

The contradictions of Kelly's performance – her statements in the confessionals versus her actions – places her, in Goffman's words, as "an imposter", thus jeopardising "in our minds the moral connection between legitimate authorization to play a part and the capacity to play it" (1956, p. 67). The fear of inauthenticity and 'fake' selfhood in RHONY – and arguably Anglophone popular culture in general – stems from an anxiety of deception, but also, perhaps even primarily, from the fear that we are all acting. Indeed, if it is all simulacra, then "[b]ehind the assiduous documentation and defence of the authentic", as Regina Bendix (1997) notes, "lies an unarticulated anxiety of losing the subject" (p. 10). This idea is expressively articulated by Slavoj Žižek (2006, p. 226), who (in reflecting upon the reality TV programme *Big Brother*) wonders:

> What if Big Brother was already here, as the (imagined) Gaze for whom I was doing things, whom I tried to impress, to seduce, even when I was alone? What if the *Big Brother* show only renders palpable this universal structure? In other words, what if, in our 'real life', we play ourselves? The welcome achievement of 'Big Brother' is to remind us of this uncanny fact.
>
> (quoted in Hartley, 2004. p. 316)

Yet, the opposite appears to be true in reality programmes such as RHONY, as audiences and reality TV stars attempt to locate authenticity rather than admitting to any form of play-acting. In interviews, RHONY producer Cohen seems to defend the *reality* aspect of the TV series and the candour or sincerity of the women's conduct, claiming that *The Real Housewives* "is very real to them [the cast]. And by the way, when it's not, they're off the show" (as cited in Brodesser-Akner, 2017).[104] This need for the 'real' and original

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[103] This backstage authenticity is what RHONY claims to offer. As the presentation of the 'housewives' tie in with what Simone de Beauvoir (1953) once wrote, that: "Confronting man, woman is always play-acting…[whilst] With other women, a woman is behind the scenes; she is polishing her equipment,…she is getting her costume together, preparing her make-up, laying out her tactics…before making her entrance on the stage" (p. 557).

[104] Cohen could be referring to the scene in season six in which the *Housewife* (one of the few *actual* housewives of RHONY) Aviva exclaims: "The only thing that is fake or artificial about me is *this*!" by which she slams her prosthetic leg on the table (The Last Leg, 2014). Despite the scene being comically effective, cast members and fans deemed Aviva's outburst premeditated

can also be analogised to the commercialisation of the reality television genre as a whole and the idea of branding considered above. A person needs to be consistent in order to symbolise something – like Bethenny with the Skinnygirl lifestyle or Ramona and Pinot Grigio – and in turn becoming saleable both to the television franchise and themselves (through product placements, endorsements, and brand exposure). The successfulness of performing a 'true' self is legitimised through the continued presence on the small screen, where failure casts them "off the show" as indicated by Cohen's comment. As a consequence, the self, or the 'self' adjudged worthy by these neoliberal logics, ceases to exist. This "yearning to speak oneself to camera suggests [both, as demonstrated,] a desire for the mark of authenticity, [but also] for the social legitimisation of one's existence" (Biressi and Nunn, 2005, p. 101). Or rather, the existence of what is recognised as a comprehensible, even 'authentic' self in the context of 'neoliberal' discourse.

Kelly's self-performance is interesting as it fails to follow the social scripts of the reality television genre that, as discussed, stresses the role of the self as an 'authentic' brand for monetary profit. On several occasions Kelly expresses her unwillingness to share personal aspects of her life, claiming that she's a "private person" (Season 2, Reunion – Part 2). The audiences are subsequently denied access to Kelly's backstage performance, which makes her personhood abstruse, as "[c]elebrity practice that stick to the safe and publicly consumable risks being viewed as inauthentic" (Marwick and Boyd, 2011, p. 149). It is also noteworthy that Kelly is not trying to sell or promote anything in particular on RHONY, which appears problematic in a context in which only the selfhoods anchored in discourses of branding and marketing are classed as worthy or even fathomable. This becomes painfully clear when in the above snippet Kelly exclaims, "you know who I am!" as the fellow 'housewives' point out her lack of a stable, bite-sized self/brand. In the previous season's reunion Kelly similarly reveals her misconception of the premise of the reality television franchise as she complains: "All of you sit here and talk about authenticity, accountability, 'I'm this, I'm that', 'you're this, you're that'…who cares?" (Reunion 2 – Part 2, 2009). Whereby the other cast members laugh and joke that in that case they should all simply go home. The idea put forward by RHONY, and popular culture texts like it, is that in order to find one's essence, this elusive 'self', one must formulate and frame the 'I' within the confines of neoliberal

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and inauthentic. Aviva Drescher was subsequently not invited to take part in the filming of season seven.

thought and vernacular. Ultimately you have to 'name' the self, put it in a box and in Hearn's (2008a) words, supply it with its "own promotional skin", so that observers can consume it and, in that sense, mark it as authentic and real.

RHONY, and reality television like it, appear to abide by the commercial notion that the self has an immutable nature – hence the obsession with categorising it – so the women whose selves are presented as fluid (e.g. Kelly) are heavily lambasted. Ironically, the fluid female self is denied existence despite the fact that social and cultural forces (external to the 'I') undeniably determine *all* selves and thus, a fixed, true self can only be an illusion, however convincing the packaging. Yet, as hinted above, this exercise of how to form, and perform, a successful self, like Bethenny Frankel, is not necessarily the lesson that audiences of the TV programme walk away with. Thus, to investigate this further, the next section of this chapter will explore how viewers of the show respond to this representation of selfhood. Further, if the *Real Housewives* is teaching viewers how to create a self/brand and create female 'neoliberal' selves, what is it that people find so pleasurable or entertaining in watching the series?

The Viewers of RHONY – A Netnographic Study

The *Real Housewives* has specifically catered for audience engagement and comment on online forums, blogs, Twitter, and Facebook pages, and has further inspired podcasts (such as *Bitch Sesh*, 2015-present) wholly dedicated to discussing the dramatic events and minutiae of the franchise's American instalments. Thus, ever since it appeared on television, RHONY has had a pronounced online presence with *Housewives* writing weekly blogs for the Bravo site (commenting on the on-screen story line). Moreover, with the upsurge of social media, most cast members are prolific on Twitter and have personal websites, Facebook pages, and Snapchat and Instagram accounts on which they can market their self/brands (I will discuss the use of social media work further in Chapter Five). Consequently, the reality television franchise facilitates and generates online discussion – both by *Housewives* and fans – and the paratextual is often included in the on-screen scenes to add drama but also authenticity (see Gray, 2010). In this sense, the casts' off-screen behaviour can be used to compare, question, or substantiate the on-screen selves. One such event was cast mate Luann de Lesseps's arrest in Palm Beach, which was heavily featured on the television show and included her real mug shot, press

coverage, footage from both her arrest and arraignment, as well as excerpts from Luann's own tweets about the event (You Broke the Penal Code, 2018). Many viewers of the series appeared to find the arrest and surrounding drama fascinating as evidenced by the surge of google searches of 'Luann de Lesseps' at the time of her arrest (Google Trends, 2018). Many viewers also seemed to commend Luann for addressing the arrest directly on RHONY. As one online fan commented: "Poor Lu. She hit bottom for sure, but onward, and upwards. At least she didn't brush it off or create some delusional story" (2018). This comment subsequently further attests to audiences' call for 'authentic' (i.e. transparent) narratives on RHONY.

Indeed, the online 'buzz' created during the broadcasting of the RHONY seasons appear to confirm that "[p]eople don't just watch reality TV: they blog about it, they read magazines and tabloids about it, they tweet about it" (Deery, 2015, p. 6). The television programme is therefore a good example of what Will Brooker (2001) calls 'television overflow,' which characterises so much of the current television culture. Thus, the choice to conduct my audience reception research online appeared as an effective way to garner insights into how fans of the series talk about the female selves portrayed on screen amongst themselves – without both the obstacle of physical location or the potential influence/intrusion my physical presence might have. My initial research questions included: How is the female self discussed and understood by RHONY audiences? Which female selves are rendered more valid, or successful, and why? and finally; How are the self/brands and product placements perceived by viewers? The following sections will explore these questions in relation to my online fieldwork, which has focused on one online discussion forum in particular (which will remain unnamed for reasons I will outline below).

The forum is one of hundreds within a website dedicated to a myriad of both current and past television series of all genres, including twelve of the *Real Housewives* instalments. The online discussion forum that I have focused on centres on Bethenny Frankel and is part of a number of RHONY forums that cater for the primary demographic of RHONY viewers, namely middle class, middle-aged women. As the commentators in the forum use pseudonyms it is difficult to determine exactly where they are located (or any other personal information for that matter), but through their comments and references to more local or national phenomena, I have been able to deduce that most commentators (excluding the silent visitors) are North American, middle class (due to mentions of occupation and living situations), middle-aged women (as they often discuss

older children and grand-children). However, before exploring the specific findings of the RHONY forum, I will present the processes through which I have collected and coded the data that constitute the basis for my analysis. The importance of including discussions of methodology and ethics has often been overlooked in research of online sociality in television studies, which is why I will make an active effort to provide an overview of my proceedings here, as well as a brief summary of this area of research. Indeed, these overviews will also serve to introduce the approaches and methods used and adapted in the study of audience engagements on social media in Chapter Five.

Literature Review and Methodology

In recent years there has been an upsurge of scholarly research dedicated to understanding 'computer-mediated social gatherings' in diverse contexts on the internet (Kozinets, 2002, p. 61). This has inevitably effected some confusion and even concern in higher education since the internet, as Jakob Jensen and Anne Sørensen state, "has no center; the information is fluid, dynamic and ever changing; and users are extremely heterogenous" (2014, p. 144). The latest transformations to the internet demonstrate a move from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0: "from a system that is primarily oriented to information provision into a system that is more oriented to communication and community building" (Fuchs et al., 2012, p. 3). As a result, researchers within a wide range of academic disciplines have called attention to the importance of studying these new forms of online interaction. Arguably, the myriad 'virtual' spaces in which we find ourselves "are increasingly affecting our social behaviour as citizens, as consumers, as friends and family, as social beings" (Kozinets, 2010, p. 13). This notion has for (perhaps) obvious reasons also attracted media and television scholars to the web, often exploring online contexts as a way of investigating audience reception and engagement with media texts (see Baym, 2000; Bird, 2003; Bury, 2014; Jenkins, 1992, 2006; Garde-Hansen and Gorton, 2013). This is also why I decided to move my ethnographic enquiries online. Indeed, since reality television is often purposely created for viewer engagement on the web (as is the case with RHONY), the genre has become intertwined with social media and online commentary, thus making these virtual engagements an important part of many reality TV viewers' experiences (see also Chapter Five).

The academic analysis of online spaces is of course not new but has been evolving for three decades, albeit not as swiftly as the online objects of enquiry themselves. Yet, it is in recent years that the ethnographic field online has "achieved relevance in international research" (Vittadini and Pasquali, 2014, p. 163). Furthermore, it is perhaps due to the constantly changing nature of online communication that the research in this area has been equally arbitrary – both in terms of methodologies and definitions. Indeed, internet ethnography has been given a multitude of names by different scholars advancing their preferred methods, utilising and coining terms such as "online ethnography" (Correll, 1995), "cyber ethnography" (Fox and Roberts, 1999), "virtual ethnography" (Hine, 2000), "netnography" (Kozinets, 2010, 2015), "digital ethnography" (Murthy, 2008), "webethnography" (Prior and Miller, 2012), and "virtual shadowing" (Vittadini and Pasquali, 2014). Whilst many of these approaches differ, most follow traditional, 'analogue' ethnography where "attitudes, perspectives, and beliefs [of cultural groupings] are of primary interest" (Prior and Miller, 2012, p. 504). Yet, these researchers have taken such ethnographic enquiries *online* (often combining them with offline methods, such as face-to-face interviews or focus groups); studying social media sites, discussion fora, message boards, comment sections, listservs, blogs/vlogs, and so forth. However, in this thesis I will use and follow Robert V. Kozinets' ideas of 'netnography' to describe this kind of research, not only because he is interested in *online* interaction specifically, but also because he is one of the few researchers who has offered defined guidelines and processes for studies of online communication.

Kozinets defines netnography as a method for using "computer-mediated communications as a source of data to arrive at the ethnographic understanding and representation of a cultural or communal phenomenon" (Kozinets, 2010, p. 60). Thus, there needs to be some sort of interaction between online users in order to create data for netnographers to code/analyse. Kozinets (2002, pp. 63-66) initially presented five methodological considerations as a starting point for conducting netnographic research, including (1) *Entrée* (finding research questions and identifying the online community/communities); (2) *Data collection and analysis*; (3) *Providing trustworthy interpretation*; (4) *Research ethics*; and (5) *Member checks,* (receiving potential feedback from the online community). These steps are still widely followed and cited by internet ethnography scholars, despite Kozinets' updated twelve-step guide in *Netnography: Redefined* (2015). This, in Kozinets' words, "roughly temporal, non-exclusive and often-interacting" twelve-step process, involves: (1) introspection, (2) investigation, (3)

information, (4) interview, (5) inspection, (6) interaction, (7) immersion, (8) indexing, (9) interpretation, (10) iteration, (11) instantiation, and (12) integration (2015, p. 97). Arguably, these clear guidelines and techniques, particularly the five-step version, have made Kozinets' approach the most established of its kind.

Netnography has been especially influential in marketing, education, business, journalism, and tourism studies, but similar methods have also been used in some more recent work in television studies (see for instance, Baez, 2015; Hine, 2011; Jensen and Ringrose, 2014; Miao, 2018; and Naess, 2017). Many of these researchers do not refer to netnography specifically, nor any other specified approaches for that matter (with the exception of Hine, 2011), which is why I suggest that netnography could be utilised as a benchmark for describing the approaches one chooses to take. This does not necessarily mean that one must follow the step-by-step guidelines but referring to the methodology would prevent what Costello et al. (2017) note, namely that "some studies purporting to be netnographic…[do not adequately] report on netnographic processes" (p. 1; see also Tunçalp and Lê, 2014).[105] Therefore, as I will describe my chosen methodology for investigating the discussion forum, I will use Kozinets' methods of netnography as a point of reference.[106]

Furthermore, the ways in which we engage with television and media have changed dramatically in the last decades – with the emergence of multiplatform viewing and the often interlinked usage of social media – and so our research methods for understanding these phenomena must develop accordingly. Scholars and students need to advance a process in which the (over)flow of televisual texts and the subsequent audience engagements are traced. This would suggest that the search and arrival at a virtual field site is less bounded and static. In praxis such a process might follow Christine Hine's (2011) idea of a "mobile, internet-search based ethnographic method" that mirrors the multiplicity of contemporary media texts (p. 580). Hine exemplifies this "itinerant strategy" through her study of the online manifestations and experiences of the UK television programme *Antiques Roadshow* (1979-present). She begins her investigation by searching for any mentions of 'Antiques Roadshow' on Google, visiting as many sites,

[105] However, their criticism fails to consider the constantly changing definition of what 'netnography' entails, as illustrated by Kozinets' publication of *Netnography: Redefined* (2015) merely five years after the first edition. In this second edition, many approaches and methods have been updated as necessitated by the continuously changing online landscape.
[106] As I am using Kozinets' guidelines as a benchmark, I will refer to this project as a netnographic enquiry, rather than as an example of 'pure' netnography.

comment sections, YouTube channels and videos, discussion fora and so forth, as possible. Along the way, Hine also notes the appearance of advertisements and tries to be aware of the extent the routes "travelled were sanctioned and suggested [for her], as a measure of the extent to which [her] ethnographic journey was being travelled with or against the grain" (ibid., p. 574). This is of course important in a cyber landscape in which the researcher is always situated and as such it is central to bear in mind that the online searches and website visits of the past are influencing future directions through algorithms, cookie 'crumb trails,' and targeted content. However, a more mobile strategy assists Hine (2011) in identifying spaces in which she as a researcher can pause to explore certain themes in more detail. For instance, Hine notes that her "discovery" of a young group of people who creates audio-visual comedy content referencing the *Antiques Roadshow* could be such a 'field site' worth studying further. She argues that investigating the group of young people 'to explore the foundations both of their video practice and their experience of the *Antiques Roadshow*' might help us "understand in more depth how those two intersect with each other, and how they become meaningful within the broader context of living meaningful lives" (ibid., p. 579). Hine's virtual journey to her eventual field site was influential in my own search for a suitable site for netnographic study. Indeed, using Google, Facebook, and Twitter to search various combinations of terms (e.g. "Real Housewives of New York," "Real Housewife Bethenny Frankel," "Skinnygirl," "forums," "discussions"), led me to various discussion groups, comment sections, forums, and blogs in which my netnographic research questions were being (chiefly indirectly) addressed to various extents. I finally chose the Bethenny Frankel forum since the focus on one Bethenny in particular led to some topics of interest to my research – such as Frankel's self-brand, authenticity, and identity/persona – were explored in greater detail than in other 'communities' where all of the housewives were discussed (often in a more causal, or superficial, fashion). Furthermore, I chose the specific RHONY forum after a period of observation, as I noted that the active users enjoy sharing their personal opinions of the housewives (both critical and complimentary) and discuss their behaviours, often imagining how they would behave in comparison. The forum is also littered with in-jokes and terms for viewers proficient in a RHONY vocabulary and people congregating in that space have typically sought out the forum purposely. This highly affective language requires an extended period of observation, or indeed active participation, depending on the study's focus and scope. Ultimately, just as is the case in more traditional ethnography, observing and learning about the socio-

cultural context means that there is less chance of misrepresenting users' thoughts and emotions.

I would suggest that beginning a netnographic process by using a mobile methodology, as the one exemplified by Hine, will both assist the researcher in finding a suitable field site but also reflects the ways in which the web is being navigated by users in general. That is, in an often nonlinear and fragmented fashion. Nevertheless, once the online sociality has been identified it is crucial that the itinerant process does not end there. In my study of the RHONY forum it has proved necessary to understand the discussion topics and themes in their wider socio-cultural contexts. Many of the posters in the forum attach links to other news and gossip sites (e.g. People.com); Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram posts; as well as videos and GIFs that either represent their own feelings or provide evidence (often termed 'receipts') for their opinions. Without continually following the trails of the discussions and the paths of users, the research would run the risk of missing large parts of the users' experience. This method would also move away from analyses that are solely text-based, as has been the trend in netnographic studies across the disciplines. Since images and audio-visual materials are also included to add nonverbal cues in the interactions between users, these are of equal importance to the analysis as the text-based data. Following the flow of online engagements further ensures that research detect novel technological practices as they emerge. Indeed, in my research I have adopted an itinerant, fluid strategy coupled with some of the more pertinent guidelines suggested by Kozinets' netnography. Ultimately, I want to avoid some common oversights in television studies. Firstly, the frequent lack of discussion and review of the methods and techniques utilised. Secondly, there appears to be a tendency among television scholars to include analyses of online fora, or social media communication, as a way of anchoring preconceived theoretical or textual readings of televisual texts in 'reality.' It is of course crucial that netnography and similar enquiries are utilised, not solely as an afterthought to add validity to an argument or to make a point, but rather as a way of studying a specific virtual community in its own right.

Nevertheless, netnography can be an exceedingly useful way of gaining an understanding of the ways in which some viewers decode the events and characters of televisual texts. Indeed, the benefits of this ethnographic process are manifold, and netnography is frequently lauded for its relative inexpensiveness, but also for it being less time consuming than other ethnographic methods (Kozinets, 2010, p. 56). However, a netnographer will naturally need to have access to the internet as well as the appropriate

technology, which might also raise questions of researchers' privilege and/or inclusivity. My own experiences of studying the discussions between RHONY viewers – including analyses of written comments, GIFs, images, external links, and video clips – proved that netnography can be more time consuming than at first expected. In praxis, this included my reading of circa 5000 posts on the Bethenny Frankel discussion forum, posted between October 2014 and September 2018 (posts that were primarily concerned with the events during the filming and airing of RHONY seasons six to nine with some discussions of previous seasons and episodes). These posts were then saved as offline pages with 50 posts per page, which mirrors the way they appear online to other users. The past comments (from October 2014 to October 2017) were downloaded and archived on my personal desktop to be decoded in closer detail and new comments were read and downloaded as and when they appeared online, in real-time, or when I visited the forum. During the process of archiving and reading concurrent forum discussions, I was following Hine's mobile strategy and was thus careful to follow the online trails left by posters in the forum; the links to other websites, Bethenny Frankel's social media accounts, gossip and news sites, and photographs taken of Bethenny at events or during her everyday life. These elements form an important part of the socio-cultural milieu of the forum and were frequently used as touchstones to further (or fire up) the conversation. The forum's intermingling of news and gossip site reports, Bethenny's own tweets and social media posts, along with the forum participants' own views and experiences, create a (virtual) space in which these are given equal credence. What matters, as explored earlier in this chapter, is what 'feels' true and authentic – a kind of microcosm of so-called 'post-truth' public discourse in the Anglosphere.

Returning to the outline of the netnographic methods used, my research suggests that the notion that netnography is less time consuming (as Kozinets has suggested) is relative to the specific case and should not be a motivation for conducting netnographic research (2002). Nevertheless, netnography is naturally less dependent on the participants' availability, location, or reticence. Another benefit of turning one's ethnographic enquiries to the web is the vast amount of data available, including interactions from both past and present (Kozinets, 2010, p. 56). As Tunçalp and Lê (2014) suggest: "ethnographers can either decide to study these messages in real time, as they are progressively posted, or they can choose to download them in a bulk and treat them as archival data" (p. 65). In my study of the RHONY discussion forum I downloaded the past conversations that had emerged before my arrival as PDFs for coding and then copy-

pasted the new messages as they appeared, saving them in folders alongside my own fieldnotes, written concurrently. I chose this method as I was interested in how the conversations might have changed with the arrival or departure of particular housewives of the television show, but I also wanted to get a sense of the interactions as they occurred. Thus, I concur with Costello et al. who suggest that the (not uncommon) practice of solely analysing archival material in an offline environment, without getting a sense for how users interact in real-time, "is perhaps more appropriately categorized as archival research than as netnography" (2017, p. 7). After having saved all the pages of the forum, I went through the comments again, copy-pasting interesting sections that I then collected in a Word file. This word document of excerpts was then printed out so that I would be able to mark-up relevant comments, images, and underline words and phrases by hand. I found that the process of hand-coding is particularly helpful in terms of detecting common patterns and over-arching themes in the data, particularly in the choice of language used and the combination of linguistic and non-linguistic cues. Furthermore, as suggested by Kozinets (2015), another simple, yet helpful, tool that I used to identify some of the major themes in a discussion forum, is the online word cloud generators, discussed more in the findings and discussion section below.

The process of data-coding and taking care to familiarise oneself with the social context also help to identify the different users of the chosen sociality. Shelley Correll's (1995) typology of internet users is especially apposite to the study of online discussion fora (even though it was published in the time of Web 1.0). In her study of a virtual lesbian community (an 'electronic bar'), Correll identifies four different types of users: (1) *Regulars*, who are proficient in the language and rules of the space; (2) *Newbies*, characterised "by an awkward conversational style," e.g. asking or stating the obvious; (3) *Lurkers*, who rarely engage in conversations or do so after admitting to having observed the conversations for a long period of time; and (4) *Bashers*, who mainly comment in order to cause dissension or to harass (1995, pp. 289-291). In the case of the RHONY forum, the majority of the visitors to the 'community' appear to be so-called 'lurkers' as the forum, between October 2014 and October 2018, contains 8,729 comments, but 389,914 visitor/readers (although the website does not state how these visits are counted). Indeed, some more passive commentators wrote how they usually only frequent the forum to 'catch up' with other viewers' thoughts and would only share their opinions on a specific subject if it somehow speaks to them personally. I found this fascinating as it suggested a more casual fan practice with users visiting the forum to read

views on specific events or general 'gossip' rather than actively participating in producing paratexts. Yet, the forum contains many regulars as well, who often develop a certain style of commentatorship, and will eventually, as Hills has found in similar contexts, build "fan cultural capital and a persona over time" (2015, p. 154).

Finally, the last and most referenced (as well as disputed) benefit of netnography is its potential to be less intrusive and more naturalistic (Costello et al., 2017; Kozinets, 2010). Kozinets et al. suggest that it can "provid[e] windows on naturally occurring behaviors" (2014, p. 262). Indeed, due to the relative anonymity and easy access of online interaction, netnography is often suited to studying more sensitive subject-matters or marginalised groups (Costello et al., 2017) – see for instance Scaramuzzino's (2012) study of the Swedish 'virtual red-light district', Langer and Beckman (2005) on internet message boards about cosmetic surgery in Denmark, and Gurrieri and Cherrier's (2013) research on Australian 'fatshionistas'. However, the unobtrusiveness of netnographic methodologies can be just as productive to television scholars. In my research I found that some users in the RHONY forum expressed concerns regarding the possible stigma of watching and enjoying reality television and often confessed to conceal their 'fandom.' These sentiments suggest that individuals indulging in in-depth conversations about something often considered a 'guilty pleasure' or 'trash' (TV) often seek out spaces in which anonymity is an option. While anonymity online might incite anxiety over the potential of users' misrepresenting themselves or constructing 'false' narratives, Kozinets (2015) argues that "anonymous or pseudonymous data…are often more honest, rather than more deceptive…[and] are a great place to look for truly deep and unvarnished human insight" (p. 228). Indeed, I found that the promise of anonymity in the RHONY forum appeared to create a more intimate space for many of the users. Nevertheless, this leads us to some of the main ethical considerations of netnographic research.

In the beginning of internet ethnography (and arguably traditional ethnography as well) researchers were specifically interested in topics of "sex and deviance," which meant that the ethnographers were mostly covert and avoided disclosing their presence to their subjects (Murthy, 2008, p. 839). This observational method, often termed 'lurking,' is still the primary method used in most netnographies (Murthy, 2008; Tunçalp and Lê, 2014). The advantages or pitfalls of conducting either nonparticipatory or participatory netnography have been widely debated. Langer and Beckman suggest that "the disclosure of the researchers' presence or contacting community members to obtain their permission to use any specific postings…would weaken one of the major advantages and strengths

of content analysis, namely its unobtrusiveness" (2005, p. 197). However, at the other end of the spectrum, Lima, Namaci, and Fabiani argue that nonparticipatory netnography "is a more superficial, non-immersive version of the fullblown netnography approach" (2014, p. 699). A more participatory process would, for instance, involve the researcher disclosing their presence and intentions, as well as engaging in conversations with other users, posing questions, or conducting interviews. The researcher would consequently become a community member in their own right. The more 'active' approach would be especially "appropriate when the researcher is interested in the experience of participation in an online field site" (Kozinets et al., 2014, p. 263). An excellent study of this kind is Gatson and Zweerink's (2004) investigation of The Bronze, a discussion forum dedicated to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. In their specific study, Gatson and Zweerink reported that "reasserting [their] presence as researchers…never compromised the community's willingness to be [their] subjects" (2004, p. 191). Indeed, several scholars, Kozinets (2015) included, have in recent years called for more overt participation in netnographic studies, or have at least emphasised the significance of more autoethnographic approaches. However, I would argue that the researcher's decision between participation or observation in the online community must be case by case specific. Moreover, choosing a site in which one *can* participate also raises questions about which field sites are possible, and for whom? Might some communities or subject matters be overlooked as a consequence? Sometimes the more active approach might be less appropriate or feel like an intrusion to the users. Therefore, a period of observation is important whether one chooses to participate or not.

In my research on RHONY, the data in the discussion forum is available without the need to log in or set up a personal profile, so I regard the interactions on the forum as 'public' data.[107] [108] Furthermore, the users are anonymous in that they use pseudonyms

[107] For scholars studying online contexts there is no consensus of the exact boundaries between what should be regarded as 'public' versus 'private' in the Web 2.0 era. Since 25 May 2018 however, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) made some important changes to data privacy regulation in the EU. This means that researchers need consent in order to use or process any personal data, more specifically 'any information that relates to an identified or identifiable living individual' (ico. 2018).

[108] However, I would contend that any social media forum or website that require the researcher to create a personal profile suggest that the data is at least semi-private. Consequently, such contexts would require some form of consent – either from the specific users in question, the moderators/administrators of the community or forum, and so forth. Either way, it is important to consult the terms, conditions, and guidelines of the specific website (Townsend and Wallace, 2018), as well as making sure that the integrity of the community is protected, and that no personal data is being disclosed.

and their profiles do not contain any personal data, which contributed to my decision to remain an observer and avoid the risk of influencing the directions of the conversations (I used the same strategy when observing social media users in Chapter Five). Nevertheless, in order to protect the communication and not change the perception of anonymity in the forum, I have made efforts to conceal the pseudonyms as well as the name of the website in any of my own published ('public') texts. This of course, does not prevent readers of this thesis from possibly 'googling' a comment I might cite, but as the original data is not revealing any personal information, I decided that it is a risk I cannot avoid. Paraphrasing quotations might instead misrepresent the collected data and/or confuse readers. Indeed, it is worth questioning, as do Gatson and Zweerink, how 'anonymous ethnographic sites have ever been…[as, for example,] many accounts have contained photographs of subjects…[subsequently] some field sites are more inherently 'knowable' or 'known' than others' (2004, p. 181). It is also worth considering whether the research requires information about the subjects for the purposes of the specific ethnographic investigation. Arguably, in this case, the personal data is less important as I am interested in the notion of female subjectivity as it has been presented in RHONY specifically and how this translates into viewers' 'talk.'

Findings and Discussion

In this section I will present some of the main findings of my netnographic enquiry into the Bethenny Frankel discussion forum. As mentioned, I started my investigation by simply reading and observing the conversations (both textual and visual) in the online forum, jotting down my initial impressions, thoughts, feelings, and interpretations of the various posts encountered. The posts published before my arrival were included and coded, but observing the active conversations became important in understanding the posters' specific jargon as well as the experience of 'entering' the space. I noted the ways in which forum moderators policed the discussions in real time; making sure that posters were not 'bitchy' to each other (however, being 'bitchy' about Bethenny was encouraged), and debates that failed to stay on topic, or simply became too heated, would subsequently be 'shut down.' For instance, a long-winded debate over Bethenny's choice to not feed her daughter processed meat (and her ex-husband's decision to reportedly give their daughter a hot dog) became increasingly tense. The discussion moved into issues of

moral responsibility and parenting, with one commentator exclaiming: "Sorry to rant, but this is very personal to me [healthy eating], and the flippant attitude just sets me off" (July 2017). Finally, a moderator intervenes, writing: "Hey all – just so you know… The hot dog debate? It's over. Please move on" (July 2017). Whilst the posters rarely comment or pass judgement on the moderators' decisions, these interruptions in the flow of conversation indicate the ways in which the forum operates, and which topics tend to incite more passionate responses.

During these initial impressions and observations in the forum, I began to discern certain themes and patterns in the conversations. In order to introduce some of these themes here I will first present one of the simplest tools I used in the beginning of my netnographic research – an online word cloud generator (wordclouds.com). Whilst this tool was merely a playful exploration of the most common words or phrases used in the forum, it offered some valuable insights as I will demonstrate here (following Kozinets, 2015). This particular word cloud generator allows users to upload a single PDF file onto the site, which is then broken down into the words within that file. These words make up the cloud, and the words' font size is determined by the number of times that particular word has been used. I decided to exclude words used less than 5 times to make the cloud easier to read, as well as any usernames that had been quoted (again, to protect the anonymity of the forum users). These are two such word clouds, chosen at random, to illustrate my point:

Figure 13. Two word clouds generated from uploading PDF documents containing two pages from the forum (fifty posts per page); one from 2014 and one from 2017.

Of course, these word clouds only showcase a slice (100 posts) of what have been, and are, the central topics of interest in this particular community, yet they do reveal a rather good, albeit simplified, overview of some of the focal points among forum participants (see Figure 13).

The first word that stands out in both word clouds is 'Bethenny' (and other versions of her name), which might not be surprising in a forum focusing on this particular RHONY housewife. Other prominent words, such as 'think', 'like', 'believe', 'remember', 'IMO' [in my opinion], are all indicative of posters expressing their personal thoughts and ideas, something which they seem to have to make clear in a reality TV discussion forum in which the lines between the authentic and fake, true and false, are constantly being questioned and evaluated. In the first cloud one can see the result of the discussion of Bethenny, Kelly, and other housewives' behaviour during the trip to what has retrospectively been termed 'Scary Island.' [109] Another theme in the forum, represented in both word clouds (related to 'Kelly' and other housewives' names), is the

[109] For reference, the events on what has been termed 'Scary Island' in popular parlance, occurred during the RHONY Season Three trip to the Virgin Islands (Sun, Sand and Psychosis, 2010). During this trip Kelly accused Bethenny of not being a 'real chef' and their feud culminated in a dramatic fight over dinner with some viewers (and fellow housewives) suggesting that Kelly had either a mental breakdown or was consuming drugs. In the RHONY forum one poster mused, nostalgically: "the whole Scary Island was some of the best tv I have ever seen" (2015).

subject of relationships – between family members, friends, and partners. These words (or names), such as 'Jason' (Bethenny's ex-husband), 'dad', 'pregnancy', 'child', 'relationship', and 'family', all demonstrate this commonly occurring subject-matter. These discussions are often among the most heated in the forum (as exemplified by the 'hot dog debate' above) and are often used as a springboard to discuss and contemplate either personal experiences and situations (e.g. receiving/offering advice) or pose questions about wider socio-cultural issues. For instance, a discussion of Bethenny's decision to join one of the RHONY season trips at the time of her (rather public) custody battle with her husband, had posters questioning her previous filmed reluctance to leave her daughter. One user argued:

> [Bethenny] better come out tomorrow with a direct quote that Brynn [her daughter] was at Disneyland with her father for the entire time she was on this trip or I'm going to bombard Andy's [Cohen] email demanding he rake her over the coals about this during the reunion.
>
> (2015)

This user thus suggests that Bethenny is being inconsistent in her feelings as a mother, possibly also implying that leaving a young child as a mother is morally flawed, especially for a woman who is expected to mourn a divorce. Another poster disagrees with this sentiment, explaining: "Literally millions of single mothers have lived through believing their ex husband/ex wife would be a bad choice for co-custody, have lost that legal battle, and have gone to take many a vacation…and do so without it being proof of moral purity or moral failure [sic]" (2015). This exchange demonstrates that the subject matter of family and relationships, often open up debates on the pressures placed on mothers, as well as the feminine traits that so often are required of women to uphold. The debates are rarely, if ever, resolved and as such the forum functions as a space where audiences may, to borrow John Ellis' (2000) phrase, 'work through' issues and concerns (over)flowing from the small screen. However, Ellis uses his term to argue that the television itself "can be seen as a vast mechanism for processing the material of the witnessed world into more narrativized, explained forms" (ibid., p. 78).[110] I argue, instead, that to a large extent the 'working through' of contextual convictions or encoded

[110] Ellis has himself borrowed the term from psychoanalysis and while this thesis will not draw on such theories, the term itself and the notion of exploring materials until they are, in some sense, explicated, becomes interesting in the context of the online discussion forum.

meanings of the televisual text on screen (here RHONY), happen outside the text itself, in the discursive spaces occurring online and offline. Indeed, Kristyn Gorton (2009b, p. 130) highlights the possible functions of such discursive spaces, suggesting that:

> Watching other people's fictional lives [or supposedly 'real' in this case] unfold on screen gives a viewer a chance to reflect, to experience things vicariously, to talk to a partner (who might be watching too) and enter into conversations about your own domestic arrangements. In other words, it opens up a space that inevitably allows us to think differently about gender and identity.

Discussions of such 'domestic arrangements' appear important to the women in the forum. As I have mentioned earlier in this chapter, evaluating, comparing, and weighing up the Housewives is encouraged by the ways in which the cast members' actions and behaviours are framed, often with the ironic 'bravo wink.' The process of both evaluating and 'working through' the "actions of celebrities against one's own morals and values", as Redmond suggests, contribute to the ways in which individuals "construct their identity and discern what is deemed acceptable" (2019, p. 206). The forum could then be regarded as a testing ground in which views are both worked through and 'tried' on. Further, there is some evidence in the forum posts that these discursive spaces exist outside (and offline) the specific RHONY forum, as many posters relay their conversations about the television programme with friends and family. Several posts also express a delight in having a shared interest or point of reference, however trivial that specific piece of information or gossip might be. As such, the talk of the show and the issues it might raise, bind the audience together with both each other and the televisual text, like, in Geraghty's words, a 'social cement' (1981).

Indeed, debating familial relationships and concerns is one of the aspects of the viewing experience that the RHONY forum users often find pleasurable. Another, related theme, and source for viewer pleasure, is the drama that occurs between the women, and between their family and friends. The, often highly melodramatic, fights between the women on the series during which wine glasses are thrown, female cast members insult, or are generally 'catty,' to each other are not uncommon on RHONY. Whilst these fights might remind viewers of the stereotypical cattiness between women on television of

yesteryear (as mentioned in the previous chapter), the dramatic outbursts are nevertheless often appreciated by the online users of the discussion forum. Here, the viewer pleasure seems to stem from the opportunity "to experience things vicariously," as Gorton (2009b) notes in the above quote.[111] For instance, in a debate on the increasing number of fights on RHONY, one of the forum regulars declares:

> Me luvs 'em [the fights]. I never have confrontations in my life, except maybe when I get paid to have 'em (as an attorney) and dat's it, folks. So I like watching 'em. They can be fun as hell & a good chuckle for me. This show without the fights & confrontations is boring as hell. It just is.
>
> (2014)

The poster indicates that the on-screen drama allows them to vicariously experience emotions of a confrontation, (presumably) such as anger, rage, sadness, but also those feelings which Ngai (2005) has termed "ugly": envy, irritation, anxiety, and paranoia. These are feelings that do not sit well with the ideal female self, pertaining to both neoliberal, postfeminist, and neoliberal feminist sentiments, in which saleability is a crucial self-virtue. Yet for women, and especially wives and mothers, kindness, compassion, and adaptability are similarly admired, and/or expected. Therefore, the deviant, aggressive behaviour of the women might offer audiences "moments of peace, of truth, of redemption, moments in which the complexity of the task of being a woman is fully realised and adapted" (Ang, 1996, p. 95). As such, the televisual text itself might, as Lee and Moscowitz (2013) argue, offer "the viewing public a wealthy villain to judge" (p. 80). Yet, these momentary escapes from working on the self, can be transgressive in that they both offer images of 'unruly,' middle-aged women (however privileged) and open up *safe* spaces in which the expectations of female selfhood can be explored (Rowe, 1995, see also Petersen, 2017). As another poster writes: "I love real fights on the shows. They are hilarious and allow me to be a Mean Girl [reference to the 2004 film, *Mean Girls*] without any of the nasty side-effects" (2014). Subsequently, the forum participant highlights what Redmond asserts, that since "the gossip that is being circulated is on an individual whom one does not know directly, the level of pleasure may be heightened

[111] See also, Ang (1985) and Radway (1984) on audiences/readers and vicarious pleasure.

because there is less real-life consequences, one can increase the range and frequency and 'bite' of the whispers when it involves someone who is famous" (2019, p. 219). The 'bite' in the RHONY discussion forum, whilst often sarcastic and used jokingly (exemplified by the usage of terms such as 'bitch', 'famewhore', and 'slut'), might therefore be more complex than a reflection of "retrograde gender politics" as Lee and Moscowitz have argued (2013, p. 80). Indeed, the pleasure it might incite does not necessarily imply acceptance or submission.

It is noteworthy that the poster who expresses a love for the fights on RHONY, specifies that they want these arguments to be "real." As mentioned earlier in this chapter, RHONY, and reality television in general, emphasise the importance of authenticity. The housewives are expected to be presenting their 'true' selves, and by extension, as both the front- and backstage selves are offered up for consumption, the audience are invited to look for consistency, for a unitary, authentic self. Therefore, the drama that so often is enjoyed by the forum participants, needs to be, or at least *feel*, real. As such, many of the forum users are occupied with finding the (supposed) 'truth.' One forum user laments: "I am sick of my brain cells being further insulted with all these *staged* arguments, tacky hair-pulling/wine-tossing/slap-filled literal fights, *made-up* scenarios and dramatic confrontations" (2014, my emphasis). The comment highlights the frequent (and supposed) infantilising of female reality television fans in the suggestion that the viewer would not be able to detect the difference between a rehearsed or uncontrived performance.

Indeed, the viewers often express their pleasure in uncovering lies and inauthentic, or 'fake' performances of selfhood in the forum (a tendency, also noted by Hill, 2005). For instance, when it is 'revealed' in the RHONY forum that Bethenny kept a romantic relationship and the subsequent break-up private, many forum commentators report feeling 'robbed' as such an emotional event might explain some of Bethenny's behaviour on RHONY. One user explains: "I like mystery novels and like to figure out the mystery as I read along but I get aggravated when the author reveals all the important clues in the end pages. I feel kinda robbed" (2015). The 'end pages' here become the paratextual information that is reported after the filming of RHONY and, as such, the audiences' potential 'detective work' has been conducted without all the 'facts'. The posters in the forum thus appear to conform to the rules of reality television, in other words, the cast members are called upon to perform their emotional labour before the cameras as per their figurative (if not, literal) contracts. As one poster maintains: "Bethenny is clearly

back on the show for the paycheck and not hustling for that paycheck anywhere near as hard and that also gets boring. If you don't want drama, don't get on reality tv" (2015). Indeed, the specific *work* required by reality television stars to appear real and authentic, will be explored in Chapter Five. Arguably, the transparency and proof that the cast members are working hard on themselves for camera, is important if their selfhood is to be deemed valid and valuable.

However, returning to the second word cloud, other words that stand out – apart from those pertaining to relationships and audience opinions – are those referring to Bethenny's self/brand: 'Skinnygirl', 'money', 'sale', 'business', 'negotiations', 'Beam' (Beam Global bought Skinnygirl cocktails in 2011) are all examples of this discursive focus. It is through Bethenny's self/brand that the forum participants discuss and essentially come to understand the female self on RHONY, as the self (here, Bethenny Frankel) is intertwined with discourses of marketing and branding. It is generally accepted in the forum that the housewives, and Bethenny in particular, are on the show to perform their selves and subsequently, their brands. Indeed, as Redmond (2019) suggests, in popular culture at large, "[f]emale celebrities…offer up a regime of looking and being looked at, which suggests objectification and the constant need to perform or embody a particular form of femininity, ethnicity, and heterosexuality, which becomes normal and desirable" (p. 7). Following the sentiments of neoliberal feminism, the ideal female self of RHONY, is the one whose self/brand is presented as having an immutable nature and whose back- and front stage selves align. This is also the self which is objectified and normalised. The RHONY forum users demonstrate a clear awareness of the function of the female celebrity, as described by Redmond, but also appear to enjoy the evaluation of what is presented as the ideal female self on the show. Therefore, they are working through the socio-cultural notions of archetypal female selfhood and femininity.

The process of 'working though' Bethenny's self in the discussion forum is complex and the posters' opinions are often re-evaluated and amended as the RHONY episodes are aired. However, I found that a large number of commentators began their posts about Bethenny, whether positive or negative, by declaring an admiration for her financial success and business acumen. For example, with users asserting: "The girl knows how to hustle" (2014), "I always admired her gusto and work ethic" (2014), or "I was never charmed by Beth, but admired her hustle" (2015). Indeed, her 'hustle' is brought up regularly in the forum as a praiseworthy quality of Bethenny's, suggesting

that the posters see a value in her self/brand being profitable. Thus, the normalisation of discourse pertaining to saleability is in this sense generally accepted, as in any late capitalist society, in which making money is a virtue as well as a requirement for survival. Product placements and promotions on RHONY appear to be accepted, or at least tolerated, by the forum participants and as such, deemed to be simply a part of reality television, or advertainment. One user who often posts in support of Bethenny writes: "I don't mind Bethenny's branding at all, at least she has products to sell unlike others who after years on the show have nothing to show for (ahem Sonia) [sic]" (2015). The poster highlights that cast members are generally expected to financially benefit from their television appearances and criticises Sonja Morgan who has arguably been less successful in her self/branding ventures.[112] In the same vein, the post highlights the audiences' recognition of the function of self/branding and many posters weigh in on whether the housewives' actions might be commercial or not. As another poster proposes about Bethenny: "I just can't believe being on this show a second time around has been great for her brand" (2016). The online discussion forum also highlights that if fans view Bethenny Frankel in a positive light, they also have less issue with Skinnygirl products on RHONY, and vice versa, as her brand is presented as an extension of her 'real' self. As such, Bethenny's fans are those posters who admire her "one liners" (2014), her "smarts" (2014), and that "she's always been a no-BS [bullshit] sort of chick" (2014). Thus, these fans have been persuaded by Bethenny's televisual self/brand as the "bullshit police" (Start spreading the news, 2016) and the "hypocrisy shamer", mentioned above. (Reunion – Part 1, 2016). However, during the airing of season seven (spring 2015) and Bethenny's return to RHONY, many, if not most, forum posters appeared to express a dislike for Bethenny and in turn, her brand. As one forum participant notes:

> I just realized what's made Bethenny's 'truth cannon' increasingly insufferable. I liked B in the earlier seasons and part of it was that she didn't spare herself from the quips (would anyone have liked Joan Rivers if she didn't make jokes at her own expense?). Since she's been back, Bethenny is perfect – in her own mind. She even hawks I KNOW IT ALL mugs and tees on her Facebook page. The 'everyone else has the problem,

[112] For instance, Sonja was criticised for talking about releasing a toaster oven as fellow cast members and potential consumers could not fathom how a toaster oven could sit well with her persona of uptown, luxury, and "campness."

> not me' is standard HW [Housewives] attitude, and it's not Bethenny alone who's guilty – but she doesn't show the same self-deprecation as she did in earlier seasons. The balance is gone.
>
> (2016)

Whilst the function of the forum remained to centre around working through socio-cultural expectations and norms, viewer pleasure in these subsequent posts seemed to shift somewhat. The specific socio-cultural anxieties of 2015, leading up to Brexit in the UK and the election of Trump in the US, and the following two years that I studied in the forum, may have had an influence on this change of tone in the forum (albeit, as politics was marked as a forbidden topics in the forum, these events were never referenced directly). At the same time, this culminated in reports of Bethenny's 'failed' marriage and custody battle, as well as her cancelled talk show, *Bethenny* (2012-2013). Consequently, even the privileged, financially successful Bethenny, who was supposed to live up to the postfeminist slogan of 'having it all' had been unsuccessful in her attempt. Yet, some forum viewer suggest that this was a personal failure on Bethenny's part, rather than a systemic one, with one poster maintaining: "she'll never 'have it all' being that bitchy" (2015). In fact, much of the commentary of both Bethenny and her life seemed to attribute the responsibility of any failure or success to the individual, as per neoliberal ideology. Ironically, the lesson that Bethenny perpetually 'taught' viewers was that her self/brand was proof that "if you really work hard…you can have it all" (Bethenny Frankel, Reunion Part 1, 2010). In contrast to this 'lesson', the forum users appeared to find a particular pleasure in finding Bethenny failing to live up to her own self/brand. Ultimately, as seen in the discussion forum, when what had been rendered the ideal self appears far from reach it becomes enjoyable to note the inconsistencies of such a self and the instances when the celebrity herself fails to live up to her own image. Thus, the viewer pleasure arises in finding Schadenfreude in the cracks of Bethenny's, and, by extension, neoliberal feminism's, ideal selfhood.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the self/brand adjudged authentic is the one that is presented as a unitary whole and whose back- and front stage selves appear to align. And in the world of neoliberal logics and neoliberal feminism, both front and backstage selves must be in line with the individual's brand, which in Bethenny's case is Skinnygirl. As such Bethenny's perceived failures often pertain to whether her self/brand is consistent and subsequently deemed authentic. Many posters suggest that Bethenny

had lost her sense of self at the end of season seven, with, for example, one forum regular demanding that she "[p]ick a course and stay true to it" (2015) and another pondering:

> Is she the know it all who built her dream home from the bricks up all by herself? Is she the little orphan who made her name without the help of her famous dad and his money? Or is she the poor wilted flower who was forced into a relationship, pregnancy, peeing on tv, and now signing false documents by big bad s[c]heming Jason [ex-husband] and his evil mommy? She and her fans need to hurry up and pick which [Bethenny] they're going with because I'm getting confused.
>
> (2015)

These sentiments appear to confirm, once again, that the female self that appears unitary and consistent is granted validity. Other forum commentators are more severe in their criticism, writing that: "Bethenny is the ultimate fake phony bullshiter [sic] of the first water" (2015), and that "her own 'brand' appears to be 'malnourished and shrill Manhattan bitch'" (2016), or argues that she "has been an insufferable bitch and that not only hurts the show but her 'brand', which is her main concern. She needs to do some major damage control, IMO [in my opinion]" (2015). Here again, the posters demonstrate their scepticism of Bethenny, yet they also indicate a general acceptance that Bethenny is her brand. The criticism of the Bethenny self/brand is an important part in the process of forum users' working through the ideas presented on screen and subsequently highlight their active viewing and possibility for resistance. Johansson (2006) describes this more malicious gossip as "celebrity bashing" and, in her study of tabloid readers, she suggests that it "provides a momentary experience of power and control to readers, as they, as spectators and [consumers], are part of the dragging the deviant personality down. They are the audience for which the celebrity is sacrificed" (p. 355). In a similar way, the failure of Bethenny Frankel to consistently fulfil the expectations that her own self/brand has created, offers a space in which audiences can question the very templates of selfhood to which they are subjugated.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I want to turn to Dana Heller, who writes:

> The oft-heard initial response to reality TV – that it is 'really' constructed, that it still depends on codes of representation, that it is highly stylized and artificial – miss the crucial innovations that the genre brings. Reality television…may be less about representing reality than intervening in it; less mediating and more *involving*.
>
> (2004, pp. 6-7, my emphasis).

Indeed, as demonstrated above, reality programmes like RHONY and their roles within popular culture are complex. This chapter has shown a specific kind of ideal female self touted in many contemporary popular televisual texts. These images of selfhood have not necessarily been *actively* encoded with a neoliberal 'message' but are nevertheless born and produced out of an industry and culture in which a growing free-market demands in-expensive, yet profitable products. Thus, whether these are actual 'products' or in fact human beings become secondary to the goals of commodification and commercialism. The ideal, specifically, female self, in this context is a subject of neoliberal feminism and has expertly constructed her 'self' by turning the 'I' into a marketable commodity, a self/brand.

In the beginning of the chapter I described the *Real Housewives* franchise and the ways in which its programmes have created a world where the line between the real and what feels 'real' has been blurred. The branding and marketing on a television show like RHONY has thus become part of the 'reality' as well as the selves the show promotes. The subsequent 'moral' of RHONY seems to be that to become a product is a legitimate route to success and self-fulfilment. Furthermore, such a lesson in self/branding teaches that the self must also become indistinguishable from the brand, so that both the self and the conjoined brand feel 'authentic.' In reality television this means that the stars of the series need to be able to reveal information as personal as possible to the cameras. Of course, this is something we off-screen individuals with social media profiles are becoming more accustomed to. As Julie A. Wilson writes:

> We circulate intimate glimpses into our personal identities and private lives that we imagine will please our audiences, while taking pleasure in judging the self-presentation of others, consuming the profiles of friends, family, and enemies as we do the celebrities on reality television.

(2014, p. 434)

The comparing, competing, and judging of other selves is consequently becoming increasingly encouraged in Western image-saturated culture, which create further stresses on which selves to choose and/or transform into. Arguably, these tendencies have been regarded as part of human nature for centuries, yet the normalisation of this type of discourse and media promoting self-formation through competition and commodification is particularly central to popular cultural texts that offer everything they present for consumption.

Yet, as discussed in the netnographic study at the end of this chapter, the teachings of RHONY, and popular culture texts like it, are not necessarily changing the ways in which viewers understand selfhood. Even though they might be normalising a type of ideal self, in this case, the idea of the neoliberal feminist self. Indeed, the online fans of the series did not simply give credence to the supposed successful selves of RHONY but used the communal space of the forums as an opportunity to discuss the ways in which selfhood is presented on screen more generally. Furthermore, even though the 'comparing, competing, and judging' is present, the forum is also a confessional and, sometimes, supportive social space in which viewers can discuss and share their own personal experiences of living in a socio-historical context in which, as demonstrated in this chapter, self/branding is presented as a tool for creating a successful, thus more valuable, self. Not only is the self/brand becoming a normalised way of representing successful women on television, but the importance of the context in which such selves emerge is equally stressed. In the next chapter, I will explore the specifically neoliberal context of market fundamentalism, that has presented a specific narrative in which idealised and successful selves emerge from a culture of meritocratic competition. The following chapter will explore this notion through a closer analysis of *America's Next Top Model*, in which stories of self-control and mastery of one's own circumstances are romanticised.

CHAPTER FOUR

'Top' Selfhood and the Competitive Spirit: America's Next Top Model

Just be yourself, and if being yourself isn't interesting, make up a character. From what I've gathered it's worked for many girls who came after me. Everyone loves a bitch. Everyone loves the underdog. Everyone loves the diva.

(Cycle One winner of *America's Next Top Model*,
Adrienne Curry – interview, Robinson, 2005, p. 229).

Whilst the previous chapter explored a case study of the docusoap genre – RHONY – and the ways in which the show (and some online audiences) engage with neoliberal ideas of (affluent and white) female selfhood, this chapter will look at how notions of the female self have been expressed through the talent/competition show format, specifically *America's Next Top Model* (2003-2006, UPN; 2006-2015, The CW; 2016-present. VH1).[113] Furthermore, while the RHONY chapter discusses *middle-aged* women who have successfully turned their selves into authentic brands, this chapter will look at younger women in their late teens and early twenties. This phase in life is particularly important in this context as it is the beginning of a woman's journey in potentially increasing their social and cultural capital through a particular construction of self through self-investment and transformation. As the title of ANTM suggests, this competition show (usually) follows a group of young women who are competing to become the next 'top model' of the United States, but also internationally (i.e. well-known and financially successful). By analysing this reality television sub-genre, this chapter will investigate the perhaps most conspicuous aspect of neoliberal rationality, namely the idea of competition and competitiveness, as both natural and somehow fair (i.e. meritocratic)

[113] Hereafter referred to as ANTM.

societal regulators. ANTM thus frequently purports to teach young women (both model participants and viewers) how to navigate a competitive society.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I offered an overview of the history of neoliberalism and the ways in which neoliberal ideology and free-market competition has seeped into the Western cultural imaginary, as well as the ideas and depictions of selfhood in media and beyond. Here, I return to Gilbert's argument quoted in the first chapter: "the point of neoliberal ideology is not to convince us that [for instance,] Hayek was right; it is to console us that the sense of perpetual competition and individual isolation produced by neoliberal government is natural, because 'that's what life is really like'" (2013, p. 15). Indeed, despite it being difficult to pinpoint 'actually existing' neoliberal policies and implementations, particularly due to the difficulty of pinning 'neoliberalism' itself down, there is, arguably, no doubt that neoliberalism's ideological beliefs (discussed in Chapters One and Two) have had, and still have, reverberations and various reiterations in the (pop) cultural sphere. This, of course, is the very focus of the arguments made in this thesis as a whole. In this chapter however, I will investigate the question of how the 'spirit' of competition, often regarded as simply a part of human nature, has become so central to neoliberal rationality. And in turn, how this has been utilised and depicted in popular culture, here exemplified by reality television.

ANTM is particularly interesting, not only as it has competition as its main premise, but also because the show lays claim to how young women in particular should navigate competition in order to come out 'on top.' Indeed, having watched the series myself as a teenager in the UK and in Sweden, the series forms a part of my personal 'rolodex' of imagery of women in popular culture, however peripheral. During the beginning of my research on the programme, my mentioning the study would often incite off-hand, either nostalgic or comic, remarks from my female friends about their own experiences of watching ANTM. This, to me, was fascinating, as it appeared that many of my acquaintances, several feminist academics themselves, had watched the show at some stage in their lives. These conversations ultimately resulted in my decision to conduct small-scale focus groups with women in their late twenties, exploring ANTM and its depiction of female selfhood in more detail. The findings of these discussions will be analysed at the end of this chapter, but my friends' anecdotal commentary of ANTM (although only representing a small socio-economic group) serves as a reminder of the potential impression a single reality TV series might leave, often as a part of a larger television 'flow' (Williams, 1975). Although, as discussed in Chapters Two and Three,

deciphering subjective impressions, especially whilst utilising an intersectional analytic framework, is always complex and contradictory. Yet, before presenting an overview of the talent/competition show format and my discussion of ANTM, I will begin by establishing my approach to, and understanding of, competition as a fundamental aspect of neoliberal ideology and rationality.

Competitiveness and the Notion of Merit

In his recent work, *The Limits of Neoliberalism* (2017), William Davies persuasively frames his analyses of neoliberalism with the logic of competition – which he regards as its key dimension *and* virtue (see also Harvey, 2005). Davies suggests that neoliberalism is "not simply reducible to 'market fundamentalism'…Instead, the neoliberal state takes the principle of competition and the ethos of competitiveness (which historically have been found in and around markets) and seeks to reorganise society around them" (2017, p. xvi). In many ways, the free market and competition have become intertwined, and arguably conflated, so that the two concepts go hand in hand in the current cultural imaginary. Indeed, up until the 1950s and the Chicago School thinkers, many early 'neoliberals' more overtly debated the fact that "the market has certain technical and moral limits" that needed to be corrected with laws and some governmental input (ibid., p. 47). During the post-1945 period (with some exceptions, of course), with the ideas of economists like Ronald Coase and Joseph Schumpeter, the more "*institutional format* for competition (namely the market) [was replaced] with psychological formats of competition" (ibid., p. 57, emphasis in original). As a result, neoliberal ideology became more aligned with a social Darwinist ethic; one which places competition as a natural and innate ability within all people. This is noteworthy as the idea of competition being natural has a central role in the narrative created on ANTM and the ways in which the contestants are expected to perform.

Of primary note here is English social theorist Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) who applied Darwin's theories of biological evolution to the social sphere. Spencer was particularly influential within the American context in which his notions of Darwinism was used to buttress more conservative ideologies. As Richard Hofstadter notes: "The most popular catchwords of Darwinism, 'struggle for existence' and 'survival of the fittest' [the latter phrase coined by Spencer], when applied to the life of man in society,

suggested that nature would provide that the best competitors in a competitive situation would win, and that this process would lead to continuing improvement" (1992, pp. 6-7). Even though this notion of competition, as an innate part of human nature, has been confuted (see Davies, 2017, for instance), it has been a powerful argument for the justification of conservative economics and neoliberal ideology, and the spirit of competition in general.[114] Social Darwinism or the idea of competitiveness as an instinctive psychological trait has in many ways become, as Mary Midgley (1985) asserts, "the unofficial religion of the west…[as] [m]ystical reverence for such deities as progress, nature and the life-force is…invoked to explain and justify cut-throat competition" (quoted in Watson, 2014, p. 489). Indeed, these persistent rationalisations of rivalry and contesting have made it increasingly difficult to disentangle competition from its perceived natural occurrence in any social interaction between individuals, teams, groups, cities, regions, and countries. Furthermore, as neoliberal logics seep into the cultural imaginary as well as the ways in which the culture industries perceive labour and employment, these narratives become part and parcel of the cultural output as well. This has of course had a major impact on how society as well as the self are regarded and understood, with some dire consequences.

As Davies underscores: "To argue in favour of competition and competitiveness is necessarily to argue in favour of inequality, given that competitive activity is defined partly by the fact that it pursues an unequal outcome" (2017, p. 41). Thus, to apply a competitive ethos to social contexts, some individuals will inevitably come out as 'losers.'[115] Yet, competitions, including the market competition of neoliberal societies, require that all individuals start from at least some common ground; some equal terrain from which the 'game' can commence. As groups of people become atomised, failure is marked as a personal responsibility, therefore making any structural improvements to combat gender, racial, and economical inequities difficult. These socio-economic injustices are consequently easily made invisible, as success according to neoliberal

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[114] It is also important to note the use of Social Darwinist ideas as a justification for fascism and militant racism in the First and Second World Wars, as well as the ideology's colonialist and neo-colonialist links. This discussion is however beyond the scope of this thesis.

[115] It is noteworthy (and telling) that the sitting US President Donald Trump frequently uses the term 'losers' to publicly denounce his opponents and critics on Twitter. He on the other hand, having created a successful businessman persona on the reality show *The Apprentice*, paints himself as a 'winner'. Trump has, for instance, declared: "My whole life is about winning. I don't lose often. I almost never lose" (quoted in Cilliza, 2015).

ideologies is founded on merit and working tirelessly to be 'on top.' Jo Littler (2018, pp. 7-8) explains this phenomenon particularly well:

> An over-emphasis on merit obscures the unevenness of the social playing field, with its profound dis/advantages of parental wealth and social location. The neoliberal idea of meritocracy as enabling a fair system of social mobility is therefore both profoundly unfair and an ideological sleight of hand, working to justify a system based on greed and extensive structural injustices.

This over-emphasis on merit runs through reality television programming, and competition narratives in particular. These shows are frequently founded on the belief that anyone can 'make it', and that a meritocratic system offers justifiable inequalities as 'losers' simply fail to live up to whatever the competitive situation is required of them. Yet, as Davies so aptly argues, "[a] game in which the winner was the 'best' or 'most virtuous' person would not be a game at all, but the ideal political society" (2017, p. 64).

The Competition/Talent Show and *America's Next Top Model*

It is arguably in the talent show format that neoliberal principles, especially the stress on competition, are most apparently assimilated and naturalised – turning the genre into, what Couldry calls, a "secret theatre of neoliberalism" (2008, p. 3)[116] [117] Couldry suggests that reality television, and competition shows in particular, offer a space in which neoliberalism and its demands on workers, are inverted and enacted as "play" (ibid., p. 3). Whilst Couldry focuses particularly on reality TV competitions' normalisation of the demands on neoliberal workers, I would suggest that the metaphor of the theatre works just as well to showcase how the neoliberal competitive spirit frames the social interaction and on-screen performances. Yet, as Couldry suggests that this 'secret theatre of

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[116] See also, Anna McCarthy's (2007) article on reality television and self-government, in which she describes the TV genre as "a neoliberal theatre of suffering."

[117] For Couldry, the theatre of reality television is "secret" in the sense that "its playful inversions obscure their links to the [inequitable] labor conditions normalized under neoliberalism" (2008, p. 3).

neoliberalism' naturalises unfair working conditions, I believe that the metaphor in this sense can only go so far. Indeed, whereas it is valid to suggest that reality television in many ways enact neoliberal sentiments, it becomes trickier, as discussed in previous chapters, to suggest anything definite about its 'effects'. Especially, as reality television so frequently repurposes techniques not too dissimilar to the *verfremdungseffekt* (à la Brecht), for instance the 'talking head' segments in which the TV cast addresses the camera directly (explored further below). Nevertheless, the talent show, or to use Couldry's term, 'gamedoc' (2008), has been one of the most successful reality TV sub-genres and today there are constantly new innovations or tweaks to existing competition formats that appear on television as well as online streaming services.

Indeed, the sub-genre of the talent and competition show was in many ways responsible for the boom of reality television as a whole in 2000. Before 1999, what Misha Kavka calls "first-generation" reality TV, had mainly consisted of reality crime shows and docusoaps (2012, p. 72). The "introduction of *competition* under conditions of *comprehensive surveillance*" with shows such as *Big Brother* (2000-2018) in the UK and *Survivor* (2000-present) in the US,[118] saw the birth of a second generation of reality TV programming (ibid., p. 76, emphasis in original).[119] [120] Indeed, whilst competition shows had been popular in the past, with the many incarnations of game and quiz shows, *Survivor* and *Big Brother* delivered a competition with a *twist*, that is, allowing almost around-the-clock observation of the contestants as a major part of the on-screen narrative. Thus, the format invites voyeurism and, as Kavka notes, often "the interest in these shows lies not simply in the strategy or popularity of a winner, but rather in the way they undermine discursive distinctions between reality and fiction, private and public identities, authenticity and performance" (2012, p. 77, see also the discussion on 'authenticity' in reality television in the previous chapter). As such, the second-generation reality TV shows encouraged viewers to both have a keen interest in and form an opinion on, the television contestants' personal lives and behaviours (as exemplified by the mini focus group discussions I will present later in this chapter). Many of these types of

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[118] Both internationally successful franchises. The concept for *Survivor* was created by Charlie Parsons in 1994 and first appeared on Swedish television as *Expedition Robinson* in 1997.
[119] Both series focus on a group of participants who all compete to become the sole of winner of the series, usually enduring physically and mentally demanding challenges.
[120] The genre has several sub-genres, such as the "game show", with shows such as *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* (Andrejevic, 2004) and the "gamedoc", which also focuses on competition but where surveillance of contestants' everyday interactions forms a vital part (Couldry, 2008; Kavka, 2012).

programmes, including *Big Brother*, *American Idol* (2002-2016, 2018-present), *America's Got Talent* (2006-present), and *Dancing with the Stars* (2004-present) include some stages of the competition being determined by a public vote, which has further advanced the sense of audience engagement, input, as well as potential power. Similarly, the shows encourage social media participation, often including the series' or the contestants' Twitter handles or Instagram account names on screen.

The choice of ANTM as a case study for this chapter on competition and competitiveness (in a thesis on female selfhood and neoliberal ideology) appeared almost inevitable as the series is one of the only American reality programmes that centre on young women; here, competing with each other to reach *the top*. In ANTM, the various tests, challenges, and makeovers the contestants are subjected to almost overtly mirror, albeit in a more extreme manner, the pressures and expectations of young women to act, look, and perform in a certain way. In this sense, the television programme, forms part of the female-centred television shows that, as McRobbie (drawing on Bourdieu) suggests, exerts a kind of "symbolic violence as a process of social reproduction" (2004, p. 106).[121] McRobbie argues that this type of symbolic violence, in the form of shaming and judging lower class women, is particularly used on television to "generate and legitimate forms of class antagonism particularly between women in a way which would have been socially unacceptable until recently" (ibid., p. 100). Whilst, this class antagonism is certainly evident on ANTM, I would argue that the symbolic violence is also performed to erase *any* divergent or non-consumable self from the foreground, as I will argue in the sub-section on 'blankness' below.[122]

As such, simply pointing this out, or the fact that any other television programme is classist, sexist, racist, or in any other way problematic, often begs the question, as Johnson asks: "*What else is there to say*?" (2007, p. 14, emphasis in original). Thus, like the analyses in the previous chapter, the following discussions of ANTM and how it presents its young female contestants, will strive to move beyond such simplifications of good versus bad or favourable versus damaging representations. This is especially

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[121] McRobbie is speaking within a specific, British 'post-welfarist' context, using the televisual example of *What Not to Wear* (2001-2007) among others, to illustrate how such cultural texts emphasise middle-class dominance.

[122] See also Winch (2013). Winch argues that in recent years with texts such as *Sex and the City* and *Lipstick Jungle* (2008-2009) a so-called 'girlfriend culture' has emerged "where women are complicit in the regulation and policing of female bodies" (2013, p. 5). They do this, Winch suggests, "through a 'gynaeopticon' – a gendered, neoliberal variation on Bentham's panopticon – where the many girlfriends watch the many girlfriends" (ibid.).

important with a television series in which the creator and presenter, Tyra Banks, plainly states that she created the show "to open up the world of high fashion to women everywhere", which indeed sounds like progress (How Short Can You Go*,* 2009).

ANTM has clearly followed the path of the competition/talent show of the second generation whilst still firmly rooted in the trends of reality productions of the third generation (2002-present day) that has been infatuated with the idea of "pluck[ing] people off the street and thrust[ing] them into the spotlight" (Kavka, 2012, p. 146). As many critics have noted the fascination of celebrity and celebrity formation is complex and often contradictory (e.g. Dyer, 1998, 2004; Kavka, 2012; Redmond, 2019; Williamson, 2016). However, on ANTM the purpose of possibly turning young women into "top models," and (at best) D-list celebrities, is arguably to demonstrate that *anyone* can make it to *the top*. Subsequently, as Tyra reminds the contestants of the prizes and the possibilities they bring before each elimination, these promises work to keep the contestants playing by the show's rules and performing for little, or no, financial compensations apart from the prize which will befall the winner (singular). This lure of working for exposure and other neoliberal labour practices will be explored further in the next chapter.

Arguably, the success of ANTM is its distinctive combinations of several reality TV sub-genres. Indeed, Laurie Ouellette argues that ANTM fuses "the conventions of the televised makeover, the internship, and the talent competition" (2013, p. 168). The makeover facet of the series is present in what is usually termed the 'makeover' episode of each ANTM 'Cycle' (season). In this episode each model contestant is usually given a new hairstyle but sometimes also bleached eyebrows, or an exaggerated tooth-gap (see discussion on makeover below). Furthermore, the makeover is also central in the contestants' journey to become America's next top model, as they are expected to improve and alter even their very 'selves' for the better. In this sense, the models are also 'interns' as they are taught to perform and succeed in a profession, but also as they mirror the typical intern placements of the neoliberal workforce where young workers lack job stability and are rarely paid for their labour. As Redden writes, this amounts "to a redefinition of fairness in which self-cultivation, learning for experience, and a chance to win are cast as inherent compensations for labor" (2018, p. 409). Fundamentally, the models reflect the "extent to which today's workers are encouraged to envision themselves as 'entrepreneurs of the self' rather than relying on unions or long-term security" (Ouellette, 2013, p. 169). Interestingly, the judges and coaches on ANTM

perpetually remind the TV show participants that their struggle through the various tasks, challenges, and often harsh critique is nothing compared to the reality of the fashion industry and 'real' life. In this sense, ANTM is often presented as a microcosm of the "real world" and the ominous and often fickle demands of the market.

Jon Dovey writes that the reality talent show is typically "based on the premise of ordinary people or celebrities taking part in a competition" (2008, p. 141). In this sense, ANTM can also be defined as a 'talent' show as it includes 'ordinary' (if this means 'not famous') young women who compete for the title of 'America's next top model,' and subsequently, depending on the Cycle, winning a modelling contract, a fashion spread in a well-known magazine, an ad campaign, and/or money. As such, the winners of ANTM are promised that their 'ordinary' selfhood will be replaced with a more unique, successful, and lucrative self, as long as they comply with the advice and lessons provided by the judges and 'experts' on the show. This advice might range from specific modelling guidelines, such as the ANTM judge and "runway diva coach extraordinaire" Miss J. teaching the contestants how to walk in a fashion show, or Tyra Banks' lessons in posing and "smizing" (smiling with your eyes); to more general "life lessons" on how to make a good first impression to a potential employer. Or, perhaps most importantly, how to come out "on top" in a competition. The ANTM theme song, sung by Tyra herself, repeatedly demands to know: "…Wanna be on top? WANNA BE ON TOP!?" as each contestant poses and gazes into the camera (and the eyes of the viewers) with the first and final frames of the title sequence typically showing a posing Tyra as the aspirational ideal of top modelhood (see Figure 14). Even though the exact definition of "the top" is never explicated, the competition and the contestants' competitiveness to reach it marks it as desirable, if not imperative. Furthermore, by breaking the fourth wall through the models' gaze, the repeated question of "wanna be on top?" seems equally directed to us, the viewers, who are invited to judge both the models' success in achieving upward mobility as well as consider our own. At the same time, the viewers and the contestants are told that: "You're not judged on how well you get along with each other…you have to show [the judges] your hunger to become America's Next Top Model" (The Girl Who Can Cry at the Drop of a Hat, 2004), as ultimately, "[t]here can only be one" winner (Welcome to Top Model Prep, 2008).

Figure 14. Stills from the title sequence of Cycle Twelve, 2009. The top two stills depict Tyra Banks as she poses and sings "Wanna be on top?" repeatedly into the camera. The bottom two stills show two (of the thirteen) contestants, Allison and Brittany, who strike poses to the rhythm of the theme song.

Every Cycle begins by introducing ten to sixteen young women contestants who each week are put through various tests, challenges, and games that are supposedly integral to learning the skills required to succeed as a model in the fashion industry.[123] Further, each episode usually includes a lesson, a subsequent challenge in which this lesson is put to the test, and one or more, photoshoots (or video commercials). At the end of each episode, all contestants are placed in front of a panel of judges consisting of Tyra Banks as the main judge, and various "industry experts" from the fashion world, for instance, photographer Nigel Barker (seventeen Cycles), runway coach J. Alexander (~nine Cycles), English model Twiggy (five Cycles), and fashion journalist, André Leon Talley (three Cycles), as well as weekly guest judges.[124] These experts share their thoughts and

[123] This format has varied somewhat: in Cycle Seventeen (2011) all contestants had starred in previous ANTM seasons; Cycle Eighteen (2012) included contestants from *Britain's Next Top Model* (2005-2013, Sky Living; 2016-2017, Lifetime); Cycles Twenty to Twenty-two (2013-2015) had both female and male contestants; and Cycle Twenty-three (2016) is the only season with British singer Rita Ora as presenter instead of Tyra Banks.
[124] Again, the judge scoring has differed in some Cycles, especially from Cycle Nineteen onwards, where a 'fan' voting system was introduced. This meant that viewers of ANTM could go online (then CWTV.com) to cast their vote on the contestants' weekly performances. The fan vote and the judges' votes were then combined to determine which model would get eliminated that week.

critiques of the models; first, as the contestants stand before them, but then the viewer is also privy to the judging panellists' "deliberation" as the models leave the room. The behind-the-scenes panel discussion offers yet another opportunity for viewers to adjudge the cast as the judges' different opinions often prompts viewers to take sides, as noted by some of the focus group participants presented at the end of this chapter.

The contestants are judged on their photographs and overall performances as models, but also how well they are progressing and conforming to the series' (and Tyra's) notion of a 'top model.' This notion is, as mentioned, dubious throughout the series. The winner of the first Cycle, Adrienne Curry, "ended up prevailing," Tyra explains to viewers, "because she has an edginess, she has a beauty that is undeniable, personality that is *so* dynamic. Adrianne is now, and Adrianne is the future" (The Girl Who Becomes America's Next Top Model, 2003). Thus, one might glean that the winner needs to be attractive and have a good personality, yet most contestants enter the talent show for these very reasons and it is not necessarily unique to the winner. In later seasons Tyra explains that she is "looking for young ladies that are…bankable" (The Notorious Fierce 14, 2008), but they also need to be able to "transform" themselves (Karolina Kurkova, 2010), and show "poise, and most importantly…determination" (What Happens in Vegas, 2009). The stress on the flexibility and saleability of the contestants' selfhoods subsequently mirror the concept of self/branding in RHONY explored in the previous chapter, and the ways in which the market (here represented by the fashion industry) looms as a determining factor for any kind decision-making by the models.

The most fundamental quality of a top model appears to be a willingness to adapt to whatever situation you are thrown into – ranging from underwater photoshoots or snakes slithering around your neck, to a runway walk with candles on your head – and to absorb any advice that is given to you. As Tyra warns a contestant in Cycle Seventeen: "It's the number one thing that girls go home for: not understanding how to take a note" (Kristin Cavallari, 2011). To succeed and triumph on the other hand, an ANTM recruit must metamorphose. Indeed, as Tyra tells the Cycle Fourteen winner Krista: "You are the embodiment of America's Next Top Model. You came here, you didn't know what you were doing, but you *learned*, and you *listened,* and you *blossomed*" (America's Next Top Model is..., 2010, my emphasis). As such, like Adam Smith's famous 'invisible hand,'

One can assume that the new voting system was a strategy to keep viewers engaged with the Top Model franchise in the Web 2.0 era.

the female contestants' choices and labour to reach this obscure notion of 'the top' are guided by indiscernible market-forces. Yet, as the goal is indeterminate, it ultimately becomes impossible to achieve. As Mary Thompson (2010) underscores, on ANTM, "model perfection is a moving target at which the contestants must continually and humiliatingly hurtle themselves each week" (p. 337). Yet, whilst the goal of 'the top' is indiscernible, the self that is expected to emerge out of the process is very much akin to the self/brands idealised in RHONY, in that it needs to be easily consumable and market literate.

Removing Personal Obstacles – Creating 'Blankness'

ANTM is the creation of the actor, producer, and former model Tyra Banks, who also acts as the show's executive producer, main judge, and presenter. In many ways Tyra Banks is presented as the *real* star of the show and her success serves as a guide (or model) for the television competition's participants. Her personal story is thus lifted in each Cycle to serve as an example and as a lesson for how to succeed, or to quote Tyra, "bear fierce fruit" (repeated through Cycle Twelves). As Thompson observes: "Bank's (relative) rags-to-riches story is held up to *ANTM* contestants as their guide, and it works as the underlying archetypal storyline for the editing of the show" (2010, p. 336). In Cycle Fifteen, Tyra explains how her modelling journey began, describing how she was 'discovered' in ninth grade outside her school. And whilst she struggled to create a name for herself, she was finally signed with a modelling agency and continued to model throughout her schoolyears and beyond, working hard to 'stay on top'. Tyra's voiceover explains, "what took me four years, I will make happen for one young girl in just twelve weeks" (Welcome to High Fashion, 2010). In this sense, ANTM is in many ways presented as a school or 'college', which is important as educational institutions are frequently mythologised as purely meritocratic (again, ignoring social locality and costs of admission).

Indeed, the idea of ANTM being educational has also been incorporated in the show, the most blatant examples being Cycle Ten's 'Top Model prep' theme and Cycle Nineteen, also known as *America's Next Top Model: College Edition*.[125] In the first

[125] All the contestants of Cycle Nineteen were in fact enrolled in higher education.

episode of Cycle Ten, the mise-en-scène was created to resemble a school with a traditional classroom, contestants wearing school uniforms, and the creative director Jay Manuel welcoming the models to "Top Model Prep[atory]" (see Figure 15).

Figure 15. Stills from the first episode of Cycle Ten, 2008. The first still depicts the contestants screaming excitedly as Tyra Banks emerges on a stage and the second still portrays one contestant striking a seductive pose for her ANTM 'photo ID' card.

The contestants' performances, their shrieks of excitement and their uniform-clad bodies (unreflexively paralleling the sexualised, scanty school uniforms found in adult film), resemble the behaviour of young girls. These scenes infantilise the women (most in their early to mid-twenties) who must be stripped of their previous experiences and personal struggles (now simply superficial markers of their 'style') in order to become 'blank slates'.[126]

The required erasure of their previous 'selves' is portrayed as crucial for their more 'successful' selves to emerge. This personal transformation is essentially portrayed as a *journey* toward valid female selfhood, a self that is determined by market forces and the demands of the 'client' (whoever that might be). As Tyra proudly declares to the two finalists of Cycle Eleven, Samantha and McKey: "You both walked into this competition as little girls and now you walk in [to the room] as lovely, young, sophisticated women" (America's Next Top Model is…, 2008). ANTM consequently represents the neoliberal ethos of submission to the 'right' school of thought; here, trusting the competitive spirit and its outcomes. Even the contestants who do not win the competition often share their gratitude for simply having participated in the process, as contestant Alasia, who despite being eliminated, exclaims: "being in this competition changed me completely. I am

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[126] Similarly, Hassinoff (2008) has argued that ANTM teaches models "to present a 'blank canvas' for clients that is in fact a performance of…unmarked upper class whiteness" (p. 338).

somebody!" (Welcome to New Zealand, 2010). Her participation in the contest is therefore presented as a process of *becoming*. ANTM presents this process as emancipatory, and as Tyra Banks emphasises in Cycle Twenty-Four: "Many people believe I created *Top Model* to show girls just how to become models, but no, it was about much more than that" (The Boss is Back, 2018). Indeed, it is this assertion that the reality TV programme is more than simply a playful competition, that makes it particularly important to investigate. The assertion overlooks the complex intermingling of the series inherent competitive 'spirit' (as a talent/competition show) and the attempts to provide young women an opportunity to 'discover' or 'retrieve' their selves. The two discourses frequently become so symbiotic on ANTM that it becomes natural to see selfhoods emerging out of competitive contexts. Thus, ANTM appears to offer an almost perfect reflection of neoliberal sentiments (and Social Darwinist beliefs) in competition as natural, and even essential, parts of humankind. Nevertheless, Tyra Banks' belief in her show is unfaltering as she asserts that ANTM "has changed the definition of beauty and empowered women when they needed it the most" (ibid.). However, is such a universal female empowerment ever possible, especially as it emerges out of a competitive context that relies on unequal outcomes?

In order for the contest on ANTM to appear legitimate the show largely effaces social, racial, and cultural differences as well as systemic oppression. An initial level playing field is an important myth to uphold if a competition is to be regarded as fair and objective (Davies, 2017), and, by the same token, the notion validates the idea of the American dream, in which individual effort equals prosperity. Yet, while the model contestants are expected to enter the competition as 'blank', ANTM teaches a performance, which Hassinoff rightly observes, "reflects elements of unmarked upper-class whiteness demonstrated by speech, posture, attitude, personal grooming, and style" (2008, p. 338). For instance, African American contestant Aminat Ayinde of Cycle Twelve, from New Jersey, is criticised for her pronunciation of certain words and told to work on her elocution, which she 'improves' to the judges' liking. The presentation of race on ANTM has been well-analysed by a number of scholars (see for instance Hassinoff, 2008 and Thompson, 2010), so even though this is a central and important theme in the series, I will only address it briefly, following both Hassinoff and Thompson's theses, to support my wider argument in this chapter.

Indeed, Thompson notes that on ANTM both gender and race are rarely "seen to be a meaningful feature of identity beyond a playful stylistic choice" (2010, p. 339). In

this sense, identity and ethnicity become optional, a choice one might 'own' whenever the situation warrants it. Thus, the series "depoliticizes ethnicity, resurrects racial stereotypes as marketable commodity identities, and obscures the normalization of white privilege behind the concept of choice and 'optional ethnicity'" (ibid., see also the example of Kim Kardashian's playful ethnicity, discussed in the next chapter). This ultimately reinforces common post-racial (and post-feminist) ideas which suggest that present-day United States, and the global West in general, have largely overcome racial discrimination and prejudice.[127] The series' attitude toward identity and gender being a 'stylistic choice' is rather well presented in scenes wherein an expert or judge attempts to assist contestants in finding who they 'are', or rather, which self/brand they should project. During Cycle Eleven, Tyra Banks directs each model in one-to-one sessions in which they are required to hone or find their "signature" modelling poses. In a scene with the model Sheena Dekai, Tyra tells her off for being "hoochie" (overtly sexual) in her poses and that she needs to find who she is (The Fierce Awards, 2008). Sheena then tentatively suggests that her signature pose might be "diva-esque"? At which Tyra simply replies:

> **Tyra:** Sometimes this simple [pose] can look so catalogue and so boring. I think your signature is more like a *cultural dance*.
> **Sheena:** That's usually what I'm thinking too. [tries to follow the direction and strikes a new pose].
> **Tyra:** …Too sweet! African dancing, do you know what that is? [dances for Sheena to demonstrate].

Although African dancing in itself is obviously not problematic, telling Sheena who is of Japanese and Korean descent, to adopt "African movements" as her "signature pose", highlights the ways in which culture (and ethnicity) is often simply regarded as a mode of expression or a way to add *flair* to one's identity. The scene also portrays how Sheena's

[127] This of course is a fallacy that has been illuminated more in the past decade with social movements such as Black Lives Matter (formed in 2013), and as such, more recent Cycles of ANTM more overtly reflect this change, however superficially. Indeed, the series has in the last six or seven years, made a point of highlighting social injustice, such as racial discrimination, but as such segments often conclude with Tyra explaining that 'black girls' have to work harder, the issues are still portrayed as personal rather than systemic and social. Indeed, this attitude mirrors the sentiments of neoliberal feminism that highlight inequality yet places the work of prevention on the shoulders of individual women.

own ideas of who she is and how she wishes to present herself are disregarded to make space for Tyra's vision of who she ought to be. The balance between personal responsibility and listening to 'expert' advice is often vague on the show. One can however glean that they are of equal importance. Nevertheless, even though the depiction of ethnicity and identity is contentious, it is necessary to highlight the diversity of the cast on ANTM, which was further noted by the participants in the focus groups discussed at the end of this chapter. This has been especially important in terms of the representation of young black women on television, and especially reality television, where more diversity is often represented.

Indeed, Robin M. Boylorn notes that "limited exposure is dangerous because it makes it seem like [e.g.] black women are stock characters instead of human beings" (2015, p. 37). Yet, several scholars have also noted the problematic nature of some representations of people of colour (who on ANTM frequently come across as 'bitchy'), arguing that they might feed into stereotypes of black women "being abrasive, loud, lewd, physically and verbally abusive, and profane" (Boylorn, 2015, p. 30, see also Gates, 2015). Thus, the consequences of depicting a black woman 'misbehaving', as opposed to a white woman, can easily come to represent the whole ethnic group and gender as a whole[128] (in the same way as portrayals of other minority groups, e.g. people who identify as LGBQTIA and/or persons with disabilities). Nevertheless, the questions of representation in these cases are more complex than simply suggesting that they are damaging for viewers and, in so doing, infantilising audiences, in this case many African American fans. Instead, it seems more productive to suggest, as does Gates that "these shows function as a type of virtual reality, allowing viewers to inhabit these 'bad' actors and work through the everyday tensions, contradictions, and frustrations that characterize life for black women across class, educational background, and professional achievement" (2015, p. 627). However, regardless of such a potential opportunity of 'working through' (see discussion in Chapter Three) the diverse representations and behaviours on ANTM, this process terminates when the episode ends. As Tracey Owens Patton and Julie Snyder-Yuly note: some might "laugh at the quirkiness of the judges [the majority of whom, throughout the Cycles, are people of colour] but have no

[128] See also, Gretta Moody's chapter '"Real" Black, "Real" Money: African American Audiences on *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*' in *How Television Shapes Our Worldview*. Moody (2014) found that many of her black interviewees expressed discomfort with "people who don't know" (i.e. white people) or "people without a lot of access to black people" watching *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* and the women's performance of 'blackness' (p. 283).

understanding of what it is like for them when they leave the sanctuary of the fashion world" (2012, p. 381). By creating a worry-free post-race and post-feminist world, ANTM ignores real-life issues of systemic injustices and other matters of its socio-cultural context, which might be unsurprising for a series of its more comedic and playful nature. Yet, this creates an image of the modelling industry – perpetually presented as a microcosm of the *real* world on ANTM – as one that offers equal opportunities for all. Such a notion is arguably the central premise of the series, as the winner of Cycle Sixteen Brittani Kline declares: "It doesn't matter where you're from, how you're raised. If you put your mind to it, you can do anything" (Season Finale, 2011).

Meritocratic Competition and Personal Responsibility

As previously discussed, Tyra Banks' personal rags-to-riches story serves as an underlying narrative for the show and is presented as testament to the idea that every individual has the tools required to create success for themselves – if only they follow the advice and lessons provided by Banks and the series' 'expert' judges. The example of the depiction of ethnicity on ANTM – as a stylistic choice rather than a defining aspect of one's identity and social mobility – demonstrates the ways in which the series frequently sweeps aside social, cultural, and political contexts for a belief in personal ability and merit. Therefore, ANTM follows the neoliberal faith in meritocracy, which "primarily assumes an ability which is inborn and either given the chance or not to succeed" (Littler, 2018, p. 3). To mirror the upward mobility of the series' presenter, a large number of contestants are seemingly chosen for their inspirational personal stories. Each Cycle begins with a 'casting week' in which the panel of judges ask the contestants leading questions (presumably, as they have been interviewed by show producers before filming) about their lives and experiences, as if to provoke an emotional reaction, or "money shot" moment (Grindstaff, 2002, discussed further in the next chapter). In Cycle Ten, contestant Fatima Siad presents herself in front of the judges and they have a jovial conversation about her Somalian background. Suddenly, Tyra's face becomes serious as she says to Fatima: "You've gone through a rite of passage that's a very controversial rite of passage…" Immediately, a slow-paced, sombre guitar is heard in the background, as if to pull the viewer into the affective state of Fatima as she explains: "Well, when I was seven years old, I was circumcised. It's a very traditional, positive thing where I'm from." Tyra

replies: “Why don’t you explain that to everybody,” at which Fatima explains the procedure of Type 3 female genital mutilation (FGM, removing the clitoris and sewing the two labia together) while Tyra nods seriously. As Fatima becomes emotional the camera slowly zooms in to a close shot of her face, streaming with tears.

Figure 16. Stills of Fatima wiping away her tears and then asserting that she has joined ANTM to win (Welcome to Top Model Prep, 2008).

After her stirring retelling, Fatima says: “I’ve been through so much and this is…me. I’m here to win,” as the background music becomes upbeat, changing the scene’s affective register with a more inspirational and upbeat soundtrack (See Figure 16). Thereafter, the serious tone of the subject matter disappears as swiftly as it appeared, switching the focus to the next scene. In this sense, the contestants’ emotions and trauma are frequently offered up for dramatic effect, to make ‘good TV’. The viewers are supplied exceedingly traumatic narratives of sexual, racial, and homophobic abuse; of serious physical and mental disorders, all told in a similarly emotional and dramatic manner, as Fatima’s experience of FGM. The desired affective performances on ANTM, are arguably central to the backdrop of a meritocratic competition and aims to demonstrate that success is democratic. However, as the example of Fatima shows, reality television programming, like ANTM, offer instances of what Deery terms “cultural fracking” where “producers have been digging down and applying the considerable pressure of media exposure without much thought to social or political repercussions” (2015, p. 136). Even though the intentions here might have been ‘good’ (i.e. highlighting a harmful and traumatic practice), one cannot escape the fact that the creators of ANTM ultimately want to create a saleable and compelling show. As such, the stories of hardship on ANTM are mainly presented as proof that successful self-formation is possible for *all* “can-do” girls and women (Harris, 2004). In fact, as Hassinoff underscores, “the more hardship a contestant can overcome through hard work, the better she demonstrates the neoliberal principle that

anyone can succeed" (2008, pp. 331-332). Indeed, for Tyra Banks and the other judges, the models' displays of "passion" and of "wanting it" determine how well they perform in the competition.[129] The contestants are therefore taught that the only person, and the only thing, standing in their way of reaching *the top,* is themselves.

Even though it is not always apparent why contestants are eliminated from the show, it is made blatantly clear that the models must take accountability for their own 'fate'. As Redden notes of the competition show genre in general: "Contestants work ceaselessly for a chance, but in situations over which they have little control, while paradoxically they must be held to account for and take responsibility for their circumstances" (2018, p. 409). Indeed, the series appear to favour segments and talking heads (individual interviews) in which contestants admit culpability and self-responsibility for any mistakes made. In contrast, if models express dissatisfaction with any advice given or hold someone else responsible for their 'failures,' they are chastised. In Cycle Fourteen, model Anslee Payne-Franklin stands before judges as they critique her week's performance during a photoshoot and subsequent photograph, which they regard as subpar. Anslee, in turn, reacts defensively to their negative comments and begins to protest profusely, blaming other individuals on the set of the photoshoot. This makes panel judge Nigel Barker exclaim: "You have to get in control of your own destiny!", a comment which noticeably annoys Anslee further. At this point, Tyra Banks decides to step in and turn the interaction around to a larger lesson:

> **Tyra:** So Anslee, this photo is not strong because… *why*?
> **Anslee:** [defiantly lists the judges' critiques] It has no energy. It has no feeling.
> **Tyra:** You didn't do great at the commercial *because*…
> [here Anslee appears to understand what Tyra wants her to say]
> **Anslee:** Myself. I didn't try hard enough.
> **Tyra:** [whispers proudly] There you go. [smiles] Because in this fashion industry it is all on *you* as that performer.
> **Anslee:** Yes, mam.
> **Tyra:** Congratulations!

[129] For instance, Tyra Banks explains that lacklustre contestant Kara was sent home because: "This industry is about wanting it" (Dance with Me, 2009).

The teaching moment of Anslee's refusal to accept her own responsibility, despite her arguments being valid, demonstrates the central ethos of ANTM: all individuals possess the recourses to succeed if given the right tools to extract them. Ultimately, ANTM is teaching contestants how to be fierce competitors (and neoliberal selves) – which makes sense in a context that *is* a competition, but when the show lays claim to what life is like outside of this context, it becomes problematic. As the creative director explains to a contestant: "I know the competition is hard, but this is nothing compared to really being out there and working" (Here's Your Test, 2009). Similarly, in Cycle Two, an eliminated contestant declares that: "I'm really trying to capitalise on the moment that I have…[having been competing on ANTM]. Now is like the real competition. That [ANTM] was just the warm-up" (The Runway Ahead, 2004). This creates a narrative that presents competition as part and parcel of 'reality' and contemporary late capitalist societies. Thus, it essentially purports to teach the viewers not only to become successful 'models', but ultimately, how to become successful model neoliberal selves.

Yet, juxtaposing this message of equal opportunity, the judges remind the contestants that only *one* can make it, as the 'the top' can only accommodate the individuals who 'try the hardest'. As Tyra explains to a group of models in one judgement segment: "So everyone worked really, really hard, but the judges have to eliminate one" (Tyson Beckford, 2011). Subsequently, Tyra explains that even though all the contestants followed the advice given and lived up to the judges' expectations, one of the models will still be eliminated. In this sense, the show occasionally disproves its own message of meritocratic justice and ultimately reflects the reality of the neoliberal competitive spirit; namely, that fairness and equality cannot be synonymous with a society that is founded on competitiveness. It is during these instances that contestants are visibly distraught and confused, yet their frustration at having complied by the 'rules of the game' and still not winning, is easily rationalised by Tyra's insistence on personal accountability. Consequently, marking the competition as fair and just, regardless of the number of winners.

The Makeover and Self-sacrifice

As mentioned, one of the central premises of ANTM is the idea that all individuals have the possibility of reaching 'the top' if only they listen and learn from 'experts' and

authority figures. Yet, in contemporary popular culture these figures are more commonly represented by individuals of fame or wealth (preferably both, e.g. Tyra Banks) rather than say 'intellectuals' and more institutionalised expertise. Indeed, this represents a trend that arguably emerged in the 1960s and 1970s with more outspoken rejections of, and disrespect for, "structures of authority," as noted by Andrew Ross [1989] (2014).[130] In the same vein, Tanya Lewis (2010, p. 582) argues that:

> [W]hile the public sphere has classically been the site where experts and intellectuals have reigned, the processes of populist 'democratization' and mediatization that have accompanied its growing commercialization have seen the authority of traditional experts become relatively weakened as more fashionable figures of authority such as the celebrity take centre stage.

Indeed, the notion of authority becoming democratised, chimes with the meritocratic ideas of competition so frequently seen in popular culture texts, including ANTM and the rags-to-riches self/brand of Bethenny Frankel (discussed in the previous chapter), as well as the Kardashian-Jenner family's cultural capital and power (discussed Chapter Five). This also reflects the anti-elitist undercurrents and recent revivals of populist rhetoric in political spheres around the globe that arguably (and complexly) have contributed to, for instance, the businessman and reality television star Donald Trump becoming the 45th president of the United States in 2017 and Volodymyr Zelensky, a comedian and actor (famous for playing a president on TV), elected President of Ukraine in 2019.[131] Fame and stardom consequently play a fundamental role in the popular cultural imaginary (and evidently beyond!); proving that familiarity and a perceived 'authenticity' (perhaps unique to *televisual* stardom) have been successful in creating *trust* between a large audience and a famous figure that surpass similar attempts of many politicians. In this sense, the 'private' sphere of cultural consumption and the public sphere of politics are

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[130] See also, among others, Bauman (1987), Garnham (1995), and Lewis (2010).

[131] Another example includes the calls for famous individuals, e.g. Oprah Winfrey, Dwayne Johnson, and Michelle Obama, to become US presidential candidates in 2020, despite them never having declared their political positions nor their wish for entering the presidential race. Simply being well-known and respected appears to justify presidency (here, celebrities perceived as antithetical to Trump). Arguably, the election of a non-politician has furthered such sentiments regardless of where you place on the political spectrum.

frequently seeping into each other. Indeed, this is further cemented by celebrities', politicians', and ordinary people's social media outputs 'flowing' side by side online. Thus, making any distinctions of public and private blurred, as I will argue in more detail in Chapter Five.

It is in this context that the experts and judges of a series like ANTM emerge and are frequently trusted to provide guidance. Simultaneously, as the self is presented as a site for constant improvement and 'bettering' (as well as a personal responsibility), so grows an anxious need to try to find the correct 'tools' from which one can extract success, happiness, and 'top' selfhood. Lewis (2010, p. 585) suggests that:

> The figure of the lifestyle expert in many ways can be seen as emblematic of this shift [the comingling of expertise and celebrity] from within contemporary media culture. In contrast to the processes of alienation and distanciation traditionally associated with stardom and spectacle, celebrity lifestyle experts present us with images and modes of advice embedded in, rather than abstracted from, everyday life.

This is arguably mirrored in the global trend of YouTube and Instagram tutorials, 'how-to' video clips and social media 'influencers'[132] describing everything from what they wear, how they exercise, and, the increasingly popular videos on morning and evening routines (where influencers prepare themselves for the day or night, usually to an instrumental soundtrack to set the 'mood'). Likewise, the self-help genre – both in books and on the small screen – is indicative of the seemingly ever-increasing demand for guidance and DIY (do-it-yourself). Of course, the supply of advice can also be seen as an example of the symbolic violence (McRobbie, 2004) exerted onto women failing to perform idealised female selfhood (white, middle-class) through the created need for transformation and makeover. The 'selling' of cultural capital through offering 'help' and social media 'influence' can thus be regarded as an extension of this 'violence'. As McRobbie (2004, p. 106) writes:

[132] Usually an individual who has attracted some fame through social media for their expertise, knowledge, interests, or relationships and who arguably has some power (although difficult to estimate) in influencing what their 'viewsers' purchase, do, or think.

> It is not without irony that we now see so many upper class girls try to earn their own living successfully by drawing from and popularizing their own store of cultural capital, by in effect flogging it on the marketplace of populist television. (It is surely a bit like selling off the family silver.)

Indeed, the growth of social media influencers and the success of celebrity lifestyle brands, point to that this flogging of cultural capital is exceedingly profitable.

There are many different workings at play here, and the supply/demand for 'help', in whichever form, is difficult, if not impossible, to locate to one specific source. However, US television, and reality television in particular (and now the often concurrent usage of social media), is, Brenda Weber asserts, "inundating viewers with imperatives about self-appraisal, self-critique, and self-improvement" (2009, p. 2). In this sense, it seems reasonable to argue that reality television has played a major part in the increase of narratives about transformation and, especially, the *makeover*. Indeed, the makeover as a feature or even as the whole premise of a television show began to appear in 2002 and has proved so popular that it has created its own reality TV sub-genre (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2006, see also Moseley, 2002).[133] Typically, the makeover show, in rather simplistic terms, "depicts the passage of a person's life from being worth less to being worth more through means of elective consumption in areas such as fashion, surgery, and home decoration" (Redden, 2018, p. 405). Some US examples include, but are by no means limited to: fitness and/or surgery makeovers: *Biggest Loser* (2004-2016), *Extreme Makeover* (2002-2007), *Revenge Body with Khloe Kardashian* (2017-present), and *The Swan* (2004); Style/Fashion makeovers: *What Not to Wear* (US, 2003-2013) and *Queer Eye* (2003-2007); home makeovers: *Extreme Makeover Home Edition* (2003-2012), *Fixer Upper* (2013-2018), *Property Brothers* (2011-present), and *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo* (2019); Pets: *Dog Whisperer with Cesar Millan* (2004-2012) and *My Cat from Hell* (2011-2018); and children: *Family S.O.S. with Jo Frost* (2013) and *America's Supernanny* (2011-2013).[134] As one might glean from these examples, the makeover

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[133] The makeover genre is notably not unique to television as makeovers and transformation narratives have largely featured in women's magazines as well as films and literature. However, it is in its televisual reiteration that the makeover has become a feature in its own right, arguably normalised through repetition.
[134] I have not included the international instalments many of these franchises have, but it is worth noting that many of these reality television programmes have seen international success both in their original (US) versions and their localised versions.

show, in all its myriad forms, has had a pronounced presence on the small screen since its arrival. Interestingly, despite a heightened awareness regarding the frequent lack of diversity, heteronormativity, and gendered stereotypes within some of these shows, the makeover has not lost its appeal to audiences.

Indeed, some of the above-mentioned cancelled makeover programmes have been, or will be, rebooted, including *Extreme Makeover Home Edition* (expected to air in 2020), *Queer Eye* (2018-present), and *What Not to Wear* (expected to air in 2020). Instead, the makeover narrative has changed, at least on the surface, to accommodate a less strict and less normative transformation, and even addressing socio-political issues overtly. Indeed, Netflix's rebooted version of *Queer Eye* is a good example of the use of the makeover format whilst attempting to tackle larger structural issues, again demonstrating the ways in which the private becomes political.[135] In the later seasons of ANTM, the calls for inclusivity, body-positivity, and what Gill and Elias (2014) call "LYB [love your body] discourse" might appear progressive. Yet, "the apparent 'democratization' of beauty and 'diversification' of body types, sizes and ages represent only a tiny shift from the normative ideal of female attractiveness" (Gill and Elias, 2014, p. 183). Ultimately, the story goes, there is always some room for improvement. However, as there have been excellent (and extensive) research conducted by scholars on makeover reality television, I will not explore the genre nor its impact of reality and lifestyle programming further here (see for instance, Heller, 2007; Moseley, 2002; Ouellette and Hay, 2008b; Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008; Sender, 2012; and Weber, 2007, 2009). Instead, this chapter will turn its focus on the functioning of the makeover

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[135] As the executive producer of *RuPaul's Drag Race* (in which drag queens compete to become the next 'drag queen superstar'), Randy Barbato suggests: "I think [Donald Trump's election] raised the stakes for content-makers to double down on quality and protect the people who are making the content that is confronting this kind of red wave" (quoted in Miller, 2018). In other words, the threat of Trump's political ideologies and policies to LGBTQIA people have had a large impact on a reality show in which these minority groups are centre stage. In this sense, politics have almost inevitably entered the storylines of reality television which is often marked as 'camp'. Yet, as John Lyttle argues, this is frequently a 'lower-case camp' that mostly functions as a "light entertainment phenomenon" (2004, p. 28). Ultimately, Lyttle proclaims: "Despite three decades of diversity, it appears that gay men are still best suited to be a) grooming gurus, b) fashion savants, c) food and wine connoisseurs, d) design doctors or e) culture vultures" (ibid., p. 29). However, as both (the new) *Queer Eye* and *RuPaul's Drag Race* have been hugely successful, the pleasure that these series elicit as well as their arguable (positive) normalisation of queer visibility, cannot be disputed.

on ANTM, both as a literal feature in each Cycle but also as a larger theme of performative 'betterment' that determines who wins the show.

As mentioned, in each Cycle of ANTM, there is a makeover segment that usually forms the central narrative of one episode. In this episode (usually the second or third) the audience is invited to observe the models' initial reactions to what their physical makeover will entail; i.e. whether they will be given a haircut, have their hair dyed in a new colour, or have any other possible changes made to their appearance. In the focus groups (explored later in this chapter), several participants revealed that the makeovers were one of their favourite elements of watching ANTM. Both as they reportedly enjoyed watching the actual results of the makeovers, but also as these scenes often include dramatic outbursts with models resisting their transformations. Indeed, one of the seemingly central lessons that the makeovers (sometimes referred to as 'Ty-overs' = Tyra + makeover) should instil is the importance of personal *sacrifice*.

Essentially, the meaning of sacrifice here denotes the act of giving up something one values in order to obtain something *more* valuable. In the ANTM competition, the contestants are arguably asked to sacrifice their own notions of their self for the sake of achieving 'top' selfhood. As mentioned, this involves the process of denouncing one's self in order to become a blank canvas onto which one's supposedly 'true' self can emerge. In Cycle Nineteen, the contestants are for the first time given the opportunity to choose whether they want a makeover or not, whereas in previous Cycles the ty-over has been mandatory. In one scene, two judges stand in front of the excited model contestants asking whether they would like to receive the envelope containing the description of their transformations. It is worth noting that in previous Cycles, any resistance or reluctance to the makeovers have resulted in the models being chastised or even eliminated from the series. As Tyra frequently and matter-of-factly declares: "there will be tears, there will be begging…but I don't care" (Fun and Games, 2009). Yet, in spite of this, in Cycle Nineteen, two contestants – Maria and Victoria – choose not to undergo their makeovers. Maria defiantly argues: "They gave us the option so they shouldn't be mad at us" (The Girl Who Wants Out, 2012). However, after the two models' decision, Tyra enters the beauty salon and asks to speak with them at a nearby table (See Figure 17). Tyra then tells them that their choice "makes me question if [you] should be in the fashion industry. Because it's really not about you. You are a canvas" (The Girl Who Wants Out, 2012). The mise-en-scene, with a large table and bright lights (mirroring the set-up of the common TV trope of a police interview room) clearly demonstrates the seriousness of

their ‘misjudgement’. Victoria, seen in the last frame, eventually breaks down into tears wondering “did I just sabotage myself?” (ibid.).

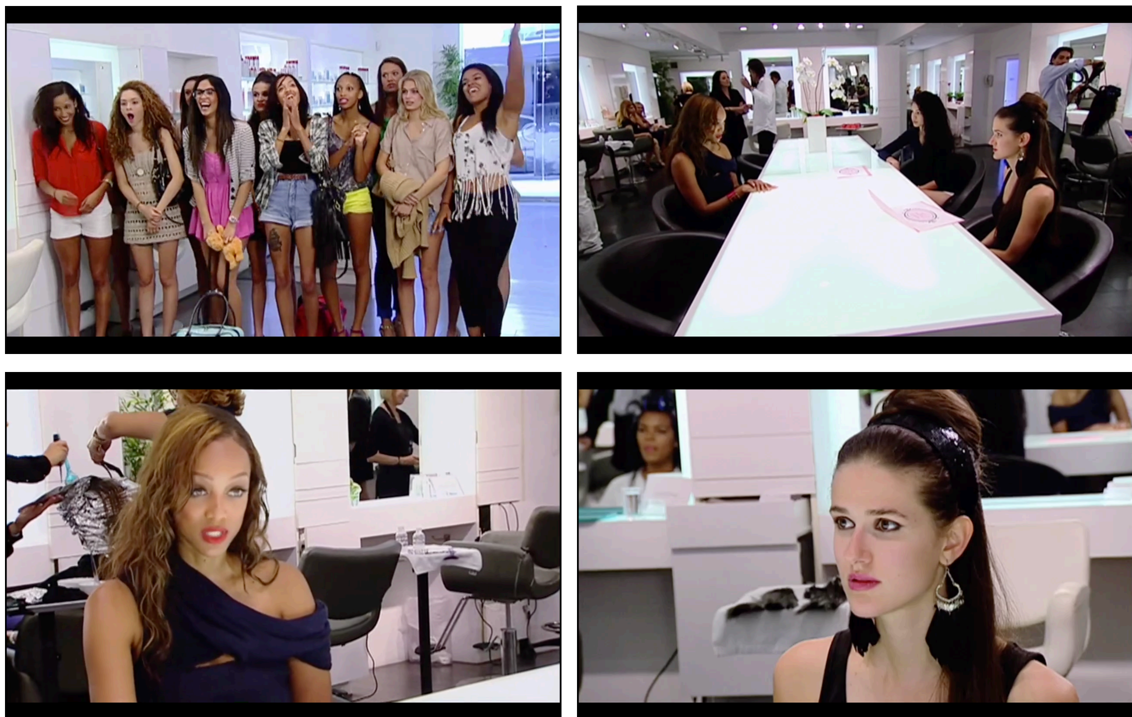

Figure 17. The first still depicts the models first being told that it is time for their makeovers. The next three stills portray the scene in which Tyra reprimands Maria and Victoria for choosing to not take the judges ‘expert’ advice. The scenes of Tyra telling models off are repeated throughout the cycles.

In this sense, and as the quote by Tyra Banks so aptly highlights, the expunging of the previous self is a requirement for top modelhood, which like the self in general, needs to align itself to the demands of the market. Indeed, Weber writes: “Stylists, coaches, and agents frequently remind the women that their appearance is no longer their own, that they don’t have a choice in how they will be made over, that their resistance and ignorance costs others money” (2009, p. 230). Ultimately, what the models (and viewers) are taught is to *trust* the market and its representatives (here, the fashion ‘experts’), as one contestant, Sophie (who later wins her Cycle) proposes: “Tyra will only do something that’ll make us stronger” (Kris Jenner, 2012).

Again, the competitive spirit and the supposedly ‘common good’ of market demand require self-sacrifice (both of one’s agency and sense of self), whilst at the same time purporting, as Tyra claims, to only make individuals “stronger versions of [them]selves” (Dance with Me, 2009). Indeed, the makeovers on ANTM are part and parcel of the creation of and process of ‘finding’ the self, but also the supposedly

homologous brand (i.e. again reflecting the notion of the self/brand in the previous chapter). The stress on self/branding has only been intensified on ANTM in later seasons, which marks a change from earlier seasons in which a very particular type of femininity was being championed. For instance, in the very first ANTM Cycle, all models were measured, weighed, given bikini waxes, and told to "watch [their] diet" (The Girl Who Wants It Bad, 2003). However, in later seasons (particularly from Cycle Seventeen (2011) onwards) the models were given less direction on how to conform to a specific feminine ideal, and more advice on how to conform to a specific personal brand (which, nevertheless, is still determined by the judges). Therefore, on ANTM the makeover is often intended to extract the 'real' self which needs to be saleable and have the possibility to be 'on top' in a competitive industry. Subsequently, this 'improved' self, determined by the competition rather than the models' background and/or own wishes, must be easily digestible and 'catchy' for consumers. In this sense, the transformation and lesson of ANTM disregards the empirical evidence that suggests that audiences often take pleasure from complex and contradictory characters. Instead, by turning the contestants into brands, the show, as Ouellette notes, "trade[s] in stock personas (the troubled girl, the crazy bitch) that participants are encouraged to adopt and perform in the interest of 'good' (profitable) television" (2013, p. 171; see also Grindstaff, 2011).[136]

However, these stock personas are not *only* utilised to create 'good' television, but also develop the idea of selfhood needing to be saleable in order to be valid. Obviously, this becomes particularly problematic as the stock characters presented are deemed 'stock' because they are already 'known' to the audience, which results in any progressive or divergent representations becoming less visible. This becomes especially clear in scenes in which the models are coached on which brand words might possibly represent their 'essential' selves. In Cycle Seventeen, blonde and blue-eyed Allison is given "quirky doll" as her brand to reflect her sweet nature and big eyes, whereas two African American models, Camille and Bianca, are given "diva" and "loud and sassy" as their brands (Nicki Minaj, 2011). Indeed, these latter terms (rather uncomfortably) reflect the ANTM stock character of 'the bitch', whilst simultaneously mirroring racial stereotypes. In this sense, the brand words often reflect superficial markers as the true identities of the models. The process of creating a 'top' self through branding is also

[136] Stehling (2013) also notes that the Top Model format concept of these stock personas or characters can be found across the international instalments of the show.

reflected in the makeover and any challenges and/or photoshoots. Subsequently, the models' acceptance and compliance of their makeovers and top model transformations are the main aspects of which the contestants are judged. Yet, throughout the Cycles, it is not uncommon for the models to resist the 'branding' process and the subsequent makeover. In Cycle Eighteen, Tyra brands contestant Eboni as "30-never"; reflecting her youthful and innocent appearance and encouraging her to wear her hair in pigtails to reflect this new self/brand. However, Eboni feels a deep disconnect with her new persona of "sweetness and innocence", explaining: "I don't want to be something that I'm not" (Cat Deeley, 2012). In one interview segment, Eboni clarifies:

> The judges want to portray me as this baby, but I don't know what it's like to act as a kid. I grew up without my mom, my dad was a single parent, and we lost our fucking house cos we couldn't pay the mortgage. Yes, I'm only eighteen years old, but I've been through a lot of fucking shit. And I have to cram it into this happy little girl: it's not who the fuck I am.
>
> (J. Alexander, 2012):

She thus explains that her given persona portraying a care-free, happy girl, does not reflect what she is or has been through. Her reluctance is eventually met with rebuke, and ultimately results in her being eliminated from the competition, chided for not "listening" to the judges' advice. Again, the sacrifice of one's notion of self (as formed by socio-cultural factors) is required in order to demonstrate that relying on a competitive and meritocratic system is the most effective way in which one finds a successful, ideal female self. The sacrifice and subsequent erasure of who the models were, is replaced by a 'winner' – an 'America's next top model' – proving that the competitive spirit is fair and profitable, for some (who possess the right cultural capital).

Focus Group Study and the Text-in-action

As a way of concluding this chapter, I will end with a small-scale empirical study of some of the ANTM's female viewers, similar to the way in which the previous chapter finished with a netnographic enquiry. In this way I attempt to combine *and* bridge the gap between textual analysis and audience research to, through a multi-methods approach, explore how

the text works both as it stands and in its encounters with viewers. This approach aims to acknowledge and address, as Helen Wood writes, "that neither the text nor the audience are unified or bounded, but that the experience of viewing exists within their relationship with each other" (2005, p. 122). I am thus following other feminist audience ethnographies, "in which female researchers have sought to understand female audiences' engagements with 'female' texts" (Jermyn, 2006, p. 203).[137] Furthermore, I argue that despite the limits of conducting such a small-scale audience study (in terms of scope and diversity for instance), it still offers important insights that a pure textual analysis might overlook. As Jermyn, writing on her small audience study of *Sex and the City* viewers, suggests: "in being able to only skim the surface of such rich material, it points to how much more might be productively achieved by exploring women's relationships with the programme further" (ibid., p. 216). Indeed, this notion became clear in my discussions with female viewers.[138] In this section of the chapter I will discuss the focus groups (FG) I chose to conduct, in order to specifically explore how some female viewers have understood the representations of female selfhood in the competitive context of ANTM and beyond.[139] The following section will present my approach to using a focus group method for my study and the specific findings that these sessions elicited.

As mentioned, during the research for this chapter, I realised that I had numerous female friends, both in the UK and in Sweden, that revealed that they have been, or still are, frequent viewers of ANTM. Indeed, when ANTM was brought up, several of these friends had a lot to say. Subsequently, I became interested in taking advantage of this apparently rich source of data so close to myself. After enquiring with friends, but also by using a snowball sampling method (Atkinson and Flint, 2001; Hill, 1996), I found twelve young women (all in their late twenties) who had watched the series at some point in their lives and expressed an interest in discussing the television programme in a group setting. Having found volunteer participants, I decided to prepare FG sessions in which I would facilitate discussions, inviting participants to explore their views on ANTM, the

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[137] Jermyn (2006) is referring to feminist scholars such as Currie (1999), Hobson (1982), Radway [1984] (1987), and Stacey (1994), and I would add Ang (1996), Gorton (2009a), Skeggs and Wood (2012), among others.

[138] Of course, as Jermyn (2006) also notes, such audience engagement studies point to the areas that need to be further explored academically. In the case of ANTM, I would encourage more reflection around issues of race and class respectively, as well as how such identity markers intersect.

[139] Arguably, as focus groups, unlike netnographic research discussed in Chapter Three, have a much longer methodological history and a more rigid set of rules for how to make the sessions academically sound, there is less need for a long description of the methods used here.

competitive reality television genre, female selfhood, as well as, their ideas of the show's pleasures and potential 'effects'. At this stage, following the four main steps for the FG method – research design, data collection, analysis, and reporting on findings (Morgan et al., 1998) – I began to design and plan for the discussions, i.e. my research objectives and questions, as well as applying for departmental ethics approval (which I received). As several of the viewers mentioned that they had not watched ANTM for several years, I decided to include a "text-in-action" session (Wood, 2005; 2007) prior to each FG session to refresh the viewers memories of the format/style of the show, as well as leave space for any potential retrospective ideas that might emerge. This session involved watching one episode of ANTM with the participants whilst, with their permission, audio-recording and observing their reactions – both verbal and non-verbal – as they happened.

FGs seemed particularly suitable for the topic of reality television and ANTM, both as the subject-matter is non-sensitive[140] but especially as "[i]t enables research participants to discuss and develop ideas collectively, and articulate their ideas in their own terms, bringing forward their own priorities and perspectives" (Smithson, 2008, p. 15). The choice of participants who are acquaintances has also proved successful in similar small-scale studies and have been supported by empirical scholars (see for instance, Bore, 2012; and Jones et al., 2018), so I chose to view the participants 'friendships' or relationship to me as an advantage in the discussions. Indeed, in her research on TV comedy audiences, Bore found that "participants who had never met before tended to be more careful in their negotiations, because they had yet to establish norms and boundaries for appropriate tastes and behaviour" (2012, p. 19). Of course, the choice of using acquaintances and friends as focus group participants simplified the process of finding women who had watched (or watch) ANTM. Due to my own background and friendship group, it so happened that most of the volunteer participants were either based in London, UK or Gothenburg, Sweden, so I decided to organise two sessions, including both the text-in-action and FG sessions, one in each city, in early 2019. However, it is important to highlight that the method of using friends for FGs frequently result in, as Jones et al. (2018) note, the social class, education level, and ethnicity of the FG participants reflecting those of the facilitator. In order to avoid this, I attempted to be more purposeful in 'where' I began the snowball recruitment technique. However, despite

[140] However, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, the idea of reality TV as 'trash' carries some stigma for viewers.

having a rather diverse group of participants to start with (and over-recruiting participants) due to unforeseen circumstances,[141] the final number of participants was six (three in each of the two sessions). Three individuals also amount to the minimum number of participants in a focus group as suggested by Adams and Cox (2008). These young women included (lower and upper) middle-class, white, multiracial women, with varying levels of education, although the majority had studied at university. Thus, they were relatively homologous, which Kruger (1994) suggests could possibly generate more useful data as participants might be more comfortable with each other. Indeed, whereas this would be more likely in a setting where the focus group participants did not know each other, in her study of female fans of *Sex and the City*, Deborah Jermyn (2006, p. 206) convincingly argues:

> The potential restriction of this audience-research method is demonstrated by the fact that most of my respondents' social profiles were so obviously similar to my own. Though this brings with it limitations, in this instance it was to some degree a desirable outcome. While the position of 'researcher' seems inevitably and indelibly endowed with a certain sense of privilege within the focus-group context, it certainly was not the case, as in much previous feminist audience research, that there was a marked disparity regarding class, education or status between us.

Subsequently, the commonality between both the participants and myself (as a [female and middle-class] discussion facilitator), proved advantageous and provided rich and useful data, in spite of this study's apparent flaws in regard to diversity.[142]

Furthermore, it is worth noting that both of these audience research sessions were conducted within a European context with European participants, rather than North American, as ANTM is produced in the US with mostly North American contestants. Therefore, some of the participants' responses reflected this, especially the kinds of references that were used, and the perceived 'Americanness' of the ANTM contestants.

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[141] Such as last-minute cancellations and illnesses. Yet, admittedly, these were more organisational flaws that could possibly have been overcome by more vigilant planning. Of course, the timeline of the submission of this thesis also had to be taken into account.

[142] Further, as representations of ethnicity, class, and sexuality were not the main focus of the study, these factors were of less importance (even though I would have liked to have seen more diversity) than the participants' gender (due to the emphasis on the *female* self here) and experiences of watching ANTM.

For instance, the Swedish FG participants referenced a few Swedish reality television shows and two FG participants suggested that the "over-the-top" behaviour of the model contestants were partly due to their perceived 'Americanness', whereas other FG participants argued that the reality television setting would elicit such behaviour out of anyone, regardless of nationality. Despite the disagreements of the source of certain behaviours on the show, the reading and 'decoding' of ANTM and its representations of the models were similar in both groups. Indeed, the specific European context of the focus groups, as well as the participants' European nationalities, were initially a concern due to the ANTM's North Americanness. Yet, arguably due to the ways in which we now have access to a myriad of television programming from all over the globe (both broadcasted and streamed online), suggests that viewers across nations are increasingly used to engaging with televisual texts from other socio-cultural contexts, especially North America. However, the US popular culture texts are still the most prominent in the global West, in terms of attracting mass appeal.[143] In this sense, as Miriam Stehling suggests, "possibly as a result of globally traded television shows, everyday life experiences are converging, becoming increasingly alike…[and therefore] we should understand localisation as translocalisation, especially when considering audience reception of television formats" (2013, p. 37). Indeed, both in the UK and in Sweden,[144] many viewers are habituated to engage with these types of US texts and also have access to global audience engagements on various social media platforms through which reactions are frequently shared (as with the RHONY discussion forums discussed in the previous chapter).

Indeed, when it comes to American reality television, global audiences are arguably more accustomed to the genre's formats and conventions, which make similar understandings of the texts more likely, at least when it comes to expectations. In her study of the *Top Model* franchise viewers, Miriam Stehling (2013) uses focus groups to explore the different responses between German and American audiences and found that "both decoding processes and the (resulting) interpretations of audiences, usually

[143] This mass appeal, or Americanisation of much popular culture, does however not suggest that we are in 'danger' of erasing localised cultural identities (Tomlinson, 1991). Indeed, the cultural appeal and export of American television is not one-sided, but should be regarded as a cultural exchange, especially with the recent successes of so-called Nordic Noir and Spanish-speaking genres on streaming sites such as Netflix.

[144] It is also noteworthy that in Sweden, unlike say Germany and Spain, it is not a common practice to dub English-speaking television shows. Audiences are therefore used to view the programming in its original form, rather than a filtered version of cultural expressions or views.

conceptualised as ‘natural’ or ‘local’, are almost identical across these two cultures” (p. 37). Consequently, following Stehling’s findings, I am less concerned with the cultural differences between US, British, and Swedish audiences, without fully discounting such disparities of course.[145] [146]

Findings and Discussion

The text-in-action sessions, in which the focus group participants and I watched an episode of ANTM together,[147] arguably contributed to making the research setting more casual and relaxed. All the participants were at various points laughing at, reacting to, and/or discussing the events and behaviours on-screen, which also provided some insights into how a television text like ANTM is watched and enjoyed. Yet, as Skeggs et al. (2008, p. 11) underscore:

> Of course the presence of the researcher and the recording equipment all make the viewing far from ‘natural’ and by inserting ourselves into the viewing process we do not suggest that this method gives a more ‘direct’ or ‘true’ picture of the viewing process; it is still a constructed research event, like the interview.

Indeed, the group setting possibly made the participants’ reactions to the occurrences on screen more vocal, as to offer something for the recording devices to record. However, as many of the women in the groups reported that they often watch (or enjoy watching) reality television with other people, this setting seemed more ‘natural’ to how they have watched ANTM at home, despite the audio recording equipment. In this sense, their vocal

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[145] Particularly as popular culture in these countries is often Americanised or US-centric.

[146] All the discussions, in both English and Swedish, will be written out in English. Thus, the Swedish interviewees’ conversations have been translated into English and due to word count limitations, they will not be included in this thesis alongside the translations. All translations are my own.

[147] The first group watched episode one of Cycle Twelve (What Happens in Vegas, 2009) and the second group watched episode one of Cycle Fourteen (Be My Friend, Tyra!, 2010). Due to some difficulties in streaming the first-mentioned episode, which resulted in some interruptions, I chose to show the latter to the second group. Both episodes were chosen as they offer great introductions to the televisual competition and include the models’ introductions, makeovers, judging panels, and eliminations, all of which are central elements of the series’ format, as discussed.

responses are equally indicative of a performance for each other during the process of watching and commenting, as a possible 'helpful' performance for data collection. What was particularly striking in these sessions were the participants' affective responses to specific scenes, such as the model contestants' sad stories (like Fatima's mentioned above), their comedic behaviours, and/or emotional reactions. Many of these scenes were met with 'oooh's and 'aaaw's from the research participants, reflecting the on-screen drama and sad moments respectively. These non-verbal responses, what Skeggs et al. term "affective-textual-encounters" (ATE), were a central aspect of the text-in-action sessions (2008, p. 18). These affective televisual moments, which Grindstaff (2002) calls the reality television 'money shot', was for several FG participants the "main reason for watching," as participant Anna[148] notes. She explains, smiling: "there's always someone who starts to cry."

Indeed, in both of the text-in-action sessions the participants were laughing and appeared to be enjoying themselves throughout the episodes. The scenes that appeared especially laugh-inducing were those of the models' unexpected or 'unruly' behaviour, what might fall outside the norm of female respectability,[149] for instance: the models' shrieks when Tyra Banks enters the studio or the contestants' surprising self-revelations to the judging panel. One woman, for example, brings her 'fun' pen collection to present to the ANTM judges and breaks down in tears, as she is scolded for not taking modelling seriously (What Happens in Vegas, 2009). The model's emotional reaction is met with amusement by the women in the viewing session. Furthermore, the participants also express schadenfreude in their laughing at the models' failure to live up to the judges' standards. One scene in which a model is asked to pose in a bikini and awkwardly attempts to look "modelesque", elicits laughter as FG participant Sofia exclaims "Wow, what a posture! [ironic amusement]." Thus, the speaking of schadenfreude is usually accompanied by comments of judgement or comparison by the participants. These televisual invitations to judge are expected, as "[e]valuation is at the heart of competition shows in which a panel of experts judge the artistic performance of participants" (Thornborrow, 2016, p. 61). However, whilst critical comments were made in the research sessions, several FG participants expressed discomfort or felt arbitrary towards ANTM's invitation to evaluate the models' 'looks' and behaviours. For instance, Louise,

[148] All research participants have been giving pseudonyms.
[149] See Rowe (1995) on 'unruly women,' as discussed later in the chapter.

who in the beginning of the text-in-action session declared her dislike for an ANTM contestant, saying “she’s such a bitch”, later confessed:

> I feel like it’s hard to watch this show now because it kinda drags you into making very rude and not polite comments that you think in your head about the contestants. Like the one with all the piercings, I thought about the Amphetamine crisis when I saw her [laughs].

Subsequently, whilst the series might be inviting audiences to judge the women on-screen, it is debatable whether the show manages to simply make these critical thoughts (already present) more vocal due to the group setting (where commentary appears natural) or whether the show, by categorising competitors as either ‘winners’ or ‘losers’, incites such viewer judgement. Arguably, a combination of both seems likely and whilst the viewing session demonstrated that some female viewers enjoy the process of judging, they were still expressing an awareness of and concern for the possible larger implications of scrutinising other women.

To a large extent, the verbal and non-verbal responses made during the viewing of ANTM, reflected the (assumed) intended response by the show’s creators, as the melancholic music and close-up shots of contestants telling a ‘sad story’ often elicited mirroring ATEs (“aww”s, or loud sighs), as well as FG commentary such as “that’s awful…”. Similarly, more humoristic segments, as reflected by, for instance, a comedic extradiegetic sound or a close shot of the judges’ eyerolls, would often incite chuckles or laughter. However, the perceived intended decoding of scenes, were for some of the viewers in the FGs dependent on the perceived authenticity or rationality of the model contestants’ behaviour. As such, the model who had brought a pen collection onto the show and later, when criticised for being unserious, had a dramatic and emotional breakdown, was received with loud snorts and “God…”, rather than sympathy. In other words, her reaction appeared disproportionate to the circumstances.[150] Similarly, in a makeover scene, one FG viewer, Maria, sighs as a model cries when her hair is chopped off, stating to the screen: “Honey, it grows back…” Thus, Maria appears to reflect the makeover requirements and the demand of personal sacrifice on ANTM, discussed above.

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[150] Other scenes, in which a model is asked to take off a wig, thereby revealing long hair, or another model telling the judges she’s never been at a hairdresser’s, are met with incredulity and questions of the scenes being “fake” or “staged”.

The push and pull between the research participants' *criticising* the failure of the televisual contestants to live up to the show's (and societal) performative standards of femininity and successful selfhood, and their *denouncing* of the same standards, became more apparent during the focus group sessions.[151] In his study of audiences, Matt Briggs (2010, p. 70), following Hill (2005) and others, found that "there are, in Bakhtin's terms, *centrifugal* delights in transgression which open up a radicalized discursive space, but also *centripetal* forces which pull radical elements back in again, towards unity, consensus and stability" (drawing on Bakhtin, 1984, emphasis in original). Briggs' findings are also reflected in my own findings here, as the text-in-action and focus group participants were perpetually engaging in discussions and expressing ideas that at times both challenged *and* affirmed the validity of the notions of the competitive spirit and the ideal female selfhood presented on-screen.

Indeed, during the text-in-action sessions the research participants were often actively judging or critiquing the models – e.g. their overall performances or willingness to undergo makeovers – with remarks such as "she is gorgeous!", "she looks so old", or "that was so fake!". This commentary was both positive and negative, yet always exceedingly subjective. One notion that both groups expressed was that the models were very or too "slim" and the ANTM contestants deemed "plus-size" were "not *actually* plus-size". Therefore, demonstrating that the physical ideals on the programme were not readily accepted by the research participants, but rather questioned and/or analysed. Some FG participants were horrified by the slim ideal of the models' bodies, whereas others simply confirmed that the prerequisite to be "skinny" reflects the ideals of the modelling industry in 'real life'. Nevertheless, the depiction and close-ups of the ANTM contestants' bodies, coupled with the judges' critical pronouncements, seemed to offer a space in which the research participants could voice their personal thoughts and insights of the models, without too many consequences. As discussed in the netnography section in Chapter Three, since the critique, "that is being circulated is on an individual whom one does not know directly, the level of pleasure may be heightened because there is less real-life consequences, [and therefore] one can increase the range and frequency and 'bite' of the whispers" (Redmond, 2019, p. 219).

[151] See also Wood et al. (2008) in which they found a similar binary in their audience research on sadness in reality TV.

However, the FG discussions revealed that even though the participants had 'indulged' in judging the contestants' bodies and behaviour during the text-in-action sessions, most felt an ambivalence towards (and even surprise at) their own vocal evaluations. One FG participant, Louise, explains that: ANTM "brings out this bad behaviour in yourself, because then we sit here and you think 'oh yeah, her hair wasn't that nice'. And like 'she looks ridiculous' or if they walk and you think 'that's a horrible walk' and yeah, you become as judgemental as the judges." Her comment elucidates the way in which she believes the show extracts "bad behaviour" from the viewer, which was also a notion mirrored by others in the groups. Sofia explains that the show makes her think: "'look at her hair, or her nose'…so silly really. Why? Just because that's what the show is about. I wouldn't notice such things walking in town." This sentiment was reflected in both groups as the women argued that since the show is primarily concerned with "superficiality" so will their initial readings of it. Lisa, from the FG in Sweden, explains: "Yeah, you notice that you become uncomfortable in other contexts when someone, especially when girls, but also, guys, talk about other women's bodies. I'm always like 'Hmm I'm not very comfortable with this…' But now, watching *Top Model,* I'm sitting here and [saying] 'ew!'" The context of ANTM and the subsequent viewer commentary and ATEs (e.g. 'ew') suggest that the series, not only invites audiences to judge, but also makes the judgement more acceptable, as "that's what the show is about." Furthermore, Anna argues "I also think that they [the models] put themselves in a programme where they will be judged by how they look. And that is what the show is about. So it's not weird that we're sitting here and judging them… so it's totally different. And then I don't feel uncomfortable with it… [laughs]." As such, because ANTM is a competition and the participants subject themselves to being scrutinised, judgement is encouraged and may be enjoyed without guilt. Yet, as the focus group participants note, in any other context they would not feel comfortable criticising women's behaviour and bodies so overtly. Arguably, this comfortability with judgement is made easier since the models are represented by 'blankness', in other words, removed from the circumstances that might influence who they are and how they behave. Therefore, as Thompson (2010) suggests, "viewers are encouraged to compare individual choices that are increasingly evaluated out of social context and understood apolitically as 'personal choices'" (p. 338). Again, the show's stress on personal responsibility within the competitive context frames any of the models' autonomy and personal choices; allowing viewers to guiltlessly revel in individuals' oversights.

Nevertheless, after the text-in-action sessions, several participants expressed an overt discomfort with both the judging aspect of ANTM and their own partaking in passing judgement on other women. For instance, when I asked Louise why she perceived her critical commentary as "bad behaviour", she argued: "I guess it has to do with how I want to see myself and I don't want to be a judgemental person but obviously I am, and the show shines a light on that."[152] Similarly, Maria also notes the negative impact that ANTM's invitation to "be judgemental" has, explaining:

> …I think at least, or something that my mum used to say…she is a (sorry mum!) a pretty judgemental person and … I grew up hearing lots of things about other women but then if *I* would say something [my mum] would say: 'but think what they're saying about you.' So in a way it makes me feel bad because then I guess people are judging me too. And that's not a nice feeling.

Subsequently, for some of the viewers the show allows some 'guilty pleasure' in offering a space in which judgement is permitted, which, the research participants argued, is not the case in most real-life situations. Yet, some participants worried that this judgement creates an environment in which critical evaluations are allowed into quotidian settings in 'real life'. As Kristyn Gorton notes, such a tension "establishes an uneasy relationship for the viewer between their emotional reactions and their critical judgements" (2009a, p. 110; see also Sender, 2012). The perceived possible consequences of watching ANTM and taking pleasure from critiquing the televisual contestants, thus seems to complicate the 'after-the-fact' enjoyment of ANTM for some viewers.

During the focus group discussions, I also asked more direct questions about why the women chose (or had chosen) to watch ANTM.[153] What was it that made them 'tune

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[152] Louise was also one of the few FG participants who vocalised that she did not get any pleasure from watching ANTM anymore, putting this down to changing "morals" and being more "pompous" [her words]. As such, for her, despite offering a lot of (verbal negative and positive) commentary about the contestants during the text-in-action session, the consequences of the unwanted judging encouraged by ANTM outweighed the pleasure derived from watching the competition show itself.

[153] I use the word 'choice' here loosely. One of the interviewees described how she used to watch ANTM as there "was not much else on TV" during the timeslot she usually wanted to watch television. Most participants, however, actively planned to watch ANTM 'live' on TV or watched reruns as well as video-on-demand services.

in'? However, before outlining these findings, it is important to reiterate both that the focus group interviewees' responses do not reflect all audiences' nor is there a definite preferred reading that a researcher (like myself) can extract from conducting ethnographic work, however extensive. Even so, with this small-scale study I hope to anchor some of the above textual analysis in 'reality'; deciphering the possible pleasures that audiences might find in a competition show like ANTM. However, following Sender (2012, p. 10), it is worth highlighting that "neither activity nor pleasure…guarantees political activity or resistance". As such, placing either, or both, in a positive versus negative binary is arguably not constructive for the arguments here.

In the FG interviews, the participants highlighted some aspects of ANTM that they believe made them follow the reality television programme more than other shows.[154] These included: (1) the drama or dramatic interactions between cast members and to "see what happens", which four interviewees described as their main reason for watching the show. (2) The idea of escapism or 'living vicariously' through the women on screen (see discussion in Chapter Three), as Lisa notes:

> I am one of those people that would never put myself in a situation like that. And I get fascinated by people who can deal with it [partaking in a reality TV show]. I think that's what attracts me, like: 'How can they deal?' Yeah, I think that's it. And I also like the drama; it's interesting and fun!

Similarly, another participant described how she enjoys watching reality television to learn more about a lifestyle that she does not lead herself, whether it be that's of a fashion model or a very rich celebrity. (3) Another source for enjoyment for the women was watching reality television together with other viewers, as Clara explains:

> For me it was also like a bonding experience with friends, because I watched it with friends quite a lot. And then comment on things and you often had the same opinion as a friend and corroborated that with them,

[154] These various 'pleasures' of watching television have also been noted by other scholars, for example Ang (1985; 1996), Bird (2003), Hall [1973] (1993), Hill (2005), Morley (1980), Skeggs et al. (2008), and Skeggs and Wood (2012).

> which was fun. We would have fun watching it together, if that makes sense. Like a social experience.

As such, Clara's description of the act of viewing ANTM together seems to confirm that *social* viewing encourages a more vocal viewership, thus demonstrating the benefits of utilising text-in-action methods in audience reception studies. Indeed, another participant mentions that sometimes she also enjoys watching ANTM on her own, as "you don't have to put any effort into it. You just watch." (4) The final motivation for the interviewees for watching ANTM was that the show, and programming like it, makes you feel better about yourself, offering a kind of schadenfreude. As a conversation between Maria and Clara demonstrates:

> **Maria:** But it's quite funny, and maybe quite ironic as well because I remember so vividly that when I had a bad day at school and I felt stupid for whatever reason, I knew I would come home and turn on the TV and that [ANTM] would be on and would make me feel better about myself because they were much more stupid than me.
> **Clara:** Yes [laughing]. I've had those moments as well.
> **Maria:** So that was like a very clear intention that I remember having. I mean I obviously enjoyed the drama, but I don't know if there was anything else in particular that I enjoyed. I just liked feeling smart.

Interestingly, again, there is a dissonance with the show making viewers both feel good in allowing themselves to judge and feel better than the individuals on screen, yet this act or behaviour (when discussed further) contributes to, as mentioned, many viewers feeling "bad". Perhaps it is this dissonance that Maria finds "quite ironic."

Interestingly, when asked if there were any particular model contestants or televisual moments throughout the ANTM cycles that stuck out to them, the participants did not mention any scenes or moments involving the eventual winners, the America's next 'top models'. Instead, rebellious or in various ways, *unruly* female contestants were brought up, those who had resisted the schooling of Tyra and the show's required erasure of one's previous self to accommodate the 'neoliberal' ideal. As Kathleen Rowe (1995) argues, "the figure of the unruly woman – too fat, too funny, too noisy, too old, too

rebellious – unsettles social hierarchies" (p. 19). The instances in which unruly behaviour – short instances of what Bakhtin (1984) terms the *carnivalesque* – are allowed on ANTM presumably to offer the 'money shots' of television, in other words, they make for 'good' TV. This was further evidenced during the text-in-action sessions during which; the more excessive or unruly the behaviour of both the women and the judges became, the more laughter or affective reactions could be heard (through the audio-recordings) from the viewers. Many of these scenes also point to what the viewers describe as "drama", which, as mentioned, was the main reason for watching ANTM for most participants. Yet, these moments of unruliness are ultimately disciplined by Tyra Banks and the other judges. In this sense, as described by Wood and Skeggs, "the [unruly] performance element works to both provide entertainment through making spectacular forensic detailing (usually bodies behaving badly), and promote an intense form of governmentality – participants must learn to control themselves" (2012, p. 67). As described above in the textual analysis section, the models who fail to take the judges' advice, deny their personal culpability, and refuse to establish a valid, saleable self, are eliminated from the show. The potential for unsettling the social hierarchies are thus presented, yet ultimately abolished to restore the rules of the meritocratic competition. Yet, this 'encoded' lesson of ANTM, does not deny the potential pleasure and subsequent transformative impulses that the moments of unruliness might evoke.

All the female participants in the interview sessions argued that they believed that they had not been affected or influenced by what they see on ANTM, or at least suggested that it did not have a more negative impact than any other cultural text with young, beautiful, slim women. Thus, for most participants it was contextual, i.e. the ideals of femininity and beauty on the television series did not extend into their beliefs in the 'real' world. One participant mentioned how her father used to tell her off for watching ANTM when she was younger, telling her: "Your braincells will die!" A warning that she used to fend off with the explanation that ANTM offered instances of "girl power," that Tyra was "empowering girls." This anecdote is noteworthy as even though the FG interviewees discussed that they had not been negatively 'affected' by the competition show, several viewers suggested that others, "more impressionable" people might be duped (often implying viewers' class status and/or [young] age). This sentiment seems to reflect the attitude that mainstream media, indeed many media and screen scholars, have towards viewers of reality television (as discussed in Chapter Two and Three). There is a frequently returned to notion that reality programming has 'negative effects' (however

you define the term) on some audiences, yet a simultaneous belief that oneself is exempt from such effects.

As many scholars have highlighted, the genre's frequent equation with trash or guilt, has rather successfully cemented such ideas. In the beginning of the FG, the participants and I conversed about reality television in general and other reality shows that they might have watched. The initial notion in both groups was that none of them watch (or have watched) reality television *that* much, seemingly wishing to dissociate themselves from such simple (guilty) pleasures (a phenomenon also noted by Skeggs et al., 2008). Nevertheless, after listing some shows that they might have come across, many expressed surprise at the (often large) number of reality shows they had in fact watched (to various extents). Similarly, a rather telling moment occurred when the first text-in-action session was interrupted by a participant's partner popping his head through the door, at which Lisa sarcastically jokes: "Hi! We're just doing a bit of *serious* research here." Although said in jest, the idea of reality television, and the study of it, as trivial is certainly not unheard of and demonstrates the ways in which anxieties of its brain-cell-killing properties are still present in the cultural imaginary (despite the aforementioned work of audience reception scholars).

In terms of the centrality of competitiveness and the competitive spirit on ANTM, most viewers in the focus groups, accepted its logic. The rules of the competition on ANTM is clearly stated throughout the episodes, thus in that context the dissension and 'drama' between the contestants seemed natural to most viewer participants. As Anna argues: "I mean it is a competition. And I am quite competitive so if I had been on the show, competing for money, covers and stuff, why would I support anyone else? It's a competition… And because of that, I think it's okay to not be friends with everyone." Anna further explains that seeing female friends fighting on screen can also be cathartic, as "nowadays when you watch TV, all the female friendships are so romanticised. It might be positive that they are pushing girls to be more like that, but it's healthy to [see] that it isn't always like that." In a similar way, several interviewees gave examples of how ANTM and its competitiveness mirrors that of 'real life', thus echoing the judges' frequent insistence that the competition show is a mere microcosm of reality. Lisa explains that she was competitive with her friends as well:

> When I watched [ANTM] a lot in ninth grade there was a lot of competition, especially when we applied for colleges and stuff like that. It

> was a bit like fighting about who was the best, like with Nicki Minaj or Cardi B; there can only be one. And I think you could get that feeling from watching shows like this.

Likewise, Louise gives an example of how competition functions at her work:

> …every year, you can only be promoted once a year in my company…And that time creates a lot of frictions and emotions because not everyone is promoted and we talk a lot about how it seems as if it's all mainly down to being liked by the people who can promote you and how it is in that sense like a competition because not everyone can be promoted as well as there are limited spots [laughs].

Indeed, the idea that society to various degrees is governed by competitive, meritocratic systems in which some individuals come out as winners and some come out as losers, appeared to be accepted by most viewers, regardless of their ideological viewpoints. Clara suggested that competition is "kinda inherent in the concept of evolution." And Louise, agreeing, explained: "at least the way we talk about evolution and the way we think about the survival of the fittest. And that doesn't need to be true in the sense that this is how it is but it's how we see it through our lens." In this sense, for the FGs, the competitive spirit and rules of meritocracy appeared to mirror the 'real' world. Thus, most appeared to accept the logic on the show but ultimately argued they had probably not been affected by it (as arguably, being 'affected' by reality TV is especially bad). In this way, the series contributes to presenting a world in which competition and the social Darwinist ethic of the survival of the fittest is deemed 'natural'. And despite the audiences' arbitrary and contradictory responses to this premise, competitiveness seems partly accepted as an inevitable aspect of society that we have to accommodate ourselves to.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined how competition and competitiveness has been established as natural to the ways in which modern Western (neoliberal) society functions. Through this development, influenced by notions of social Darwinism and meritocracy, performing

selfhood can be regarded as something that individuals can either 'win' or 'lose' at. Tyra Banks and ANTM enforces this premise as the competition show, firstly, is presented as a microcosm of the demands of the 'real world', and, secondly, as it offers specific lessons that, if followed correctly, can make contestants and viewers come out 'on top.' These lessons, as I have outlined, teaches participants to erase their previous selves (their class, ethnicity, experiences) to create a 'blankness' onto which the market representatives of ANTM (judges and experts) can fill with a self/brand fitting for survival in the competition. Tyra Banks' own rags-to-riches background, and the recruitment of participants with troubling pasts, serve as a founding narrative and proof of the 'fact' that anyone who works hard and is willing to transform themselves can succeed. Indeed, self-sacrifice becomes crucial in the makeover segments in the show and the models' willingness to do whatever the show and Tyra require them to do, demonstrate their commitment for forming a *model* self. In this sense, their own fate and success or failure is the participants' own responsibility. Therefore, the show appears to create an archetypal neoliberal workforce, or a theatre of neoliberalism (Couldry, 2008), wherein workers need to be responsibilised and trust the fairness of meritocratic competition, whilst at the same time presenting this 'world' as natural, indicating: "that's what life is really like" (Gilbert, 2013, p. 15).

Yet, as I have argued, I wanted to conclude the textual analysis of ANTM with the show's female viewership and as such I conducted two small-scale FG and text-in-action sessions in order to gain some insights into how some female viewers (here a rather homogenous group, as discussed) have engaged with the text. Following the netnographic study in the third chapter, again, what emerged from the FG sessions, was a dissonance between the cultural text itself (ANTM) and the ways in which the textual discourse and sentiments are decoded by female audience members. This obviously complicates the idea of reality television and neoliberal logics having severe adverse 'effects' on individuals' very notion of selfhood and self-formation. As such, even though Tyra Banks as the creator of ANTM, frequently expresses her mission to teach women how to navigate meritocratic competitions, and society at large, FG participants had a more arbitrary response to such attempts. I found that there was a push and pull between viewers both laughing at and finding pleasure in some models' 'unruly' behaviour, whilst still expressing irritation with the same models for failing to live up to ANTM's performative standards of competitive female selfhood. At the same time, the same female FG participants could express incredulity and frustration over these very

standards. Indeed, as mentioned, several of the FG members suggested that the show incites them to express negative or judgemental commentary about the women portrayed, therefore potentially creating a space of vicarious pleasure in the judging of other women for some viewers (thoughts that might not be allowed in real life).[155]

As the television series portrays the contestants' behaviour and choices as solely personal, the audience's potential enjoyment from the on-screen women's 'self-inflicted' misfortune might feel more acceptable, and guilt-free. And so does the safety of spatial distance from the object (or subject) of the judgement itself. The pleasure in 'unruliness' was further attested by most of the FG viewers citing models who failed to conform to Tyra's schooling (i.e. all non-winners) as their personal favourite contestants of ANTM. However, performative unruliness and the pleasure it might elicit are temporary and are presumably allowed on ANTM to create drama and 'good TV'. Yet, audiences, by accepting these behaviours/bodies as 'unruly', also seem to accept what is presented as the norm, the epitome of female performativity and self/branding. Moreover, by removing the misbehaving contestants on ANTM, the show also removes the prospect of longer lasting resistance within the narrative, and the notion of an alternative to the model female self purported to persevere in the competition. But, as I have argued, ANTM's and Tyra Banks' implied message does not deny the potential enjoyment and pleasure that such moments of unruliness and defiance might invoke. Ultimately, it becomes interesting to question whether the socio-cultural imaginary and its increasing intertwinement with the logics of competition and 'fairness', might normalise the logics of competition in other contexts as well?

In the next chapter, I intend to explore this question to some extent, but more specifically, I will be investigating strategies that some of the most successful reality television women have developed to come out on 'top' in this perceived competitive context. As such, I will, by a closer examination of the Kardashian-Jenner women and their media outlets, explore how they utilise and transform their work in order to increase their human capital. And as such, how they present specific tactics by which women are encouraged to turn their selves into work whilst at the same time, performing work on their selves.

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[155] However, one participant noted how these negative thoughts made them feel bad about themselves.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Personal is Profitable: Self-Work and Keeping Up with the Kardashians

Being a woman involves work, work of constant self-(re)construction.

(Ang, 1996, p. 80)

The Kardashian show's transparency depicts…'hard work'. However, what the Kardashians and their friends consider work, others may not.

(Scheiner McClain, 2014, p.11).

In the previous two case studies, on RHONY and ANTM, I explored the phenomena of 'authentic' self-branding and the perpetual popular cultural presentation of successful female selves emerging out of competitive, 'meritocratic' contexts. These concepts are deeply ingrained in the worlds of the reality televisual texts, yet they are simultaneously put forward as reflections of the *real* world and how to succeed within it. Consequently, both the previous chapters have in various ways touched upon the concept of work and how the self is called upon to guarantee 'success' and profit. However, this chapter will talk more specifically about self-work and labour,[156] and the seepage of work into all aspects of life, what I refer to as a process of 'workitisation'. I will explore how this seepage (also partly presented in the concepts described in Chapters Three and Four), has almost become complete in the most popular reality TV texts at the end of the 2010s, in which the main characteristics of one's self (the body and the mind) *require* work.

However, the very notion of work has changed, which is why this process of workitisation has been possible. Thus, in order to describe the subsuming of *being* into *working*, I will outline how the understanding of 'work' has altered – no longer simply

[156] Usually, as Casey (1995) notes, the difference in the definition of 'labour' and 'work' "lies in the connotations of labor with pain and trouble, and work with effort and product" (p. 26). In this thesis I will adhere to these definitions, apart from those instances in which I am quoting other scholars (many of whom use the terms interchangeably).

an extension of the self, but work (or self-work) becomes part of the subject where simply existing demands various forms of 'working'. I will thus begin this chapter by offering a very brief outline of how work and working has been conceptualised previously, and thereafter, how these notions have altered in the socio-cultural present (here lined by neoliberal sentiments) – including the usage of social media, the platform economy, the feminisation of the workforce, and finally the role played by reality television. As I will argue, reality television has played a crucial part in the ways in which the definition of valued work centres around being seen and thus collapsing the distinction between private and public.

I will present the idea of workitisation through a closer analysis of the hugely popular and long-lived reality television series *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* (2007-present, hereafter referred to as KUWTK) and the central cast members, the Kardashian-Jenner sisters. The Kardashians are culturally significant as their show and their personal lives are such omnipresent features of American popular culture, and perhaps across the world. Due to their omnipresence (their televisual presence – on KUWTK, talk shows, etc., their social media saturation, and their mentions in the press and popular discourse), I will use a more mobile strategy, akin to Hine's (2011) "itinerant strategy" discussed in Chapter Three. Therefore, I have been following the Kardashians across their multimedia outlets (including Instagram, Twitter, Youtube, media interviews) with KUWTK as the focal point. Along this multimedia approach to the textual analysis of the Kardashian women's self-presentations, I use the methods of netnography described in the Introduction and Chapter Three. I have collected and coded the viewers', followers', and potential customers' engagements with the Kardashians' televisual appearances, social media posts, and overall medial presence. I have particularly focused on some appearances that I directly refer to in the text that have elicited commentary. I argue that the previous empirical findings can be extended into the discussion here, in that they demonstrate the complex manners in which viewers engage with such (intentionally or not) encoded texts. Particularly, as I have argued previously, to the idea of audiences resisting or 'working through' meaning. However, in this chapter I explore more explicitly the changing ways in which social media and other mediums are used by televisual stars (especially from reality television) to extend the possible ways in which the self is presented to an audience. By doing this, I found that many viewers follow the stars across platforms and appearances and therefore following these virtual pathways

become an important tool in understanding this perpetually changing online and televisual landscape.

Indeed, I will discuss how the Kardashians demonstrate their work and worth in popular culture as, I argue, the sisters have been the pioneers of turning their selves and their whole lives into work. Through this process, they utilise their platforms to transform all aspects of their private lives – their thoughts, their relationships, and emotional states – into avenues for financial profit. In this chapter, I will focus on two aspects of the self-work that represent the process of workitisation in popular culture well: firstly, I will look at the function of the kind of body work performed by the sisters to 'keep up' with the ideals of womanhood and femininity. I will provide examples using the sisters Kim, Khloé, and Kylie in particular, who have all used their bodies to display their hard-work and commitment to financial success. I will also include audience responses to the sisters' stress on body work. Secondly, I will explore the emotional work and self-analysis required in the current cultural imaginary, influenced, as I will argue, by psychoanalytic discourse and the so-called 'affective turn'. In this sense, I explore how women, in particular, are not only required to work on their bodies but their psychic lives are equally important as an aspect of their capital. In this section, the focus is on Khloé's reactions to the highly publicised news of her partner Tristan 'hooking up' with a family friend on KUWTK. I am especially interested in how the display of emotional work is employed to frame particular business ventures, a strategy presented as a 'safe' and lucrative way for financial gain. Furthermore, I look at how some social media users responded to the news of the 'scandal' and Khloé's subsequent reaction.

However, in the following section, I will begin by exploring the concept of work as it stands and how various socio-cultural and technological developments have contributed to the process of workitisation.

The Changing Meanings of 'Work'

In the last few decades there has been a definite shift in the ways that work functions. And in recent years what is, and can be, defined as 'work' or 'labour' has become less established and fixed. Indeed, with the arrival of Web 2.0/social media and smartphone devices, leisure and working are often intertwined. Particularly as an individual's online presence and presentation of their private life frequently become an extension of their

professional self (and a way to monetise this online presence). For instance, as an academic I am encouraged to set up a Twitter account or create a blog to market my self and my work, hence it is assumed that sharing the personal is profitable (both for the worker and the employer). This points to a kind of 'workitisation' of everyday life in which work has come to subsume large aspects of what previously has not been deemed work, i.e. quotidian tasks and what falls outside 'office hours'. Therefore, the changes to how work functions have shifted "from a materiality of labor and product, and specialization of function, to forms of production that are discursive, or symbolic, and highly integrated" (Casey, 1995, p. 2). As such, to define the fuzzy contours of the concept of work and the roles it plays in terms of self-formation in the twenty-first century is a Sisyphean task. Such a task is not the objective here but, in the next sections, I am interested in exploring how the neoliberal cultural present has influenced the ways in which the ideas of work and *working* are conceptualised.

For centuries people have forged their identities and been defined by what they do for a living to various degrees, so this is certainly not a novel phenomenon. In the following paragraphs I will briefly examine the history of work, particularly following Catherine Casey and her book *Work, Self and Society* (1995). In her book, Casey underscores that:

> Recognizing people by what they do, and naming them accordingly (cooper, weaver, tailor, chandler and so forth), occurred well before the industrial revolution, and was particularly commonplace in medieval cities. But the social identification of persons primarily with their place in the economic sphere became more typically characteristic of modern industrial societies.
>
> (1995, p. 21)

Furthermore, the Western modern notion of work might be traced back to the early Judeo-Christian tradition, in which "labor was regarded as a 'blessing' or 'joy' of life" (ibid., p. 26).[157] Hard work thus became a symbol for virtue, goodness, and even a 'calling'; a

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[157] However, this was not always the case, as in Ancient Greece, for instance, "all work was considered the domain of slaves and women. It was viewed as painful drudgery that debased the mind and made man unfit for the practice of virtue" (Casey, 1995, p. 26).

notion that was further entrenched by the Protestant Reformation. Of course, there has always been an ambivalence of work/labour and this is still the case, especially in the Western context focused on here.[158]

Nevertheless, the ultimate "convergence of work and virtue (through methodical adherence to one's 'calling') and the establishment of a dominant Protestant work ethic set in place a type of citizen-worker that would subsequently come to typify modern citizenship and undergird modern forms of social organization" (ibid., p. 28). It is these notions of work that have come to prevail in the socio-cultural present, following the developments of capitalism, economic liberalism, and later, neoliberalism. As explored in previous chapters, with the latter ideology especially, came the ideas that human life must adapt to economic interests and the free market, often resulting in a greater personal sacrifice of individuals' private lives and time. We have indeed seen this in the previous two chapters with the rise of self-branding, personal sacrifice, and trust in competitive market forces. Couldry writes, "[i]n the contemporary neoliberal economy workers are facing (under the guise of expanded 'freedom' – the freedom to 'keep in touch' with work!) the last stage of the reorganization of labor-time" (2008, p. 6). Of course, technological advancements such as smartphones have contributed to many workers 'taking their work home',[159] but they have also created new opportunities to make money for corporations and businesses, as well as individual workers, that have further changed many of the demands of worker-citizens. These new demands often build on the traditional (Judeo-Christian) ideals of work as 'a calling' as well as the alignment of self to market interests, as discussed in terms of the self/brand in Chapter Three. Yet, moving further into the process of workitisation, the self is not merely a brand but ideally aligned with one's profession until the two become extensions of *work* in general. Further, one's work and one's relationship to it, is consequently idealised and described in positive, affective terms. Indeed, Couldry (2008, p. 6) writes:

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[158] Casey further describes various changes to the notions of labour: "With the rise of philosophy and political theory a distinction emerged between contemplation and activity, and a tradition of distinction between labor was instituted" (1995, p. 27). These distinctions were further elaborated by thinkers such as Adam Smith and Karl Marx, and Marx in particular, suggested that "human labor possesses an inherent productivity on its own…[producing] life, and therefore all labouring is productive…[Thus, for Marx] productive labor is the human being's essential activity and the main source of human self-development and fulfilment" (ibid., p. 27).

[159] As much work, at least administrative tasks (emails, phone calls, scheduling etc.), can be completed remotely.

> Willing submission to the *total* appropriation of one's living-time by an employer is impossible without self-denial, so its impossibility must *itself* be denied through the public expression – for others to see and hear – of 'passion': the performance of expressive attachment to whatever are the goals of one's employer [or market interests]…[Therefore, p]assion becomes a *necessity* in the neoliberal workplace because its work of denial erases contradictions and legitimates the extended appropriation of the worker's time.
>
> (emphasis in original)

Indeed, talking of work, not only as a means of financial security and socio-economic duty, but rather as an extension of one's self and a source for happiness and personal fulfilment is customary.

Meanwhile, the changes to work in the cultural imagination have been coupled with an increase in social and economic precarity, particularly after the most recent financial crisis (Nau and Soener, 2017).[160] Various terms have surfaced to characterise the myriad developments emerging from the digital economy, such as "gig economy" (Taylor, et al., 2017), "platform economy" (Garben, 2019; Kenney and Zysman, 2016), or "sharing economy" (Frenken and Schor, 2017).[161] These terms (broadly speaking) define the work that is organised around various digital platforms and mobile apps in which short-term, freelance jobs can be matched with flexible, independent workers, whose work or creativity is sold to consumers. Companies using these strategies include, Uber, Deliveroo, AirBnB, Upwork, Etsy, etc., and the many social media platforms such as Instagram, Youtube, Snapchat, and Twitter, should also be included in these definitions (as these platforms are used as marketing and financial match-making outlets in the same manner). Indeed, apart from contributing to precarious work, Sacha Garben (2019) highlights, that:

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[160] Of course, the roots of such precariousness are very dependent on the specific context of the countries in question (see Lee and Kofman, 2012), yet this argument is particularly relevant to the North American context, as well as the Western European.

[161] Some of these terms have been in use for some time. For instance, "gig economy" was already used in 2009, during the height of the financial crisis to describe the increase in the use of non-standard forms of employment and work: casual work, on-call work, temporary agency work, informal work and dependant self-employment" (Garben, 2019).

> …it appears that the online-platform economy is growing 'for the wrong reasons' – not to deliver new, innovative and better-quality service for the benefit of customers and with the side-effect of quality employment opportunities, but as 'unfair competition' undercutting existing industry operators. The profit generated on the back of the individual worker's wellbeing and the welfare state's sustainability.[162]

This precariousness – without a social safety net and employment rights (especially in the North American context) – has also resulted in a more competitive workforce with a stress on meritocracy and the (often false) promises of hard work (see Chapter Four), as well as a culture saturated with individuals creating bite-sized, saleable version of themselves – self/brands – for profit (see discussion of Bethenny Frankel in Chapter Three).

Yet, there is also a third feature of this late capitalist socio-economic milieu, which brings competition and self-branding together; namely the idea of *self-work*, explored in this chapter. Here, I will use the term self-work to denote the notion that simply *performing* oneself (for an audience) can offer financial reward and fame, seemingly demonstrating areas in which a kind of 'workitisation' has been realised. As such, I use self-work to both indicate the work performed on the self, but also the notion that simply having a self requires work. Arguably, the growing difficulties of finding secure work in the 'real' world as well as the notion that work should be a 'passion project', has made the possibility of working and making money on one's own terms (meritocratically) seem highly attractive, especially on social media or reality television. As mentioned, in this digital economy, the incorporation of social media and other digital platforms in daily life has subsequently given rise to new types of workers. These workers try to capitalise on their personal lives, with full public access, in the hope to reap some financial benefits (particularly through what is frequently called 'spon con' or sponsored content) from the comfort of their own homes.

Brooke Erin Duffy has conducted ethnographic research on (mainly female) social media workers, who perform this kind of 'voluntary' hard work with the only payment being promises of 'exposure' and 'visibility', such as future sponsorships. This

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[162] An example of this is the rift caused between the ride service/sharing company Uber and more traditional taxi companies, as Uber drivers have been able to undercut other taxi drivers. Further, Uber recently lost their appeal against an employment ruling that grants their workers access to minimum wage and other worker's rights in the UK (Butler, 2018).

type of work is what Duffy terms “aspirational labour” (2017, p. x). Additionally, such work can be compared to the workers in the reality television industry – both in front and behind camera – who are often non-unionised and even unpaid (ANTM being a prime example). Duffy notes: “These [workers], I came to realize, were motivated by the wider culture’s siren call to *get paid to do what you love.* But what they experienced often fell short of the promise: only a few young women rise above the din to achieve major success” (ibid., emphasis in original). Indeed, this ‘siren call’ appears, as Duffy highlights, to be partly advanced by the women who *have* seen huge success (like all five Kardashian Jenner sisters), who then become the benchmark for what is deemed possible. Despite the fact that such success can only be claimed by an exceedingly privileged and small group of women (middle- and upper-class women with the right cultural capital and aspirations). These women have successfully woven their public and private lives together, becoming, to again quote Bethenny Frankel, “CEOs of their own lives” (see Chapter Three). Visiting Kim Kardashian and her sister Kylie Jenner’s Instagram accounts offers an amalgamation of images of Kim’s shapewear Skims, KKW (Kim Kardashian West) perfume, and Kylie Cosmetics products (respectively), alongside photos of their children, family holidays, and birthday celebrations. Subsequently selling their lives, products, and very selves; all at once and side by side (See Figure 18).[163]

[163] Kim, Khloe, and Kourtney Kardashian and Kendall and Kyle Jenner are all in the top twenty-one most followed people on Instagram, with Kim at the forefront with 147 million followers (September 2019. Followers in this social media context, of course, mean an audience to market one’s own and other’s products, as well as one’s self-brand. Subsequently, these social outlets become highly lucrative business opportunities.

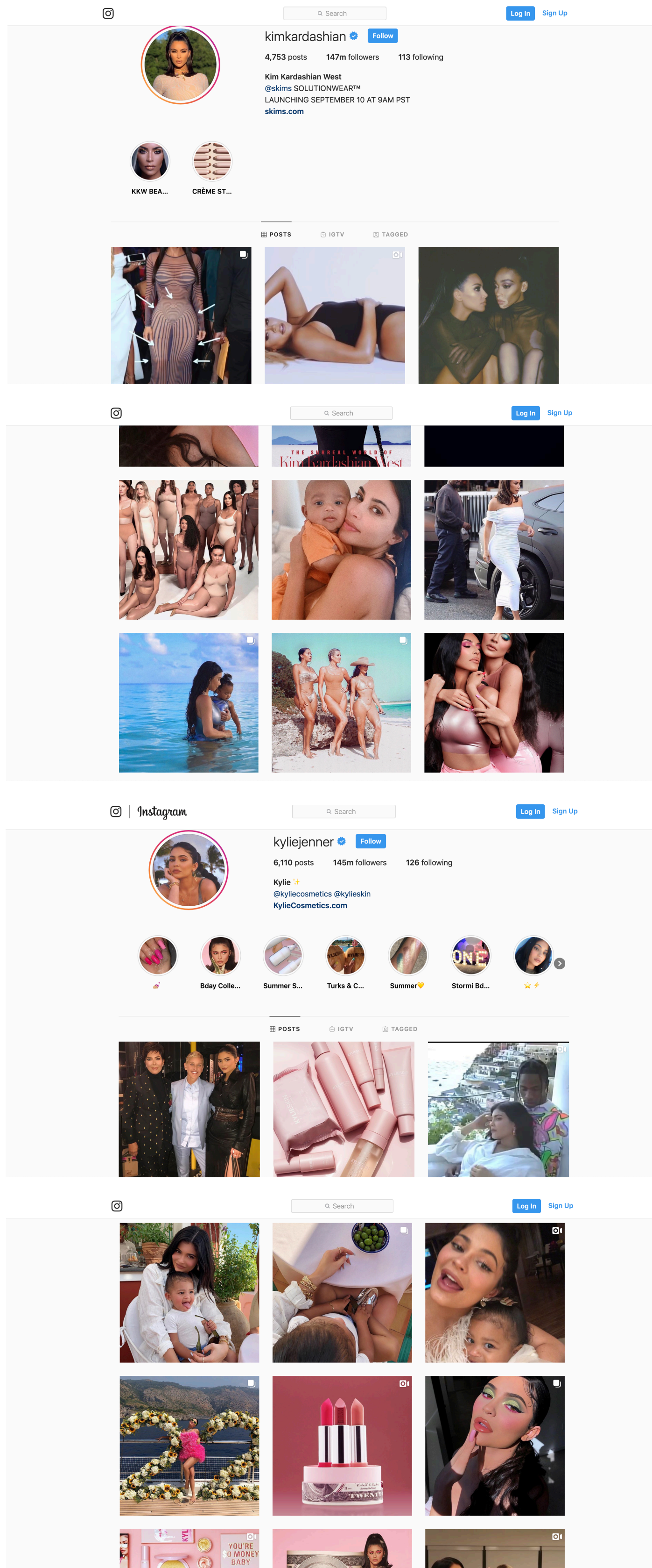

Figure 18. The front pages of Kim Kardashian West and Kylie Jenner's Instagram accounts as well as screenshots of their 'feeds'(Accessed 10 September 2019).

Reading the comments under these posts, the audience responses are varied but often engaged and passionate, with one single celebrity post receiving around one million (or sometimes a lot more) 'likes' and thousands of comments. Many of these comments are merely so-called 'spam' or emojis (both positive – in the form of hearts, lips, or smiling faces – and negative – often angry faces or 'throwing up' emojis). And other commentators write simple lines such as "so hot", "So proud of you", or the more critical "Y'all look stupid" (anonymised users, 11-12 September 2019). Yet, many also leave longer comments, often demonstrating their familiarity and even intimacy with the family. One fan writes on Kim's family holiday photograph:

> "Blessed 🙌🏼🙌🏼🙌🏼🙌🏼 Thank you for sharing your beautiful family with us. Unlike some celebs, you freely and regularly post a vast variety of photos of all of your children. Myself, like millions, enjoy seeing your daily posts. It's an honor [to] see photos of your adorable children's growth over the years. God bless.❤️" (25 August 2019).

This commentator encapsulates much of the sentiment expressed on the women's social media accounts demonstrating the audiences' desire to get more and more insight into the most personal aspects of the women's lives. Similarly, another follower comments on Kylie's image of herself and her daughter Stormi:

> "Wow I feel the love from watching [you]. I would love to meet your family. Lol I feel like I know you guys from watching all of you guys' show and grow and be so successful 👍 proud of you and I love your makeup collection 💯 Once I get situated I'll order" (9 September 2019).

This comment illustrates the interconnection between the sharing of the personal – of family members, everyday life – with the public – the product placements, advertisements, and branding. The differentiation between the spheres is in this sense removed as the *work* and monetary success for these women require a combination of the personal and professional. In this sense, it appears that the inclusion of private moments

keeps social media followers interested whilst simultaneously allowing for more posts of the Kardashians' business ventures and exposure for their interconnected brands.

It is noteworthy that the majority of these workers, often termed 'influencers', are women.[164] Importantly, as Duffy contends: "the labor of aspiration has conceptual similarities to traditional forms of 'women's work' (domestic labor, reproductive labor, care labor), which have remained invisible despite their central role in servicing the engines of capitalism" (2017, p. 9). In broader terms, the new influencer work is decidedly feminised and can be (and should be) likened to the traditional roles of women in the home, as it is frequently divorced from what has been known as the public sphere. Even if the influencer women on social media, are in public spaces in their visual content, these social media spaces (at least the most financially successful) are often concerned with stereotypically feminine products and subjects (i.e. within the private realm), such as makeup, motherhood, reproduction, fitness, and fashion. This appears like a form of 'safe female entrepreneurialism' (further explored below), where women take opportunities, or have the option, to create 'success' in traditionally feminine areas/concerns. Despite the fact that this work is highly visible (unlike many other forms of 'women's work'), this kind of 'female empowerment' seems akin to the power feminist and postfeminist discourse of the last decades that creates successful brands but does very little to change structural inequalities, habitually erasing class in the process.

Whilst new ideal female workers have emerged, there has in the last decade also been a marked *overall* "feminization of work in contemporary capitalism" (Jarrett, 2014, p. 15). Indeed, this is a 'trend' reflective of the 'affective' and 'emotional' turn in Western culture, which has arguably been influenced by the commercialisation of the various strands and snippets of therapeutic discourse – an entanglement of the ideas brought forth by psychoanalysis, positive psychology, happiness studies, and other popularised psy disciplines (discussed later in this chapter). Due to the (to various extents) neoliberalisation of the workforce, the "precariousness, mobility and fragmentation become constituent elements of the work of all persons irrespective of gender" (Morini, 2007, p. 41).

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[164] The term 'influencer' denotes the social media worker as successful in their ability to influence their viewers/consumers. This usually entails marketing certain products or selling a lifestyle that in various ways can be achieved through the purchase of the items or products advertised on social media (either overtly or carefully placed within the photograph/video).

Furthermore, Cristina Morini suggests that "[t]he model advanced [for this neoliberal workforce] is pliable, hyper-flexible and in this sense, it draws on the *baggage of female experience*" (2007, p. 41, emphasis in original). Likewise, Ouellette argues, that "[w]hat has long been demanded of women – to be adaptable, flexible, desirable, presentable, and consumable – has been intensified and extended to the entire post-industrial workforce" (2012, p. 173, see also, Swan, 2010). Indeed, due to the 'double subjugation' of women (under both patriarchy and neoliberalism) discussed, while all work (regardless of the workers' gender) has been affected by this 'feminization', the performance of womanhood/femininity requires *more* work. Julie Wilson explains this especially well: "In the postfeminist, neoliberal milieu women must perform as self-entrepreneurial, self-promotional workers on equal footing with their male colleagues yet still be invested in and appear willing to perform traditional gender roles" (2010, p. 34).[165] Therefore, the self and our presentations of it; "how we look, how we sound, how we use our emotions and bodies has become part of how business is done" (Swan, 2010, p. 22). As these new ways of working become standard practice, it is worth asking where this stress on hypervisibility and self-presentation emerge and become normalised. This will be explored in the next section.

The Work of Being Watched: From Reality Television to Social Media

Arguably, one of the main reasons for the changes of our understanding of work (as outlined above) can be found in the world of reality television. With the genre's insistence on showing 'reality' as well as individuals' 'true' selves as glimpsed through the (often) staged settings, "'reality' television represents the successful marshalling of the intimate sphere into the public realm for commercialisation" (Wood, Skeggs, and Thumim, 2008, p. 11). Indeed, before social media, reality television was also (and still is) a space for viewers to observe and peer into the lives, events and relationships, of non-actors. Furthermore, as Hearn finds in her study of the reality show *The Hills* (2006-2010), cast members "are showing viewers how to successfully 'live' on camera in a way that reflects and promotes the values of consumption and image savvy now dominant in the

[165] Again, this is even further complicated for individuals that fall outside of this very binary system and theorem.

west…they are promotional objects for the ostensibly labour-free world of the attention economy" (2010, p. 67). In many ways the genre opened up a possible route to fame and success for seemingly 'regular' people, pointing to a democratisation of celebrity (see also discussion in Williamson, 2016). Therefore, presenting the potential rewards of revealing oneself to camera.

In 2004, prior to the boom of social media usage, Andrejevic described reality television as demonstrating "the work of being watched", i.e. "a form of production wherein consumers are invited to sell access to their personal lives in a way not dissimilar to that in which they sell their labor power" (p. 6). Even earlier, Kilborn – writing on the British docu-series *Video Diaries* (1990-1996)[166] – suggests that offering people to film themselves for the public, "brings us that much closer to realizing the Brechtian aspiration that communication technology should one day be able to transform the passive individual consumer of mass media messages into an active and creative producer/consumer" (1994, p. 437). Of course, both Kilborn's thesis and Andrejevic's 'work of being watched' in reality programming sound exceedingly similar to the use of social media today, in which posting images, interests, and personal opinions, become a way to present one's self.[167] And where having no social media presence might even be regarded with suspicion, which points to the importance of revealing one's self to others. Indeed, as Hearn argues, "with the rise of social media, the processes of self-branding and self-promotion entrenched and formalized by reality television have intensified as they have spread across the population at large"; celebrities and 'ordinary' people alike (2016, p. 12). In many ways then, reality television has helped to normalise the presentation of a private self for public consumption.

The new forms of work of presenting one's life to camera, emerging from reality television (and then social media) might be unsurprising since the TV genre, as Hendershot notes, "is obsessively focused on labor. Indeed, it seems that there is no human activity that cannot be turned into labor on a reality show" (2009, p. 244). Hendershot continues:

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[166] *Video Diaries*' producers gave a few members of the public camcorders to film themselves and their lives for the television programme.
[167] Further, Andrejevic (2004) argues that reality programming has created a milieu in which ordinary people are accustomed to surveillance and being watched.

> [T]he vast majority of reality TV focuses on some way on work. Often work is redefined as 'competition' [as explored in the previous chapter], but the hoops one has to jump through to succeed on competitive reality shows are laborious. Work is work. Play is work. Banter is work. Sex is work.
>
> (2009, p. 245)

As we have seen in the previous two chapters, cast members are indeed expected to take advantage of their visibility (the work of being simply watched) and turn it into a way to make money that goes beyond the realm of the reality programme. Indeed, no other reality television (and social media) celebrities have demonstrated the possibilities of turning one's own existence into work, as well as the Kardashian-Jenner clan.

The Kardashian Family

The Kardashians[168] have been a part of this changing work environment and their fame has in many ways followed the proliferation of reality television as well as the intertwined use of social media. Or as Kim Kardashian herself notes in an interview for *The Cut:* "I have always felt that with my show starting off on regular television and then transcending into the social-media world, it was the perfect magic of old-school media with new-school media all happening at the same time" (Van Meter, 2019). Further, Louise, a participant in the focus group discussions of Chapter Four notes, "I don't even follow any of the Kardashians on Instagram or watch the show [KUWTK] but I still feel like I know what they're doing anyway" (2019). As Abidin writes:

> [T]he Kardashian-Jenners profit from social media through sponsored advertisements; they use the internet to promote their cosmetic and fashion brands and selectively post self-branded content to catch their followers' attention in a feedback loop that channels viewership back to their traditional media estates.

[168] Including Kris Jenner and her daughters Kendall and Kylie Jenner.

(2018, p. 17)

Indeed, in this way, they successfully appear *omnipresent*, creating a feedback loop of profit from media saturation. Their iniquitousness has also resulted in their name frequently being used as a shorthand to describe contemporary popular culture, or even the global West at large, particularly to point to its conceitedness or even to its demise. Furthermore, as mentioned, due to this omnipresence, this chapter will follow not only the KUWTK show, but also the family's paratextual appearances on social media, talk shows, in magazines, and so forth, to capture the significance of the family to contemporary popular culture and their followers.

To understand the Kardashians' rise to fame I will offer a brief overview of their personal (and public) history. The family was initially formed with the marriage of defence attorney Robert Kardashian and flight attendant Kristen 'Kris' Jenner (née Houghton) who had four children together before their divorce in 1991; Kourtney, Kim, Khloé, and Rob. In 1991, Kris married Bruce Jenner (who after her transition in 2015 is known as Caitlyn Jenner), with whom she has two children: Kendall and Kylie Jenner. Robert Kardashian's name gained notoriety during the highly publicised O.J. Simpson trial in which he was a part of Simpson's legal defence team. Subsequently, the Kardashian name was known before his daughters rose to fame (after his death in 2003). Yet, in the mid-2000s, Kim Kardashian began to spend time with various socialites, for instance, working as 'IT-girl' Paris Hilton and actor Lindsey Lohan's stylist for a few years, even appearing on Hilton's reality TV show *The Simple Life* (2003-2007) on few occasions. Kourtney also made a reality television appearance on *Filthy Rich: Cattle Drive* (2005) that followed wealthy celebrity children on a cattle ranch. However, it was not until 2007, with the leaking of Kim and her previous boyfriend Ray J's private sex tape that the media began to follow Kim with closer interest (adult entertainment company Vivid entertainment bought the rights for the tape and released it as *Kim Kardashian, Superstar* the same year) (Cashmore, 2019). Arguably, it was due to the sex tape 'scandal' that the family was able to get their own television show on E!, KUWTK in 2007. The show has had a host of executive producers including Ryan Seacrest (also the show's creator, known for hosting *American Idol*), Kris Jenner, and later Kourtney, Kim, and Khloé Kardashian themselves. During a recent appearance on a talk show, Kim explains why the family decided to allow cameras into their home:

> Everyone around used to say like 'OMG, your family is so crazy, if people only saw this…no sitcom writer could write this reality', like no one would believe it…We love to share what we're really going through and we've found that it's been really helpful for other people who've been dealing with something similar, and we love being so open about it all.[169]
>
> (The Tonight Show starring Jimmy Fallon, 2019)

Indeed, across the Kardashians' social media accounts there are comments and discussions between followers who express gratitude for the family's ultimate normalisation of certain topics in public, especially Caitlyn's transition and Kim and Khloé's fertility struggles. However, many of these same subject-matters are also ridiculed or criticised in equal measure.[170] For instance, one fan comments on a photograph of Kim and her youngest son Psalm (conceived through surrogacy):

> I am literally sitting in a hotel in Georgia waiting for our surrogate to go into labor. Your story last night [on KUWTK] (and all through your journey to mommyhood) is incredible and beautiful! I am so grateful for you helping to normalize surrogacy and help take away the stigma and shame surrounding it. Love love love you!!!!! Thank you! (26 August 2019).

Again, as discussed in Chapter Three, the social media forums of these famous individuals, frequently become spaces in which viewers can share and 'work through' their own personal experiences and attitudes toward certain topics. Indeed, the Kardashian women's following often share personal experiences both with the stars themselves (addressing them directly in comments in often intimate ways) and each other. As such, even these more commonplace spaces of online convergence become opportunities for viewers to discuss what they see on screen (whether on television, a computer, or a smartphone).

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[169] Kim particularly points to the very public transition of Kris Jenner's former husband, Caitlyn Jenner (neé Bruce Jenner) that was featured on the show, along with the family's reactions to it.
[170] Whether this normalisation is good or bad is subjective of course, but on social media several followers express concern for the possible normalisation of plastic surgery and other beauty ideals, especially for young female fans.

The KUWTK docu-soap,[171] here a kind of reality family sitcom, described by Kim as a "modern day *Brady Bunch* with a twist" (Managing Mom, 2007), is also the longest running reality TV show of its kind (2007-present), which demonstrates the long-lasting viewer interest in Kim Kardashian and her siblings.[172] [173] This is noteworthy as Kim, initially the most famous of the siblings, has been accused of simply being known for being famous without any discernible talent. In 2007-2008 when the television show appeared on screen, there were some media confusion around Kim's fame, calling her a "buxom noncelebrity" (Horgen, 2008); Paris's BFF [best friend forever] (TMZ, 2007), and "the biggest ass in Hollywood" (TMZ, 2008). Indeed, these sentiments have lasted to the present day (2019), especially in the comment sections of the sisters' social media platforms, particularly as the work of the Kardashians is either dismissed as non-work, or simply rendered invisible. Whilst the work of appearing on social media and television has become more accepted in public discourse (justified by the possibilities of financial profit), Kim Kardashian and her family are still frequently mocked. For instance, in 2012 actor Jon Hamm publicly declared: "Whether it's Paris Hilton or Kim Kardashian or whoever, stupidity is certainly celebrated…Being a fucking idiot is a valuable commodity in this culture" (quoted in Cashmore, 2019, p. 106). Therefore, there does seem to be a backlash towards any celebrity who has not gained access to their celebrity status through the traditional routes of working in Hollywood, e.g. by acting in films or on television, hosting talk shows, and so forth (see also Holmes and Negra, 2011, who explore the specific anxieties around female celebrity). Boileau notes: "Where fame's core was once linked to talent and achievement, has now transitioned towards the capitalist undertones of the entertainment industry where fame correlates with brand power" (2017, p. 6). However, it is this notion of Kim Kardashian's work, as without merit and talent, that seems both outdated and increasingly unwarranted. Instead, as mentioned, the notion of 'work' has changed, which does not point to people working less nor lacking talent. As

[171] The docu-soap subgenre of reality television is described in Chapter Three.

[172] Along with the various spin-off series featuring cast members, including *Kourtney and Kim Take Miami* (2009-2013), *Kourtney and Kim Take New York* (2011-2012), *Khloé and Lamar* (2011-2012), *Kourtney and Khloé Take The Hamptons* (2014-2015), *Dash Dolls* (2015), *Rob and Chyna* (2016), and *Life of Kylie* (2017).

[173] Furthermore, the show was possibly inspired by *An American Family* (1973), which is considered to be the first 'reality' TV programme on American television, and later, *The Osbournes* (2002-2005) that follows singer of Black Sabbath Ozzy's famous family. KUWTK has also been followed by other successful reality television family shows, such as *Duck Dynasty* (2012-2017) and *Chrisley Knows Best* (2014-).

Amanda Fortini (2014) writes in a famous *Paper* interview with Kim Kardashian, Kim's "perceived lack of accomplishment is also, perhaps, an accomplishment in itself."

The Kardashians' main achievement thus appears to be their ability to make money on simply 'being themselves', to the extent that their mere *existence* in most settings can be marked as 'work'. Each episode, throughout the seasons, usually follows one, or several, story arcs, revolving around the different family members and their relationships or personal events. These arcs usually adhere to a rather stereotypical dramatic arc, with a background story, a problem which reaches its climax, and a final resolution that resolves any tension between cast/family members. These narratives, typically for the genre, are interspersed with 'talking head' or interview segments in which the cast comment on the narrative directly to camera and the audience. In these interview segments, along with extratextual interviews and appearances, the Kardashians frequently remind the viewers that they have (perhaps unlike other reality TV stars) chosen to be transparent about *all* aspects of their lives (with some exceptions as I will mention below). This has of course also resulted in viewers frequently expecting or even demanding to know intimate details of the family's lives, as became very clear through my netnographic study of their various media platforms. Kim, in particular, frequently declares that it is their 'job' to share every event in their lives. In a Skype interview with Brown University students (featured on KUWTK), Kim and Kourtney are asked why they believe they are "such polarising figures" in mainstream media, to which Kim replies:

> I think we've gone through every crazy thing that you could possibly imagine, and we've *shared* that. I think that people can relate to that, whether they want us to win or not. I mean it's so funny to me that there are people that are so bothered…like, I get it, if it's not your thing, like, it's not your thing…but change the channel or whatever.
>
> (The Betrayal, 2018)

The emphasis here is that Kim has done her work of sharing her personal life, and then it is up to the viewers/consumers to do what they will with the product (her filmed life). In other episodes it is hinted that the family members, unsurprisingly, have all signed contracts that outline when and where the filming of their lives will take place, and thus their work involves recording any events that might be happening during these contracted

times. Khloé even argues that “something that I’m super grateful about, is that the show basically documents all of these great moments in time and that we’re gonna have kinda really expensive well-produced home videos” (The Betrayal, 2018). Indeed, the notion of KUWTK as a ‘home video’ is perpetually reinforced by the production. For instance, during important life events, such as Khloe’s wedding (The Wedding, 2009) or the birth of a child, the family members often use the interview segments to congratulate each other, speaking into the camera, which creates a feeling of intimacy for audiences who are firstly, invited to watch such important events, and secondly, they are given the impression that the family members will watch the footage in the same way that *they* are. This air of intimacy and familiarity with the Kardashians is further reinforced by the recurrent inclusion of actual home video footage from the 1980s and 1990s of the Kardashian siblings, as well as their parents, Kris Jenner, the late Robert Kardashian, and Caitlyn Jenner. Similarly, such intimate moments are shared on social media, interspersed amongst promotional and product placement posts (See Figure 19). The sharing of such private moments subsequently further the notion of the *reality* and the authenticity of the lives presented on screen, as well as hinting at viewers’ desire for such intimacy. On the below “happy birthday Bobby boy” post by Kendall Jenner, many fans chime in to wish Rob a happy birthday or to comment on how similar they all look or how their appearances might have changed since the photograph was taken. Such comments show the perceived personal relationship between follower and star, which, as discussed in Chapter Three, is crucial for creating an authentic self/brand. At the same time, such posts offer affective ways in which to consume the stars’ lives and work (I will discuss the use of emotion/affect in work below).

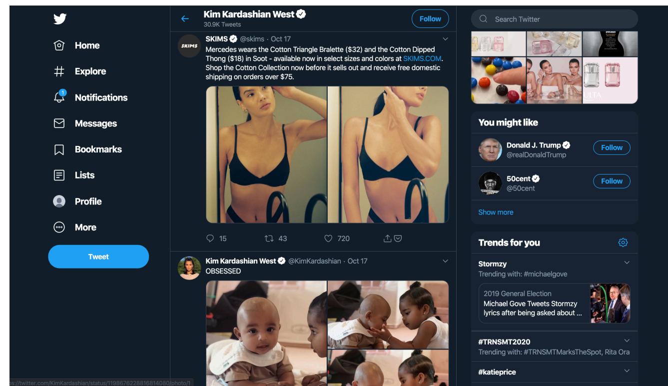

Figure 19. The fist screenshot is an Instagram post by Kendall Jenner, showing Rob, Kourtney, Kendall, and Kylie happily posing for a picture years before Instagram existed (17 March 2016). The second figure shows a screenshot of Kim Kardashian's Twitter page, in which she has shared pictures of two of her children alongside a promotional post of her shapewear (17 October 2019).

Yet, whilst as previously argued, reality television has centred around bringing the private into the public, in the earlier seasons there is still a distinction between the Kardashians' private lives and selves versus their work. Kim, especially, is purposely shown working hard in the more traditional sense of work in that it takes place in the 'public sphere' – during photoshoots, ad campaigns, event hosting – and the filming of KUWTK simply fits around this 'real' work. The first ten seasons, therefore, focus on attempting to legitimise Kim, Kourtney, Khloé and the rest of the family as deserving of their fame. For instance, in one episode, Kris scolds Kim for committing to making a Las Vegas club appearance on her birthday, as she believes Kim is taking on "too much" work (Blame it on the Alcohol, 2010). Kris tells Kim: "you work 364 days a year, it's like a bit much." In the talking head segment, Kris explains: "Kim has been working so hard 24 hours a day, 365 days a year," followed by a montage of footage of Kim rushing to get ready for various flights, posing on different photoshoots (by which product placements are included on KUWTK), and during various appearances (See Figure 20).

Figure 20. Screenshots of Kim's hard work and working commitments in Blame it on the Alcohol (2010).

In the next scene Kim stresses to her 'momager' (mother/manager) how important it is for her to honour her business promises, as if to demonstrate to viewers her commitment to her work and proof that she, and her mother, work exceedingly hard (and are thus deserving of their celebrity status). Yet, the filming of KUWTK and the (over)sharing of the Kardashians' private lives are still not presented as legitimate work, despite the family's involvement in the production, product placements, and the assumable money made on such work.

However, later and perhaps parallel to the increase of social media use,[174] there is a shift of how work is presented on KUWTK, by which the filming of the programme is explicitly referred to as work. Indeed, in the first half of the show's existence there was a more 'documentarian' approach to the filming of the show's events, with a kind of fourth wall in which viewers were invited to peer into snippets of the Kardashians' humorous relationships and lives. This was also reflected by the KUWTK title sequence (see Figure

[174] Especially Instagram, as a visual social media forum, which Kim Kardashian joined in 2012.

21), in which the family members push each other around jokingly with a happy, whistled melody in the background. Further, the typeface is reminiscent of some well-known, wholesome North American family sitcoms, such as *The Brady Bunch* (1969-1974)[175] and *Full House* (1987-1995), to arguably set the jovial tone of the series by these potential comparisons (See Figure 22).

Figure 21. Title sequence used in seasons 1-10 with some variations.

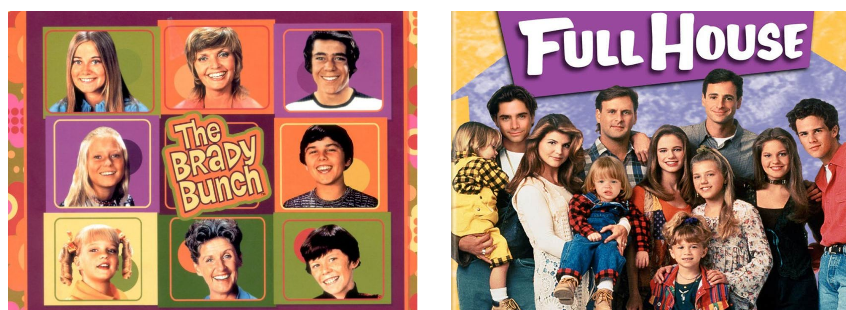

Figure 22. The colourful typefaces and imagery of *The Brady Bunch* (Griffin, 2019) and *Full House* (Shepherd, 2015).

However, from season eleven onwards, the tone of the title sequences shifts and becomes more serious; mirroring the ways in which the show has become an extension of the cast members' self/brands, rather than being centred around the more collective, comedic family events, along with the more frequent inclusions of product placements and marketing collaborations. Indeed, this shift also mirrors the changing nature of work, which stresses the individual self as well as the presentation of this self *working*, pointing to change in which work has also become a personal responsibility and has therefore become a more serious matter. These new title sequences are markedly sleeker, less colourful, with a mixture of seemingly candid photos and more stylised photoshoots (See Figure 23). Also note the first photograph in fragments, that seems to place the

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[175] As noted, Kim also refers to the *Brady Bunch* directly when describing KUWTK.

Kardashian-Jenner women in the same context, but ultimately as separate fragments. No longer is the family solely presented as a collective entity but rather the individual women are separated to emphasise their individual self/brands.

Figure 23. KUWTK title sequences. The top two screenshots are from seasons 11-13, and the bottom two are from season 14-present.

With the new style title sequences, came frequent inclusions of the sisters' social media posts and videos on KUWTK, usually filming the sisters taking selfies or documenting their lives on Instagram or Snapchat, and then inserting these real posts into the frame of the show. Indeed, these inclusions are similar to the home video footage inserted in earlier seasons, yet the new 'home videos' are happening concurrently and continuously with the show and also encourage viewers to follow their lives on all platforms to not miss any aspect of their presented selves. There is therefore a marked blurring of the distinction between private and public, obliterating any kind of fourth wall as the reality television series is no longer simply just that, but presented as an extension of their *work of existing* – in which all parts of their selves must be shared. Subsequently, demonstrating a complete workitisation of their lives and selfhoods. The filming and the 'work of being watched' is in these latter seasons directly addressed by the family and talked about *as* work in a different way than previous seasons. Essentially, this reflects the changing definition of work that has occurred on a larger socio-cultural scale, as outlined above. Indeed, in season seventeen, the father of Kourtney's children, Scott, notes that he and

Kourtney are used to having the cameras around and highlights that they have worked with the KUWTK filming crew for ten years, whereas the cameras presence might be "awkward" for others (Three's Company, 2019).[176] Similarly, Kim, in the same episode, suggests that her daughter North can be herself in front of the KUWTK crew but might be uncomfortable if she were to "collaborate" and film with someone else. Thus, both of these examples demonstrate the difference in how the making of KUWTK is described; here, presented as a part of the protagonists' work and lives. Furthermore, the argued comfortability with being filmed both validates the 'authenticity' of the family's behaviour on screen and normalise the sharing of the personal.

As such, KUWTK reflects the ways in which the traditionally distinct spheres of the private and public have become obsolete as the two spheres melt into each other, creating, what Berlant (1997) refers to as an "intimate public sphere" (p. 4). Lauren Berlant (1997) has noted that North American society has transformed into an "intimate public" where "the family sphere is considered the moral, ethical, and political horizon of national and political interest" (p. 262). In this sense, as Todd (2018) notes, "Intimate publics provide an affective frame for being in the world" (p. 21). Thus, whilst the intimate or private succeeds in being political at times, the intimate public chiefly "act[s] as a critical chorus that sees the expression of emotional response and conceptual recalibration as achievement enough" (Berlant, 2008, p. x). This, in turn, makes the ways in which the 'private' self is performed and represented crucial, not only on an individual level, but for society at large. The ways in which the public/private is conceptualised is also fundamental for the intertwined notion of work. As Rottenberg writes, in terms of neoliberalism's financialising consequences:

> …as neoliberal rationality transforms more and more elements of society into enterprises informed by a business model with financialization at its heart, not only do all remaining private-public distinctions collapse but the self (itself) become increasingly indistinguishable from any other kind of business enterprise, which ultimately undermines the very logic upholding the separation between the spheres.

[176] Scott is referring to his girlfriend Sofia Richie who is not yet used to being filmed and has agreed to join Kourtney, Scott, and their children on a filmed family trip to Finland.

(2018, pp. 146-147).[177]

Indeed, this is a similar argument to the one made in Chapter Three on the self/brand, and as explored in this chapter, the changing notion of work has not only muddled the distinction between private/public, but made the spheres symbiotic: in other words, the personal should be regarded as work in the same way as work becomes an extension of the private self in the public sphere.

However, it is of course important to underscore that the Kardashians' appearances on KUWTK, social media, and beyond, are still performances. The reality television show and social media platforms (which also seep into each other) function as stages in which the performers are still somewhat in control, as they take part in the production (unlike the women in RHONY and ANTM for instance). Yet, as argued in Chapter One, as individuals we perform our selves in most contexts in the sense that we do not possess an 'essential' self. We thus, to paraphrase Butler (1990), become the sum of such performances and others' understanding of them. Nevertheless, when the various spaces of our lives (work, family, home, and so forth) coalesce, the distinction between our various self-performances become blurred. In the context of KUWTK, these previously separate spheres are workitised, and therefore the sum of the Kardashians' various performances (i.e. their selves) centre around work and the accumulation of capital. And therefore, due to the sum of their appearances, this is how the ideal notion of the female self is presented, in that the female cast members so frequently speak of their work/lives as a "blessing".

I think it is fundamental here to pinpoint the progressively indistinguishable spaces of private and public (in the various definitions of the words) that are becoming normalised in the current socio-cultural and historical context, and that has contributed to the process of the workitisation of the self. I suggest that there are four factors that are particularly noteworthy for the discussion here: (1) reality television and social media have largely normalised the sharing of exceedingly personal events to the public, and in many instances, such sharing is expected (wherein being 'private' is increasingly regarded with suspicion and contempt). (2) Work is encouraged to be described as a passion and an extension of the self. As such, expressing the opposite sentiment would mean admitting to one's own failure of not 'doing what you love.' (3) Cultural and

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[177] See also Wendy Brown's *Undoing the Demos* (2015).

political content (traditionally seen as separate spheres) frequently overlap, as reality stars become politicians (as mentioned in Chapter Three), Kim Kardashian secures a visit to the White House, and so-called 'light-hearted' reality series like RHONY and KUWTK feature discussions of presidential elections, abortion rights, and prison reform. While factual and personal 'news' are read alongside each other on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, blurring the virtual 'private' and 'public' (further explored in terms of online data in Chapter Three). (4) And the old feminist slogan of 'the personal is political' (as mentioned in Chapter Two),[178] has mutated into something closer to a slogan of the 'personal is profitable' in popular culture, in which sharing one's personal life is used to garner followers and create authentic producer/consumer relationships. Furthermore, as mentioned, there has been a marked feminisation of the whole workforce, in which sharing the personal plays a great part in ensuring one's success.

The blurring of private and public, have equally changed the demands of women, particularly in terms of the notion of women's societal roles and the perception of progress. With the discourse of the feminist waves, women have moved from the private sphere, gained access to the public sphere, frequently required to 'sacrifice' one over the other, until the 'having it all' slogan of postfeminism put forward the ideal of pushing for both. Rottenberg (2018), as discussed in Chapter Two, finds that since 2012 the notion of 'having both' has transmuted into a pop culture feminist, indeed, *neoliberal* feminist, obsession with "a *felicitous* work-family balance" (ibid., p.15, emphasis in original). Drawing on an article by Anne-Marie Slaughter (along with texts by Sheryl Sandberg and Ivanka Trump),[179] Rottenberg writes that "progressive professional women" are in these texts presented as finally being able to "bridge private and public spheres simultaneously *without disavowing or disparaging either one* (ibid., p. 33, emphasis in original). Today, she writes, "well-roundedness and well-being increasingly signify liberation" (ibid., p. 40), and "this is how the 'truly liberated' woman of the twenty-first century is increasingly being construed" (ibid., p. 33).[180] Indeed, the Kardashian women are examples of the new neoliberal feminist subjects that seek happiness in the balance between work and family life, and have successfully done so as they have turned their

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[178] See also Berlant (1997) for the reversal of this slogan to "the political is the personal."

[179] All self-described feminist authors who Rottenberg characterise as central in the emergence of 'neoliberal feminist' sentiments and the discourse of balance.

[180] Of course, the stress on happiness and equilibrium, rather than equality and social justice, inevitably means that the majority of women in society are ignored, "since it does not and cannot take into account the reality of most US [or European] women" (Rottenberg, 2018, p. 41).

personal lives *into* their working lives. The successful workitisation of their existence means that everything is work, including and perhaps especially the self. Further, in this highly visual context of current popular culture texts in which the Kardashians reign supreme – through the popularity of KUWTK and their social media channels – the body and the work performed upon it becomes essential. Particularly as, to quote Weber, "the body stands as the gateway to the self" (2009, p. 5). As such, the Kardashians' physical bodies become both symbols and extensions of their hard work. Indeed, no work is more scrutinised than that performed on and by the female body – the work and performance of femininity. In order to reflect the importance of the body for self-work, the next section will explore the workitisation of the body as the exterior representation of the self, and the ways in which the physical self has transformed through the changing notion of work on KUWTK and Western popular culture on the whole. Of course, there is a long history of conceptualisations and contentions of the female body in feminist thought that, due to the limited scope and space of this analysis I will not be referencing directly. However, here my textual analysis (as well as the scholars I reference) are largely indebted to the seminal feminist texts on the body, for instance: Bordo (1993); Butler [1990] (2001), [1993] (2001); Braidotti (1994); Grosz (1994); Haraway [1985] (2001); Orbach (2009); Wendell (1996); Wolf (1991); Tate (2009), among others.

Body Work

Kim Kardashian arrived in the public and cultural consciousness *body first*. Her sex tape brought her most intimate and private self into the public sphere and thereafter her appearances and photo campaigns have frequently been based around her physique, her likeness, and most famously, her bottom. Indeed, the public's focus on her rear is frequently alluded to on KUWTK, with one episode even centred around Kim proving its 'authenticity' by getting X-rays performed by a doctor to demonstrate the lack of implants (see Figure 24). As she explains, the X-ray is "for the whole world doubting me," arguably suggesting that her physical authenticity legitimates the reality of her self and the hard work she performs on KUWTK (The Former Mrs. Jenner, 2011). Although, as seen in Kim's Instagram comment section, many social media followers are still doubtful of the 'authenticity' of her body or shame her for the way her body looks. One commentator (rather maliciously) asks Kim: "why don't you float on the water with [all

that] silicone in your buttock🤔🤔🤔" (25 August 2019). Such comments demonstrate that for Kim's following and online presence proving the 'realness' of her self is still a central concern for her brand. Yet, in the show, her curvaceous body is explained by her Armenian heritage and consequently, as Genz and Brabon (2018) highlight, her body is "positioned along racial lines that marks [Kim's] body as exotic and 'non-white'" (p. 263).

Figure 24. The screenshot shows Kim taking a photograph in front of her 'butt X-ray' (The Former Mrs. Jenner, 2011).

Figure 25. Kim photographed for *Paper,* photographs which caused quite a stir in the press (Goude, 2014).

Yet, Kim also seems happy to cater for this obsession with her body, as seen in the playful photoshoot for the *Paper Magazine* interview (see Figure 25). However, in this context, unlike the non-consensual release of her sex tape, Kim is in control of the revealing of

her nude body. Nonetheless, her body is sexualised and racialised[181] and she seems to capitalise on a (traditionally) white fetishization of the 'exotic' body. For a longer discussion on Kim's body as racialised, see Sastre (2014) who argues that "the public's fixation on this body part [her bottom], reflects the historic treatment of black bodies in the media" (p. 131). And as Sastre also notes, Kim is "capitalising on her body in ways that most women, black or otherwise, are rarely allowed to" (ibid.). Ultimately, her racial ambiguity is what has offered her more opportunities in that she can arguably utilise her privilege, close proximity to whiteness, as well as utilising 'ethnicity' as an identity marker whenever it fits her purposes (see also the discussion of 'optional ethnicity' in Chapter Four).[182] Nevertheless, the show presents the Kardashians' bodily capitalisation and commodification as both profitable and desirable – ultimately a way to signal women's empowerment to *choose*. As Kim maintains, "I'm all about empowering and uplifting women" (2016, quoted in Cashmore, 2019, p. 28). Although, of course, this is not necessarily how the audiences might decode her 'message', as discussed throughout the audience research in this thesis.

Kim and her sisters' bodies are important as the frequently expressed public disdain for Kim and her family seems to partly be based on their openness and willingness to 'flaunt' their physical attributes, again demonstrating this seepage of the private into the public and vice versa. Drawing on Bourdieu (1984), Grindstaff writes:

> Culturally legitimate bodies reflect the bourgeois aesthetic that privileges restraint, control, distance, and discipline over excess, impulse, and sensuality, and certain bodies – those that defy social norms of proper size, dress, manner, speech, etc. – are by definition in violation of that aesthetic.
>
> (2002, p. 266)

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[181] Kim is of course not black (she has in fact been accused of cultural appropriation and even blackface in various social media posts and photoshoots), yet here the photograph in *Paper* is based on an older photo, also by Goude, portraying a black woman featured in a book (somewhat troublingly) entitled *Jungle Fever* (1981). The white photographer can subsequently be argued to accommodate for this white fascination with the black female body, although in this case, by looking at Kim.

[182] See also Negra's (2001) point about pop star Cher, also of Armenian heritage. Negra describes Cher's body as the "sign of her unstable class and ethnic attributes – the marker of her ability to complicate operative distinctions between white and non-white, and high and low cultural forms" (pp. 165-166), a notion that can easily be applied to Kim Kardashian's fame also.

Indeed, the Kardashian sisters' arrival into popular culture has been characterised by their being 'too much'; represented by their voluptuous figures; large rears, breasts, lips (often deemed 'unnatural'); and their filming of how these bodies are made – their make-up, diets, workouts, and beauty treatments as well as more invasive procedures.

Further, their apparent willingness to show off and capitalise on their bodies arguably contributed to their initial *controversial* celebrity status, as traditionally women's bodies have been the most private of private matters. Of course, this has undoubtedly also furthered much of their public attention. As such, the Kardashians' 'too much-ness' or 'unruliness' can partly be explained by their transgressing the private/public binary, as Grindstaff (2002, p. 267) explains:

> The private is constructed as sacred, inviolable, and exclusive. It is the space of bodily processes, intimate functions, the backstage preparation of self. So, when private matters spill into the public discourse – especially those private matters branded shameful, dirty, or polluting – it is perceived as a moral breech.

However, with the growing workitisation of the private and the increased legitimisation of self-work, what might previously have been perceived as a "moral breech" in Grindstaff's words – is now expected and indeed, works to establish one's entrepreneurialism and impeccable 'work ethic.' In this sense, it appears that the intimate revelations of how an individual has improved their body, simply becomes part of a larger narrative in which self-work is romanticised.[183] Any kind of work performed on the body – here referred to as body work – then illustrates the current cultural idealisation of 'work' that appears to postulate that: "working on the self, is akin to performing one's moral duty," mirroring the ways in which work in general has been traditionally conceptualised, as summarised above (Dubrofsky, 2011, p. 97).

The audience engagements with the presentations of the Kardashians' body work have been varied. For instance, when Kim reposted the *Paper* photo shoot (see Figure 25) on Instagram she received the usual criticism of being fake or famous for doing nothing of value. One follower writes "So disgusting to have to always sell yourself for so much

[183] This sharing of the personal also works to 'authenticate' the self/brand as discussed in regard to Frankel and her lifestyle brand in Chapter Three.

attention, you would die without it!" and another "I hear this is how you got famous", possibly referencing Kim's sex tape (12 November 2014). Indeed, many of the comments on this particular image express similar sentiments, often even more explicit. In this sense, the idea that a woman would expose her body in this way still received negative feedback by followers; her excessive femininity (accentuated curvaceous body, feminine posing, yet playful demeanour) is thus perceived as 'too much' for many. Nevertheless, this shaming of the sharing of the intimate body appears to have shifted somewhat in the comment sections across the Kardashians' social media platforms since 2014. Rather than receiving mainly criticism by followers, a revealing photo shoot on social media will now also receive kudos and praise, both in the form of heart emojis and clear expressions of admiration. Arguably, Kim's pendant for showing her body to viewers has also helped authenticating her brand as followers have seen the work she has performed to alter and transform herself. Indeed, with the launch of her new shapewear brand (SKIMS), Kim posted videos and photographs of herself in the past and then explained how her outfits would have looked better if she had worn the right shapewear. Such content received much positive feedback with one commentator exclaiming "This is the realest I've ever seen her omg I love it!" and another one noting that she "would definitely trust Kim to create shape wear! If any woman would know how to slim and shape the body for fashion, it's her!" (Instagram, 18 September 2019). Kim has in this way managed to capitalise on her own body and her work upon it to create a believable brand in which she encourages women to shape and transform their bodies in similar ways. Hence, Kim demonstrates the importance of being transparent about body work and proving her body's authenticity. Despite that Kim (and her sisters) are certainly profiting off the pressures for women to look a certain way, especially through their performances of femininity, many followers are positive to their products (at least the fans commenting on their social media accounts). Kim's choice to include plus size women and women of colour in her campaigns for SKIMS proved especially successful, as one Twitter follower (6 February 2020) writes:

> I love it, the inclusion is surreal, no matter the color, body type, you always include everyone in your releases. I love your commitment to your companies, your role as a citizen, your dedication to studies, I love the beautiful family you have built.

This follower's comment and praise thus seems to place inclusion into market capitalism over general social acceptance; mirroring the current cultural sentiments of choice- and neoliberal feminism.

However, noting the pressures on individuals, in particular women, to look a certain way is not a novel argument.[184] Nevertheless, the specific focus on perpetually *working on* the self through body work in the popular imaginary has been more prevalent in recent years. Indeed, other scholars have noted the importance of the physical body to display the individual's hard work, in a way that demonstrates, as Winch (2015) argues, that "managing the body…is the means by which women [and beyond] acquire and display their cultural capital" (Winch, 2015, p. 233). In her study of fashion models, Wissinger (2015) presents her term 'glamour labour' to describe the kind of work of body and image expected of fashion models; to keep up with both style trends and physical ideals. Similarly, in Elias, Gill and Scharff's recent edited collection entitled *Aesthetic Labour* (2017), they call this kind of body work 'aesthetic entrepreneurship,' explaining that such a worker (or 'aesthetic entrepreneur) is, "[l]ike the neoliberal subject more broadly… autonomous, self-inventing and self-regulating in the pursuit of beauty practices" (p. 39).[185] The body thus comes to serve a larger purpose.

Indeed, Kim perpetually frames her own body as an asset and as perhaps the most important aspect of her human capital (see Chapter One). It is, as she notes in an episode in which she is diagnosed with psoriasis, "her career" (Kendall Goes on Birth Control, 2011). Kim explains: "I mean my career is doing ad campaigns and swimsuit photoshoots. People don't understand the pressure on me to look perfect. But when I gain a pound, it's in the headlines. Imagine what the tabloids would do to me if they saw all these spots" (ibid.). When 'momager' Kris tells Kim to "stop whining" about her skin condition, Kim explains to the cameras: "I mean my mom should be upset about this too. If it affects me then it affects her too," pointing to the fact that her mother takes a percentage of her earnings. Apart from the apparent pressure Kim is under to look a certain way, she also references how her physique is indeed a fundamental aspect of her working life. In this

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[184] Several scholars have written on the importance of the body from a sociological and cultural standpoint, see for instance, Bartky, 1997; Bordo, 1993; Butler, [1990] (1999); [1993] (2001); Featherstone, 1995; Foucault, 1977, to simply name a few seminal texts.

[185] Furthermore, see their chapter in the collection on 'aesthetic labour', in which they offer an overview of feminist scholarly positions on beauty and feminine ideals leading up to this stress on 'aesthetic labour.'

sense, her body is in need of safeguarding and careful investments both to *protect* but especially, in order to *increase*, its value. After Kim undergoes some skin treatments, and despite her flareup of psoriatic spots, she decides to go to a photoshoot arranged by her mother. Kris explains in the interview segment: "I'm just happy we got it all back where it needs to be and I'm getting my ten per cent [smiles jokingly]." Indeed, despite Kris's apparent jovial tone, the fact that Kim's body, along with the bodies of her sisters, are essential to the family's work, is clearly brought to the foreground in this statement.

Significantly here, the physical body, the exterior package of the self, is equally influenced by neoliberal rationalities as the understanding of selfhood in Western culture in general. Indeed, Weber asserts that several social theorists, such as Mary Douglas and Bryan Turner have noted the "interconnection between narrative and bodies, arguing that the individual body is a microcosm of the larger social body, so that both material and metaphorical bodies influence one another" (2009, p. 21; see Douglas, [1996] 2002 and Turner, 1996). In this way, it is simple to see how the Kardashians' shared and filmed body work therefore presents wider pressures on the body politic, and women especially (including Kim and her sisters), to 'keep up' with the culture of self-improvement. Women are, of course, more frequently than men, encouraged to use their bodies to present their work as well as view their bodies as markers of self-betterment (see also Gimlin, 2002). Indeed, this discourse, along with those of the makeover (see Chapter Four), stress personal satisfaction rather than societal structures, and Marwick notes, drawing on Llewellyn Negrin, consequently "posit the natural female body as inferior and problematic, tying self-worth to appearance" (2010, p. 253). Yet, whilst the show also mirrors the makeover segments in ANTM that stress self-sacrifice and trusting market representatives in the form of judges, KUWTK *foregrounds* working and self-working as *the* raison d'être.

Khloé Kardashian is an interesting example here as she and KUWTK frequently address her 'weight struggles' and insecurities about her body. Up to season fourteen of the reality series, her storylines often centres around the various efforts she makes to feel better about herself and the pressures she feels to look a certain way – both of which are interlinked for her. The amount of media criticism and commentary she has received about her body – how it is larger, taller, or less attractive than her sisters' – has time and time again been alluded to on KUWTK. The narrative surrounding Khloé thus seems to admit how her supposed 'nonconforming' female body is problematic, again it is 'too much'. In an episode in season three, Khloé is invited to do a nude photoshoot for animal

activist organisation PETA's 'I'd Rather Go Naked Than Wear Fur' campaign. Khloé is hesitant to commit to taking her clothes off on camera since, she claims, "I don't have that skinny body" (I'd Rather Go Naked…Or Shopping, 2009). In the same episode, viewers see Khloé telling her mother's spouse Caitlyn (then Bruce) about the campaign, who then asks:

> **Caitlyn**: I'll get shot for bringing this up, but don't you think you should lose a few pounds?
> **Khloe**: What?
> [Caitlyn repeats the question]
> **Khloe:** [more agitated] I have a rock-hard body, I'm just a bigger individual!
> **Caitlyn:** Yeah, you are a bigger individual, but you could lose a few pounds… It's not major…
> [Khloé, now upset, starts to walk away]
> **Caitlyn:** That's why you're running around wearing black.
> **Khloé** [shouting back]: I was wearing black 'cause I was *depressed*!

Caitlyn appears to accuse Khloé for being passive in regard to her body, in other words, failing to display a successful work ethic through her physical body. Her wearing black, as if hiding her body (as insinuated by Caitlyn), comes to represent 'laziness' or indifference – the antithesis in a context where self-work is romanticised. At the day of the shoot with PETA, Khloé gets cold feet and is telling Kim, her sister, that she cannot bear to get undressed in front of so many people, wishing, as she explains in an interview segment, that she "was a little skinnier." Eventually, she decides to go nude, explaining to the camera: "Even though my body is not like Eva Mendes' or these other beautiful people, I *have to* be comfortable… I *need to* learn to love myself and through this shoot I really did. And I do think I'm beautiful in a way." The supposed 'moral' of the episode then finishes with the public reveal of Khloé's photo for the campaign (see Figure 26) and her final remark of: "people need to know that you have to embrace…who you are." Subsequently, despite some 'Love Your Body' discourse emerging in episodes like

this,[186] the inclusions of her family's critical comments, such as the ones made by Caitlyn, as well as Khloé's own (rather body dysmorphic) descriptions of herself as "Kim Kardashian's fat, funny sister" and "an obese, fat cow", negate any of the possibly positive messages of body acceptance, instead pointing to the need to body management and control (I'd Rather Go Naked…Or Shopping, 2009).

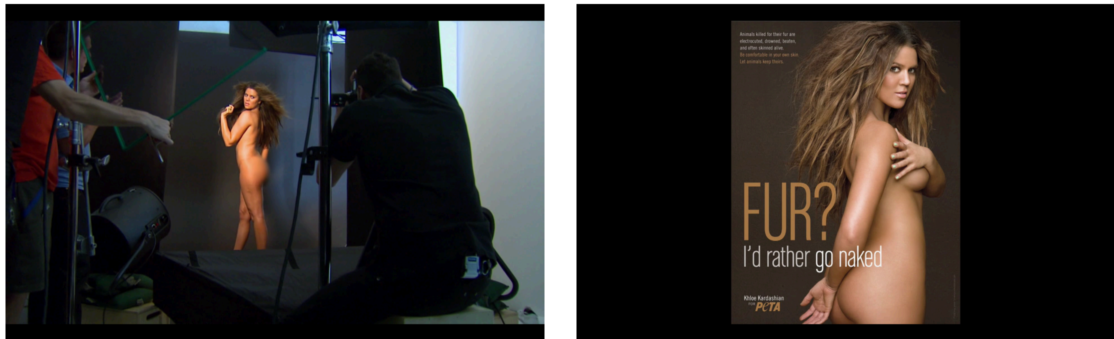

Figure 26. Khloé Kardashian poses for PETA's anti-fur campaign. It is also worth noting how the campaign photo has been highly edited and airbrushed, which further suggests that Khloé's body is not good enough as it is. (I'd Rather Go Naked…Or Shopping, 2009).

Furthermore, in later seasons on KUWTK (season fourteen onwards), the notion of body acceptance is fully set aside as Khloé begins a strict exercise regime, undergoes more beauty treatments, and loses weight – a 'decision' portrayed as Khloé finally taking responsibility for her self. Her body work also becomes an extension of her work in general, as she turns her physical changes into new business ventures – launching athleisure wear and her own spin-off reality television show *Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian.* In the first season of her TV series, Khloé professes:

> Growing up people called me the fat, funny sister until one day I decided to work out, eating right, and putting myself first [sic]. And you know what? I have never felt better. And now I am helping others transform by hooking them up with my favourite Hollywood trainers and glam experts to turn their lives around and shut down the shamers. Because a great body is the best revenge.

[186] See Chapter Four for more on 'LYB' discourse.

(Softball Sweethearts & Former Footballer, 2017)

Once again, the working on the self is a personal responsibility of which the body becomes proof of an individual's effort and hard work. As Elias, Gill, and Scharff note, "Preoccupations with appearance, beauty and the body are turned into yet another project to be planned, managed, and regulated in a way that is calculative and seemingly self-directed" (2017, p. 39). The above quote also correlates self-work with emotional well-being, as Khloé now 'feels better', an idea which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Moreover, by continuously presenting the body as a project to be improved, exemplified by Khloé's 'success' story, KUWTK frames this kind of body work "as a personal choice which brings individual pleasure rather than a response to systemic cultural values" (Marwick, 2010, p. 253).[187] For example, in reaction to the frenzy surrounding the youngest Kardashian-Jenner sibling, Kylie acquiring apparent lip fillers, KUWTK frames her cosmetic surgery as a felicitous decision. Khloé explains in an interview segment that Kylie's new lips "changed her life" thus marking the cosmetic surgery as both necessary and natural (Lip Service, 2015). In the same episode, the three eldest sisters decide that Kim is to talk to Kylie to make sure she is transparent about her surgery to the public, as Khloé purports the importance of not being perceived as "a liar" (again demonstrating the important relationship between self/branding and authenticity, see Chapter Three). Kim tells Kylie (and the viewers):

> I think if something makes you insecure and you've been feeling that way forever, who doesn't want to look amazing? [inspirational music played in the background]. You only get one life and what I've realised from what all of us have gone through is – do what makes you happy… to *an extent*! I mean, I don't, like, want you to go crazy. [gives Kylie a meaning look].
>
> (Lip Service, 2015).

The message is clear, Kylie's choice to improve her bodily assets are acceptable, as long as they stay within the margins of acceptable femininity – evading possible 'moral breeches' and/or 'unruly' bodily expressions. This aligns with the lingering postfeminist

[187] Marwick is specifically speaking about plastic surgery, but the same argument can arguably be made in reference to makeover discourse in general.

idea that, as Negra argues, “continually hypes empowerment but a closer examination of its affective registers reveals a sense of stern disapproval and judgement for any manifestations of ‘off-script’ femininity” (2009, p. 152). For instance, a visit to Kim’s shapewear website (skims.com) shows supposedly “inclusive” garments for all body types, whilst simultaneously offering ‘solutions’ to various bodily, and female, ‘problems’ (see Figure 27).

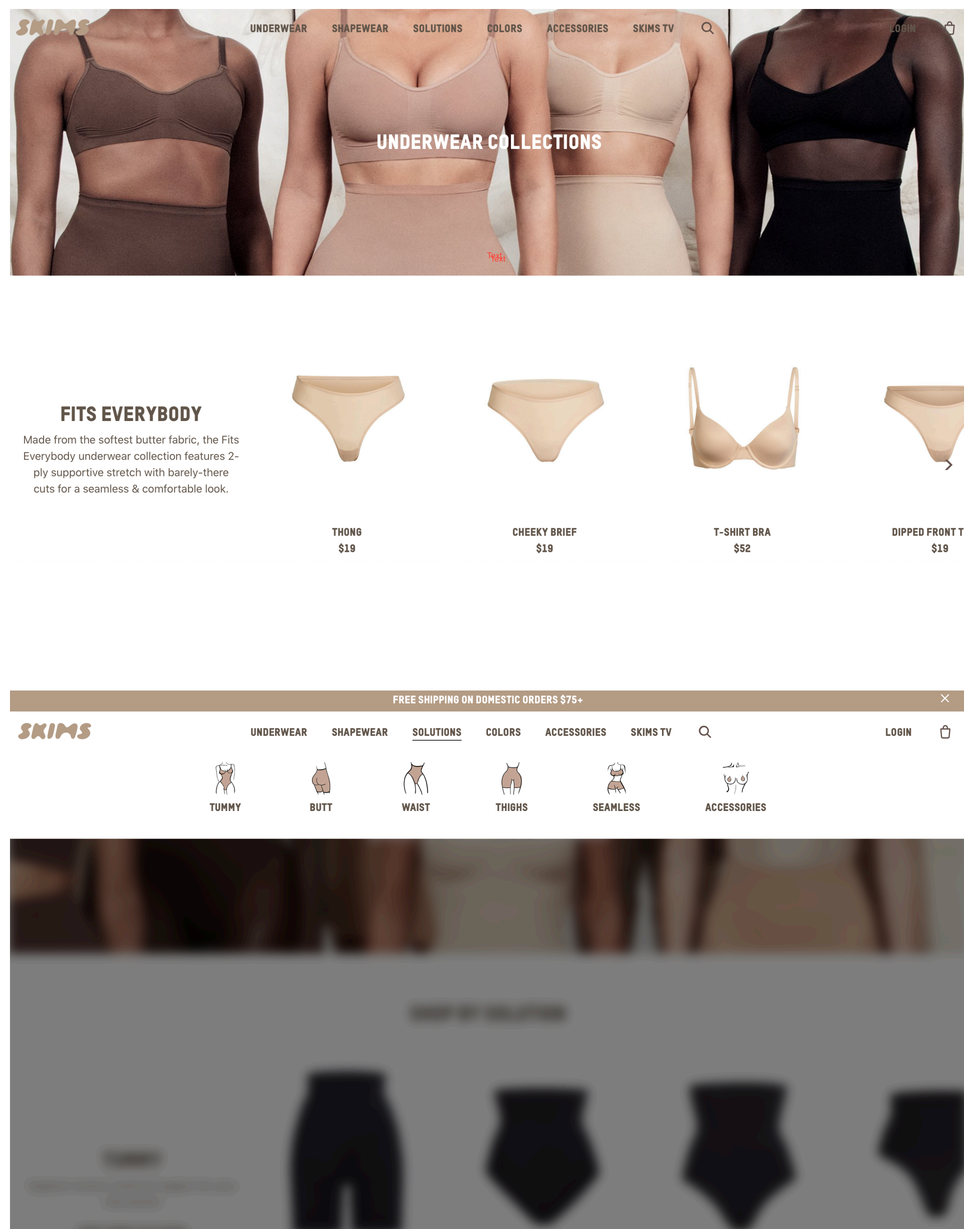

Figure 27. Screenshots from skims.com, showing the various ‘solutions’ for consumers’ tummy, butt, waist, and thigh issues (13 November 2019).

However, as previously explored, possible unruliness (whether behavioural or physical) is often the very cornerstone of audience-derived pleasure – frequently as schadenfreude or even resistance to many socio-cultural expectations.

Nevertheless, on KUWTK, the possibility of transforming one's body through body work further presents a possible *democratisation* of beauty and femininity.[188] Like the neoliberal faith in meritocracy in general, KUWTK presents various options for viewers/consumers to attain the successful femininity that they all present, with Kim Kardashian in the forefront. Ultimately, as Deery writes, "having 'work done' is represented as something people with any discretionary spending now engage in to boost their market value (2015, p. 111).[189] However, like the belief in meritocracy in general, the democratisation of beauty and "lifestyle culture [leave] many victims in [their] wake – those who don't conform to [the] preferred images and those who are too poor to exercise 'control' over their lives through the 'liberation' of consumerism" (Whelehan, 2000, p. 178). This of course marks the supposedly meritocratic femininity on KUWTK as classed; only available to those with some disposable capital to perform the right type of body work (see also Gill, 2007; Skeggs, 1997; Wood and Skeggs, 2004 – for a closer analysis of the function of class in similar texts). Although, this inequality was rarely pointed out in the comment sections across the Kardashians' social media, below the Fallon interview (quoted above), a few commentators began arguing whether any woman might have the opportunity to work on their careers, family relationships, and bodies in equal measure like Kim argues she does. One person writes: "I'd say money makes it somewhat easier. Like having nannies all the time, house gym, people cooking and cleaning for her and etc.," whereas another commentator claims that hard work pays off regardless of socio-economic status. Even though the discussion in the comment section is never resolved, it clearly demonstrates the long-lived promises of meritocracy and the so-called American dream that stresses the importance of aspiration over the realities of hegemonic structures.

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[188] On a side note, the democratisation of 'female' beauty through consumption and makeovers is also notable in the filming of Caitlyn's gender transition, who in an episode describes the various feminising "tweaks" she needs to do in order to fully feel like a (feminine) woman (About Bruce – Part , 2015). Or as Caitlyn tells Kris over a facial in a later episode: "I'm telling you Kris. This girl thing is a lot of work" (The Ex-Files, 2017).

[189] Deery also notes the direct correlation between the increase in makeover and maintenance on the small screen and the booming beauty and plastic surgery industries.

Indeed, KUWTK, and the Kardashian-Jenner's other media outlets, appear to postulate that anyone can increase their worth if they only perform the self-work, including body work, necessary to extract both one's 'potential' and supposed 'real' self. Albeit, the correct amount of self-work remains arbitrary or everchanging. Instead, "the Kardashian sisters have promoted an array of products intended for feminine self-fashioning, including clothing, perfume, makeup, nail polish, and diet systems" (Leppart, 2015, p. 213). These products feature heavily on the latest seasons of KUWTK, reflecting, as mentioned, the changing tone of the television programme at large; moving from "a *Brady Bunch* with a twist" to a montage of self-work – either to improve, invest in, and/or protect their various 'forms of capital' (Bourdieu, 1986). Indeed, as Scheiner McClain (2014, p. 50) asserts:

> The Kardashians must consistently create new products to create a need to consume for their fans, hence the seemingly unceasing cycle of new series and products. Becoming stagnant, or fading from the limelight, would reduce the amount of Kardashian media impressions and subsequently their fame.

In this sense, the 'products' being sold function in multiple ways. The stereotypically 'feminine' commodities – Kylie's 'lip kit', Kim's Shapewear and beauty products, and Khloé's fitness brand – all serve to promote a kind of heightened femininity, whilst offering products inviting fans to 'keep up' with the Kardashians and their perpetually changing bodily appearances. It is also noteworthy that their chosen commodities directly mirror their own bodily insecurities and eventual transformation – for example, the media attention around Kylie's lip fillers ultimately helped to launch her lip makeup-kit, and cosmetic line, which subsequently earnt her the title as the youngest self-made billionaire in *Forbes* Magazine (Robehmed, 2019). The Kardashians' carefully performed body work has thus created an avenue for creating highly lucrative careers. The notion of 'keeping up' of course means incessant restyling, of hair, makeup, and even body shape (both by the Kardashians and their target audiences) and thus creating a demand for *new* commodities and *novel* personal revelations (I will look closer at the interlinked divulging of 'secrets' and consumption below).

Finally, the specifically feminine and woman-centred focus of the Kardashian family's business ventures and products (stereotypically speaking), also highlight the ways in which the sisters have found a way to profit from their body work of femininity

and thus gaining power in a ‘safe’ way. This kind of ‘safe female entrepreneurialism’, Negra and Tasker (2014) found was central in many recession-era narratives, but their point rings true in terms of the Kardashians’ work as well.[190] Ultimately, their work, partly successful due to their woman-centredness, again align with the notion of the self as in need of constant transformation. Their bodies represent their selves, and as such their work, and require safeguarding and careful investments to protect the exterior. However, what has become more and more important is the expression of happiness and well-being. As Gill and Elias assert: “No longer is it enough to work on and discipline the body, but in today’s society the beautiful body must be accompanied by a beautiful mind, with suitably upgraded and modernized postfeminist attitudes to the self” (2014, p. 185). Indeed, the body work discourse and the process of workitisation thus extend beyond the external package of the self and also need to include the interior, which similarly must be disciplined and worked upon, as I will consider in the next sub-section.

Emotional Work and Self Analysis

In this section, I will explore the creeping of work into what is often referred to as the inner core of the self, regardless of whether this self is perceived as a social construction or not. Indeed, notions of self-work, of which, as discussed, body work is a large aspect, is not only presented as a way to become ‘successful’ but rather such self-work is frequently also normalised as a route to personal well-being and happiness. Happiness and emotional balance are then, in turn, portrayed as equally important as body work for creating a valuable self. Yet, whilst happiness in itself is hardly a controversial or even problematic goal, the insistence of the importance of working on one’s inner self (and promote specific emotions/feelings) is arguably as demanding as the pressures to look a certain way. These pressures all become part and parcel of the work required to possess a self. Therefore, this final section of the chapter will explore the workitisation of the psychic aspects of the self, by firstly establishing where this notion of self-work might

[190] Negra and Tasker suggest that these narratives often “seek to retain traditionalist femininity under conditions of financial exigency, leading to phenomena like the privilege of the female cupcake baker [or other stereotypically feminised professions] …as the exemplar of adaptive economy and safe female entrepreneurialism” (2014, p. 7).

derive from and secondly, how it manifests itself in some popular cultural texts, here exemplified by KUWTK and its central women.

As explored in the previous chapters, popular culture and reality television in particular, frequently echo the comingled Romantic and Freudian ideas of the self as essentialised and innate, hidden deep within the recesses of the mind. In particular, as discussed in Chapter One, North American culture seems suffused by the Freudian notion of the self as split between a conscious (mere superficial) self and a 'true' self hidden or repressed within. Indeed, this 'true' self can only be 'recovered' through introspection and self-analysis, which is often mirrored by the perpetual stress on self-help, self-care, and self-control in contemporary pop culture. However, there are several (and sometimes contradictory) 'psy' ideologies at play in this cultural discourse, including some psychoanalytic theories (see Chapter One), but also, those informed by the self-help industry, positive psychology, and the recent (and associated) emphasis on individual well-being, especially happiness (for critiques of this 'happiness turn' see for instance, Ahmed, 2010; Berlant, 2011; Binkley, 2014; Davies, 2015).[191] As such, I will organise some of these ideas into clearer (albeit simplified) categories that will describe what Scharff (2016) terms "the psychic life of neoliberalism." Before doing so, it is important to highlight that, it is in this 'psychic' aspect of neoliberal ideology (and its impact on reason), as I have discussed in the previous case studies, that neoliberal rationality becomes particularly powerful and prominent. It is in this sense that (to answer the critique of those sceptical of the usage of 'neoliberalism' as a term), neoliberalism 'actually exists' (see Chapter One). As Anderson (2015) points out: "Whether understood as composed of beliefs, values, or ideas, [neoliberal] ideology works *affectively*" (p. 4, my emphasis). As such, when the language on how we come to understand psychic life is influenced by neoliberal discourse, so is the notion of who we are and how we come to be. In this context, the purpose of human existence becomes framed as a process of work and constant 'self-improvement'.

I will begin this exploration with the set of psychological theories that many have argued has had the most influence on the modern notion of selfhood and self-formation in North America – psychoanalysis (see Elliott, 2014; Flax, 1990; Illouz, 2008). Even though these therapeutic discourses are rarely alluded to directly on reality television, for

[191] Positive psychology is often termed the "science of happiness" by its proponents (see for instance, Boniwell (2012) and Gregory and Rutledge (2016).

instance, it is apparent that the Freudian and post-Freudian outlooks, however filtered, have been influential in the way in which the self is expressed and understood in such popular cultural texts. Especially influential are those ideas pertaining to the self as multi-layered and in need of analysis and self-work. Indeed, as these theories have become watered-down versions of their originals, they often seem to become truisms and bromides that are habitually repeated through off-hand remarks and discussions on the small screen. As Biressi and Nunn (2005, p. 103) suggest:

> Psychoanalysis provides a shared discourse with which to economically transmit ideas about emotional conflict and desire. The common types of psychoanalysis – rivalry, primal desires, taboos, anxiety about death, loss and survival, group identification, repression, dreams as ciphers of the unconscious – have filtered in simplified form into mainstream film, television shows, radio dramas and magazine advice columns.

These ideas that in various ways reflect that which individuals apparently 'resist' or 'repress' have been important for giving psychoanalysis its socio-cultural mass appeal.[192] Such Freudian concepts have ultimately "helped create a new narrative of selfhood in which precisely what people did not think about, talk about, or do would define the narrative crux of self-identity" (Illouz, 2008, p. 46). This narrative is frequently depicted and utilised in televisual texts, especially reality television. Indeed, many scholars have noted the influence of 'psy' and therapeutic discourse on reality television (particularly the talk show genre), with some notable mentions including, Biressi and Nunn (2005), Grindstaff (2002), Marwick (2010), Peck (2008), Shattuc (1997), White (1992), and Wood (2005; 2009). [193] For many TV scholars, a central influence of psy discourse has been the 'confessional monologue' – the talking head segments[194] – and the other formats

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[192] Of course, there are myriad reasons for why Freud and psychoanalysis have been so influential in the US, undoubtedly affected by the timing (the historical and social contexts) of their arrival. Arguably, psychoanalytic and therapeutic concepts became so persuasive, as Illouz highlights, "not only because they addressed central problems of American selfhood, but also because they expressed them in a hybrid language that combined the tropes of popular healing and myth with the legitimising language of medicine and scientific rationality" (2008, p. 36). Again, the 'unconscious' or repressed is perpetually alluded to as a site for finding truth.

[193] Due to the limited space and scope of this text, I will not delve deeper into the television scholarship on the therapeutic, but the scholars mentioned will serve as an excellent starting point for possible further discussion and research.

[194] The interviews, or 'talking heads' segments are utilised to express subjective 'truths' and the cast members 'real' thoughts and emotions in all the three case studies discussed in this thesis.

through which individuals are asked to reveal and perform their 'deepest' thoughts and feelings (Aslama and Pantti, 2006, pp. 168-169).[195] Indeed, this will be further explored below.

Here, it is important to note that while Freud initially formed his ideas in a specifically European setting, the discourse of therapy was reformulated and adapted as it travelled across the Atlantic to the US context. Indeed, Janice Peck describes how this encounter was "conditioned by [the clash] between psychology and therapeutic/religious movements that developed during a period of religious turmoil in the late nineteenth century" (2008, p. 25). Subsequently, a new strand of therapy, variously termed positive thinking, 'mind cure', or 'New Thought' emerged (ibid.), evincing "the American conviction that people could shape their own destinies and find true happiness" (Leach, 1993, p. 227). As the different strands of psychology and positive thinking evolved in tandem, it is difficult to single out one influence from another in popular texts. However, what one can frequently discern is the pervasive idea, as Swan writes, that the "self is seen as the source of its own problems, but also as the wellspring of solutions to these problems" (2008, p. 90). Indeed, with the solution often involving some form of self-work. This of course, is a crucial notion similarly pervasive in neoliberal concepts of ideal selfhood and has arguably contributed to the stress on personal happiness and self-analysis in recent years.[196] As Cabanas and Illouz (2019, p. 3) explain: "Happiness is now generally seen as a mindset that can be engineered though willpower; the outcome of putting into practice our inner strengths and authentic selves; the only goal that makes life worth living."[197] Ultimately, due to the intermingled therapeutic and positive

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[195] Perhaps because television, and reality television especially, is concerned with the private and inner lives of people, therapeutic discourse lends itself particularly well to explain behaviour and actions on screen which claim to reveal cast members' 'backstage selves,' to use Goffman's term.
[196] For Adams et al. (2019) there has also been a distinct (albeit not necessarily intentional) neoliberalisation of psychology in the last decade. This has partly developed alongside and through the emergence of positive psychology and what has been termed 'happiness studies' in various disciplines. Positive psychology, Binkley explains, is an "influential movement in contemporary psychology directed at the study of what it considers optimal emotional states" (2014, p. 2). Indeed, this kind of research and other related topics on, for instance, "subjective well-being, positive emotions, flourishing, optimism, [and] resilience" has, as Cabanas (2018) asserts, "mushroomed since 2008, engaging not only in the field of psychology, but also the fields of economics, education, therapeutics, politics, neuroscience, management, and business" (pp. 4-5; see also Gill and Orgad, 2018).
[197] Indeed, Western culture's fascination with, and emphasis on, happiness is of course not new, but what sets it apart from its historical predecessors, as Binkley notes, "is its reduction of happiness to a purely plastic attribute of a psychosomatic self" (2014, p. 2). As a consequence, an individual's well-being is not determined by external factors, but happiness is rather thought of as "a biological potential of the individual that makes no recourse to psychic interiority,

psychological discourses of repression, self-determination, and self-analysis, what has stuck in the popular cultural imaginary, is the notion that the inner self (or "unconscious") and one's emotions must be *worked upon.*

On KUWTK, different, usually norm-breaking or 'unruly' (see Chapter Three and Rowe, 1995), behaviours and actions are often explained by some deeper trauma within the individual that they have to 'work through.'[198] As such, drama is included in the show without it necessarily harming the self/brands of the cast member. For instance, when Khloé Kardashian is arrested for a DUI (driving under the influence), her behaviour is explained as a logical, albeit unfortunate, consequence of her inability to process the birthday of her deceased father six years prior (Remembering Dad, 2007). The episode consequently builds up to Khloé's self-realisation that she needs to perform self-work to control such 'unruly' emotions that are depicted as dangerous, e.g. resulting in drunk driving. This is further emphasised by Kim and Kourtney referring to Khloé as a "loose cannon" and "a psycho" in the same episode; hinting that Khloé is in need of controlling herself. Further, the consequences of unmanaged emotions are, if not handled by the individuals themselves, often managed through the invitation of an expert, which on KUWTK frequently include a cameo appearance of a therapist or other psychic 'experts' (e.g. mediums, marriage councillors, and healers). As Furedi (2004) notes, therapy culture's frequent pathologizing of negative emotions supports an image of the self as exceedingly vulnerable and often dependant on professional help (although this help needs to be self-prescribed). Furthermore, the anxiety around unmanaged emotions might also be explained by the belief in the 'catchiness' of some emotions (see Ahmed, 2004; Brennan, 2004; Gibbs, 2001; Gorton, 2009a, Sedgwick, 2003), particularly negative ones, such as anger, sadness, shame etc. Indeed, the work of the scholars mentioned, exemplify the worries around emotions performed 'wrongly' and thus self-care and work appear to

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biography, or social relationships of any kind, however sublimated" (Binkley, 2014, p. 2). Instead, happiness becomes a personal responsibility – mirroring the ideas of meritocratic competition discussed in the previous chapter – and as Binkley underscores, more frequently "individuals are invited to assess and transform their respective levels of well-being as a *life opportunity*" (ibid., my emphasis). An apt example of this phenomenon is the concept of 'mindfulness' that has proliferated in recent years, particularly as an extension of the influences of positive psychology (Cabanas, 2018; Reveley, 2016). However, I do not intend to argue that such techniques of 'self-help' do not offer relief or comfort for some, but rather that these techniques are indicative of a cultural trend that places the consequences and responsibilities of life under late capitalism with its subjects.

[198] Trauma as a term has also altered in the last two decades, becoming more of an umbrella term for psychological distress and negative emotion (Furedi, 2004).

function as preventative measures. For Khloé however, the DUI supposedly caused by her emotional distress lands her in jail for a sentence of thirty days. Nonetheless, her sentence is cut short (having lasted a mere few hours in jail) due to "overcrowding" and the lesson emphasised on the show is Khloé taking responsibility for her actions and feelings, overlooking the ways in which her privilege offers her the luxury to simply learn a lesson (in thought rather than practice).

Important for the arguments here, is the gendered aspect of therapeutic and self-help discourse, as well as the calls for women *specifically* to take control and responsibility for their psychic lives. Of course, the overreferenced maxim of women as particularly emotional springs to mind, e.g. women as hysterical or unhinged (see Probyn, 2005).[199] Similarly, reality programming, as a genre centring on the inner lives of its participants and discourses around authenticity, has frequently favoured the casting of women and female experiences on screen. Indeed, as Dubrofsky underscores, "the displays of women, emotional women in particular, is ubiquitous in the reality TV…genre" (2009, p. 353). Again, the focus on interiority and 'confessions' of that interiority (the 'moneyshot' moments à la Grindstaff) has placed women centre-stage on much reality television, as the performance of femininity traditionally requires forms of 'emotional labour' (a term which will be explored further below). As Wood, Skeggs, and Thumim so pertinently write:

> 'Reality' television, by sensationalizing women's domestic labour and emotional management of relationships, displays the new ways in which capital extends into the 'private,' in which capital is engaged in the socialization of affective capacities and in which governance and capital become intricately entwined.
>
> (2008, p. 2)

The therapeutic discourse and its associated views on the self and well-being as an innate possibility, coupled with its comingling with cultural neoliberal rationalities, thus redefines the ways in which self-formation is conceptualised.

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[199] A notion pervasive not only in popular parlance but also in psychology and neuroscience for instance. Such gendered notions of the brain and emotions are increasingly proven to be false and much more influenced by socio-cultural contexts than say merely biology (Fine, 2010; Rippon, 2019).

Moreover, Helen Wood notes that the influences of Freud's 'talking cure' "has a particularly gendered inflection, as women have been traditionally overrepresented as clients within the therapy industry, as well as being the largest body of consumers of literature on self-help and cognitive development" (2009, p. 26; see also Peck, 2008).[200] The emphasis here being the 'talking' aspect of the Freudian 'cure', which is reflected by the perpetual focus on reality TV series of 'talking things through' and 'speaking one's truth' to the camera, audience, and/or on-screen expert. Further, the various, rapidly growing resources, including apps and workshops that offer "individuals models and tools to develop resilience and self-confidence" seem to particularly cater for a female (and decidedly middle-class) demographic (Gill and Orgad, 2018, p. 480).[201] In the face of privatisation of health care coupled with a cultural obsession with self-responsibilisation, women are encouraged (sometimes forced out of economic necessity) to take their emotional well-being into their own hands.

Indeed, KUWTK viewers, as well as app and social media users are inundated with various 'inspirational' quotes and imagery of resilience, including those posted by the Kardashian family. These focus on "self-transformation, positive thinking, gratitude, and affirmations" that ultimately promote the "capacity to 'bounce back' from difficulties and shocks" (Gill and Orgad, 2018, p. 478). Again, the ability to 'bounce back' is internal and seemingly innate; a case of self-discipline and, as Gill and Orgad emphasise, the ability to curate a "positive mental attitude" (ibid., p. 478). For instance, after gossip and news stories broke of Khloé Kardashian's partner Tristan being unfaithful with a family friend (Jordyn), Khloé posted messages and quotes on Instagram to possibly both encourage herself and others to work on themselves in the face of adversity (see Figure 28). Both of these Instagram posts reprimand the intended reader for being negatively affected by those things external to the self: a self which is ultimately presented as a source of 'good energy.' Thus, the gist of Khloé's message is that happiness is ultimately interior as well as a personal responsibility, despite the clear impact of external factors

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[200] Not to mention, the inherent masculinist assumptions of psychoanalytic and therapeutic discourse (see for instance, Flax, 1990). These masculinist assumptions were also a common critique of many feminist thinkers in the 1960s and 1970s (Peck, 2008; Showalter, 1987).

[201] As Gill and Orgad note, "[w]hile many of these programmes and literatures are not addressed specifically to women, they are often packaged and marketed in highly gendered ways that *imply* that their ideal subject is the middle-class woman and her children" (ibid., pp. 480-481, emphasis in original). Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter Two, in late capitalist societies women are doubly subjugated, being subjected to, and having to navigate, both pervasive patriarchal *and* neoliberal ideologies. Of course, following an intersectional framework – ethnicity, race, class, physical mobility, et cetera – complicate and overlap such subjections further.

(here, Tristan's actions). At the same time, the Instagram posts seem rather superficial and impersonal in their style, as if Khloé simply reposts quotes that she has read online. The posts appear to be a way for Khloé to demonstrate the kind of individual self-analysis and self-work required by citizen-subjects who take ownership for their selves. This work is particularly important if she is to continue to embody the type of role model she presents on her own television show *Revenge Body*, since the reality television programme's whole premise is to invite participants to make-over and work on their bodies and mental attitudes to improve their lives. Therefore, stressing the importance of individual accountability for both happiness and overall 'quality' of life.

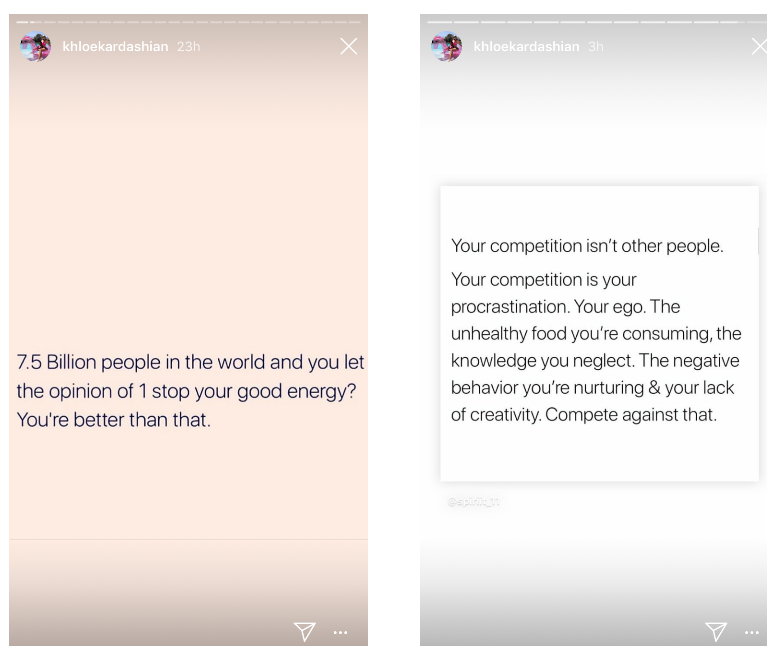

Figure 28. Screenshots of Khloé Kardashian's stories from 1 July 2019 and 13 June 2019, respectively.

In the two episodes[202] centring on the news breaking of Tristan and Jordyn's "hook-up" (Treachery, 2019) and its aftermath (Aftershock, 2019), Khloé's emotional response to these news (along with those of her sisters') is unsurprisingly the focal point. Here we see the workings of therapeutic discourse coming into effect as Khloé's sisters frequently

[202] It is notable that the revelations of Tristan's unfaithfulness are covered in two episodes, unlike many other major events in the Kardashians' lives. The media attention surrounding Khloé and Tristan's breakup seemingly created a need for KUWTK to address the situation to arguably offer their reality of the speculations as well as satisfy viewers' curiosity. These two last episodes of season sixteen also resulted in KUWTK being "ranked as the [top] cable entertainment telecast of the month among all key demos, according to Nielsen" (Multichannel News, 2019).

express their concerns of Khloé's inability to display, what they believe to be, the right feelings for the situation. Kim explains in a talking head segment: "Ever since the story came out…Khloé has just been very quiet. She isn't really emotional…and that concerns Kourtney and I for sure" (Aftershock, 2019). And Kourtney similarly states "I keep saying to her 'do you want to let your anger out? Like it's okay!'" (ibid.). The implications of Khloé not 'releasing' her emotions are arbitrary, but Kim tells Kourtney that she worries that if Khloé "doesn't let it out…she's just gonna explode." Indeed, this notion of emotional release leading to catharsis is a traditionally psychoanalytic idea of the releasing of that which is repressed to effect positive change. As such an individual, in this theorem, needs to work towards getting in touch with the 'unconscious'. Failing to do so might lead, as viewers have been shown in the case of Khloé, to another DUI incident or worse. Of course, in the context of a reality television show, the arguable threat of an 'emotional explosion' also functions as a way to encourage an individual to reveal their deepest emotions on screen.

This also ties into the idea of the authentic self, discussed in Chapter Three. As Aslama and Pantti (2006, p. 181) persuasively argue:

> Preoccupation with the internal life of the individual leads to a new representation of the self in terms of emotional determinism, which celebrates public displays of feeling as a means of therapeutic disclosure and regards one's feelings as a foundation of authenticity, the true self.

As such, the policing of Khloé's emotions reflect not only a concern for her well-being but also her performance of authenticity (as discussed in Chapter Three). Indeed, on Twitter and other social media forums, the discussions around Khloé's handling of her emotions became widespread, with commentators seemingly unfamiliar with the particulars of the KUWTK show weighing in on the topic. After Khloé posted a few 'tweets' (end of February/beginning of March 2019) addressing Jordyn Woods negatively, without doing the same to Tristan, she received a massive backlash for focusing her (public) anger on a young woman rather than her boyfriend. Many Twitter account holders suggested that Khloé was processing her feelings incorrectly; trying to save her own image rather than expressing the sadness and disappointment directly to her boyfriend. In this sense, many followers expressed the apparent expectation that Khloé

and her family members must perform their emotional lives publicly *and* appropriately. The drama[203] taking place online appeared to calm down as Khloé started to explain herself and why she had reacted with anger even though what she was really feeling was sadness (a more appropriate response and emotion for a woman, as I will explain below).

At last, in the season finale, Khloé has an emotional outburst which consequently marks her emotions as authentic, delivering what Grindstaff terms the 'money shot' (borrowed from pornographic terminology). Grindstaff notes how reality television participants, focusing particularly on talk show guests, are frequently expected "not just to discuss personal matters but to do so in a particular way…[i.e. showing] joy, sorrow, rage or remorse expressed in visible, bodily terms" (2009, p. 19). Grindstaff also outlines how TV production frequently appears to cater for such emotional moments. This kind of 'talk' on reality television, "is a narrative of explicit revelation in which people 'get down and dirty' and 'bare it all' for the pleasure, fascination, or repulsion of viewers" (ibid., p. 20). This talk, much like the Freudian 'talking cure', highlights the belief in the catharsis of the money shot, whilst corroborating the 'reality' of the genre and cast members. Further, as Dubrofsky (2009) underscores, the money shot moment is crucial for establishing the drama in reality television storylines. The importance of Khloé's emotional display is, as mentioned, significant for manifesting Khloé's authenticity, who, like Bethenny Frankel of RHONY, is known for 'telling it like it is.' Yet, the usage of emotion on KUWTK is arguably more complex than this. Indeed, as I will argue, Khloé's and the other cast/family members' emotional performances are fundamental aspects of their self-work. However, here it is difficult to claim the extent to which the Kardashian family can control how their emotional work is portrayed (edited or produced). Yet, since the mother Kris plays the role of both manager ('momager') and producer, she (and by extension, her family) has arguably more sway in these portrayals than the *Real Housewives* or ANTM model contestants. In this sense, much of the self-work presented on screen has the air of being more calculated and strategic.

Several scholars have noted the emotional or "affective turn" in recent years, both across academia and in society at large (Clough and Halley, 2007; see also Berlant, 1997;

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[203] This included discussions around race as well. With many social media users accusing the Kardashians for always getting public attention at the expense of black women (e.g. through cultural appropriation), in this case, by directing their (and their fans) anger towards a much less famous (and less powerful) young black woman. However, due to the limited scope here, I will not address these accusations directly in this thesis, although they do hold some truth.

Gorton, 2009a; Woodward, 1996).[204] Similarly, Swan (2008) calls this development an "emotionalization of society," in which she argues that various forms of emotional expressions have become more legitimated in the public sphere. Reality television's penchant for emotional 'outbursts', such as Khloé's on KUWTK, have certainly contributed to this legitimisation (or at least to its normalisation). Indeed, in the current context of Western (neoliberal) culture, I have noted how self-work and introspection have become an important aspect of presenting valid and valuable selfhoods. The present culture that has seen the seepage of everyday life into work, can also be described, following Illouz as suffused by "emotional capitalism," "in which emotional and economic discourses and practices mutually shape each other" (2007, p. 5).[205] Indeed, the need to manage and utilise emotions at work to convey a message has been theorised previously and is certainly not a new phenomenon, especially as seen in the service industries.

In fact, in her seminal text on emotional labour, *The Managed Heart* (1983), Hochschild writes about her ethnographic research on the required 'emotional labour' by female air stewardesses as they encounter passengers. For example, Hochschild notes how the stewardesses were told to treat difficult individuals onboard as children and were consequently encouraged to draw from their own private experiences. With this and other examples, Hochschild introduces 'emotional labour' as the work, mainly required of women, of manipulating one's feelings as to cater for the positive experiences of others. [206] [207] In a service profession this might include the expectations of a welcoming smile or a 'caring' demeanour regardless of whether one's actual feelings reflect such sentiments.[208] 'Emotional labour' or the use of emotions in professional settings has been

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[204] See Gorton (2009) for a comprehensive overview of the scholarly work on emotion and affect.
[205] Here it becomes important to note, as does Ahmed (2004) that "emotions should not be regarded as psychological states, but as social and cultural practices" (p. 9). In this sense, following Ahmed, emotions are performative in the same way as gender (Butler, 1990), in that the performances of emotions such as anger, pain, sadness, joy, etc. over time, shape the ways in which various socio-cultural contexts come to understand their importance and value within the popular imagination. As such, emotions have to be looked at contextually (see also Probyn, 2005).
[206] Thus, serving as another example of the feminisation of the workforce as discussed above.
[207] These ideas have been particularly influential in popular feminist parlance (see for instance, Hartley, 2018), but as Hochschild (2018) asserts, the blurring of the lines of her initial definition of emotional labour has rendered it less useful as a concept. Instead, Hochschild (2018) suggests that this kind of work could be viewed as mental labour or even as 'pure' labour.
[208] Hochschild's notion of emotional labour has been exceedingly influential to scholars in various fields since the 1980s. During the same time, as Wood, Skeggs, and Thumim (2008) note, debates around women's labour in the domestic sphere began to emerge. They write: "These debates forced women's 'invisible' labour [e.g. care work] to be recognised within male social theory,

a requirement of workers for a long time to assure the success of business. Yet due to the more recent emotionalization of society (Swan, 2008) and workitisation, the performance of emotionality for financial profit is encouraged, if not a requirement. In the finale of season sixteen of KUWTK, Khloé's eventual displays of sadness through tears are not only making her 'real', they are also perceived to be the correct emotions for Tristan's betrayal (see Figure 29), which is also evidenced by the concurrent fan support Khloé began to receive on Twitter (rather than the previous criticism).

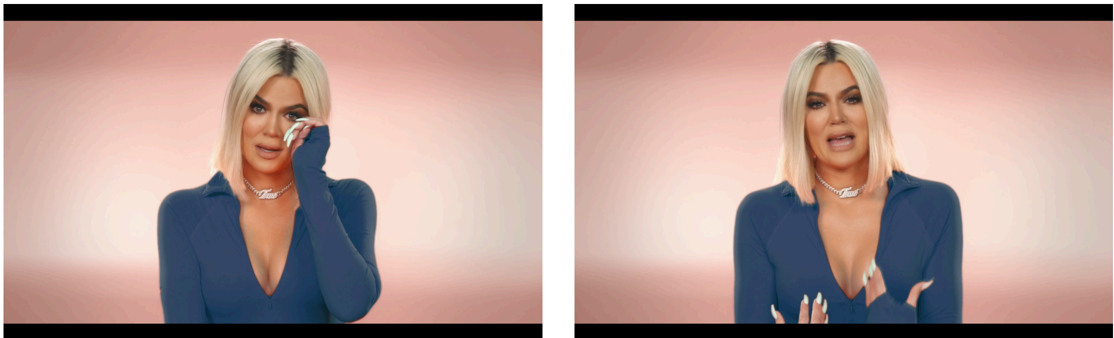

Figure 29. Khloé sheds a few tears as she explains her emotional distress after the cheating incident (Aftershock, 2019).

This money shot moment of Khloé's confessional shows what Grindstaff defines as an authentic as well as feminine affective moment. It is 'feminine', by Grindstaff's definition, as it is confessional rather than confrontational, and presents "soft-core" emotions, which to Grindstaff includes "heartache or joy rather than conflict and anger" (2002, p. 26). This is further enforced by the softness of the light and muted pink background, as well as Khloé's nails, deep cleavage, and choice to wear a necklace with the letters of her daughter's name (most likely not a coincidence), thus reminding viewers of her role as both a woman and mother. The imagery therefore exaggerates her femininity and vulnerability. Of course, the emotional work of Khloé is likely a reflection of her 'real' feelings, yet what marks it as *work* here is her performance of these emotions *for* the camera. As Aslama and Pantti argue, "[t]he paradox of an individualized society

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and eventually, through women's lobbying, by governments: the EU, UK, France and Scandinavian countries have all attempted to quantify domestic labour in relation to GDP" (p. 1). These developments have of course been crucial for inching closer towards gender equality, yet there has also been a frequent usage of the term 'emotional labour' to describe other kinds of 'invisible labour' that women perform at home, e.g. remembering to send birthday cards, doing more of the household chores and so forth.

is that while one is talking alone about one's deepest emotions, at the same time one is selling one's authenticity to viewers" (2006, p. 181). However, arguably Khloé is not only selling her authenticity through this display of emotional work, but she is also using this authenticity to create financial opportunities down the line.[209]

Indeed, the right display of feminine emotions, along with her self-deprecating description of herself as the 'fat, funny sister', have seemingly contributed to making Khloé one of the most likeable US reality television stars. Indeed, on 11 November 2019 she won the E! People's Choice Awards 'Reality TV Star' of 2019, voted by the 'people' (or viewers of the E! network).[210] The emotional display and revealing of her personal heartache, creates a seemingly 'authentic' relationship with her audience, which in turn creates an avenue for marketing her products. After her win of reality television star of the year, many fans took to Twitter and Instagram to congratulate Khloé, repeatedly expressing how much she is "deserving" of the win (Khloé's Twitter and Instagram pages, 11-12 November 2019). As one Twitter follower writes: "So happy for you, you deserve it after all you've been through and for sharing with us ❤️ " (2019). And a commentator on Khloé's Instagram indirectly addresses Jordyn Woods by writing: "Congratulations @Jordynwoods they won an award because of you" (2019). Subsequently suggesting that the publicised 'cheating scandal' and her eventual public displays of feminine emotions made Khloé more popular.

The interconnection between Khloé's on-screen emotional life and her entrepreneurship is subtle but noticeable. Indeed, the emotional process of overcoming heartache ties into her 'revenge' brand and extends to the promotion of other products, whilst also marking Khloé's ordinariness. As an Instagram fan comments: "I'm so proud of you queen❤️ just ordered the perfume and I have never been so excited" (Instagram.com/khloekardashian, 2019). The commenter thus expresses their appreciation for Khloé through the purchase of the recently released Kardashian fragrances (it is of course noteworthy that the timing of various product launches

[209] The usage of emotion in reality television has been noted by television scholars researching the production aspect of reality television, see for instance Grindstaff (2002) and Gorton (2009). As Gorton argues, "[p]art of the reason why writers and producers seek emotion from their audiences is so that their work is remembered and valued. Emotion is one of the ways this can be achieved" (2009, p. 153). Arguably, on KUWTK, the family are even more conscious of the importance of emotion as the three eldest daughters along with Kris Jenner, are executive producers of the series.

[210] KUWTK notably won the 'reality television show' of 2019 during the same award event, evidencing the continued success of the reality television programme.

frequently falls after tumultuous events on KUWTK). In this sense, the emotional performances of Khloé (and her sisters), of which the aftermath of her breakup with Tristan is but one of many, creates spaces in which the self and other 'products' can be promoted and sold. Thus, the television series with its 'backstage' revelations of the family's personal and affective lives has proved a great investment. Arguably, lending a new (and more literal) meaning to the 'money shot' of reality television. Recently, this idea was also explicitly highlighted in an interview with Kris Jenner, who argues:

> There is something to be said about the way we started; the audiences that we have now and the people that follow us and the consumers that buy our things are the people that became *emotionally invested* in the family. And there was always a family member that somebody either, you know, loved or, you know, wanted to watch their journey. And everybody saw the kids grow up on TV for the last decade or so.
>
> (The New York Times Conferences, 2019, my emphasis)

Arcy calls this type of emotional entrepreneurship "affective enterprising",[211] which she describes as a "gendered business model (that trades on feminine emotions and melodrama) and intensifies neoliberal labor practices (that rely on perpetual activity, innovation, and flexibility)" (2015, p. 76). For instance, it is worth mentioning that the female family members have been the most successful in both business *and* the sharing of their inner lives; unlike Robert Kardashian (junior) who rarely, if ever, features on KUWTK. I would argue that this is partly due to his inability to use emotional work as capital to generate business.[212] Indeed, this again chimes with the notion of safe female entrepreneurship as the practice of affective enterprising disseminates strategies "for economic success that hinge upon performances of feminine emotions" and thus "steers women into economic models that rely on their emotional faculties, not their financial expertise" (ibid., p. 90). Nonetheless, I find this argument slightly too simplistic, as

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[211] Arcy uses the *Real Housewives* franchise to elucidate her argument (2015).

[212] Unfortunately, due to the limited scope here, I will not be able to delve deeper into this analysis of Rob and other male KUWTK cast members (e.g. Scott Disick, Kanye West, Brandon Jenner) and their inability to use emotional work for profit in the same way. A good starting point for such an analysis might be Cornwall et al.'s edited collection *Masculinities Under Neoliberalism* (2016).

utilising one's emotional intellect does not necessarily negate an acumen for business and finance, but arguably the opposite. Yet, what is unfortunate is the need for specifically gendered performances for 'success' at all, especially those of women. Nevertheless, the above examples of Khloé presents an example of emotional work performed correctly and successfully on KUWTK, but what happens when a cast member fails or refuses to work on their emotions to an audience?

The eldest of the sisters, Kourtney, is arguably an example of self-work done incorrectly. Kourtney is perpetually portrayed as, and scolded by her sisters, for not being transparent or willing to share her emotional work, as well as failing to perform various forms of body work. Indeed, Kourtney rarely speaks of her looks and her rather muted fashion sense does not stand out in the same way as perhaps Khloé's penchant for loop earrings and everchanging wardrobe of fitted clothing. Yet, it is her seemingly composed nature that particularly sets her apart from her younger sisters and mother. In her talking head segments, as well as in her filmed interactions with her family, Kourtney hardly ever shows her feelings. In an episode that is partly centred around Kourtney's inability to express her emotions, Kris explains: "She keeps everything locked inside" (Momager Dearest, 2012). This inability of course, makes it more difficult for the audience to become 'familiar' with Kourtney, who, like Khloé, has experienced various tumultuous romantic relationships but is mostly only speaking of them in a matter-of-fact manner. For instance, in an interview segment in which Kourtney explains the erratic behaviour of her ex-boyfriend Scott (the father of her three children), she merely explains that she *has* cried but does not do so for the camera (see Figure 30). In this instance, Kourtney therefore fails to provide the viewer with a possibly expected money shot.

Figure 30. Screenshot of Kourtney describing her relationship with Scott (Diamonds are Forever, 2018).

Indeed, her facial expressions are often, as seen in the screenshot above, neutral and her voice monotone. Also note the buttoned-up, demure styling of Kourtney, visually mirroring her emotional closedness, in stark contrast to the emotional availability and feminine excess of Khloé (see Figure 29). Therefore, following scholars on the belief in the 'catchiness' of emotion, (see Ahmed, 2004; Brennan, 2004; Gibbs, 2001; Gorton, 2009a, Sedgwick, 2003), her neutrality might fail to ignite a perceived transmission of 'positive' affect (Brennan, 2004).[213] Indeed, in the case of Kourtney, the problem is presented as Kourtney having no market impact at all by refusing to share her personal life. After Khloé gets angry with her for refusing to say her new boyfriend's name during filming, Kourtney calmly explains, "I don't need to expose every aspect of my life" (Baby One More Time, 2017). Yet, her unwillingness to present her emotional work and perform self-analysis onscreen makes the use of affective enterprising impossible for her, as well as creating positive authentic relationships with potential consumers/viewers. Throughout the seasons, her mother and sisters frequently comment on Kourtney's lack of emotional range, which appears to spill over into their notion of her work ethic. Indeed, as discussed in the beginning of the chapter, the idea of work is heavily tied with the notion of 'passion'. As such, her exterior neutrality seems to translate as impassionate and even lazy. This perception (or framing) of Kourtney's laziness has also been evident in the comment sections of her social media accounts. One Twitter follower writes to Kourtney, saying: "You are lazy…You've been making money off the back of Kim for years #teamkim" and another writes "You're boring just stay off the show" (3 April 2020). Of course, not all of Kourtney's followers express such sentiments but perhaps surprisingly many air their frustrations regarding Kourtney's unwillingness to present herself as a hard worker. Even when Kourtney claims that she is only prioritising being a mother she is met with scorn. One fan writes, "I'm for the first time as a long-time viewer so disappointed to hear you speak. What a terrible thing to communicate to mothers everywhere who HAVE to work. I'm sure they would say being a mother is their priority too" (6 August 2018). What comes across in the social media discussions of Kourtney is a frequent disappointment or frustration over Kourtney's perceived lack of a work ethic

[213] Yet, it is important to highlight, as does Gorton, that "while television may construct intimate moments…this does not necessarily mean that viewers will experience emotion or *catch* emotion in the same ways – some will laugh, some cry and some feel bored by the same moment" (2009a, p. 61, emphasis in original).

– perhaps echoing the ways in which Kourtney is often portrayed on KUWTK. Consider the below conversation in season fourteen, episode fifteen (Diamonds are Forever, 2018).

> [Kourtney has told her family that she has finally found what her "passion is," namely, working with interior design. In the scene she is asking her family for advice].
>
> **Kim**: You have to live it, breathe it… people have to feel it in your soul!
>
> **Kourtney**: It *is* in my soul.
>
> […]
>
> **Kris**: Yeah. I want you to find something that you *really* wanna do and that you love to do so you can do it for years to come. You know, Kim threw herself into her makeup and realised… I mean you [Kim] said to me one day: 'Mom, this is like a 24-hour a day job.' That's what it's gonna take, but you have a different work ethic than the rest of us. And part of that isn't working as hard as everyone else.
>
> **Kourtney**: That doesn't mean that I can't still do something, just because I don't wanna do it exactly like everybody else does…
>
> **Kris**: It's about the energy that you put out there. And the way that you go about doing things. You don't wanna give as much as the rest of us have to give to make things happen.
>
> **Kourtney**: I don't, and I agree with you, but that doesn't mean that I'm not gonna do *anything*. It just needs to make sense for my kids.
>
> **Kris**: I get that […] What you *could* do would be quite powerful and I'm quite sure very successful… You just have to put your mind to it.
>
> **Kim**: …You have to, like, stay focused.
>
> **Kourtney**: I'm not sitting here dilly-dallying…

In this passage, Kim and Kris' scepticism of Kourtney's potential business propositions is evident. While, the advice is somewhat unclear, the talk of 'feeling it in your soul', the

kind of 'energy' you put out, and what you are prepared to 'give', presents language that seems saturated with the ideas of performing emotional work for success and finding one's "passion".

Dubrofsky highlights that "articulations of the therapeutic stress …that labor upon the self – through talk, by working through issues, by revealing the self – can transform us for the better, help us overcome what ails us, make us healthier, happier individuals" (2011, p. 97). In this way of thinking, this kind of self-work will subsequently make us better neoliberal subjects. Of course, the 'us' in this instance seems discouragingly reserved for the middle- and upper-class woman: subsequently this decidedly classed and socially situated objective is marked as a universal *beau idéal*. What Kourtney needs to 'give' and 'feel' is part and parcel of the advice of how she must conduct her work. In order for Kardashian audiences to become consumers of Kardashian products, they must know Kourtney affectively. Therefore, she must follow her sisters, who use emotions to frame their products, either as a way of self-care, empowerment, or 'revenge'. However, her reluctance to turn her whole existence into work – self-work – seemingly marks her selfhood as less valuable (both in terms of economic and cultural capital).[214] As Kim remarks, after a particularly heated argument with Kourtney over her work ethic: "She's the least exciting to look at so she can *get out*… she doesn't do shit, she doesn't know what it's like to have work to do" (Photo Shoot Dispute, 2018).[215] Indeed, Kourtney presents the ways in which refusal to work on the self (through talk and self-analysis), leaves her unable to form a (saleable) self in the cultural context of neoliberal and 'emotional capitalism'. Furthermore, in the context of television, her failure to perform is also a failure in creating an engaging narrative that will keep audiences' 'tuned in'. In this sense, Kourtney's family is warning her that her emotionless performance will also make her the "least exciting to *look* at" on the television screen. Subsequently, I am not only arguing that emotional work is used in tandem with capitalist interests, but rather that this kind of work is also crucial for presenting a successful self. The emotional work

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[214] As a side note (and not necessarily as a measure of likeability), although Kourtney is not by any means disliked on social media, she has the least number of followers in comparison to her sisters.

[215] In the most recent season, framed by the cheating scandal in Khloé's life, Kourtney reveals that she is launching a new 'modern lifestyle' brand Poosh.com. In this sense, she seems to have found a way to utilise her sisters' emotional work to launch her own affective enterprise, in absence of her own self-revelations. In the same episode as Khloé is crying, Kourtney states: "I'm feeling really excited to create the Kourtney *empire*" (Aftershock, 2019).

is therefore a part of the larger move towards creating one's self and proving one's worth and relevance through the display of self-work.

Conclusion:

To conclude, this chapter has explored the ways in which the cultural notion and legitimisation of certain ways of working has changed. Indeed, since the financial crash of 2008, a myriad of new technological and cultural changes, along with an extended period of precarity, have altered the demands of workers. I have offered the notion of workitisation to term the creeping of work into quotidian life, that has been coupled with a dissolution between the private and public. Indeed, in recent years, work has frequently come to entail and demand the investment of one's personal life into one's work so that the two become entwined. As such, the self becomes an aspect of one's work and something to be worked upon, in the same way as work itself. This self-work is authenticated by its presentation to an audience, in other words, the self is validated through the work of being watched. This work of presenting one's self for public consumption has been normalised, as mentioned, through reality television and social media.

I have used the example of KUWTK to demonstrate the importance of conducting self-work in popular culture and how both the body and the mind become projects that need to be managed and worked upon. The Kardashian reality television show (and its paratexts) is indeed a cultural touchstone of Western popular culture and has arguably had a fundamental impact on the ways in which we now understand, and frame, work. The Kardashians were some of the first to utilise social media in tandem with their televisual performances; utilising their stardom (however controversial) to create indisputable financial profit, which is also why these social media encounters have been included alongside the textual analyses. Their successes, as I have explored, arguably rest on their representation of their self-work, which comes to validate their fame and existence in the cultural imaginary. The Kardashians have arguably found ways to capitalise on their female, sexualised bodies, using their own and their audiences' insecurities to build brands and products that tie into their body work. The larger feminisation of the workplace (stressing adaptability, presentability, and saleability), has subsequently worked in the Kardashian women's favour. Similarly, the influence of 'psy'

and therapeutic discourse on the notion of the psychic self in need of analysis and cultivation, has catered for a specific gendered strategy for launching a career. Indeed, the most successful sisters have used the required management of female emotional work to their advantage, in other words, demonstrating how the sharing of the personal can generate profit. In this sense, the show offers specifically female strategies for launching careers, showing Kim, Khloé, and Kylie utilising both their physical (excessive) femininity and displays of emotional work for financial gain, which their social media followers appear primarily convinced by. Yet, of course, as previously discussed, there is always room for textual resistance. By contrast, as I have noted, their sister Kourtney, who refuses to wholly share her personal and emotional life, fails to create an authentic and consumable self. In this sense, this chapter demonstrates how KUWTK, through its emphasis on self-work, presents the female self as an investment in need of protection – a valuable asset that if used correctly, can have great market value and even power.[216]

[216] Indeed, the example of Kylie Jenner's tweet in 2018, in which she simply wrote "sooo does anyone else not open Snapchat anymore? Or is it just me... ugh this is so sad", represents the Kardashian-Jenner clan's actual cultural (and economic!) power. One day after announcing her disinterest in the social media platform, media reports emerged of the company subsequently having lost 1.3 billion dollars of its market value (Vazquez, 2018).

CONCLUSION

In popular cultural contexts, the female self is frequently situated as the battleground for pervasive contemporary ideologies of, as I have demonstrated, both selfhood and neoliberal rationality. As a socio-cultural construct, the self subsequently comes to reflect notions of who we want and, especially, should strive to be at specific historical conjunctures. In this thesis I have explored the ways in which neoliberal sentiments in the post-2008 period have influenced the ways in which female selfhood is conceptualised in Western popular culture. The thesis has particularly set out to outline the contours of this *ideal* performative female self and, in turn, how this ideal has been framed, portrayed, and sold to audiences and consumers. Indeed, by looking at the female self through the lens of American reality television, I have been able to tease out specific facets of neoliberal selfhood that I have argued are important to bring together if we are to understand self-formation in this cultural context. The facets that I have outlined are: firstly, the notion of the authentic self/brand, or how the self is now conceptualised through discourses of branding and marketisation; secondly, the emphasis on meritocratic competition as the necessary context through which successful selves are formed; and finally, self-work, the idea that to possess a self requires optimising and working on both its mental and physical embodiment.

In the first chapter, I have shown the myriad and complex ways in which neoliberal rationalities have translated into the cultural imaginary and notions of subjectivity. I have discussed the numerous dissensions surrounding the definitions of neoliberalism in thought, but also, praxis – so-called, 'actually existing' neoliberalism. However, locating 'actual' neoliberal economic and political policies or implementations has not been the purpose here. Indeed, in this thesis I have characterised neoliberal influences more as a collection of cultural sentiments that, whilst conceptual, have had an impact on how selfhood has been rationalised across popular media. The first chapter has subsequently offered a background to how both neoliberalism and notions of selfhood have overlapped in Western culture. I primarily follow Foucauldian scholars (e.g. Brown, Rose, Miller, Oksala) and theories of governmentality to explore how this neoliberalisation of the notions of selfhood have occurred, which then contextualise and substantiate the ideas of self/branding, competition, and self-work put forward in the

televisual case studies. Chapters One and Two thus constitute the toolbox for the discussions on the neoliberal self in the three case studies.

In the second chapter, I have discussed both the female self in feminist theory and how scholarly and mainstream concepts of selfhood have influenced the representations of women in popular culture. I have provided a historical trajectory of the female self in feminist thought as I struggled to find such overviews in my own research for the chapter. I have used televisual examples of female representation, since television (no longer simply watched on a TV set) “can be seen as a vast mechanism for processing the material of the witnessed world into more narrativized, explained forms” (Ellis, 2000, p. 78). The representations of women on the small screen also offered a larger historical background to the conceptualisation of the neoliberal female self on reality television proffered in the textual analyses. I have followed feminist media and cultural scholars who have highlighted the interconnection between neoliberalism and women as subjects, audiences, and consumers (see Budgeon, 2001; Gill and Scharff, 2011; Hearn, 2008a, 2008b; McRobbie, 2009; Negra, 2009, Phipps, 2015; Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008). However, whereas these scholars focus primarily on the female body, performances of femininity, and women as ideal neoliberal citizens, this thesis has explored popular cultural ideas of female selfhood and self-formation more explicitly. Some edited collections, notably Gill and Scharff’s (2011) edited book on various cross-cultural examples of postfeminist media, sexual subjectivity, and audience engagements, as well as Elias, Gill, and Scharff’s (2017) work on ‘aesthetic labour’ and beauty practices, have explored the interconnections between subjectivity and neoliberal (or late capitalist) culture. These collections of essays present perceptive analyses of different phenomena forming in the clashes between so-called ‘feminine’ and neoliberal culture, and therefore provide an excellent foundation for further academic research. Nonetheless, this thesis has advanced the scholarship within this area of research with its discussion and outline of the central facets through which a specific ideal female self has emerged in Western popular culture.

In the latter part of Chapter Two, I focused on the postfeminist (Boyle, 2008; Gill, 2007b; McRobbie, 2009; Negra, 2009), and neoliberal feminist (Rottenberg, 2013; 2018) rationalities that have been, and still are, pervasive in more recent representations of female selfhood in US popular culture (and beyond). In these texts the female self is primarily conceptualised as intrinsic – the supposed authenticity of which can be found within. A typical, essentialised desire in such texts centre around finding a love-interest (usually a future husband) and eventually having children, all the while, and perhaps most

importantly, balancing a successful career. Women in these texts, are, in other words, still 'having it all', or at least, aspiring to 'have it all'. The narratives vary slightly, with the later, neoliberal feminist texts usually acknowledging gender inequality for instance (as I discussed in Chapter Two). However, what make these later texts *neoliberal* feminist is the eventual insistence that women must make 'empowered' choices to succeed, thus reframing social inequality as an individual responsibility. While there is a constant discussion of 'true' and 'real' selfhood in such pop cultural texts, the female self is also framed as malleable in that she must use external tools by which to locate the 'true' self. Indeed, such strategies encompass the self/branding and self-work that I have analysed in Chapters Three and Five. In this way, the idealised notion of female selfhood in these popular narratives is found within, and this 'authentic' self can, and should, be improved upon through various processes of consumption, choice, and transformation. Especially, as I have argued, through various stresses on performing femininity. Therefore, the popular texts in which this female selfhood appears, offer insights into how the self is formed in this context, but also which selves have become valorised.

Further, I have argued that the ideal representations of female selfhood are proffered as models for *all* selves in the current cultural imaginary in which (stereotypically feminine) ideas of plasticity are highly valued. In this cultural framework, a general plasticity of neoliberal citizens ultimately allows market fundamentalism to take centre stage as personal responsibility is placed on individuals rather than larger hegemonic structures. Subsequently, I concur with Rottenberg (2018) who maintains that neoliberalism has in large parts *needed* feminism. Neoliberalism in culture has utilised such (feminist) notions as empowerment and freedom of choice to find acceptance in media discourse. Indeed, Rottenberg uses the pertinent examples of care outsourcing and new developments in egg freezing to show how such feminist slogans have made some neoliberal goals of self-optimisation possible for (*some*) women (ibid.). These aspirational women are, in this sense, no longer 'held back' by stereotypical 'women's work' such as caring for family or being held back by their 'biological clock,' but are instead encouraged to work on themselves and their careers. Indeed, all of the successful women discussed in this thesis, e.g. Bethenny Frankel and Kim Kardashian, pay other women to either care for or even carry their children.[217] Such choices, eliminate the need to fight the societal structures and privatisations that create the demand for this kind of

[217] Kim Kardashian has notably used surrogates to carry her last two children.

outsourcing to begin with. These promises of success are of course available to only a very small group of women: middle- and upper class and mostly white. This also means that a growing class of women (largely working-class and minority women), who are hired to, for instance, care for the children of aspirational individuals, are erased from the equation of success (ibid.). As such, the ideal female neoliberal self that is established in this thesis, is a (barely concealed) bourgeois self, who has the privilege to be driven by aspirations of wealth, beauty, and happiness – all of which are presented as interlinked.

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I have used examples from US reality television to demonstrate the ways in which neoliberal rationalities and ideas of selfhood intersect in these popular cultural productions. Each of Chapters Three, Four, and Five of this thesis has outlined one central aspect of how this ideal female self is invoked and framed. In Chapter Three I have explored how the post-2008 period has been marked by anxieties over what is real, true, and authentic. Within the business world, Klein (2001) has noted a shift from companies regarding themselves as product producers to producers of meaning. Indeed, this shift has only intensified with the usage of social media and online communication, in which semantic subtleties are paramount. Following such developments, a larger 'affective turn' (Clough and Halley, 2007), has seen a move toward that which is *felt* – that which feels 'authentic' and 'true'. We are no longer simply sold products but instead certain sentiments, lifestyles, and by extension, possibilities of an improved self. The general anxiety over authenticity then, is something that 'reality' television has contributed to and taken advantage of. Both because it functions as advertainment (Deery, 2004), and also since it purports to portray the 'real'. Within this larger socio-cultural milieu, I have presented the ways in which the docu-soap RHONY, with its excessive consumption, product placements, and filmed intimate 'backstage' moments, generate a world in which everything can, and should, be monetised – especially the self. The female selves on RHONY are required to create individual brands that must reflect and align with their performances of selfhood. Within the show, discourses of branding, marketing and selfhood appear symbiotic and natural. I used the examples of Ramona and her brand of 'turtle time' and Pinot Grigio, and Bethenny's Skinnygirl lifestyle brand to demonstrate how self/branding becomes necessary on the show, wherein the failure to successfully perform such a unitary self means erasure from the show (exemplified by Kelly).

Bethenny's self/brand of Skinnygirl is especially valorised on RHONY through its financial success. Her self/brand presents happiness and wealth (along with a slim physique) as a possibility for all who manage their lives proficiently enough. As such, her own personal rags-to-riches (American dream) narrative becomes a model for ideal neoliberal selfhood. Indeed, the authenticity of her self is determined by the performance of a fixed and saleable brand, in which her personal and professional lives intertwine. In this sense, the closer the cameras get to her personal life, the more 'real' her self/brand feels. Subsequently, notions of the self become contingent on neoliberal, and neoliberal feminist, sentiments of competition, commodification, and self-responsibilisation. Self/branding in this context therefore functions as a tool for *becoming*.

Nevertheless, here I want to reiterate what I have argued throughout the thesis, namely the importance to avoid making all-encompassing assumptions about the influence of such neoliberalised versions of selfhood. As such, I have posed the question: If RHONY, and series like it, indeed offer templates for ideal neoliberal citizenship and subjectivity, as Ouellette (2009) among others argues, why do we as audiences tune in? I, myself, for instance, find pleasure in watching reality television, but at the same time, I can be critical of the shows' capitalist and neoliberal sentiments. In this sense, my research interests have aligned with the so-called "neoliberal turn" in recent reality television scholarship (Kavka, 2019, p. 10), in which scholars have emphasised the relationship between neoliberalism and reality TV (as mentioned in the Introduction).[218] Yet, whilst the majority of these scholars make repeated assumptions about audiences' decoding of such 'neoliberal' messages (as inherently 'bad'), I have included empirical research to avoid such academic tendencies.

Therefore, in the case studies I have proffered small-scale ethnographic studies that explore the contradictory ways in which the audience members worry about, discuss, and take pleasure in, their viewing of the feminised reality TV programmes. Therefore, I follow the media audience scholars who note the often reflexive and even resistant ways in which viewers and consumers engage with cultural texts.[219] I am however, careful to not wholly dismiss arguments of governmental impact nor the possible influence of socio-cultural expressions of neoliberalism. Reflexivity does, after all, not negate influence.

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[218] See, among others, Couldry (2008), Dubrofsky (2011), McCarthy (2007), Ouellette (2009, 2012), Ouellette and Murray (2008), Ouellette and Hay (2008a, 2008b), Peck (2008), Weber (2009), Hearn (2010, 2016), and Winch (2013).
[219] See Ang, (1985, 1996), Brunsdon and Spigel (2008), Gorton (2007, 2009a), Hill (2005), Kavka (2008), Sender (2012), Skeggs and Wood (2011, 2012), Wood (2005, 2009).

Instead, this thesis has presented multi-methodological approaches in which I bridge the gap between scholarship on the neoliberalisation of reality TV *and* audiences' subsequent decoding. The coupling of extensive textual analyses of the ideal neoliberal female self and how 'she' might be interpreted by viewers has not (to my knowledge) been the singular concern of previous scholarship. This makes the contributions of this thesis particularly significant.

My first ethnographic study in Chapter Three investigated audience engagements with RHONY online – a discussion forum focusing on Bethenny, who largely comes to embody the ideal self on the show. In my analyses, I wished to gain insights into how the female self is discussed and understood by some (US and middle-class) RHONY audiences. I primarily found that the discussion forum became a space for valuing and evaluating female selfhood. It offered a context in which users could, in John Ellis' (2000) words, "work through", or in various ways, perform and test the ideals of femininity, female selfhood, neoliberal feminism, and postfeminism. Yet, unlike Ellis' argument, as cited above, the processing or 'working through' of such cultural ideas was happening beyond the televisual text itself. This could take the form of both resistance and receptivity to some of the more 'encoded' beliefs – self/branding – influenced by cultural notions of neoliberal ideology. There was also an apparent pleasure in finding cracks in the portrayals of ideal female selfhood, not by criticisms of the notion itself, but rather by critiquing the individual women's failure to live up to their own image.

Similarly, in Chapter Four I combined textual (discourse and visual) analyses of ideal female selfhood with an empirical study of two focus groups of female viewers. Following the same structure as the previous chapter, I begun the discussion with analyses of the televisual text. I explored the female self, following the notion of the self/brand, through the lens of competitiveness and ANTM. In the chapter I was therefore interested in contextualising the ideal female self. I began the discussion by exploring how competitiveness (and ideations of 'the survival of the fittest') has become central to much public discourse on selfhood. Indeed, competition is often perceived as simply a part of human nature and has therefore been a powerful tool for the justification of late capitalist and neoliberal ideologies. It is also frequently invoked to rationalise the premise of competitive meritocracy in reality television – and beyond. This point is important since justifications for competition also naturalise the idea of winners and losers. Of course, 'winning' is an inherent aspect of any competition and as such, within a social context, 'losing' can become a detrimental consequence. Furthermore, as Littler underscores,

“[a]n over-emphasis on merit obscures the unevenness of the social playing field” (2018, p. 7). In other words, privilege, or the lack thereof, is made invisible when losing is framed as a personal responsibility. As I have argued, it is this spirit of competition that forms the socio-cultural backdrop of the self depicted on ANTM.

ANTM’s female contestants are interesting in the neoliberal context since the women are at a stage in their lives (late teens and early twenties) in which they are encouraged to make decisions through which romanticised ideas of female selfhood can be realised. The show and its presenter, and *beau idéal*, Tyra Banks, purport to teach these women the value in performing a certain kind of self. The actual advice and lessons taught to the models – whether pertaining to physical makeovers or behavioural rules – are less important than the models’ showcasing their willingness to denounce notions of their selves for the advice offered (arguably determined by market forces). This required flexibility further demonstrates a rationalisation of meritocracy. Indeed, the models are required to remove any personal obstacles to create, what I have termed performative ‘blankness’, onto which the lessons of ANTM can be realised. Hence, such ‘obstacles’ of racism, sexism, and other intersectional discrimination are obscured. In this way, race, for instance, becomes a mere optional identity-marker on ANTM, a potential feature of a self/brand. Hardship on the show is utilised to show the fairness of competition, i.e. the more obstacles the models can overcome, the more they prove that meritocracy works. Once again, the onus is placed on the individual woman. The definition of this promise of ‘the top’ and what winning entails beyond the show, is markedly absent. But as the models fight tooth and nail to reach it (sometimes literally), it is presented as imperative. At the same time, the lack of definition, also makes the pinnacle of female selfhood subject to the whims of the market, and by which ‘winning’ such a self becomes elusive – a constantly moving target that incentivises personal transformation. Expert guests often scold the ANTM models for resisting or complaining about various stages of the contest, arguing that the tasks are nothing compared to the cut-throat competitiveness that constitutes the ‘real’ workplace and market. As such, ANTM presents this world of competition and self-optimisation as a microcosm of what the real world is really like.

Yet, I follow this textual discussion of ANTM with two FG and text-in-action sessions in order to provide a more nuanced perspective of how some (admittedly homogenous) viewers engage with the presented ideas of competition. In these empirical discussions I found a dissonance between the representations of ideal female selfhood within the text itself and how viewers engaged with these notions. The participants often

expressed contradictory sentiments (and did indeed note these contradictions themselves) in which they could vocalise negative judgements yet still worry about the consequences of those same thoughts. However, as the contestants are removed from their social context (through performative 'blankness'), their faults become their own, seemingly leaving space for more guiltless 'cattiness' by female audiences. During the viewing of the programme, the FG women did indeed appear to enjoy judging the women onscreen. The context of the show as a competition also makes such appraisals, comparisons, and criticisms of the young women choosing to partake, expected, as, to cite one focus group participant, that is "what the show is about." Nonetheless, ANTM's emphasis on merit and the 'survival of the fittest' and its claimed mimicry of real life appeared to resonate with its viewers. In this sense, by the focus group members own examples of competitive workplaces and competitive friendships, the spirit of competitiveness was largely accepted as natural and inescapable.

Therefore, my findings in all three case studies suggest that the combination of textual and audience research, whilst disproving assumptions of singular neoliberal 'effects', indicate that the portrayals of ideal female selfhood and neoliberal sentiments have a normalising influence. Arguably, such texts provide a narrative framework through which selfhood is talked about, and in this sense, partly conceptualised. I also think that it is worth highlighting that the audience research in this thesis[220] – both on- and offline – focus on individuals who *want to* talk about television. Indeed, the commentators in the online discussion forum chose to visit the virtual space to share their thoughts and feelings about RHONY. The FG sessions were organised to facilitate discussions between individuals who had all volunteered to discuss ANTM. Similarly, the paratext and social media commentary of KUWTK and its stars online were made by individuals who in various ways were 'keeping up' with the Kardashians. In this sense, I argue that audience reflexivity is always possible, especially when actively sought out, and in this sense, it does not negate the possible normalising processes of texts who are encoded with certain narratives (whether purposely or not). This is why, regardless of whether we love, hate, or feel indifferent towards these popular cultural texts, analysing what they valorise and present as 'real' tells us a lot about the ideologies to which they pertain and the 'mental framework' through which selfhood is understood. Such

[220] This, of course, includes all audience studies with voluntary participants, i.e. the work of the TV audience researchers mentioned.

normalising processes are of course not necessarily negative, indeed the possibility for resistance is evident in the empirical studies conducted in this thesis. To suggest otherwise, would be to ignore the arguably positive normalisation of certain representations that reality television in particular has contributed to. For instance, the representations of people who identify as LGBTQIA on reality TV shows (as seen on *RuPaul's Drag Race*, *Queer Eye*, or Caitlyn Jenner on KUWTK), have also opened spaces for discussions of LGBTQIA rights and have also proven to be exceedingly popular programmes. Such shows, despite some tendencies toward sensationalism, have also been instrumental in more diverse portrayals on the small screen (yet, of course, this does necessarily mean audience acceptance beyond the narrative).

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The fifth and final chapter of this thesis has provided a culmination of the previously discussed ideas of self/branding and the spirit of competition, in the analyses of work and, what I call, 'workitisation'. Indeed, in the chapter I have described the ways in which work has creeped into most aspects of life. I maintain that the socio-cultural developments such as Web 2.0, the growing use of social media, and the long periods of precarity, have changed the demands of workers and contributed to the collapse of the distinction between private and public. Similarly, I have argued that before social media, reality television has advanced the notion that sharing the private can be a way of working and has therefore furthered the normalisation of both revealing one's self to the public and regarding it as work. In this cultural context of workitisation the self has become something which ultimately *requires* work. By analysing one of the most popular televisual texts at the end of the 2010s, KUWTK, I have demonstrated how the seepage of work into quotidian life has become near total. Furthermore, I argue that the Kardashian women have become ubiquitous in Western popular culture. Even though one does not watch their reality television series, or even follow the Kardashians on social media, it is difficult to not come across some aspects of their fame – whether through their self/branding, beauty and lifestyle products, or simply as referenced in other media outlets. Arguably, even though the narratives of work will not be accepted by all who consume them, the Kardashians' cultural power will contribute to its normalisation. Due to their cultural omnipresence, I chose to follow the Kardashian women across their media outlets and include the social media paratext that this public presence as elicited. In this

sense, I have followed the online discussion of the women wherever they have appeared – whether on Twitter, Instagram, Youtube and so forth. This netnographic method, whilst still following the methodology used in Chapter Three, is more overtly inspired by Hine's 'itinerant strategy' and presents insights into how these stars and texts are consumed and engaged with in the age of Web 2.0. By pairing the textual with the virtual paratext in this way, I managed to gain an insight into how the text is encoded and how the audiences engage with and 'work through' such ideations and performances concurrently. This new televisual and online age has made the televisual stars' performances more fluid and less bounded, and to gain an insight into how such texts are decoded it becomes crucial to follow the journeys they might travel across platforms and mediums.

KUWTK provides an apt trajectory of the larger cultural notions of work in its gradually changing representations of its female cast members throughout the seasons. Indeed, from the show's conception in 2007 a lot has changed. The series has arguably moved from being simply a comedic reality sit-com with an emphasis on family and relationships, to presenting a more individualistic, competitive world in which each of the female family members must perform self-work to 'keep up' with each other and the pressures of femininity, happiness, and success. These changes on the show subsequently reflect the wider reconceptualisation of work since the financial crash. In this milieu, the work of selfhood demonstrates how the self has become an asset that both requires protection and investment to safeguard and increase its value. Presenting the self *working* becomes a way to validate one's existence, wherein the opposite indicates laziness and a failure to find one's 'true' self. Through the examples of Kim, Kylie, and Khloé's displays of body work, I have argued that the female body is presented as a fundamental aspect of the women's human capital. Therefore, actively sharing how their bodies are made and controlled, shows the individual women's entrepreneurialism and admirable work ethic. Further, presenting such 'hard work' also democratises beauty, essentially presenting it as meritocratic, whilst at the same time proving the individuals' authenticity.

In the chapter, I also turned to the influence of 'psy' discourse, especially psychoanalysis, and the 'affective turn', to demonstrate how the presentations of the hard-working beautiful body, also needs to be accompanied by an equally beautiful mind. The chapter has therefore outlined how some twentieth century (filtered down) notions of psychoanalysis and 'the talking cure' have influenced how selfhood in popular culture inherently requires analysis and management. Stereotypical, patriarchal ideas of women as overtly emotional and in need of self-control are thus still present. However, in the

context of KUWTK the emotional displays, such as Khloé's eventual 'money shot' moment in which she shares her sadness to viewers, are now utilised to demonstrate the individual's supposedly authentic self, but also provides proof for the self at work. In this sense, performing self-work for an audience helps to validate the self – including that of the self/brand – and its 'realness.' However, the emotions and affective responses shared on the Kardashians' various outlets, have a larger purpose within the narrative. Not only do the 'money shots' create good TV moments, but as I have argued, they also create market impact, as shown by some audience responses. The women's investment in revealing their selves *working* therefore translates into market value – creating both audience/consumer interest and support. I suggest that in this sense, the Kardashians offer strategies in which women specifically can utilise their physical *excessive* femininity and displays of emotional work for financial gain. Failing to do so, as I have argued, also results in a failure to create a female self that is saleable and thus intelligible in the context of neoliberal feminism. Rather than illustrating the second-wave feminist slogan of 'the personal is political', the women on KUWTK, and indeed, RHONY and ANTM, demonstrate how the 'personal is profitable.' For women, performances of femininity and feminine self/brands as I have shown throughout the thesis become both a safe and profitable way to do so.

Considerations for the future

In this thesis, I have focused on the narratives of *successful* performances of ideal female selfhood in popular culture. During my research some interesting ideas emerged that could not be investigated within the scope of the thesis. Indeed, through the discussions of reality television I have demonstrated the ways in which representations of the female self offer original insights into ideations and idealisations of selfhood within neoliberal contexts. What this research has demonstrated then is that the romanticised neoliberal feminist subject is exclusive to a very small group of aspirational women, namely affluent, white, educated, able-bodied, and heterosexual women. However, following on from this research, it would be interesting to further explore the female selves who 'fail' or fall outside these idealised versions of selfhood and subjectivity. I utilised some examples of 'unruly women' to demarcate the bounds of the ideal female self, e.g. Kelly on RHONY; some contestants on ANTM; and Kourtney on KUWTK. In these examples,

Kelly's unsuccessful performance of an authentic self/brand and the losing contestants of ANTM, were removed from reality television and therefore denied a chance to find their ideal, saleable selves. Kourtney Kardashian's failure to display self-work is more subtle since she has the social capital of being part of the Kardashian family to fall back upon, in which her success is bound with that of her sisters'. As such, both Kourtney and Kelly (as a privileged New York socialite), continue to live privileged lives off screen regardless of how they perform on screen. These women are therefore not dependant on their performances of selfhood on the shows. In this sense, further research on the portrayals of less privileged women (e.g. working-class women, LGBTQIA women, women of colour, women with disabilities, and any possible intersections) would arguably elucidate the kind of female self that the 'other' woman can claim. Indeed, further research on the women selves who simply serve as examples for what the ideal *is not*, become especially interesting since, as I have argued, most viewers appeared to find pleasure in the 'unruliness' of women who were unsuccessful or simply refused to assimilate to ideas of the neoliberal female self.

Furthermore, as I have highlighted, the ethnographic study of ANTM viewers was faced with the limits of scope (and timeline) in this thesis but would have benefited from a larger and more heterogeneous group of participants from various backgrounds and social classes. However, as I have also noted, the homogeneity in these particular studies contributed to a more relaxed and arguably 'natural' environment (or as natural as a research setting can be). Nevertheless, a more heterogeneous FG might have provided an understanding of how viewers who are not framed as 'ideal' neoliberal female subjects might engage with the female selves romanticised on screen. Indeed, as Skeggs and Wood (2012) note, the social status of audience research participants plays a significant role in their subsequent textual analyses. Additionally, even though this thesis has centred its discussions on the most extreme forms of Western popular culture – US reality TV – exploring non-Western contexts and audiences, would shed light on the ways in which these texts and sentiments have travelled beyond the global West.

Additionally, in my search for methods to investigate online sociality in television studies, I came across a noticeable gap in research. There are no published overviews of the study of online sociality in TV scholarship. This is also problematised by television scholars omitting details of both their approaches to ethics and methodologies in their studies. As such, I have dedicated space in Chapter Three to discussions of how netnography has been studied previously, but I also offer methodological and ethical

suggestions for how TV scholarship might approach virtual spaces in future research. This is especially tricky as both television as a medium and online sociality are in seemingly perpetual stages of liminality (Robinson, 2017). Nonetheless, I suggest that adopting reflexivity coupled with more mobile, flexible ethnographic methods (following Hine, 2011), in which we are open to trail online engagement, would teach us about the cultural contexts of the televisual text – where it is referenced, alluded to, reproduced, discussed, and reported on – and will help researchers to identify suitable starting points for further investigation. I also propose that Kozinets' netnographic methods, whilst not strictly centred around television audiences, should be used as a benchmark for identifying and outlining the methods taken. Ultimately, this would contribute to a more transparent academic climate in which both methodologies and ethics are made explicit.

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By conceptualising the very ideas we surround ourselves with right at this moment in time this text has set out to do something rather difficult. As central features of the recent popular cultural imaginary, the reality television shows and ideal female selves explored in this thesis, advance the sense that we are all being watched. The idealised notions of the female self outlined demonstrate that selfhood, especially the female self, is something that cannot simply *be* or exist. Rather, the various ways in which these cultural texts suggest that we have to work on the self – through performances of self/branding, competitiveness, and even the physical and psychic body – present the idea that the female self needs to be worked upon to 'make sense'. And within neoliberal and mainstream feminist narratives, this sense-making is framed by that which is saleable, unitary, and thus merely symbolic. Feminism, or rather postfeminism and neoliberal feminism, has largely become symbolic as well. In popular feminism's reframing of branding and self-work as forms of empowerment and self-care, the purported feelings of personal satisfaction justify the choices made – regardless of whether these choices align with the constant cultural exhilaration of capitalist and neoliberal ideologies. Angela McRobbie is still right then, in her call for "the resuscitation and re-conceptualization of feminist anti-capitalism" (2008, p. 548). Such a resuscitation might help us find a way of reimagining hegemonic structures. Perhaps, the pleasure that audiences have found in the nonconforming female selves in popular culture suggests that there is something hopeful, and potentially transformative, in misbehaving. Simply existing in this context then,

without trying to find, capture, choose, and improve that which can be called ‘selfhood’, can offer a form of resistance to the pervasive neoliberal ideal female self conceptualised throughout this thesis.

Appendix

Focus Group and Text-in-action Consent Form

Neoliberalism and the Self: The Engendering of (female) Selfhood in Western Popular Culture (preliminary title)

UNIVERSITY of York

Department of Theatre, Film and Television

Participant Consent Form

Thank you for your interest in this project. This research activity will be used to explore female viewers' engagement with *America's Next Top Model*, as a part of the fourth chapter of Siiri Sjöstrand's doctoral thesis (contact: sms539@york.ac.uk).

Please read the following statements carefully and tick the appropriate box:

	YES	NO
I have read the information sheet about this project		
I agree to take part in this project		
I consent to my watching *Top Model* being audio recorded		
I consent to the in-depth interviews and discussions being audio recorded		
I understand that the researcher may take electronic notes during the text-in-action sessions and/or discussions		
I understand my right to withdraw and/or have my data destroyed from this project at any time		
I understand that my participation in this project will be treated anonymously		
I am over the age of 18		

Participant Name: ________________________ **Researcher Name:** ________________________

Participant Signature: ________________________ **Researcher Signature:** ________________________

Date: ___/___/______ **Date:** ___/___/______

If you wish to be informed about the outcomes from this project, please provide your email address:

____

Abbreviations

ANTM: *America's Next Top Model*

FG: Focus groups

GDPR: General Data Protection Regulation

GIF: Graphics Interchange Format

IMF: International Monetary Fund

KUWTK: *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*

RHONY: *The Real Housewives of New York City*

WTO: World Trade Organization

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2 Broke Girls (2011-2017). CBS. US.

Ally McBeal (1997-2002), Fox. US.

America's Got Talent (2006-present). NBC. US.

America's Next Top Model (2003–). UPN, 2003-2006; The CW, 2006-2015; VH1, 2016-present. US.

America's Supernanny (2011-2013). Lifetime. US.

American Idol (2002-2016, 2018–). Fox, 2002-2016; ABC, 2018-present. US.

Antiques Roadshow (1979–). BBC1. UK.

Bethenny (2012-2014). Syndication. US.

Bethenny Ever After (2010-2012). Bravo. US.

Big Brother (2000-2018). Channel 4, 2000-2010; Channel 5, 2010-2018. UK.

Big Little Lies (2017–). HBO. US.

Biggest Loser (2004-2016). NBC. US.

Britain's Next Top Model (2005-2017). Sky Living; 2005-2013; Lifetime, 2016-2017. UK.

Broad City (2014–). Comedy Central. US.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997-2003). The WB, 1997-2001; UPN, 2001-03. US.

Chewing Gum (2015–). E4. UK.

Chrisley Knows Best (2014–). USA Network. US.

Crossroads (1964-1988, 2001-2003). ITV. UK.

Dallas (1978-1991). CBS. US.

Dancing with the Stars (2004–). ABC. US.

Dash Dolls (2015). E! US.

Dear White People (2017–). Netflix. US.

Desperate Housewives (2004-2012). ABC. US.

Dog Whisperer with Cesar Millan (2004-2012). National Geographic Channel. 2004-2011; Nat Geo Wild, 2011-2012. US.

Duck Dynasty (2012-2017). A&E Network. US.

Expedition Robinson (1997–) SVT, 1997-2003; TV3, 2004-2005; TV4, 2009-2012, 2018; Sjuan, 2015. Sweden.

Extreme Makeover (2002-2007). ABC. US.

Extreme Makeover Home Edition (2003-2012, 2020–). ABC, 2003-2012; HGTV 2020. US.

Family S.O.S. with Jo Frost (2013). TLC. US.

Filthy Rich: Cattle Drive (2005). E! US.

Fixer Upper (2013-2018). HGTV. US.

Fleabag (2016–). BBC Three; BBC Two, 2016; BBC One, 2019. UK.

Full House (1987-1995). ABC. US.

Girlfriends (2000-2008). UPN, 2000-2006; The CW, 2006-2008. US.

Girls (2012-2017). HBO. US.

Hart of Dixie (2011-2015). The CW. US.

I Dream of NeNe: The Wedding (2013). Bravo. US.

I Love Lucy (1951-1960). CBS. US.

Insecure (2016–). HBO. US.

Julia (1968–1972). NBC. US.

Keeping Up with the Kardashians (2007–). E! US.

Khloé and Lamar (2011-2012). E! US.

Kim Kardashian, Superstar (2007). Vivid Entertainment. US.

Kourtney and Khloé Take The Hamptons (2014-2015). E! US.

Kourtney and Kim Take Miami (2009-2013). E! US.

Kourtney and Kim Take New York (2011-2012). E! US.

Laverne and Shirley (1976-1983). ABC. US.

Life of Kylie (2017). E! US.

Lipstick Jungle (2008-2009). NBC. US.

Love, Lust or Run (2015-2016). TLC. US.

Martha Stewart: Apprentice (2005). NBC. US.

Master of None (2015-2017). Netflix. US.

Maude (1972-1978). CBS. US.

My Cat from Hell (2011-2018). Animal Planet. US.

Orange is the New Black (2013–). Netflix. US.

Property Brothers (2011–). W Network. US.

Providence (1999-2002). NBC. US.

Queer Eye (2003-2007). Bravo. US.

Queer Eye (2018–). [reboot]. Netflix. US.

Revenge Body with Khloe Kardashian (2017–). E! US.

Rob and Chyna (2016). E! US.

RuPaul's Drag Race (2009–). Logo, 2009-2016; VH1, 2017-present. US.

Sex and the City (1998–2004). HBO. US.

She's Gotta Have It (2017–). Netflix. US.

Survivor (2000–). CBS. US.

That Girl (1966–1971). ABC. US.

The Biggest Loser (2004–2016). NBC. US.

The Brady Bunch (1969-1974). ABC. US.

An American Family (1973). PBS. US.

The Fosters (2013-2018). Freeform. US.

The Mary Tyler Moore Show (1970-1977). CBS. US.

The Osbournes (2002-2005). MTV. US.

The Real Housewives of Atlanta (2008–). Bravo. US.

The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills (2010–). Bravo. US.

The Real Housewives of Dallas (2016–). Bravo. US.

The Real Housewives of Miami (2011–). Bravo. US.

The Real Housewives of New Jersey (2009–). Bravo. US.

The Real Housewives of New York City (2008–). Bravo. US.

The Real Housewives of Orange County (2006–). Bravo. US.

The Real Housewives of Potomac (2016–). Bravo. US.

The Real Housewives of Salt Lake City (expected to air 2020-2021). Bravo. US.

The Real Housewives of Washington, D.C. (2010, cancelled). Bravo. US.

The Simple Life (2003-2007). Fox, 2003-2005; E!, 2006-2007. US.

The Swan (2004). Fox. US.

Tidying Up with Marie Kondo (2019). Netflix. US.

Transparent (2014-2019). Prime Video. US.

Vanderpump Rules (2013-present). Bravo. US.

Video Diaries (1990-1996). BBC. UK.

What Not to Wear (2001-2007). BBC Two, 2001-2003; BBC One, 2004-2007. UK.

What Not to Wear (US, 2003-2013). TLC. US.

What Not to Wear (expected to air in 2020). TLC. US.

Who Wants to be a Millionaire? (1998–). ITV. UK.

Who Wants to be a Millionaire? (1999-2019). ABC. US.

Xena: Warrior Princess (1995-2001). Syndication. New Zealand.

Films

Bad Moms (2016). Dir. Lucas, J. and Moore, S. STX Entertainment. US.

Bridesmaids (2011). Dir. Feif, P. Universal Productions. US.

Hustlers (2019). Dir. Scafaria, L. STX Films. US.

I Feel Pretty (2018). Dir. Kohn, A. and Silverstein, M. STX Films. US.

Mean Girls (2004). Dir. Waters, D. Paramount Pictures. US.

Sweet Home Alabama (2002). Dir. Tennant, A. Buena Vista Pictures. US.

The Holiday (2006). Dir. Meyers, N. Sony Pictures Releasing. US.

The Proposal (2009). Fletcher, A. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures. US.

Reality Television Episodes

The Real Housewives of New York City

(2008–). Bravo. US.

Season One

The Lost Footage. May 27, 2008.

Season Two

Van Kampen's Houseparty. April 28, 2009.

Charity Wives. May 5, 2009.

Reunion – Part 1. May 12, 2009.

Reunion – Part 2. May 14, 2009.

Season Three

Sun, Sand and Psychosis. May 20, 2010.

Reunion – Part 1. June 10, 2010.

Reunion – Part 3. June 17, 2010.

Season Four

The Mask Has Two Faces. May 12, 2011.

Season Six

The Last Leg. July 22, 2014.

Season Seven

The Art of Being a Cougar. April 28, 2015.

Season Eight

Start Spreading the News. April 6, 2016.

Reunion – Part 1. August 31, 2016.

Season Nine

Oil and Vinegar. July 12, 2017.

Season Ten

You Broke the Penal Code. June 6, 2018.

America's Next Top Model **(2003–)**

UPN, 2003-2006; The CW, 2006-2015; VH1, 2016-present. US.

Cycle One

The Girl Who Becomes America's Next Top Model. July 15, 2003.

Cycle Two

The Girl Who Can Cry at the Drop of a Hat. January 27, 2004.

The Runway Ahead. May 11, 2004.

Cycle Ten

Welcome to Top Model Prep. February 20, 2008.

Cycle Eleven

The Notorious Fierce 14. September 3, 2008.

The Fierce Awards. October 8, 2008.

America's Next Top Model is…November 19, 2008.

Cycle Twelve

What Happens in Vegas. March 4, 2009.

Fun and Games. March 4, 2009.

Cycle Thirteen

How Short Can You Go. September 9, 2009.

Dance with Me. October 7, 2009.

Cycle Fourteen

Be My Friend, Tyra! March 10, 2010.

Welcome to New Zealand. March 10, 2010.

America's Next Top Model is… May 19, 2010.

Cycle Fifteen

Welcome to High Fashion. September 15, 2010.

Karolina Kurkova. October 6, 2010.

Cycle Sixteen

Season Finale. May 18, 2011.

Cycle Seventeen

Kristin Cavallari. September 28, 2011.

Tyson Beckford. November 30, 2011.

Cycle Eighteen

Kris Jenner. March 7, 2012.

Cat Deeley. March 14, 2012.

J. Alexander. March 21, 2012

Cycle Nineteen

The Girl Who Wants Out. September 7, 2012.

Cycle Twenty-Four

The Boss is Back. January 9, 2018.

Keeping Up with the Kardashians

(2007–). E! US.

Season One

Managing Mom. October 21, 2007.

Remembering Dad. November 11, 2007.

Season Three

Free Khloé. March 8, 2009.

I'd Rather Go Naked…Or Shopping. March 22, 2009.

Season Four

The Wedding. November 8, 2009.

Blame it on the Alcohol. February 15, 2010.

Season Six

The Former Mrs. Jenner. June 26, 2011.

Thicker Than Water. July 17, 2011.

Kendall Goes on Birth Control. July 24, 2011.

Season Seven

Momager Dearest. May 27, 2012.

Season Ten

Lip Service. May 10, 2015.

About Bruce – Part 1. May 17, 2015.

Season Thirteen

The Ex-Files. April 23, 2017.

Season Fourteen

Baby One More Time. December 10, 2017.

Diamonds are Forever. January 21, 2018.

Season Fifteen

Photo Shoot Dispute. January 21, 2018.

The Betrayal. November 4, 2018.

Season Sixteen

Treachery. June 23, 2019.

Aftershock. June 30, 2019.

Season Seventeen

Three's Company. October 6, 2019.